

Why Journalism Laws Fail Rural Schools— and the Extension Model that Can Save Them

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For many Filipinos, journalism is more than just a career; it's a voice that gives democracy, justice, and the truth meaning. Campus journalism is frequently seen in schools as a training ground where young people learn how to think critically, communicate responsibly, and participate in society. To uphold these principles, Republic Act No. 7079, also referred to as the Campus Journalism Act of 1991, was passed. It encouraged schools to start student publications and gave aspiring journalists the chance to hone their craft. However, this promise is little more than legalese for many students in the rural areas of the northern Philippines. The reality of poverty, distance, and unequal access cannot be eliminated by legislation, even though it grants the right to participate.

In many respects, the perception of campus journalism as an even playing field is false. Urban school students frequently compete with the help of knowledgeable advisors, cutting-edge technology, and regular training. On the other hand, many students from remote and underprivileged areas face challenges such as out-of-date materials, restricted internet access, and instructors with little formal training in journalism. As a result, the competition honors talent while discreetly ignoring the unfair circumstances that foster it. Gifted students in rural communities go unnoticed despite their potential as success becomes more a measure of opportunity than ability.

This discrepancy highlights a crucial reality: laws cannot change people's lives on their own. A law may acknowledge a student's right to voice their opinions, but it cannot supply computers for layout design, cameras for photojournalism, or mentors who are aware of the evolving needs of digital media. Only when people have the information, self-assurance, and means to exercise their rights do they become meaningful. Without these, the Campus Journalism Act runs the risk of ceasing to be a true representation of educational equality and instead becoming a symbol of good intentions.

Higher education institutions can rethink their role in this situation. Universities shouldn't continue to be exclusive knowledge hubs accessible only to those who are fortunate enough to gain admission. Alternatively, they can collaborate with rural communities, bringing their knowledge outside of the classroom to schools that most need it. This vision can be realized through the Journalism Education for All (JEFA) extension model. The program sees journalism as an ongoing process of learning, empowerment, and mentoring rather than as a one-time competition or a seasonal activity.

The JEFA model's strength is its conviction that real learning occurs via experience. Students practice interviewing, writing, editing, broadcasting, and working in editorial teams in addition to memorizing journalistic concepts. They deal with deadline pressure, the obligation of ethical reporting, and the joy of creating important stories. In addition to being instructors, university professors and student journalists also act as mentors, helping younger students at every stage of development. In this setting, journalism transforms from an academic endeavor into a practical activity that fosters self-assurance, self-control, and critical thinking.

The extension program's ability to transform communities rather than just individuals is perhaps its most inspiring feature. Advisers for school papers receive expert assistance, which lessens the loneliness that frequently deters them from maintaining campus publications. No matter where they live, student writers learn that their voices should be heard. Schools that previously thought of journalism contests as far-off dreams start creating publications that represent the goals, realities, and culture of their local communities. The influence goes beyond winning competitions; it fosters a culture in which telling stories becomes a shared duty and a source of community pride.

The Division Schools Press Conference's participating schools' outstanding progress demonstrates how opportunity can reveal hidden brilliance. Long-ignored rural schools began placing highly in writing, layout, photojournalism, and broadcasting. Talent can be found everywhere, even in the most isolated villages, as evidenced by students who previously doubted their skills could qualify for higher levels of competition. Their accomplishments serve as a reminder that failure does not always indicate a lack of aptitude; rather, it frequently indicates a lack of resources and guidance.

Even so, these successes show that there is still much to be done. Outside of the classroom, rural students still encounter obstacles. Financial difficulties prevent participation in regional competitions, unreliable internet connections limit access to digital learning, and many schools still lack the equipment needed for contemporary journalism. Inequality is exacerbated by unequal access to technology in a time when information is instantly disseminated via digital platforms. Students from all communities need to be prepared with digital literacy and the ability to spot false information in addition to traditional writing skills if journalism is to stay relevant.

Because of this, cooperation rather than just legislation is essential to the future of campus journalism. Universities should keep developing long-term extension programs that foster the growth of both advisers and students, while government agencies should bolster policies that offer rural schools sustainable funding. Instead of being limited to yearly competitions, journalism education ought to be a continuous collaboration that fosters civic engagement, ethical communication, and critical thinking all year long.

In the end, rural journalism is about more than just contests, regulations, or educational initiatives. It is about young people who have worthwhile stories to share but are far too frequently denied the opportunity to do so. It concerns communities whose voices ought to be heard alongside those of more affluent educational institutions. The freedom to express oneself may be protected by law, but education empowers individuals to make meaningful use of that freedom.

The JEFA extension model serves as a reminder that significant change starts when organizations embrace the deeper responsibility of empowering communities rather than just meeting legal requirements. Journalism becomes more than just a classroom activity when universities share their expertise with the Kalinga Mountains and other underprivileged regions. It serves as a link between expression and silence, between participation and seclusion, and between untapped potential and real opportunity. Then and only then will campus journalism be able to fulfill its promise of providing every Filipino student, regardless of location or situation, with a fair and balanced avenue.