



Summation: The Philippine Press Today — In Extremis*

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The Philippine communication system today appears to be *in extremis* in both its print and broadcast components; its credibility — or whatever remains of it after eleven years of constitutional authoritarianism — in tatters from the maelstrom of recent events.

The country's mass media, grossly personified in the so-called "controlled press," the daily newspapers published out of Manila, stand accused of purveying dis-information, of printing half-truths, of actually presenting distortions of the truth, and obstructing the "free flow of ideas," by warping it.

They have, in fact, been tried in the court of public opinion and found guilty of renegeing on their public trust, and sentence has been passed though a popular boycott of the major dailies that is even now expanding nationwide.

But the problem appears to go deeper, striking at the very essence of "development". It has spawned a host of contradictions in Philippine communications and made it all the more difficult for journalists to practice their craft.

*Culled from a 1983 country report prepared by the author on "The Philippine Communication System as it Relates to the UNESCO Media Declaration."

Philippine media spans the entire range of journalistic experience, from the issue of press freedom to sensationalism, to conscious news manipulation and self-censorship by practitioners themselves, to the unholy convergence of government and publishers' interests, to outright repression and harassment, to government or military intervention in reportage, to a real climate of fear obtaining from government's introverted perception that mass communication must serve official ends — and anything else is subversive.

Reality projects the Filipino journalist today as being more vulnerable than ever to "controls", pressure or influence of such extraneous interests as (1) newspaper owners, (2) advertisers, and (3) government itself. Those who insist on their "freedom to report" are either forced to resign, fired, slapped with harassment suits, imprisoned or even killed.

'Victimized' Journalists

We must consider the following documented cases.

* *Bulletin Today* correspondent Demetrio Dingcong was shot dead in 1984 by the Constabulary bodyguard of a high government official in Iligan City on Mindanao, Southern Philippines, after exposing anomalies involving government men.

* Letty J. Magsanoc, editor of the *Panorama* (circulation: 350,000), Sunday magazine of the English-language broad sheet daily, *Bulletin Today*, was pressured to resign in July 1981 by her own publisher, when she questioned the results of President Ferdinand E. Marcos' victory at the polls. Simultaneously, Minister Ricardo Puno of Justice and Jose Roño of Local Governments as well as Commission on Election Chairman Vicente Santiago wrote the publisher expressing "indignation" and threatening to file libel and subversion charges against the *Panorama*.

* In December 1982, the outspoken English tabloid, *We Forum*, was raided and sequestered by military operatives and its editor, Jose Burgos, Jr., detained with 13 of his staffers and columnists, including former Sen. Francisco "Soc" Rodrigo, Dean Armando Malay, Cris Martinez and Teodoro Cecilio. They were released to the status of house arrest after one week of incarceration at Fort Bonifacio. The *Forum* had been printing articles questioning the authenticity of President Marcos' war medals.

* While Burgos, Rodrigo, Malay and company were being tried for subversion, the Armed Forces' National Intelligence Board, said to be the highest body in the country's intelligence community, summoned — the military insisted they were merely "invited" — eight women journalists to a "dialogue to shed light on confidential matters." The first called by National Intelligence Committee No. 2 — *Panorama* Editor Domini T.

Suarez, associate editor Lorna Kalaw Tirol, free-lance writers Ceres Doyo and Jo-Ann Maglipon, and *Bulletin* columnists Arlene Babst and Ninez Cacho-Olivares — were told that their failure to answer the summons would automatically constitute a waiver of rights and clear the way for more drastic action to be taken against them. The women were grilled on everything, from their private lives to their political beliefs. Shortly afterwards, two more women journalists — *Mr. & Ms. Magazine* Editor Eugenia Apostol and Managing Editor Doris Nuyda — went through a similar ordeal. All of them had been critical of the government's policies and programs, particularly in the countryside.

* When the women filed an injunction with the Supreme Court protesting the incident, in January 1983, the government announced the "dismantlement" of the special committee and the High Tribunal declared the petition "technically moot and academic." Days afterwards, the military filed multi-million peso libel suits against Ms. Suarez and Doyo, with the publisher excluded from the charge sheet.

* In April 1983, a community newspaper, the weekly *San Pedro Express* in Davao City, Mindanao, was closed down by the military "for publishing a denial by the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) of a certain encounter."

* Again in April, Antonio Nieva, *Bulletin* Senior Editor and president of the newspaper's employees union, was held by the military on a Presidential Commitment Order and detained on a charge of inciting to rebellion. The arrest came three months after a strike by the *Bulletin* Union protesting unfair labor practices and barely a week after five existing newspaper unions agreed to band together in a brotherhood that would later be launched as a journalists' guild. Nieva was released under house arrest after three weeks of detention.

* In May 1983, *Bulletin* Editor-in-Chief Ben Rodriguez was forcibly "retired" by his publisher. Rodriguez was described as being "not cooperative enough," the last straw apparently being a report on military abuses in Abra Province, Northern Luzon, filed by *Bulletin* correspondent Isidoro Chammag and front-paged in early May.

* Chammag himself is now hobbled by a P5-million libel case because of the Abra story. We Forum Editor Burgos faces a P40-million suit filed also by the military.

* Recah Trinidad, Editor of *Bulletin's* English-language sister-tabloid, *Tempo*, was forced to resign in December 1983 because of his attempt to carry a balanced coverage of protest actions and human rights abuses.

* In July, all four women columnists of the *Bulletin* — Babst, Olivares, Sylvia Mayuga and Melinda Quintos de Jesus — were finally

sacked, and *Bulletin* Publisher Brig. Gen. Hans Menzi himself admitted on September 27, 1983 he had been "criticized heavily regarding some ladies I had in my paper."

The Publishers' Interests

Of the cases enumerated, eight involve the *Bulletin*, the largest-circulated daily in the country today (circulation: 350,000) and show the publisher's involvement, directly or indirectly in terminal actions meted on journalists. This has not been lost on the working press, on July 15, 1981, the National Press Club issued a statement "deploring an unhealthy trend that turns newsmen into sacrificial lambs of publishers in the perpetuation of their interests." Reacting to the Magsanoc ouster, the NPC asked: "How can the working press have the courage and moral conviction to tell the truth, however painful it may be, when their own publishers find it easy to subordinate press freedom for profit and political convenience?"

The publisher or newspaper owner illustrates what is probably the single biggest constraint to the exercise of press freedom.

The media ownership pattern in the Philippines today is hardly representative of multi-sectoral interests. In fact, its present structure discourages public participation.

One of the reasons given by President Marcos for the sequestration of pre-martial law papers and radio-television facilities on September 21, 1972, the day Proclamation 1081 went in force, was their oligarchic structure of ownership which, he said, negated the essence of press freedom.

What seemed to have been overlooked is that the very nature of the media business in a free enterprise society renders an elitist or oligarchic control inevitable. The profit motive is ever present, as Publisher Menzi himself admitted in a speech before the Ateneo University's student body on August 20, 1981; "As to financial success, I ask you — can growth of a publication be attained without financial operational gains? Never, I assure you, the earnings of a publication versus capital investment is not the best, let aside the risks involved. As in any other business, the Press is entitled to a fair financial return."

In the early stage of the martial law period, Marcos enacted a decree requiring all media corporations to do business, but this law eventually was shelved. Efforts by the government to broaden the mass media ownership only resulted in the very opposite of what was avowedly sought. Today, mass media ownership is more concentrated in the hands of a few than before:

* General Menzi, a former senior military aide to Marcos, is owner and publisher of *Bulletin*, the tabloids *Tempo* and Pilipino-language *Balita*,

and a chain of weekly magazines including the *Panorama*, *WHO*, *Sine*, *Liwayway*, *Bannawag* and *Bisaya*.

* Ambassador Roberto Benedicto, a sugarman and banker close to the President, owns the *Philippine Daily Express* and *Weekend Magazine*. In the television and broadcast industry, he controls Channel 2, 13 and 9, and about a dozen radio stations affiliated with Kanlaon Broadcasting System.

* Ambassador to the United States Benjamin Romualdez, a younger brother of Mrs. Marcos, owns the Philippine Journalists, Inc, chain of publications which includes the morning daily, the *Times Journal*, the afternoon daily *Times-Mirror*, the tabloids *People's Journal*, *People's Tonight*, the Pilipino-language *Taliba*, the *Chinatown News*, *Architectural Journal*, the weekly *People Magazine*, *Parade* and *Women's Journal*.

Kerima Polotan Tuvera, wife of Presidential Executive Assistant Minister Juan Tuvera, owns the *Evening Post*, the morning daily *Metro Manila Times*, *Focus Magazine* and the Chinese-language *Orient News*.

The newspaper owners are organized into the Philippine Association of Publishers, Inc. (PAPI) now headed by Mrs. Polotan, which has a say in the allocation of newsprint at controlled prices. Non-member papers have to get their newsprint supplies from Chinese dealers at exorbitant rates.

An agreement inked by PAPI two years ago with the Ministry of Public Information provides that only its members, properly attested to, may benefit from the advertising placements of government corporations and agencies.

Between them, the publishers keep the Filipino journalist effectively leashed.

Wages are low, from P700 to P800 a month plus living allowances of P330 for newspaper workers, while journalists get from P1,500 to P1,700 also with a P330 allowance.

Trade unionism is discouraged, and any attempts at labor organizing is met with swift disciplinary action that does not preclude actual dismissal.

Advertising Pressure

Advertisers exert as much unholy influence over free reportage.

The most recent case of the advertising bloc's intervention was the unexplained cancellation of movie actress Liv Ulmann's scheduled appearance on a TV talk show, "Ms. Ellaneous." Miss Ulmann was in Manila to promote breast-feeding. One of the show's biggest sponsors was Nestle & Company.

In 1978, a *Panorama* staff writer, Chelo Banal, was chastised in a public apology carried by the *Bulletin* on its front page, after movie theater owners threatened to pull out all their film ads over an article by Miss Banal

exposing a cartel in cinema distribution.

Small papers fighting for survival are often forced into grossly discounted contracts with ad agencies for much-needed placements. In the process, they are co-opted and end up as a mere outlet for press releases.

Government Pressures

Government intervention in the Philippine press is manifested through guidelines handed down at the start of martial law and which media practitioners have internalized. These guidelines, in a nutshell, enjoin the journalist from writing (1) anything critical of the First Family, (2) any story that would jeopardize national security, (3) any item that would peril military operations and police investigations, (4) any article tending to cast aspersions on the military, and (5) any report inimical to the interests of the Philippines, its culture and its people.

From time to time, the Presidential Malacañang Press office would call up newsdesks in the event of a major newsbreak that could affect government interests, to inform editors on whether the story should be played up or down — or placed under total embargo.

The same practice is employed by other key government ministries as well as the military.

In the August 21 assassination of Opposition leader Benigno S. Aquino, Jr., the film negatives of all newsphotographers covering the airport were confiscated by Aviation Security operatives.

The *Daily Express* was forced to scuttle an extra edition it was preparing on orders of a ranking official of the Ministry of Public Information.

Newspaper editors were explicitly told they could not use words like "assassination," and "sympathizers," and to substitute them instead with plain "killing" and "mourners" which are neutral.

During the 26-kilometer funeral procession for the slain arch-political rival of Marcos, editors were again told not to use photos showing the massive turnout of Filipinos.

The crowd that participated in the Aquino funeral was the biggest ever in Philippine history, estimated at close to two million or so, but the papers carried scaled down figures the next morning, with one paper reporting it at 50,000.

There was not a single footage on all TV channels, despite the fact that it was *the* event of the moment, and this in a sense served to expose government controls of the press to a vast number of people.

Only one radio station, the Catholic church-owned Radio Veritas rendered a faithful coverage of the signal event.

Only weeks before, all TV channels as well as radio stations carried a live coverage of the wedding of the President's daughter in Ilocos Norte Province, replaying it again and again down to the last innocuous detail.

Responsibility of Journalists

All these, of course, touch on the responsibility of journalists and other agents of the media in informing the world about the struggle of the oppressed people against colonialism, neo-colonialism, foreign occupation and all forms of racial discrimination and oppression; about the socio-economic evils of malnutrition and diseases, aspirations of the people to eliminate ignorance and misunderstanding and thus contribute to the task of reducing international tension.

For one, no newspaper will carry a detailed account of the Tingguian tribesmen's struggle to protect their ancestral lands in Abra from the encroachment of the Cellophil Corporation which is after its tree resource.

The U.S.-R.P. military bases agreement is another taboo subject that may not be written about critically.

Abuses by the military, if they do happen, are better left alone.

Any report of encounters between government troops and dissident forces must come from the military and from no other source.

The Ecumenical Movement for Justice and Peace, in a statement September 16, cites the following incidents involving news distortion:

* The Daet, Camarines Norte massacre of four farmers in June 1981 by Constabulary troops who, opened fire on 4,000 people conducting a peaceful rally. The military version of the incident, which was the only version carried by the papers, attributed the massacre to the New People's Army.

* The Hinunangan, Southern Leyte massacre in March 1982 where nine farmers were mowed down with rifle fire after being lined up by PC troopers. Again, this incident was pinned on rebels.

* The gunslaying of Dr. Remberto dela Paz, in Catbalogan town, Samar, in August 1982. The military insisted it was the NPA's who did it until public outcry forced them to produce the killer, a soldier.

* The gunslaying of another medic, Dr. Juan Escandor, whom the military said died in an encounter. An inquiry by human rights groups indicated the contrary.

In any case, no newspaperman would dare engage in investigative reportage on such incidents for fear of falling afoul of government statutes.

Three statutes support such moves. These are the National Security Code, the Public Order Act, and the controversial Decrees 1834 and 1835.

This, in effect, is how things stand with the Philippine press today.