

Media Policy, Media Reform, and Media Criticism

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I come to this panel with the desire to put two professional identities I carried between 2006 and 2008 in dialogue with one another. The first is my role as a doctoral candidate with interdisciplinary training in cinema and media studies, and the second is my position as a Research Associate for an Asia-Pacific focused, Manila-based, feminist N.G.O. engaged in media and communications advocacy at the levels of policy, programs, and practices. I propose that this kind of dual affiliation provides one way in which academics, even those who don't conduct policy studies per se, can contribute to policy matters. Coming from a cultural studies background, I was familiar with the debates regarding the nature of the discipline's commitment to policy. I was aware of the increasing use of culture as a resource to solve social problems as proposed by George Yúdice, which I encountered in my dissertation research on alternative digital cinema production in Manila.¹ I was also intrigued by Tony Bennett's contentions that cultural policy studies did not inevitably necessitate a "top down" approach due to communities' formation by, and effects on, governmental practices.² Nevertheless, the idea that someone primarily utilizing textual analysis and ethnographic methodologies could productively engage policy advocacy seemed far afield.

What I found, however, was that whether for better or for worse, due to the "NGO-ization" of a good deal of social movements in the Philippines, my academic background was quite fitting. This was owed in part to the bureaucratization that accompanied this institutionalizing process,

¹ George Yúdice, *The Expediency of Culture: The Uses of Culture in the Global Era* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).

² Tony Bennett, *Culture: A Reformer's Science* (London: Sage, 1998).

wherein NGOs, much like academe, exist within their own, rather closed circuits of research, publications, key players, and meetings (Association for Women in Development, World Social Forum, etc.), while occasionally linking into the somewhat externalized lobbying spaces of actual policy makers (the World Summit on the Information Society, or the UN Global Alliance for ICT and Development, for example). Critics argue that this institutionalization has diluted the radical impulses of social movements, and certainly, such arguments are valid. Funding agencies that fuel much of the publishing and programs of organizations often require a more reformist, rather than radical ethos. At any rate, the parameters for NGO inclusion and intervention in policy-making process are limited.

Though perhaps flawed, I found that civil society's more recent structure led to several factors that facilitated collaboration between activists and academics, even if this was partly due to the watered down radicalism of both sectors. Because of the importance of circulating publications and studies for distribution along these established NGO circuits, writing and research—the skills every graduate student hones—were quite useful. Moreover, while the language of lobbying spaces requires the "hard" data of statistics, economics, and law to be most effective, the kind of narrative analysis that emerges from much ethnographically driven cultural studies work was welcome in many other arenas and was certainly an asset in the grant-writing that maintained the organization's projects. Even the language of theory, when boiled down to its fundamentals, could have "functional" applications; this is tricky territory, and certainly, the ways in which theory was utilized produced its own, less nuanced, more accessible versions of dense, discipline-specific concepts, versions which might not be acceptable to some scholars heavily invested in rigor.

In part, this academic-advocate crossover was possible because it is so commonplace in the Manila context. The university system in the Philippines works very differently from its counterpart in the United States, in that professors ranging from newly minted PhDs to University of the Philippines Vice-Presidents are heavily and visibly involved in the country's social movements and are also expected to conduct work outside the university. However, I do not wish to idealize this academic/activism crossover, as much of it is practical; due to the meager salaries of those working in academe, it is understood that one will take on consultancies or other work to supplement one's income. While this leads to a severely overworked academic population and fewer local, academic research publications, it also means that there is no partitioning off of the academy from other sectors of public life, as is the common conception of academe in the United States. Certainly, there are positive and negative elements to both institutional configurations, and my purpose in sharing these differences is not to assess their merits, but to provide background for the possibilities of such collaborations facilitated through more widespread institutional support of such partnerships within humanities based media studies. My experience as a media-communications advocate is undoubtedly incomplete, and perhaps even myopically focused on a particular national, cultural context. Consequently, I would like to see how my experiences in the Philippines might translate to the United States. How might the infrastructures of humanities-based media departments more effectively incorporate opportunities for activism, both for students and faculty? How might affiliations between university departments and like-minded social movements organizations be productive for both institutions? In what ways might university-based research centers forge links among

the macro frameworks of industry, politics and economics, the micro frameworks of community issues, and the audiences, texts, and theories that drive media studies research?