A decade ago, the World Bank estimated that corruption was costing the Philippine government $47 million a year. Current figures are surely higher. It’s a problem that has impeded social development and weakened institutional structures in this young democracy. Stealing from government coffers has been blamed as the root cause of the country’s poverty because resources that should be allotted for much-needed social services go to the pockets of those in power.

It’s bad enough that corruption is prevalent in the Philippines, but it’s worse when those whom the people trust to report on stories like these are involved in corrupt activities themselves. This project aims to help news organizations mitigate the problem and hopefully, start a debate about this so-called “elephant in the room.”

RATIONALE

In promoting its book entitled “News for Sale,” The Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism writes: “No one in (Philippine) journalism will deny that media corruption exists. There is contention only in the extent of the corruption and the damage it causes.” Corruption comes in different forms: from the $10 bribe given to a reporter by a news source in exchange for a favorable write up to putting a journalist on the payroll of a politician to ensure consistent good stories that will advance the politician’s interest.

‘Tackling the Elephant in the Room’ recognizes that the seeds of corruption among journalist start when they are not paid decent wages by their news organizations. This project will not try to solve corruption at the level of influential journalists who receive expensive gifts in the form of new cars, but with those less affluent journalists who are forced to receive the $10 bribe just to make both ends meet. It will initially focus its efforts on five young reporters from the Philippines’ poorer provinces. The project will partner with an existing non-profit organization to give the families of these five reporters access to microfinance services so they can augment their income in exchange for embracing the principles of honest journalism. It will also give these journalists a chance to contribute to an audio newspaper, an online news startup that will pay for their stories--all while giving them training in journalism ethics.

CHANGING LIVES, FIVE REPORTERS AT A TIME

For a year, five impoverished students fresh out of journalism school will experience skills and ethics training that will help them be better equipped journalists. While working their regular shifts on their first newsrooms, they will also undergo values formation seminars and regular skills workshop. They will be asked to sign a no-corruption commitment. After a year, they will be asked to talk about this experience and inspire others to do the same.

The objective of the project is to start small and achieve tangible results: if it can influence five less affluent journalists every year to say no to media corruption for a year and have them tell their stories to inspire others on the project’s website later on, it would have helped achieved this goal.

DETAILED PROJECT DESCRIPTION
The project has tapped the cooperation of the National Union of Journalists in the Philippines (NUJP) in selecting five rural based journalists to participate in the project. The NUJP will provide them with values formation seminars in journalism ethics.

In providing the families of these journalists access to microfinance loans, ‘Tackling the Elephant in the Room’ will partner with an existing Microfinance Institution engaged in giving access to microfinance services for the poor. It will also work with practicing micro-entrepreneurs who can provide advice and inspiration as well as initial handholding for the recipients of the loans.

Lastly these journalists will also be given a chance to contribute their stories to an online news start up, an audio newspaper developed by Stanford Knight Fellow John Duncan to augment their income.

Supporting these journalists will hopefully initiate efforts to advance the principles of honest journalism. The project will strive to aid them financially in exchange for a commitment to embrace a certain code of ethics.

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**HOW THE PROJECT BUILDS ON EXISTING EFFORTS**

Big news organizations have started implementing rules on how their reporters should act when offered gifts. ABS-CBN Broadcasting Corp., the Philippines’ largest broadcasting network has launched its Standards and Ethics Manual and has advocated a policy of “zero tolerance” for media corruption. It has been known to fire members of its news organization found to be compromised by lobby groups. But ABS-CBN is a news company that pays its people well. Journalists who belong to smaller news organizations, specifically those based in the countryside do not enjoy the same institutional support that will help them resist corruption.

This project pioneers in the effort to support these less privileged journalists who are susceptible to accepting bribes because they are not paid well.

**EXPECTED OUTPUT**

For 12 months, these five reporters will be given values formation seminars and financial support in exchange for their commitment to embrace a standard code of ethics for journalists. Their stories will be posted online to inspire others to start talking about media corruption and hopefully inspire the public to take steps in finding solutions to the problem.

Success will be measured by written commitments that will be made by these five journalists and continuous monitoring of their progress.

**Project timeline;**

MONTH 0 – Submit project proposal to the Knight Fellowship at Stanford University, in compliance with the requirements of the fellowship program

- Secure funding for the project
– Secure commitments from microfinance institutions and journalist groups that will help implement the project

MONTH 1 – Select five journalists to participate in the project

MONTH 2 – Begin series of values formation training among these journalists and microfinance training for their families

MONTH 3 – Disburse microfinance loans

MONTH 4-10
– monthly monitoring by microfinance institutions; progress will be tracked on the project’s blog
– every month, these journalists will be asked to write about their struggles with media corruption, the challenges they face and insights they may have made from the experience
– journalists can begin contributing stories to the online newspaper

MONTH 11

Expected output:
- an interview with each of the journalists on the impact of the project on their lives to be posted on the project’s blog
- a documentary telling the story of these five people to be posted on the project’s blog

ADDITIONAL NOTES FROM THE AUTHOR

I’ve been a political journalist for the last twelve years in the Philippines and I have experienced first hand how the media have become an important influence on how people vote their leaders. I’ve also seen how a compromised media can do a disservice to democracy.

This sense of disillusionment has always challenged me to do something to solve the problem other than just talking about it among my colleagues. This is the reason why I proposed to write a standard and ethics manual for journalists as my final project when I took graduate courses in journalism at Stanford University, under the John S. Knight Fellowships for Journalists. Over the course of the year, however, I realized that an ethics manual alone will not achieve the desired social impact if journalists not live by them or even read them. Thus was born the idea for building a support network for journalists to advance the principles of honest journalism.

I believe I am suited to carry out this project because I am an adherent to the principles of honest journalism myself, and because I am determined to make a difference in solving the problem of media corruption in the Philippines. I know that when provided with the needed support to get this project going, it will make a significant impact in promoting good journalism in my country.