

Opinion is critical and freedom of expression an inalienable (natural) right. Too is the right to information and often we assume they are the same thing. Yet information is essentially data and fact. Unfortunately, too much reporting the world over is poorly rooted in fact and too heavily in opinion and hearsay. The sorry financial state of traditional media outlets is in part to blame.

But so too current media practices.

Of course, it is easier to report what somebody is saying – and often alleging– about something than it is to verify whether what they are saying has any basis in fact.

So-called “he said: she said,” reporting is often entertaining, but it is not necessarily enlightening.

A famous newspaper editor once wrote way back in 1921 that “comment is free, but facts are sacred.” Media’s second duty (the first being to financially survive) is surely to provide verified

news and information to the best of its ability. Only then can analysis and opinion follow.

The point of all this is to highlight the recent furor around the education budget and the future funding of state universities and colleges (SUC). Argument surrounded the question of whether the budget has or has not been cut for next year.

There have been dozens of column inches devoted to the subject each day recently as there has been much about student demonstrations and plans for demonstrations and strikes: We got to read and hear many claims and counter claims of politicians and professors. Yet, until this weekend, how well were the media helping us to sort out the facts?

Many people last week were claiming the tertiary education budget for 2011 has been cut – while others –including President Aquino – were claiming this is absolutely not so. Budgets earmarked for universities have been cut, according to some –with university professors being quoted as saying students face a 300 per cent increase in tuition next year.

Politicians on opposing sides traditionally try and score points off the other – that is rarely news since we know it already. What we want more is for the media to tell us what we don’t know.

We got the debate, but not the actual facts.

So it was good to see a refreshing [headline](#) on page one of the Manila Bulletin on Saturday (November 27) which asked simply: “What is the real score on budget for tertiary education?”

It led with the very good question: “Are students in state universities and colleges (SUCs) misinformed when they staged walkouts and sit-ins against the supposed cut in budgets for their schools in the 2011 national budget?”

The article essentially highlighted the fact that the apparent ‘cut’ in funding was actually a decision to omit this year’s Congressional initiative for capital outlay projects in the 2011 proposed budget.

But in fact, the Congressional initiative (also known as a Congressional insertion) amounting to PhP 1.8 billion (USD 42 million) has not actually been spent this year – and it cannot be spent –until and unless new revenue is found to cover it. So in fact it never really formed part of the 2010 existing operating budget.

When you look at the actual 2010 budget for tertiary education against the proposed 2011 budget, what you see is an actual increase in spending.

Of course this is without regard to inflation and any rising costs related to the education sector – not to mention any urgent needs it has – but that is a separate issue. The issue here was/is, about whether or not the SUC budget is being cut.

It seems not.

Unfortunately, in the same Saturday issue of the Manila Bulletin, a separate [story](#) on page five was headlined “Students Stage Walkout Against Cut in SUC funding.”

So a confusing message is still being put out by the media.

In trying to find out the truth as best I could about the budget this weekend, I went to the source – at least what I thought was the best source – the Department of Education website.

Unfortunately there was precious little news to be found there about what was such a topical issue last week. Instead I found only short news stories about new uniforms being introduced, vegetable gardens being planted - and pledges that a million new pencils had been bought in a bid to combat illiteracy (?).

Surely somebody in the DepEd could have put up clarification on the budget issue in recent days. Instead though it was left to the Official Gazette to put up the government position and to show, in the third paragraph of a [statement](#) put out by Budget and Management Secretary Florencio Abad, that there was, in fact, no actual budget cut.

So what is the conclusion to all this? The conclusion I come to is that to separate fact from fiction on this issue, I felt I had to go to the source and to the official government websites concerned. The internet should actually be making it easier – and quicker -- for the media to verify basic information.

It is surely a wake-up call to the traditional media that it must first provide the news and information before all the comment otherwise they are in danger of being increasingly

by-passed by people and increasingly irrelevant as people cut them out in their search for basic information such as next year’s SUC budget.

**Alan Davis**

Director, Philippine Public Transparency Reporting Project

Head of Asia, Institute for War and Peace Reporting