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**CONFESSIONS  
OF A SMALL TOWN  
JOURNALIST**

# PJR REPORTS

Published by the Center for Media Freedom & Responsibility

JULY 2008

Ethical Dilemmas and the Drilon Kidnapping

## WHEN JOURNALISTS ARE **NEWS**



# EDITOR'S NOTE

**PJRREPORTS**

PUBLISHED BY THE CENTER FOR MEDIA FREEDOM & RESPONSIBILITY

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## Court decisions and other blows to press freedom

**T**HE DISMISSAL by the Makati Regional Trial Court (RTC) of the class suit filed by the Center for Media Freedom and Responsibility and other media organizations and individual journalists outraged over the arrest of several dozen practitioners during the so-called Manila Peninsula siege could yet be the biggest legal blow to press freedom to date.

While the ruling cannot compare in impact to the continuing killing of journalists, it was issued in the context of a clear policy by a regime hostile to press freedom and the people's right to information to do all it can, both within and outside the law, to deny the press its Constitutionally-guaranteed right to cover events of public interest. This policy undermines the public's sovereign right to information.

In the Peninsula incident, the regime stretched the definition of obstruction of justice to include journalists' doing their job of covering events of public interest, and arrested journalists even after the so-called military rebels had been taken into custody. It did so without saying why they were being so treated, and on the pretext of determining who were legitimate journalists and who were not, hauled them off to a police camp for "processing."

It was the worst incident of its kind in the history of the struggle for press freedom since 1946—worse than any attempt by government to restrain the press during the several coup attempts against the Aquino administration in the 1980s, and worse even than during the martial law period, when no journalist was ever arrested while doing his or her job.

By arresting journalists who were at the scene of an event of public concern, the regime was in effect saying through its coercive instrumentalities that covering such an event is illegal, and withdrawal from the scene of crisis is the only legitimate decision a media organization can make.

The decision to stay and to continue to cover a developing story, or to withdraw from the scene, is the editorial prerogative of a Constitutionally-protected press. It is at the very heart of the capacity of the press to discharge its duty to the public. By preempting the right of the press to decide either way, and declaring that there is only one right way, which is not to cover a story, the regime usurps a function and right that belongs only to the press. No regime has the right to dictate that a decision to stay and cover is wrong and can be penalized.

The RTC decision, if not challenged, would not only legitimize an illegitimate attempt to subvert press freedom, the Constitution, and democracy. It would also embolden an already aggressively anti-press freedom regime to repeat the offense, as it has several times threatened to do.

The RTC decision came in the heels of the killing of one more journalist. Like most of the others killed, he was a colleague in the community press. The assassination of Fausto "Bert" Sison last June 30 demonstrates that while the killings have abated, they are continuing as a sustained blow against press freedom.

It reminds us all that while the legal is an important arena in the continuing effort to defend press freedom, the killing of journalists is still a major factor in undermining it, and that the defense of press freedom is as urgent a task as ever during the reign of a regime whose indifference to the killings on the one hand, and whose sustained assault through legal and other means on the other, has evolved into the worst threat to free expression and democracy since the Marcos dictatorship.

Luis V. Teodoro

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*PJR Reports* welcomes feedback and contributions on press and media issues.

## PRESSED FREEDOM

By Manix Abrera



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## THE COVER

**The kidnapping of ABS-CBN 2's Cecilia Victoria "Ces" Drilon provoked a spirited discussion on ethical issues.**

Cover photo by JOSEPH VIDAL  
/HTTP://WWW.GMANEWS.TV

### Biggest chill yet

"Effectively, the ruling puts journalists under the police, nay, at their mercy. It signals to the police that next time any journalist disobeys them they can arrest him, cuff him, haul him to jail, and detain him. It is frightening to imagine what, with such police and judicial mindset, can happen to practitioners in the provinces, where they are particularly vulnerable, as evidenced by the highest number of disappearances and killings among their ranks.

"Indeed, Judge (Reynaldo) Laigo's ruling sends the biggest chill yet across the media profession, because it kills a journalist's last chance at keeping his freedom—freedom that he exercises not for himself, by the way, but, as constitutional watchdog on the powers that be, for all of society."

*BusinessWorld on the June 29 decision of Makati Regional Trial Court Judge Reynaldo Laigo to dismiss the class suit filed by journalists and media organizations regarding the Manila Peninsula incident, June 30*

"The decision of Makati Regional Trial Court Judge Reynaldo Laigo to dismiss the class suit filed by journalists and media organizations against the Philippine National Police (PNP) for unlawfully arresting journalists during the Peninsula Manila incident last November is a terrible mistake. It misreads the context of the journalists' detention, it rewards the police for unbecoming conduct. Not least, it adds to the erosion that has steadily undermined press freedom in the Age of Gloria....

"Judge Laigo said he found that the charges brought against the PNP 'do not constitute sufficient cause of action for damages against the defendants that warrants further prosecution of the instant case.'

"We beg to disagree, not least because the ruling does not accord with the reality that transpired on the night of Nov. 29. As we wrote in this space a couple of days after the Trillanes takeover telenovela: 'very few would disagree that the way the police handled—or more accurately, manhandled—the members of the media who were covering the event bordered on ruthlessness.'

"That, in fact, was the point: to make an example of the media. The use of plastic tie wraps, the herding of news personnel to the buses, the gun-pointing and stick-beating, above all the inexplicable insistence on identifying media workers inside a police camp, instead of on the scene (a scene already secured by thousands of policemen)—all this was meant to humiliate those who had the temerity to cover the country's latest spasm of military adventurism.

"Laigo's contention that the complainants were fortunate the police did not file counter-charges against them is not only misplaced; it is unjust. The filing of counter-charges (at one time seriously contemplated by the Arroyo administration) would have added abuse of the processes of the administration of justice to the tactics of harassment.

"The judge added: 'the right of the plaintiffs as members of the press as guaranteed under the Constitution was not violated and trampled upon by the respective acts of the defendants complained of.'

"Again, we strongly disagree. As a review of the reporting from the hotel all the way to Camp Bicutan will readily show, PNP officials were remarkably inconsistent about the reason for the journalists' detention. Some even denied the fact, calling the unusual action mere 'processing'. (By such rationalizing misuse of bureaucratic language are crimes by officials committed and covered up.) Other officials hinted darkly at possible 'obstruction of justice'—an incredible accusation rendered even more unbelievable by the casting of such a wide net. (At one time, the PNP chief and other police officers pointed meaningfully in the direction of certain journalists, alleging involvement in the escape of a Magdalo mutineer, but they have failed to produce evidence to persuade even fellow officers.)

"We mustn't also forget that the Arroyo administration imposed a curfew that night for the first time since martial-law days. If it wasn't clear then, it is transparent now: The curfew was an attempt to gauge public sentiment regarding the administration's use of harsher measures. The 'processing' of the journalists who covered the Pen incident was part of that plan....

"Full of confidence in the quality of the judiciary, this newspaper wrote last year: 'Let's see if (the PNP chief) can find a friendly judge who will declare it a crime to cover...breaking news.' Unfortunately, Laigo has done just that. The effect of his decision, which must immediately be appealed, is to make it a crime to cover the news—merely on the police's say-so."

Philippine Daily Inquirer, June 30

### On libel

"In a working democracy, the free flow of information and ideas—even if there are mistakes and lapses—is crucial. Criminalizing libel tends to restrict that flow of information."

*Journalist and educator Chay Hofilena, on Olivarez's conviction, abs-cbnNEWS.com/Newsbreak, June 6, http://www.abs-cbnnews.com/storyPage.aspx?storyId=120833*

## LETTER TO THE EDITOR

### Baseless reports

Dear Editor,

**I**N ITS April and May-June issues, the *PJR Reports* wrote about perceived ethical or journalistic lapses on the part of VERA Files. What your writers said about our work is baseless and wrong.

The first article that mentioned VERA Files was "First Quarter Shows Coverage Boost" by Hector Bryant L. Macale and Apple Jean C. Martin, which came out in your April 2008 issue. That story came with a sidebar that merely echoed what had already been published in the papers – that Sen. Juan Miguel Zubiri complained about the VERA Files story, "Ethical lapses mark passage of biofuels law" by Jessica Hermosa and Johanna Sisante, exposing him as having business interests in the Biofuels Law he sponsored in Congress; that Zubiri insinuated Hermosa and Sisante misrepresented themselves when they told him they were University of the Philippines (UP) students doing research on biofuels; that VERA Files responded by saying there had never been any misrepresentation because the two were indeed UP students and the report was originally part of a thesis submitted to the UP Journalism Department.

Why *PJR Reports* chose to highlight this point puzzles us. It is a non-issue. Hermosa and Sisante strictly abided by the interview conditions that were set in the course of their research. As you well know, UP journalism students are routinely sent out to cover stories and write news reports. They introduce themselves as students. If their work meets journalistic standards, their stories are likely to see print. The same is true with undergraduate or graduate theses. Those that meet the standards get published. The *PJR Reports* should know because the Center for Media Freedom and Responsibility publishes the *Philippine Journalism Review*, which gets its material from both undergraduate and graduate theses. We research and write with publication in mind.

Yet *PJR Reports* wrote, "VERA Files, however, did not say whether Zubiri was informed that the interview was also intended for mainstream publication. Journalism ethics demands that publication be made explicit through the interviewer's identifying him or herself as a journalist."

Is *PJR Reports* suggesting that there should have been a different standard for Zubiri?

The second article that mentioned VERA Files was the May-June article "Reporting UNCLOS: Foundering in the Shallows" by Don Gil K. Carreon and Kathryn Roja G. Raymundo.

The article supposedly studied how seven print, broadcast, and online news organizations covered the issue about Philippine baseline laws. Yet its supposed findings centered only on three: *The Philippine Star*, the *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, and VERA Files.

Although the writers did call VERA Files' two-part report on the Philippine baselines "laudable," it also said, "...the VERA Files reports missed out too in providing the perspective of those experts opposed to UNCLOS who are not necessarily politically motivated."

That is sloppy writing. There are no "experts opposed to UNCLOS" because there is no opposing UNCLOS. UNCLOS is the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, which the Philippines ratified in 1984. It is a done deal. It cannot be opposed. It will be implemented, whether we like it or not.

If the paragraph just happened to have been sloppily edited and the writers meant "experts opposed to the baseline bill," or "experts pushing to meet the UN deadline," then they should have read our report again because some of our sources were scientists and lawyers who had no political interest in the issue.

And your writers should have thought twice before saying, "The highly technical baseline bills were largely ignored by the networks, which did not devote a single report to it." ABS-CBN 2, GMA-7 and the other networks did devote reports to it, some of which were based on the VERA Files reports.

Yours truly,

Jennifer Santiago  
Chit Estella  
Booma Cruz  
Yvonne Chua  
Luz Rimban  
Ellen Tordesillas

### The editor replies

**P***JR Reports regrets that not all of us can be as perfect. However, may we point out that the following are matters of fact rather than opinion: (1) the PJR Reports monitor of both networks' primetime news programs shows that their reports were on the Joint Marine Seismic Undertaking agreement and not on the baseline bills; and (2) among the experts who has opposed and continues to oppose the UNCLOS, despite its being "a done deal," is former UP College of Law Dean Merlin Magallona who alleges a conflict between UNCLOS and the Philippine Constitution and who has in fact written a primer on it.*

*Our point regarding the identification of the authors of the VERA Files biofuels story is that journalists are required to identify themselves as journalists to forewarn sources that what they say will be published. The writers of the article in question identified themselves as students. But identification as students does not imply publication of the material in the mass media. An interview without the sources' awareness that it will be for publication comes dangerously close to entrapment. ■*



LITO OCAMPO

### Explaining inflation

**C**CHEERS TO the *Philippine Daily Inquirer* for explaining the state of the economy and its effect on consumers. For its June 6 banner story, the paper consulted several economic experts to discuss the sharp increase in the inflation rate ("Inflation soars to 9.6%: Peso dives below P44 to a dollar as food, fuel costs rise"). The experts cited different scenarios which could occur in the future and discussed its value to the development or worsening of the economy. The *Inquirer* also explained the consequences of double-digit inflation to the consumers and the overall financial system. The article explained that if the government is unable to control inflation, then the country would experience a phenomenon called "stagflation" in which "rising prices are aggravated by a stagnant economy brought about by weak spending." The article also explained the reasons why the government is giving subsidies to the poor.



REY BANQUET/HTTP://WWW.OPS.GOV.PH

### Forgetting

**C**CHEERS TO *The Philippine Star* for failing to explain the significance of its own lead story. Last June 9, the *Star's* "Hot money' fleeing RP" reported that portfolio investments "continued to flow out of the financial market" in June. Although it defined what portfolio investments or hot money meant, the *Star* did not explain the issue's repercussions on the general public. Given the story's prominent treatment, the *Star* could have

# MONITOR



CHEERS



JEERS

related the issue to the interest of its readers, some of whom may not understand complex economic matters.

## The old into new

JEERS TO the *Philippine Daily Inquirer* for trying to make a news story out of an old issue. The article "Razon: Bigger story behind Lozada story" repeated the statements by government officials on the abduction of the national broadband network (NBN)-Zhong Xing Telecommunications Equipment Company Ltd. controversy witness Rodolfo "Jun" Lozada Jr. (May 17, p. A1). It claimed that it was the police that saved Lozada's life and that, despite his own denials, he had sought police protection.

The *Inquirer* did not press Philippine National Police Director General Avelino Razon to explain what he meant when he said: "There are things about it (the Lozada incident) that I cannot yet reveal." The article pursued an obvious government spin by solely relying on the allegations of Razon and by not asking pertinent questions. Some "issues" the government claimed were relevant at the time, such as the alleged attempts to oust President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo were allowed to go unchallenged. The article also forgot to provide the background and context of the NBN deal considering its consequences to the economy and to politics and governance.



LITO OCAMPO

## Adding it up

CHEERS TO the *Philippine Daily Inquirer* for an article on the high cost of college education today. The *Inquirer* showed that the average Filipino family income is not enough to pay for food, rent, and other expenses, much less for a child's enrollment in any of the country's top colleges and universities ("The cost of college education: Do the math and weep and



Razon and Lozada during Senate probe of the NBN-ZTE controversy.

LITO OCAMPO

wonder," May 26, Learning section, p. I). The article had a table of tuition rates in Metro Manila colleges and universities for undergraduate freshmen this school year and compared the rates of private and state colleges and universities. It also discussed the consequences of the increase in fees in the University of the Philippines (P1,000 per unit) as compared to the Polytechnic University of the Philippines (PUP) which charges only P12 per unit. But the article could have explained how PUP still manages to charge such low tuition in these high inflation times.

## An ad or a news report?

JEERS TO the *Manila Bulletin* for packaging an ad as a news report in a May 25 story.

With fertilizer expert Gonzalo Catan Jr. as its only source, "Food production need not be expensive, says fertilizer expert" discussed how organic fertilizer can help lower the cost of food production,

noting different natural sources where farmers can source out their organic fertilizer.

But towards the end of the report, the story began to sound like an advertisement when Catan was quoted as saying "...in the light of the sky-rocketing prices of gasoline and diesel, Mapecon vermicast (organic fertilizer) is a definite alternative as has for years been proven by farmers."

Catan is the founder and the executive vice-president of Mapecon Green Charcoal Philippines. Mapecon stands for Manila Pest Control, a company that recently branched out to agribusiness.

## Missing the who

JEERS TO *The Manila Times* for an incomplete report last June 3 on the plunder cases filed against officers of Manila Electric Company (Meralco) and former Energy Regulatory Commission (ERC) officials.

The *Times* reported that at least 10

groups have filed plunder cases against ERC and Meralco officials for conniving to keep power rates high. While the report identified the people being charged and the cases being filed against them, it did not name the groups or personalities behind the cases. The paper did not provide any further reports on their identities.

## Biased reporting

JEERS TO *The Daily Tribune* for a biased report on the conviction of the paper's publisher and editor-in-chief Ninez Cacho Olivares last June 5.

The June 6 report "Olivares gets jail term, P5K fine, P5M in damages from Makati RTC court" heavily relied on Olivares's reaction to the conviction, although it cited parts of the ruling handed down by Makati Regional Trial Court Judge Winlove Dumayas.

It also accused Carpio, Villaraza and Cruz Law, the firm that filed libel suits against Olivares, of knowing what the verdict was even before it was announced. Without citing any source, the article said the media had been "tipped off by the lawyers in the Firm on the promulgation of (the sentence of) Olivares" and had been "invited a day before by the Firm to a press conference."



Kho

HTTP://WWW.LPP.GOV.PH

## No comment

JEERS TO the *BusinessMirror* for running the one-sided story "Atlas Mining's unpaid excise-tax arrears questioned" last June 16.

It failed to get the Atlas Consolidated Mining and Development Corp.'s response to Masbate representative Antonio Kho's allegation, that they disregarded a Supreme Court order mandating them to pay taxes to their local government units.

The report should have indicated if Atlas refused or was not available to comment. ■



LITO OCAMPO

# MONITOR



CHEERS



JEERS



Estrada

LITO OCAMPO

## You did it too, remember?

**CHEERS TO ANC's Pia Hontiveros** for reminding former President Joseph Estrada that his press freedom record is not as pristine as he remembers it.

In *Top Story's* June 5 telecast, Hontiveros sought Estrada's reaction to the libel conviction of *The Daily Tribune* publisher and editor Ninez Cacho Olivares. Estrada said the conviction shows that freedom of the press is no longer practiced in the country and lamented the current government's tendency to file libel suits against critics. He added that libel should be decriminalized so this freedom would be respected.

Asked how government should deal with a critical press, Estrada cited his experience during the impeachment efforts against him where he said he did not lift a finger even when the press ganged up on him. Estrada further said he also did not try to suppress media coverage of the impeachment proceedings.

Hontiveros though did not let Estrada off the hook so easily. She reminded the deposed president how he dealt with *The Manila Times* for the "unwitting ninong" article and his advertising boycott of the *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, which was prompted by the paper's series of critical articles against him.

## One-sided

**JEERS TO Teledyaryo** for continuing to serve as a propaganda tool of the Arroyo government. *Teledyaryo* devoted an entire segment to then Press Secretary Ignacio Bunye who criticized the opposition last May 16 for allegedly reviving scandals against President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo. Photos of Arroyo, her husband, and other government officials playing golf with Zhong Xing Telecommunications Equipment Company Ltd. (ZTE) officials before the signing of the national broadband network (NBN) deal had been made public at the time, reigniting the NBN-ZTE controversy.

*Teledyaryo* came to Arroyo's rescue by faithfully reporting Bunye's claim that "Bigo na naman ang oposisyon na makita ang totoong punto na ginagawa ng pangulo ang lahat para isulong ang investment sa Pilipinas...kahanga-hanga pa nga kung tutuusin

ang sipag ng pangulo dahil ginawa niya ang lahat ng ito sa gitna ng kanyang bakasyon (Again, the opposition failed to notice all the efforts of the president to attract investments. The president's dedication to work is commendable because she did all these during her vacation)."

*Teledyaryo* failed to provide any background of the controversy, to get the side of the opposition, and even to ask if the meeting in China was official, why this was not mentioned at the height of the controversy, and if the Arroyo administration still has more information on the cancelled NBN-ZTE deal it has not revealed.

## Daboy over Independence Day

**JEERS TO 24 Oras** for choosing reports about the late actor Rudy "Daboy" Fernandez over stories on this year's celebration of Independence Day.

Last June 12, *24 Oras's* top four stories were all on the funeral of Fernandez who was laid to rest on the same day. Not content with a report that recapped what had transpired during the burial, *24 Oras* also aired reports on the program held during the necrological service for the actor, the reactions of different celebrities, the messages of the actor's family members, and how many fans waited just to see the burial.

The Philippine government's decision to prioritize its "holiday economics" policy or the practice of shifting holiday observances to the nearest Monday had already minimized the significance of Philippine Independence Day celebrations last June 12.



Arroyo and her men RENEY PAMPOLINA/PCPO

## Empty claims

**CHEERS TO Bandila** for highlighting the appalling situation in public schools, contradicting Department of Education (DepEd) Secretary Jesli Lapus's claims otherwise.

Last June 10, Lapus said that in general, the first day of classes had been "very smooth and very orderly." Lapus also boasted of the reforms that DepEd supposedly implemented this school year, including the non-requirement for elementary and high school students to wear

school uniforms. He added there are enough teachers for each school and enough books for students.

Exposing Lapus's empty claims, *Bandila* interviewed the principal of a public school in Pasig who lamented the lack of enough classrooms. The report also showed schools in typhoon-devastated provinces that have no electricity, blackboards, and chairs, and which use tents and covered courts as makeshift classrooms.



LITO OCAMPO

## Pushing an agenda

**JEERS TO Teledyaryo** for pushing a political agenda at the expense of more important concerns. As the opening of classes neared, *Teledyaryo* mentioned the preparations of the Department of Education including its efforts to ensure that there are enough teachers and classrooms (May 29). It could have been a good story if only the report had explained in detail these efforts and their results.

Instead, the report quoted the education secretary, who said that electric utility corporation Manila Electric Company (Meralco) should prepare for the opening of classes. Each one has a task to do to guarantee a pleasant, smooth, and safe opening. This is done yearly and all agencies know their responsibilities, *Teledyaryo* quoted Lapus as saying.

To fault Meralco for the high price of electricity is one thing, to blame it, no matter how indirectly, for the problems of basic education is another. In April, a possible government takeover of Meralco supposedly as an effort to lower electricity costs was in the news. But this was widely viewed as President Gloria

Macapagal Arroyo's way of getting back at the Lopezes for TV giant ABS-CBN 2's allegedly critical reporting on the administration.



HTTP://FLICKR.COM/PHOTOS/JRAC2002

## Biased

**JEERS TO TV Patrol World** for biased reporting.

Last June 17, it reported the negative reaction of the National Historical Institute (NHI) to the June cover of *Rogue*, a lifestyle magazine. The June cover and inside pages of *Rogue* had a nude model covered only with the Philippine flag in body paint. NHI said the photos were offensive and punishable under Republic Act 8491 or the "Flag and Heraldic Code of the Philippines".

Section 34 (e) of the Code states that it is prohibited "to wear the flag in whole or in part as a costume or uniform."

*TV Patrol* sought the reaction of the writer of the cover story. The writer, lawyer Argee Guevarra, told the reporter that the photos did not violate any provision of the Flag Code. However, the reporter added color to his story when he said: "Palusot ni Guevarra, bagama't sinabing bawal isuot ang bandila, wala namang sinabi na bawal itong ipinta sa katawan (Guevarra's excuse: Although the law states that the flag should not be worn, it did not say it could not be painted on the body)."

Contrast this *TV Patrol* report with similar accounts from *Bandila* and *Dateline Philippines*. *Bandila*, the network's late-night news program, did not use the word "palusot" (and instead used the word "ayon"). *Dateline Philippines*, an English news program shown in sister cable channel ANC, used the word "said". ■



# MONITOR

## Remembering

**CHEERS TO Bulatlat** for not forgetting the plight of former overseas Filipino worker (OFW) Norayda Katigan. The mainstream press largely ignored the story of Katigan, a 26-year-old Maguindanao native jailed and allegedly maltreated in Syria where she worked as a domestic helper. *Bulatlat* featured her experience and current condition in its June 4-8 issue ("To Hell and Back: The story of an OFW who tried to endure everything to provide for her family," <http://www.bulatlat.com/2008/06/hell-and-back-story-ofw-who-tried-endure-everything-provide-her-family>). ■

■ By Kathryn Roja G. Raymundo

**T**HE COVERAGE of the Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program (CARP) bares media's weaknesses in reporting public policy. In what has become a predictable pattern, most of the reports lacked background, context, and analysis.

Republic Act (R.A.) 6657, the Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Law (CARL), expired last June 10. But CARP caught media attention only a week earlier. R.A. 6657 was passed in 1988 under the social reform program of the Aquino administration and was extended for another ten years during the Ramos administration. CARL is the legal basis for the implementation of CARP, an asset redistribution program aimed at promoting social justice and industrialization.

# CARPING ABOUT CARP

From May 11 to June 20, *PJR Reports* monitored CARP stories, including reports on bills pending in Congress particularly the CARP extension bill (House Bill or H.B. No. 4077) and the Genuine Agrarian Reform Bill (GARB, or H.B. No. 3059), President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo's certification of the extension bill as urgent, and the clash of party-list representatives over CARP.

*PJR Reports* monitored three newspapers (the *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, *The Philippine Star*, and the *Manila Bulletin*), two news



Photos by LITO OCAMPO

programs (*TV Patrol World* and *24 Oras*), and three news sites (*The Daily PCIJ*, *abs-cbnNEWS.com/Newsbreak*, and *GMANews.TV*).

## Shallow reporting

The coverage uniformly failed to comprehensively discuss the issues of agrarian reform. The media organizations monitored also allowed the issue to pass without reporting the discussions and debates crucial to better public understanding of the urgency of land reform.



the blocking of H.B. 4077, rallied and made their wishes known in the House gallery.

Only five segments in the television news programs of ABS-CBN 2 and GMA-7 covered CARP-GARB during the entire monitoring period. Each segment devoted a minute or two reporting an issue as complicated as agrarian reform and the policies on it. For instance, *TV Patrol* in its segment "1 Minute Patrol" reported the rally of about a thousand farmers protesting the extension of CARP and the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the implementation of CARL (June 10). Few who saw this report would have realized that agrarian reform matters at all and that it affects everyone. The in-depth reports and analy-

The press reported CARP only when Arroyo signed the extension bill as urgent and both the House and the Senate began their deliberations on whether to extend the law or not. CARP-GARB became an issue only after party-list representatives exchanged harsh comments on their opposing agrarian reform views. Another event that was much covered was the interruption of the House of Representatives hearing on the extension bill by a group of pro-extension farmers, which out of frustration over



The press did not comprehensively discuss agrarian reform issues.

ses on the policies on and consequences of CARP were also conspicuous for their absence.

In a *PJR Reports* interview, former agrarian reform secretary Florencio Abad said the media were badly covering CARP issues. Abad claimed that media did not bother to explain why CARP is significant for the Philippine society in whole, the differences of opinion between the party-list groups in the House on the issue of extension, the duplicity and hypocrisy in the actions of the President as she certified the extension bill urgent while her party and relatives were voting against it, and the implications of a non-extension. He added these were very important issues the people need to understand. Unfortunately, the media were failing to provide the information the people needed.

"The problem with media is (they) work (too much) on bites. But you know, it is hard to explain a program like this through bites and media gimmick lines. You cannot (do that). You have to devote time (to the discussion of salient issues)." He suggested the media should go back to the basics of CARP so as to get some perspective from which to analyze what is happening today.

#### Missing the context

That was exactly what the media did not provide. The public was at most getting running accounts of the debates without the background and context on the agrarian reform issue needed to understand it.

Only when Arroyo had certified the CARP extension bill as urgent did reports discuss the plans of the House and the Senate to extend it for another five to 10 years.

Although there were a number of reports on the state of the extension bill and CARP, few managed to exactly define what CARP is, how it came about, and what its purpose is. The reports also mentioned the benefits and/or failures of CARP. But media did not back up these claims with independent case studies and other empirical data. The media barely discussed the effectiveness of the program and its actual contribution to the development of agriculture and the economy. An assessment of the performance of the CARL and a presentation of the different views on CARP and GARB would have helped the public decide on the relevance of agrarian reform at present.

There were also several leads the media should have pursued but did not. Among them were the history of land ownership in

the country, CARP's relevance to the rice and food crises, and corruption allegations in the Department of Agriculture and Agrarian Reform (the fertilizer fund scam, the Agrarian Reform Communities, etc.). These could have connected the policy to such current problems as the rice crisis and poverty.

#### 'Word war'

Bayan Muna Party List Rep. Teodoro Casiño, an advocate of GARB, noted another shortcoming in the media coverage of agrarian reform. Media have the tendency to pit ideas and personalities against each other, he told *PJR Reports*. In the case of the CARP coverage, the rival groups were those for extension and those opposed to it. Casiño said the media tended to simplify the issues into being pro-farmer if you favored the CARP extension, and being pro-landlord if you opposed it, whereas GARB proponents were precisely fighting for it and opposing a mere extension of CARL in behalf of farmers.

The *Star* in its story "In lieu of CARP extension, House okays land acquisition, distribution" reported the word war between Akbayan Party List Rep. Risa Hontiveros Baraquel and Bayan Muna Party List Rep. Satur Ocampo and explained their different views on what genuine agrarian reform means (June 12, page 2). It would have been better, however, if the story had recalled the histories and differing orientations of both parties.

The editorial "Unparliamentary?" by the *Inquirer* also tried to sort out the conflict between the two progressive party-list groups in the House (July 16, p.A 14). But instead of reporting on policy formation, media fell into



KRISTINE JOYCE G. MAGADIA



the trap of highlighting the personalities in battle and in engaging the public for the wrong reasons.

The GARB coverage came a little later. Casiño explained that GARB follows the "land to the tillers" slogan and seeks to correct the "congenital defects" of CARL in terms of land coverage, exemptions, and conversions. The CARP extension bill dominated the earlier reports with their own suggested reforms.

The similarities and differences plus the advantages and disadvantages of the House and Senate bills on agrarian reform rarely saw print or broadcast. This failure of the media limited the education of the public on the costs and benefits of CARP. Thus, it also limited the possibility of developing a sound policy on agrarian reform based on the opinion of informed citizens.

Casiño said the roles of the media in furthering the agrarian

reform issue were providing information and policy advocacy. He also asked for continuing coverage, emphasizing that once CARP-GARB is forgotten by the media, the politicians will also lose interest in addressing the issue.

"Media play a big role in advocating social reforms. If they would not themselves advocate, then at least they should give enough space for advocates of genuine agrarian reform to air their views, and to participate in the bigger and broader debates on the issue," Casiño said.

#### Online did better

The online reports did better than print and broadcast. *GMANews.TV* reported studies by IBON Foundation on the disadvantages of extending CARP, provided a case study in Negros Occidental showing the problems of agrarian reform, and discussed the provisions of the CARP extension bill as well as the GARB ("CARP extension meant to benefit landowners - IBON," <http://www.gmanews.tv/story/101838/CARP-extension-meant-to-benefit-landowners-IBON>, June 18; "20-year CARP fails to end feudal relations especially in Negros Occ," <http://www.gmanews.tv/story/100310/20-year-CARP-fails-to-end-feudal-relations-especially-in-Negros-Occ>, June 10; "House defers CARP extension vote, enraged farmers protest," <http://www.gmanews.tv/story/100349/House-defers-CARP-extension-vote-enraged-farmers-protest>, June 10).

For its part, *abs-cbnNEWS.com/Newsbreak* had several special reports which discussed the progress of CARL before and during the Arroyo administration including the state and position of the DAR on the extension of the bill. It also interviewed an agrarian reform expert to address the most frequently asked questions and misconceptions on CARP ("Arroyo's lack of political will blamed for non-extension of CARP," <http://www.abs-cbnnews.com/storyPage.aspx?storyId=122116>, June 20; "DAR sees CARP extension, asks for P162B more," <http://www.abs-cbnnews.com/storyPage.aspx?storyId=121234>, June 10; "Slow CARP shows need to reform DAR, says former secretary," <http://www.abs-cbnnews.com/storyPage.aspx?storyId=121537>, June 20; "Senators should not demand an accounting when CARP's life is on the line," <http://www.abs-cbnnews.com/storyPage.aspx?storyId=121216>, June 11). ■



The coverage of the debates on the CARP extension and GARB provided little context and even less analysis.



Even in past calamities (photos on the page), the coverage of disasters was lacking in substance. Photos by LITO OCAMPO



■ By Don Gil K. Carreon

# DOES THE PRESS HAVE A DISASTER POLICY?

**D**ESPITE THREE typhoons' leaving hundreds dead and billions of pesos in property and crop damage, the press has yet to report how the government plans to prepare for the 20 more the weather bureau says will be coming before the year ends.

A PJR Reports monitor of several media organization's coverage of the three typhoons that hit the country found that their focus was mainly on the extent of damage and the subsequent government response.

The monitor period was from May 6 to 18 and included the newspapers *Philippine Daily Inquirer* and *The Philippine Star*, the news programs *TV Patrol World* and *24 Oras*, and online news sites of the Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism and *Newsbreak*.

## More misses than hits

The sinking of Sulpicio Lines' M/V *Princess of the Stars* was the most reported of the devastation wrought by Typhoon Frank, so far the deadliest among the typhoons that have visited the country.

The press did not just focus on the government's search and retrieval effort for the victims' bodies. The reports also explained how the worst sea tragedies we have had to endure are largely attributable to the inefficiency of the agencies charged with ensuring the safety of maritime vessels.

The reportage on the government's disaster mitigation and preparedness policies was not as thorough, however. For example, the press barely discussed Senator Rodolfo Biazon's proposal to pass a law for the mapping of the earthquake-and typhoon-prone areas in the Philippines. The disaster map would provide the government with data so it can prepare a calamity contingency plan specific to different provinces.

Most of the reports on this

were unsatisfactory. The *Star's* May 28 article "RP not ready for natural disasters" did not explain how the proposal will be implemented if passed while *24 Oras's* May 27 report may have spooked some of its viewers with its treatment of the issue.

*24 Oras* cited Philippine Volcanology and Seismology Institute chief Renato Solidum who said the 7.9 magnitude earthquake that hit Sichuan, China last May could also hit the Philippines. Nathaniel Cruz, chief of the Philippine Atmospheric, Geophysical and Astronomical Services Administration, was also interviewed. Cruz said the agency expects 20 more typhoons to enter the country and that some could be as destructive as Cyclone Nargis. Nargis ravaged Burma also last May.

The *Star* report however did not say how the government expects to cope with such a calamity, while declaring that it did not mean to alarm people.

## Intrusive

Some reports were too intrusive on the grief of the victims. Last May 19, *TV Patrol* re-

## The reportage on the government's disaster mitigation and preparedness policies remains wanting

ported the drowning of three siblings in Dagupan after they were swept away by floods caused by Typhoon Cosme. The report included footage of the boys' mother wailing and crumpled on the ground while clutching a relative's leg. The boys' father, who was still obviously distraught over his loss, was also made to recount how his children were swept away by the flood. Footage of the grieving relatives of the passengers of the sunken ferry were also included in the *TV Patrol* reports of June 23 and 24.

## Bright spots

The press ably covered the aftermath of the typhoons by providing daily updates on property and crop damage, the death toll, and the adequacy of the government's search, rescue, and relief efforts.

There were also some notable follow-up reports on the government's rehabilitation and reconstruction efforts. *24 Oras* reported last May 22 the education department's decision to take over the reconstruction of some schools in Zambales having found that the destruction of infrastructure there by Typhoon Cosme was aided by the use of substandard materials.

Two reports by the *Inquirer* ("Central Luzon typhoon victims seek urgent help" and "Sta. Cruz town gets back on its feet after 'Cosme'") last May 22 and 24 focused on how one of the hardest hit towns by Typhoon Cosme was not getting enough aid, with the provincial government overwhelmed by the magnitude of the damage and local politics further complicating reconstruction efforts.

Only the *Inquirer* was the only one that explained fully how the government's disaster mapping project is expected to work. In a May 8 report "Now, ready to get out of harm's way," the *Inquirer* identified the participating agencies and their tasks, the provinces where the project is being implemented and the other areas where the government plans to implement it.

On the other hand, *Newsbreak* reported last May 18 how government should also prepare for climate change, which can cause deadlier weather disturbances and raise sea levels that will endanger people living near coastal areas. The report suggested what government must do to mitigate the impact of climate change and identified the areas most vulnerable to its effects. ■



■ By Kristine Joyce G. Magadia and Apple Jean C. Martin

**P**JR Reports's follow-up on last month's monitor of the media coverage of the Manila Electric Company (Meralco) controversy shows that media still failed to explain such important issues as the reasons behind high power rates.

Most reports on the Meralco stockholders' meeting last May 27 portrayed the meeting as a contest for power between the Lopez family and the Government Service Insurance System (GSIS). Following the meeting, the reports focused on the Meralco board's supposed defiance of the Securities and Exchange Commission's (SEC) cease and desist order and on the ensuing word war between such key personalities as First Philippine Holdings Corporation chairman and chief executive officer Oscar Lopez and GSIS president and general manager Winston Garcia.

## THE MERALCO FLAP MOSTLY HEAT, BUT SOME LIGHT

Those aspects of the issue most pertinent to the public's understanding of it remained unexplained. The media did not look into Garcia's claim that GSIS could lower power rates by 10 to 20 percent two months after it takes over the management of Meralco. Only a few reports checked if the intrusion of a court or a quasi-judicial body like SEC in a company dispute would have serious implications on corporate operations.

Reports on the issue also did not look into the impact of electricity costs on the inflation rate—an issue of public concern in an era of high inflation.

Neither did the reports examine the impact on the 2008 national budget of President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo's unsustainable lifeline subsidies program. The government claimed that the P2-billion budget for the lifeline dole-outs was being sourced from the value-added tax on petroleum products. However, the media did not check if it would affect the budget for other government projects or if it would affect the country's debt payment obligations.

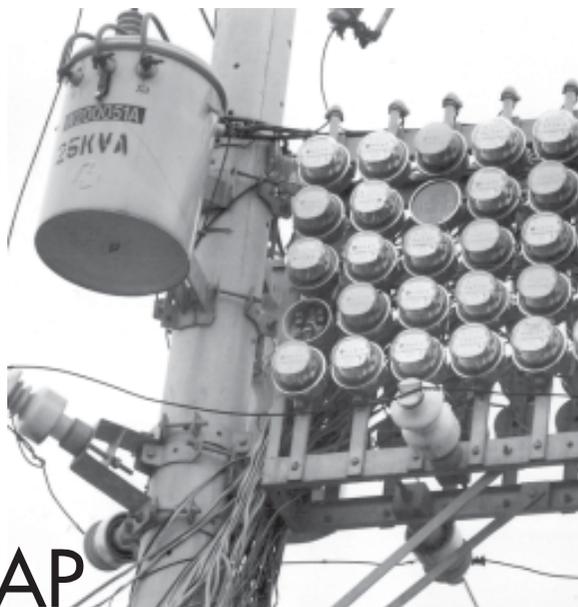
PJR Reports monitored the news pages of the *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, *The Philippine Star*, *Manila Bulletin*, *BusinessWorld*, and *BusinessMirror*; the primetime

news programs of GMA-7, ABS-CBN 2, and government-owned NBN-4; and news online sites from May 20, a week before the stockholders' meeting, to June 10.

### Showbiz flare

The media took up actress Judy Ann Santos's Meralco ad, but did not look into the others, and into the question of who was paying for them—an issue of special relevance when it comes to the obvious involvement of government agencies.

The Santos ad, which earned the ire of various cause-oriented groups and opposition politicians, likened the systems loss to a piece of melting ice's loss of volume as it is transported from one place to



Photos by LITO OCAMPO

another. According to the advertisement, charging consumers the cost of systems loss is legal and government-approved.



The program did air the side of the Meralco management but did not give it enough air time to defend itself. It also aired Garcia's claims against Meralco without verification. *Imbestigador* also highlighted Meralco customers' ire on the company's alleged inaction on their concerns and even highlighted how the program itself allegedly helped these customers.

NBN-4 was up to its usual tricks. *Teledyaryo*, NBN-4's news program, aired a number of reports criticizing Meralco for the high cost of electricity rates without getting Meralco's side. It relentlessly emphasized government's denial of plans for the takeover of Meralco, while claiming that GSIS control would result in lower electricity rates.

*Teledyaryo* emphasized the alleged efforts of the government to reduce power rates and to mitigate their impact on the public. Allegations of government officials against Meralco were presented in the reports without corroboration and without being contested.

### Bright spots

However, some reports did try to provide the public the information it needs on an issue vital to millions of families' daily survival.

The *Inquirer* published a two-part special report last May 26 to 27 on electricity rates. "What Meralco has been charging its customers" provided a detailed discussion of the different components of a Meralco electricity bill, while "Meralco swamped with refund claims" looked into the refunds Meralco is obligated to give.

Although PJR Reports did not include it in its monitor, it should be noted that *The Manila Times* reported that the commission may "scare away" and create "discontent" on the part of foreign investors ("SEC intervention may scare away foreign investors," May 28). The *Times* is one of the first media organizations to discuss the effect of SEC intervention in the business community.

While most other reports failed to seek experts' views, *Newsbreak* solicited Energy Council of the Philippines president and former Department of Energy Secretary Francisco Viray's perspective on such issues such as why the country's electricity rate has remained among the highest in Asia ("Viray: Power sector reforms have been overtaken by events" [http://newsbreak.com.ph/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=4726&Itemid=88889065](http://newsbreak.com.ph/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=4726&Itemid=88889065), May 22). ■

### Biases

The competition between the networks was evident in the reports. The bias of GMA-7 against its top rival—another Lopez-owned entity—ABS-CBN 2 showed, for example, in a June 7 *Imbestigador* special report on the controversy.

While the report had its positive side, this was overshadowed when it became biased for Garcia.

# MAKING SENSE OF INFLATION DATA

## Contextualization is key to writing relevant stories

■ By Danilo Araña Arao

**J**OURNALISTS ARE expected to refer to official sources of information in writing and producing their reports. There is, however, a potential failure in giving relevant information to their audiences if they were to rely solely on government-issued press releases and to accept hook, line and sinker the analyses that go with the data presented.

That press releases are jokingly referred to as “praise releases” should prompt journalists to proceed with caution in citing the data and analyses they contain. While some writers of press releases try to be as factual as possible, one cannot deny that there are different ways of interpreting data and it is likely that the analysis will be done to favor the officials and offices concerned. In addition, the data presented could have been selected to achieve the same objective.

Social reality can be distorted not only by withholding the essential facts. There are also instances where all the data are made available to the public but presented in a manner hard to understand.

The National Statistics Office’s (NSO) report on the inflation rate for May 2008 is an interesting case study of how journalists should go beyond public pronouncements and to analyze carefully the publicly available data in the form of tables and charts.

The NSO press release dated June 5 provides in the first paragraph potential headline-grabbing information: “The year-on-year headline inflation rate at the national level further jumped to 9.6 percent in May from 8.3 percent in April, the highest inflation since January 1999 (10.5%). This was primarily triggered by the continuing higher annual price increases in the heavily-weighted food, beverages, and tobacco (FBT) index. The rest of the commodity groups also posted higher inflation rates during the month. Inflation a year ago was 2.4 percent.”

While journalists are expected to cite the figures and the official explanation behind the data,

there is a need to relate the latter to pressing issues like the increases in the prices of rice and petroleum products.

The NSO press release more or less helps journalists in making the correlation as it gives a breakdown of increases in the FBT index. With regard to rice, “(a)nnual price adjustments were higher...at 31.7 percent in May from 24.6 percent in April” at the national level. In the case of the NCR, a “(h)igher annual price increase was noticed in rice at 43.6 percent in May from 38.4 percent in April.” As regards other regions, “(a)nnual price changes in rice posted in all the regions moved further higher...Inflation rate for rice...accelerated to 30.1 percent in May from 22.7 percent in April.”

Once a journalist gets updated statistics from the Department of Trade and Industry on the prices of rice and other commodities and includes these in his or her article, it would appear that the report is already complete. Proper contextualization, however, is still important in analyzing other important matters such as the effect of the series of oil price hikes on the country’s inflation rate.

Interestingly, the increases in gasoline, diesel, kerosene, and Liquefied Petroleum Gas (LPG) were only mentioned in the last few paragraphs of the NSO press release. It cited an increase in the fuel, light, and water (FLW) index by 0.7 percent nationwide, with NCR posting a 0.3 percent increase; and areas outside NCR, 1.0 percent.

Please note, however, that what was cited was a *month-on-month* comparison, which means that unlike the annual price adjustments in rice, the data com-

pared were April 2008 and May 2008. The changes of prices are sometimes not noticeable on a month-on-month basis. The disparity can be better appreciated by using a year-on-year comparison, in this case between May 2007 and May 2008 data.

areas outside NCR, the year-on-year figures were 6.6 and 9.0 percent, respectively. An astute observer may ask at this point: “Why were these figures not mentioned in the NSO press release?”

These and other important data are not explicitly stated in

### Missing figures

The year-on-year FLW index to which petroleum products belong was pegged at 8.2 percent nationwide as of May 2008. For NCR and



Petroleum prices increase almost on a weekly basis. This photo was taken in the last week of June. Analysts predict oil prices to reach as high as P70 per liter. LITO OCAMPO

the press release, but they may be extrapolated by downloading the various multi-column inflation-related tables from the NSO website.

By computing the percentage increases on a year-on-year basis (i.e., the difference between May 2008 data and May 2007 data divided by the May 2007 data; and then multiplied by 100), one can come up with statistics even more newsworthy than what is stated in the official press release.

Analyzing the consumer price index (CPI) according to region, for example, a journalist would find out that 11 out of 17 regions had double-digit inflation, the highest being Region IX (Zamboanga Peninsula) with 13.5 percent. With the exception of Region XI (Davao) which had an inflation rate of 9.5 percent, all the other regions in Mindanao had double-digit inflation rates. The same can be said for all three regions in the Visayas.

The extrapolated data provide empirical evidence that increases in the prices of goods and services are felt in most provinces.

To make the inflation rate figures more relevant to the people, it is also necessary to present the purchasing power of the peso (PPP) based on the CPI figures (For basic information on the CPI and PPP, including how to compute the latter, please see my article "Reporting Inflation" published in the *Philippine Journalism Review* of June 2002, pp. 43-44).

In any case, computing the PPP based on the May 2008 CPI would show that one peso is



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worth only 65 centavos in real terms (See Table 1). This means that a person needs one peso today to buy goods and services worth only 65 centavos eight years ago (i.e., 2000 is the base year currently used by the government with regard to the CPI).

A journalist may also add in his or her report that the value of the peso has been eroded by 35 percent (i.e., the difference between 1.00 and PPP multiplied by 100). Analyzing the regional data, one may also mention that

**Table 2: Average headline and core inflation rates (in percent) 2005-2008**

	HEADLINE INFLATION RATE	CORE INFLATION RATE
2005	7.6	7.0
2006	6.2	5.5
2007	2.8	2.8
2008 (May only)	9.6	6.2

Source: NSCB

ARMM has the lowest purchasing power of the peso (59 centavos) which translates to an erosion of its value by 41 percent (See Table 1).

The data serve as quantifiable proof of the complaint of underpaid workers that their wages are not enough to make ends meet.

Comparing the nominal and real value of the money people have today, a journalist could get updated statistics on wages from the Department of Labor and Employment and compute the real value of, for example, minimum wage earners in all regions. All s/he has to do is to multiply the nominal wage by the PPP of the respective region.

#### Low wages, low purchasing power

A careful scrutiny of the data would show a startling reality with regard to ARMM: it has the unfortunate distinction of having the lowest minimum wage (non-agriculture) and the lowest purchasing power.

Another angle worth reporting by journalists is the core inflation rate which, according to the

## Proper contextualization is important in analyzing other important matters such as the effect of the series of oil price hikes on the country's inflation rate

situation, these refer to the sudden increases in the prices of rice and petroleum products.

The core inflation rate can be useful in assessing the impact of monetary policy. According to NSCB, it can provide "a better gauge of the overall state of the economy and a more reliable basis for economic policymaking."

That the May 2008 core inflation rate of 6.2 percent is lower than the headline inflation rate of 9.6 percent should not be easily dismissed as a result of simply excluding six items from the computation. A journalist should carefully analyze the core and headline inflation rates through the years (See Table 2).

In 2005 and 2006, the difference between headline and core inflation rates was less than one percentage point; and in 2007, no difference at all. What proves to be remarkable in May 2008 is the 3.4-percentage point difference. This indicates that the current price fluctuations of excluded items in the core inflation rate, particularly rice and petroleum products, are steeper and more sudden than in the past three years.

The challenge therefore remains for journalists to deeply analyze the official data. Contextualization remains the key to making stories relevant to the audiences, and they deserve no less from journalists whose mandate is to help shape public opinion. ■

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**TABLE 1: Purchasing Power of the Peso**

May 2008

	CPI	PPP	EROSION
Philippines	153.9	0.65	35%
NCR	154.6	0.65	35%
Areas outside NCR	153.6	0.65	35%
CAR	154.5	0.65	35%
Region I (Ilocos)	154.4	0.65	35%
Region II (Cagayan Valley)	148.2	0.67	33%
Region III (Central Luzon)	151.6	0.66	34%
Region IV-A (CALABARZON)	150.5	0.66	34%
Region IV-B (MIMAROPA)	151.4	0.66	34%
Region V (Bicol)	151.7	0.66	34%
Region VI (Western Visayas)	150.9	0.66	34%
Region VII (Central Visayas)	160.0	0.63	38%
Region VIII (Eastern Visayas)	151.3	0.66	34%
Region IX (Zamboanga Peninsula)	156.7	0.64	36%
Region X (Northern Mindanao)	159.7	0.63	37%
Region XI (Davao)	158.1	0.63	37%
Region XII (SOCCSKSARGEN)	154.0	0.65	35%
Region XIII (CARAGA)	158.1	0.63	37%
ARMM	169.5	0.59	41%

Source of basic data: NSONote: PPP=1/CPI x 100; Erosion=(1-PPP) x 100

■ By Melanie Y. Pinlac

## MEDIA AND TORTURE

# A CULTURE OF SILENCE

**N**OT ONLY the inefficient justice system but media as well have contributed to “a culture of silence” among victims of torture.

This was one of the main points raised in a Manila-held forum on torture. The International Rehabilitation Center for Torture Victims (IRCT), the International Federation of Human Rights (FIDH), the National Union of Journalists of the Philippines (NUJP), and the Balay Rehabilitation Center organized the day-long forum “Torture: Is it happening Again in the Philippines?” last June 25 at the Richmond Hotel in Pasig City.

In celebration of the United Nations Day in Support of Torture Victims, the forum updated journalists on the international and local campaigns against torture. The forum also served as a venue to examine media coverage of torture in the Philippines.

### A common practice

The United Nations Convention Against Torture and other Forms of Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment defines torture as “the intentional infliction of severe physical or mental pain or suffering for purposes by, or with the consent of, the state authorities for a specific purpose.” The Optional Protocol to the Convention Against Torture (OPCAT) that the Philippine government signed in April 2008 bars the use of torture in all circumstances.

But the presence of OPCAT and other international laws prohibiting torture has not prevented the practice of torture in the Philippines. A fact-finding mission by IRCT, FIDH, and the Philippine Alliance of Human Rights Advocates found that torture is widely practiced in the Philippines. According to the mission report, police and military agents use torture against suspected terrorists and criminals, while non-state armed groups use it on their captives. They also cited the lack of local criminal laws on torture and the victims’ having the burden of proof as factors in the widespread practice of torture.

Many Filipinos also view torture as a common and normal procedure in law enforcement. A



Journalists Arguillas, Conde, Nery, and Lingao discussed media coverage of torture in the forum.

LITO OCCAMPO

2007 BBC survey showed that 40 percent of Filipinos interviewed believe that the torture of prisoners is permissible to a certain extent. It placed the Philippines third along with Indonesia among 25 countries that view torture as permissible.

The common view that torture is permissible and the inefficiency of the justice system compel most victims to keep their experiences to themselves in fear of ostracism and retaliation, the speakers said.

### Blind on torture

Unfortunately, most media practitioners also assume the permissibility of torture and thus contribute to its continuing practice in the Philippines.

The media’s misunderstanding of torture has resulted in underreporting it. News on torture and other human rights violations seldom get printed in the mainstream media. Carlos Conde,

### The media’s misunderstanding of torture has resulted in underreporting it

the Philippine correspondent for the *New York Times* and *International Herald Tribune*, explained that some journalists and sources view human rights and torture reporting as a form of advocacy that compromises objectivity.

As a result, most reports on torture and human rights violations appear only in the alternative press. “What these media outlets (alternative press) have in common is that reporting on human rights is part of their advocacy. Perhaps more importantly, they don’t operate in the same environment as the mainstream press,” he added.

Participants observed that many news reports that do get aired or printed often suggest that acts of torture are permissible and normal. For example, such reports are often biased against suspects, and ignore the fact that suspects also have rights. News programs often air crime reports showing a complainant or policemen slapping, punching, or kicking suspects. By airing this kind of reports, the media predispose their audiences to convicting suspects even before they are tried.

Some journalists report petty crimes rather than police/state brutality in fear of losing their sources. “We’ve heard of tales by our colleagues being ostracized in their beats and being ignored by their sources for their reportage on human rights,” Conde said. “In other words, human rights and torture are subjects that can emasculate the journalist.”

There are also journalists who accept torture as standard oper-

ating procedure in arresting and investigating suspects—just like how law enforcement agents see it, Conde said.

Some police and defense reporters even join in torturing suspects and prisoners. Ed Lingao, ABC-5’s News Operations department head, said some reporters, cameramen, and photographers punch suspects when they are brought to the police stations. “Once they even mistook a complainant for a suspect,” he said in Filipino.

### Steps taken

To address the problems on reporting torture, human rights groups have launched an international awareness campaign on torture prevention for the media. For example, the FIDH and IRCT have organized workshops and forums for the media in 10 countries where there is a war on terror. Loraine Dela Cruz, IRCT Council of Leader and Balay Board chair, said during the forum that they “want to help establish a network of international journalists involved in human rights reporting. These journalists...will receive training in analyzing and reporting on human rights matter with focus on torture in the context of the fight against terror.”

Local human rights groups also said they are willing to partner with media groups to hold forums on torture prevention. Asian Human Rights Commission executive director Basil Fernando shared how good reporting on a young torture victim which came out in the Sri Lankan media encouraged other victims to come forward.

Media groups have also formed modules for human rights reporting in the Philippines. The Human Rights Reporting Project (organized by the Institute for War and Peace Reporting together with NUJP, *MindaNews*, and the Center for Community Journalism and Development), uses their modules in forums they launched nationwide. The group also provides space for human rights stories in its website (<http://www.rightsreporting.net/>).

*Philippine Daily Inquirer* columnist John Nery also suggested that the media “help create a climate for telling torture stories...where stories like torture can be told in comfort, and in some safety without questions of credibility and extravagance.” After all, as Fernando said, the willingness of victims to talk is what’s critical in torture reporting. ■



The released ABS-CBN 2 news team with Sen. Loren Legarda  
Joseph Vidal/HTTP://WWW.GMANEWS.TV

■ By the PJR Reports staff

**W**OULD IT have improved the prospects for peace negotiations between the Abu Sayyaf group (ASG) and the government if ABS-CBN 2's Cecilia Victoria "Ces" Drilon had obtained and aired that exclusive interview with the bandit group's new leaders she said she was after? Should peace negotiations between a police problem like the ASG and the government be on the national agenda at all?



Dinampo

Al Jacinto/HTTP://WWW.GMANEWS.TV

Both questions are crucial to the main ethical issue, unremarked by many commentators, that was at the heart of the Drilon kidnapping episode. Mostly dismissed as a spent force and no more a terrorist organization than a common kidnap-for-ransom gang operating in Manila would be, any interview with ASG leaders aired over a major network would have re-conferred on it the status it once had as a supposedly separatist rebel group, thus putting it on the same level as formations with clear political aims like the Moro Islamic Liberation Front. The capacity to confer legitimacy and status is inherent in the mass media.

The ASG gained notoriety in the late 1990s as a supposedly terrorist organization with its bombing, assassination, and kidnap for ransom operations. Eventually, however, its lack of any clear political aim made it clear that it does not even qualify as a terrorist group, the definition of which includes having a political program. It does qualify, however, as a group that uses terrorist methods for non-political aims.

As for its origins, Octavio Dinampo, the Mindanao State Uni-

versity professor who was kidnapped along with Drilon, told the *Manila Mainichi Shimbun* that the ASG is not linked with Al Qaeda as has been repeatedly claimed, but is a "locally-grown organization" supposed to be known as the Al Harakatul Al Islamiya. (Al Qaeda) never created this so-called ASG. This ASG is the creation of the Philippine military," said Dinampo.

The group has not had much of a media presence after its leader Khadaffy Janjalani and senior ASG commander Abu Sulaiman were killed in September 2006 and in January 2007, respectively. It has receded in the national consciousness primarily because it is correctly perceived as no more than a bandit group that deserves police action rather than peace negotiations as a government response.

Was the story on the new leadership of the ASG then worth risking life and limb? Drilon said it herself after she and the other hostages — ABS-CBN 2 cameramen Jimmy Encarnacion and Angelo Valderama and Dinampo — were released by their abductors that she had gravely endangered the lives of her colleagues. The experience was sobering, she said, and no story is worth any life.

Ethical dilemmas and the Drilon kidnapping

# WHEN JOURNALISTS ARE NEWS

Drilon  
AKP IMAGES



Television grab of Carroll while she was in captivity  
[HTTP://WWW.WINDSOFCCHANGE.NET](http://www.windsOfchange.net)

## MEDIA AND KIDNAPPINGS EXPERIENCES FROM OTHER COUNTRIES

■ By JB Santos

WHEN NEWS spread that Jill Carroll, a stringer for the international daily *Christian Science Monitor* (*CSM*), had been abducted in Baghdad, Iraq on Jan. 7, 2006, some United States news organizations reported receiving an e-mail message from Marshall Ingwerson, managing editor of the *CSM*, requesting that "media please honor a news blackout on the kidnapping...pending further notice. We ask this out of respect to the journalist and the ongoing intensive effort to save her."

The *Associated Press* (*AP*), which was among those who granted the request for a news blackout, explained that the "request was made to give authorities an opportunity to resolve the incident during the early hours after the abduction."

The *New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and the *Los Angeles Times* also granted the request for a blackout. *AP* ran a story about the kidnapping, but did not mention Carroll's name or *CSM*.

The online magazine *Slate* reported on "How To Cover a Kidnapping" that although the "blackout pretty much held in the American press until the *CSM* lifted it two days later, some Baghdad hands resisted."

*Slate* reported that on the day of the kidnapping, John Fiegner of Fox News said that the "press couldn't treat the Carroll story differently than other kidnappings," and that "the news had already hit the wires." Noting CNN's early coverage of the event, an *Agence France Presse* reporter stated that "we can't keep a blackout if CNN is running it."

Lourdes Garcia Navarro of the National Public Radio in the United States meanwhile told colleagues in an e-mail sent a day after the kidnapping about her reluctance to play "news police" for very long.

In the same report, *Washington Post* managing editor Phillip Bennet said the *Post's* delay in publishing news about the Carroll kidnapping did not reflect a "double standard."

"We have in some instances withheld information about non-journalist kidnap victims in Iraq at the request of a family or investigators who persuaded us publication would endanger the victim," Bennet said.

*New York Times* executive editor Bill Keller was quoted in the report as saying: "Our default position is that we publish things. If the information is reliably sourced and of public interest, and if the presentation is fair and accurate and cogent...we publish it. It sticks in our craw to keep interesting or important information to ourselves. Not publishing is the exception and we need a good reason for it. But we will listen to an argument. If someone makes a plausible case that withholding information will save a life, we'll listen."

Two days after the request, the press started regularly covering developments on Carroll's kidnapping until her release on March 30, 2006.

### Common practice

In the monthly journal *Editor & Publisher*, Jay DeFoore wrote in his article "When Covering Iraq Kidnappings, Caution Can Save Lives": "(E)ach kidnapping situation is different, information is often sketchy, and there's no clear consensus on how to negotiate a hostage's freedom, much less how the media should operate."

"This much is known: the desire to suppress media coverage, especially in the early stages of a kidnapping and particularly with journalists working for well-known news organizations is a fairly common, and sometimes beneficial practice," DeFoore wrote.

Coverage about the two-day captivity of Paul Taggart, a freelance photographer kidnapped in Baghdad in October 2004 was likewise diminished, with "perhaps twenty news organizations" taking part in an embargo, the *Columbia Journalism Review* (*CJR*) reported.

"They (news media) feared that reporting on the case would give the kidnappers their desired publicity, and end with yet another sinister beheading video," *CJR* said.

Quoting a statement from Taggart's photo agency, DeFoore wrote that the news blackout on the kidnapping could have been instrumental in Taggart's release because "there was no value placed on him, he was never sold up the river and put in a yellow jumpsuit."

### Non-entity

There are instances however when the publication of a news story about a kidnapping could help the victim.

"It could alert the populace of the crime and produce clues. It could marshal opinion against the abductors for kidnapping a woman (in Carroll's case)," the *Slate* report stated.

DeFoore also wrote that a collective silence could also give the impression that the kidnapped journalist is a non-entity and is therefore of no value.

"The thinking goes that if the kidnappers don't know that they've got a big fish, they may throw it back," DeFoore said, while at the same time also cautioning that "kidnappers, however ruthless, aren't stupid...A simple Google search can often unearth a treasure trove of a working journalist's prior work."

Professor Dipak Gupta of the Institute for International Security and Conflict Resolution at San Diego University was quoted by the *American Journalism Review* (*AJR*) as differentiating between two kinds of kidnapping: one purely for money, and another for political purposes.

According to Gupta, in cases where the kidnappers are advocating political ideologies, publicity is a big issue, but in instances where kidnappers only want money, "press coverage has little impact."

Tina Susman, an *AP* reporter held hostage in Somalia in 1994 and whose plight, upon *AP's* request, was not made known until after she was released on July 8, or 20 days after her abduction, believes that the media blackout in her kidnapping helped in her release.

"These kidnappers who were holding me were young, arrogant thugs who wanted attention as much as money... If they had gotten the impression they had their hands on a real celebrity, they would have been a lot tougher," Susman told *AJR*.

Unlike the Philippines' Ces Drilon, however, Carroll, Taggart, and Susman were abducted in places where there are far more extreme conflict situations. But every hostage situation, whether the victim is a journalist or non-journalist, is an extremely volatile situation with its own set of peculiarities, with the news media dealing with a matrix of unknowns. ABS-CBN 2's Bong Osorio in fact stated that asking for a news embargo on abductions of their staff is not company policy and will be on a "case-to-case basis".

For DeFoore, however, media's treatment of hostage situations boils down to a simple concept.

"Ultimately, the decision of what to publish and when should come down to a simple calculation: are we doing more harm than good in publishing this?" ■

### What's the story?

But what exactly was the story Drilon's team was chasing after despite the risks involved?

More than four weeks after the abduction, ABS-CBN 2 executives were still mum on what story Drilon and her cameramen had risked their lives for. The network, they said, is conducting an investigation on whether Drilon had breached coverage protocols, thus resulting in the abduction. Nothing is so far known about the story, other than Drilon's admission that the team was doing research on a story on the "new" ASG leadership.

As veteran journalist and media critic Vergel Santos rightly asked in ANC's *Media in Focus* last June 26: "(W)hat did she take the risk for? What exactly was the story she was chasing?" The risks a journalist take depends on the story and the public interest involved, added Santos, who is chair of the editorial board of the *BusinessWorld*. "You take the greatest risks for the greatest story." Santos also serves as a member of the board of trustees of the Center for Media Freedom and Responsibility.

Maria Ressa, who also appeared in the same *Media in Focus* episode, was asked if Drilon's story was worth the risks she took. "In management view, it was not," said Ressa, who is head of ABS-CBN 2's news and current affairs.

That was ABS-CBN 2 management's view, but the question for journalists is whether the risks involved in getting the story were worth it in terms of providing the public information vital to the continuing need for it to understand what's happening in the problematic areas of Mindanao.

### ABS-CBN 2's 'gentle request'

For the most part the Philippine press failed to take up and discuss these ethical and professional issues. Press coverage, especially in its first days, focused on ABS-CBN 2's "gentle request" for a "news embargo" on reports on the June 8 abduction.

The network requested media outlets to withhold information on the abduction from June 9 up to 6 a.m. of June 10. "The request was made primarily for the security and safety of Ces and her companions. At that time (June 9), we did not know what their situation was. We don't want to speculate on any information that would jeopardize their safety," the reports quoted Bong Osorio, ABS-CBN 2 head of corporate communications, as saying.

In ABS-CBN 2's first public statement regarding the incident



Indanan mayor Alvarez Isnaji and son Haider Isnaji

last June 10, the media giant said that "(u)ntil we learn more details, ABS-CBN News requests other media to report on this matter with utmost consideration for the safety of our news team."

Most of the major media organizations based in Manila granted the network's request. The coverage by the *Philippine Daily Inquirer* and GMA-7, for example, began in earnest only two days after the abduction.

Elsewhere in the country, particularly in the Visayas and Mindanao, radio stations and community newspapers reported the abduction as soon as they learned that Drilon was "missing". Among these were community papers *Mindanao Examiner* and *Sun.Star Cebu* and government-owned stations NBN-4 and dzRB *Radyo ng Bayan*. According to a June 10 *The Manila Times* report, at least three radio stations—dzIZ, dzEC, and dzXL—also reported the abduction last June 9. The report added that the

radio station dzBB of rival network GMA-7 reported Drilon was "missing" but that "the kidnapping has yet to be confirmed."

Given the absence of details in the reports, it would seem that withholding the story until the facts came in would have been more prudent. However, ABS-CBN 2's "gentle request" could have been better understood if it had released the information it had, and justified the request for an embargo on the basis of its limited nature. As it was, its refusal to provide the information already in its possession contributed to the speculation and limited information that characterized the reporting on the incident in the first few days.

Justifying the need to hold the story, Ressa cited the abundance of false and inaccurate information in first days following the kidnapping.

"Maybe in the first four days, I would say 98.9 percent of what came out publicly was false,"



Photos by RUY MARTINEZ/HTTP://WWW.GMANEWS.TV

Ressa told *Media in Focus* last June 26. "We were powerless to do anything or say anything to stop it."

ABS-CBN 2 was not so powerless. They could have reduced the level of speculations on the abduction. When ABS-CBN 2 asked other news organizations to initially withhold reports for the safety of hostages, did it divulge such details as Drilon's reason for going to Sulu? At what time did the network know that Drilon's group was missing? When did ABS-CBN 2 confirm the group had been abducted, and how? These details could have strengthened rather than weakened ABS-CBN 2's case for an embargo and helped stop the spate of inaccurate and misleading information on the kidnapping.

ABS-CBN 2 should have provided the public with facts as soon as possible, Santos said, differing with the network's decision to ask for an "embargo". "We give the facts as we get

them," Santos said. "It becomes complete as it is revealed." Santos said the network should have called a press conference so the public would know what is going on, as the case clearly involved public interest.

Anti-crime advocate Teresita Ang See had a similar view. Coverage of the incident cannot be helped because of the subjects involved, she said. ABS-CBN 2 should have issued regular news bulletins to the media to lessen speculations and rumors on the abduction. "The media indulged in a lot of speculation," Ang See told *PJR Reports* in a phone interview last July 12.

What is clear is that the press should have followed up the circumstances regarding the "embargo" and abduction. But more than a month after Drilon's group was freed, and Drilon suspended for disobeying orders not to pursue the story, most of the details of the incident are still unknown to the public. The excuse that ABS-CBN 2 was not releasing those details does not wash. The news organizations could very well have checked other sources and documents that are already available to fill in the gaps.

The June 8 abduction in Sulu was the first and biggest case in recent memory when a network asked other news organizations to temporarily hold reportage. That angle should have been pursued further.

### Debates in the community

The decision by some media organizations to grant ABS-CBN 2's "request" sparked debates in the journalism community, especially about imposing a "news embargo" on similar cases in the future. Complicating the issue further was that three of the hostages were media practitioners themselves.

National Union of Journalists of the Philippines chair Jose Torres Jr. said initial reporting of



JOSEPH VIDAL/HTTP://WWW.GMANEWS.TV

the incident could have angered the abductors and put the lives of the captives in greater harm. But he also stressed the need to inform the people in the community where the abduction happened. Torres said the decision on whether to release the news calls for a "balance on the part of editors and a question of ethics."

"Lives and the people's right to be informed should be balanced," Torres told the *Inquirer*. "If the information is all clear, then that should have been the time the story should have been out."

While some camps accuse the media organizations of connivance to temporarily conceal the abduction, and claim that it was a clear display of 'arrogance' and an 'unethical reaction' by the media, the *Inquirer's* editorial last June 12 ("Judgment call") underscored that "this (news embargo) was not a case of professional solidarity trumping public interest, but precisely, public interest demanding a thorough vetting of the story before its release to a society already jittery about renewed prospects for conflict in Mindanao."

Pointing out the result of the incident, the *Inquirer* editorial said: "An embargo should now be standard operating procedure for all media in the initial hours of a kidnapping." The safety of hostages should be a paramount consideration, the paper added last June 12.

News blackouts should be ideally observed in every kidnapping incident until after the release of the hostage whether he or she is famous, Ang See told *PJR Reports*.

To University of the Philippines journalism professor and *PJR Reports* editor Luis V. Teodoro, journalism's ethical rules apply to every story, whether the subject is a journalist or not.

"When ABS-CBN 2 asked for an embargo, the details of the kidnapping were not yet available, and lives were at stake. Public interest could have been even more compromised by inaccurate reporting, even as the ethical rule of compassion applies as well to vulnerable colleagues in the profession as much as to sources and news subjects who are at risk. In this context, the request, which specified a time limit as is usual in embargoes, was reasonable.

"We can take issue with the wisdom of Drilon's pursuit of the story that put her and her team in jeopardy. The Abu Sayyaf is receding into obscurity and deserves that fate. But Drilon's safety was totally separate from that issue." ■

# COVERING CONFLICTS

■ By Hector Bryant L. Macale

**JOURNALISTS CAN draw lessons from the June 8 abduction in Sulu, especially in covering conflict areas and crisis situations, as well as on journalist safety.**

The International News Safety Institute (INSI), a global institution established in 2004 to promote journalist safety worldwide, has guidelines when journalists are hostages in conflict areas. "Most kidnappings are carried out for financial gain or to achieve political objectives, which could include discontent with the news media," according to INSI (<http://www.newssafety.com>). "Whatever the reason—terrorist, political, criminal, revenge—the outcome usually is the same: a highly emotive situation where a threat is made by an external, often unknown, force intent on pursuing its own agenda with the target as a tool."

"Ransom demanded can be money, a political concession such as a prisoner exchange or a public action by a news organization in favor of the kidnappers, e.g. broadcast or publication of unedited publicity material," the INSI also said in its guidelines.

Here is the rest of INSI guidelines on coping with situations in which media practitioners are hostages.

## Preparation

This can happen at any time to any news organization, not just those in conflict zones. It is prudent for any news organization to have ready a core crisis team of senior news executives which can take an immediate decision on the nature of the incident whether it is real or a hoax. Behind that initial response team will be a broader team of top editorial and general management personnel which will take over if the threat turns out to be genuine. That team would usually include a chairperson with direct access to the highest level of the company, plus Human Resources, Legal, Finance, Public Relations, and Editorial Managers. One person must be charged with being the company's link to the family of the missing person for the duration of the crisis.

The teams must comprise top decision makers. This is a life-or-death situation, often with large sums of money involved. The reputation of the company may also be on the line. The people in the team may find themselves involved in a highly emotional, stressful, exhausting, and prolonged incident.

These teams should be designated now. They may never need to be activated but the people involved should be aware

of their roles and ready to drop all other commitments should the worst happen. Consideration should be given to business continuity when key personnel are diverted to the hostage crisis.

Staff at risk of abduction, either in their daily work or on likely assignment to a danger zone, should also be prepared, preferably through participation in an appropriate safety or hostile environment training course. INSI can provide guidance on this.

Staff likely to encounter danger must draw up and deposit with senior management a document recording their personal details, comprising at least name, date and place of birth, passport number, job designation, photograph, any known medical condition, religious belief and next-of-kin to be contacted in case of emergency with full contact details, as well as other details considered relevant to local conditions. Freelancers should deposit the same with their commissioning organization or a reliable friend or family member.

*NB: A "duty of care" must be demonstrated by the organization to its employee, especially if the person has been exposed to the danger in course of his or her work. Organizations must ensure they do their utmost—and are seen to—to recover and rehabilitate the individual, otherwise legal liabilities can be incurred, not to mention a dramatic plunge in staff morale and loss of public esteem.*

## When a kidnapping is confirmed

### Organization

- Activate the initial crisis management team, which will remain constant until the incident is resolved.

- Establish an operations room with good communications, including a dedicated incoming-only phone line, with recording facilities, for the kidnappers. Set up a dedicated PC with Internet access.

- If the incident involves a staffer in a foreign country, identify a local language speaker within the organization who can speak to the abductors in their own tongue. This should be the same person throughout. Identify key local staff or stringers who can tap their own sources for information. Assign a senior person from Head Office to the country to run the situation on the ground.

- Consider the need to withdraw all other personnel from the same area or same or similar stories.

- Decisions should be made as a team, using specialist consultants if possible, with regular reviews as necessary. All communications, deliberations and actions should be logged for later evidential review.

- Decide to what extent you will in-

volve your government and its agencies.

- Beware of the limitations of external advisors. They can only advise. Normally, they can not negotiate directly or make decisions on behalf of the organization. Generally, government agencies cannot negotiate a concessionary settlement and then claim never to negotiate with terrorists or pay ransoms.

- Key considerations of the team will include: a) thorough investigation of the facts, b) assessing the options, c) a news blackout, keeping in mind they can only be maintained for a short time, d) communication with the family, staff and the media, e) working with advisors, f) business continuity, i.e. maintaining normal operations, and g) arranging funds (a large number of successful outcomes are achieved after payment of ransom).

### Hostage

- Be courteous and cooperative. Answer all questions truthfully. Assume your kidnappers know a lot about you, your background and your reporting.

- Keep alert and exercise regularly if possible. Try to develop a structure and routine to your day and maintain a positive attitude.

- Eat and drink at every opportunity, even if you do not like what you are offered. If the food or hygiene makes you sick, inform your captors. Generally, they will need you in good shape.

- Prioritize your requests carefully (e.g. would I prefer a radio or an extra blanket?).

- Do NOT attempt to escape unless an obvious opportunity arises. A failed attempt usually will result in harsher detention conditions, or worse. Can you trust neighbors or passers-by for help—or would they be friends of, or frightened by, your captors? You can however plan for a rescue attempt and think of safe cover should it happen.
- Remember: 1) play it safe, 2) keep fit and focused and 3) be courteous and cooperative.

### Family

- This will probably be the most stressful situation they will ever have encountered—the life, safety and well-being of a loved one held by people to whom moral considerations are irrelevant. The captors will view the family as a key pressure point to achieve their aims.

- The family will want the ransom paid immediately to secure the swift release of their loved-one. Other considerations such as "this will set a precedent" or "this will affect the safety of our other staff in the area" will be irrelevant. The concerns of the family could be in conflict with the concerns of the news organization.

- The organization should assign a contact person to the family fulltime. The

family MUST be kept fully informed and up to date and helped to cope with news media interest, which could be intense. They must be shielded against uninformed rumor and speculation. Critically, they must not hear of developments from the news media before they hear from the captive's employer.

- Contingency plans should be in place to deal with any direct communications between the kidnappers and the family. The family should be dissuaded from trying to open up their own channels. These moves could have devastating effects on the hostage and the overall negotiations.

- Protracted periods of silence can follow confirmation of a hostage-taking. During this period, family and friends can become despondent, feeling that nothing is being done. It is of the greatest importance that the family feels the organization cares and is doing its utmost. Even when nothing is happening, communication must be maintained. Of critical importance is a first-rate liaison person, who is fully appraised of activities in the operations room and fully in tune with the family. This person must be able to communicate with the company at the highest level of the crisis team.

- Consideration must be given to the general health of the family, personal finance issues, employment and education issues and household help.

### Release

- Ensure medical and, if appropriate, evacuation services are on standby. The released captive should undergo a medical examination as soon as practicable.

- The captive may be suffering post-traumatic shock. It is recommended they be closely monitored for at least the first 48 hours of release. Counseling should be considered for captive and family in the awareness that the effects of being held hostage have been known to last for years.

### Death

- All must be aware of and prepared for this possibility.

- Every effort must be made to confirm the death.

- The family must be protected against unconfirmed rumors and must be informed immediately if confirmed.

- Preparation must be made for the dignified retrieval of the body. This might not be possible for a time. Nevertheless efforts cannot cease until the loved one is returned to his or her family. ■

# PUBLISH AND BE DAMNED

The story should have been made public as soon as verified

■ By Vergel O. Santos

**A news blackout did come down all the same, one widespread enough, considering alone that the most widely circulated newspaper and the widest-reaching broadcast network took part in it**

**T**O PUBLISH or not, but, again, publish when?

That was the central proposition to the debate incited by the kidnapping of television journalist Cecilia Victoria "Ces" Drilon and three companions in Sulu last June 8. The first half of the proposition should have been easy enough to resolve, since, without question, the kidnapping was news—something of public interest, affecting or bound to affect the lives of enough number of people, requiring therefore to be made public.

It was the second half of the proposition that proved contentious: when to publish—could the news have waited?

Asked that precise question in light of requests from Drilon's network, ABS-CBN 2, for the media to hold the story, I replied:

The story should have been made public as soon as verified. Indeed, it was a story whose urgency could not be overstated: it was the first case of kidnapping after a long lull in a place notorious for it. That made it only proper that the alarm be sounded so that the public might be roused from any false sense of security.

But what about the captives' safety? That, on other hand, was the conscience question that dogged ABS-CBN 2. Afraid that further harm might come to them if the story became public, as kid-

nappers routinely threaten, ABS-CBN 2 tried to manage the news by campaigning for a blackout, and did in fact get some media to go along.

They may have all been convinced in their hearts that they were doing the right thing, but still they should be able to square it with the basic principle that governs their profession, the very reason indeed for which it exists—the people's right to know. And if they insist on this one case as a moral exception, they will be expected to judge every comparable case that comes along by the same standard, otherwise they will open themselves to the suspicion that they are applying it discriminatorily.

But what exactly is that standard? So far as I can discern, it is a variable and ineffable one, set by what feels right in one's heart at the moment. Journalists are given wide latitudes, but still they have to validate their judgments and actions against certain express rules and principles.

At any rate, events have overtaken the debate. In fact, probably even before ABS-CBN 2's call for a news blackout went out, the story had been out in public, heard first and nationwide on dzBB, on the day itself of the kidnapping, and posted on the *Mindanao Examiner's* Internet site the next day, the same day I myself got it in text messages, repeated or updated through the night and into the next day. Which gives cause to wonder what practical purpose a news blackout might have served.

But a news blackout did come down all the same, one widespread enough, considering alone that the most widely circulated newspaper, the *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, and the widest-reaching broadcast network, ABS-CBN 2, took part in it.

Defending the blackout, *Inquirer* editorial consultant and columnist Amando Doronila wrote:

"If I were the editor...I would have found it reasonable to agree to the embargo primarily on the grounds that human lives were

at risk from premature publicity. Public security and national interest would not have been harmed by a one-day embargo that denied the public only tentative information. At that stage, the primary concern was the safety of the hostages."

Doronila reckoned that "a one-day embargo" was all it would take to ensure the safety of the hostages (in fact, the blackout took longer). How he worked his arithmetic of life assurance to such precision—a day's allowance, not two days', not three, not longer—I am afraid I would not be able to follow. Neither would I his point, as he picked on my own, about there being after all no "complete story" to tell.

"He (me, that is) said publishing the story should have alerted people in Sulu [who could] be 'lulled into a false sense of security,' adding that the complete story had to be told to...lessen speculation," Doronila said. I was quoted quite faithfully, but Doronila went on to quibble, "How could a 'complete story' be told on the basis of sketchy and still developing events?"

Doronila could have been only quibbling, because it is difficult to believe a man of his years and stature in daily journalism unfamiliar with the sense of completeness that applies to a news story: a collection of material that, properly marshaled and packaged, provides a clear, accurate, and *complete* account of an event—meaning, whole enough to be able to stand by itself; in the standard guide phrase in the newspaper business, fit to print for the day.

Indeed, in the general sense, no story can be complete. And for a "running story" such as the kidnapping of Drilon and her companions, it is only further revealed as it is chased or as it develops on its own, so that to wait until a story is thus complete before telling it is to wait till kingdom-come. ■

The writer adapted this comment for the PJR Reports from a piece he had published in the June 15 issue of the *BusinessWorld*.



JOSEPH VIDAL/HTTP://WWW.GMANEWS.TV

# A REASONABLE REQUEST

Compassion applies as much to fellow journalists as to news sources and subjects

■ By Luis V. Teodoro

**T**HE NEED to craft and implement guidelines in the coverage of crisis and conflict as well as for safety training have not been lost on Philippine media organizations. The Kapisanan ng mga Brodkaster ng Pilipinas, as well as broadcast giants GMA-7 and ABS-CBN 2 among others have adopted internal guidelines in the coverage of conflict and crisis, and have provided safety training under the tutelage of security professionals for journalists who cover crisis and conflict.

Unfortunately, journalists tend to ignore their media organizations' own guidelines when on the trail of a story that could outdo the competition as well as enhance their own careers. These often outweigh other considerations, in some cases resulting in journalists themselves' becoming part of the news.

Judging from her own admission that she ignored the instructions of her editors, the kidnapping of ABS-CBN 2's news anchor Cecilia Victoria "Ces" Drilon was in this category of errors. But she was nearly a casualty not only of her focus on getting an exclusive, but also of the network wars: the competition for ratings that has defined the relationship between ABS-CBN 2 and GMA-7 for over a decade.

That competition was a subtext in the reportage of both networks on the Drilon kidnapping. GMA-7 reporting was thus subdued specially when Drilon was released, while that of ABS-CBN 2, in the days following the abduction itself and its request for media organizations to hold the story, was the opposite.

But that was not the main bone of contention as far as ethical issues went, although it should have occupied a prominent place in the debate that ensued. Instead it was the ABS-CBN 2 request to other media organizations to hold the story—for an embargo of several hours—and some of the latter's granting it, that occupied the media.

The ABS-CBN 2 request was condemned by some media observers, among them *BusinessWorld* editorial board chair Vergel Santos, as an attempt to

"manage" the news. If Santos was in the minority in taking that position, it was because "managing" the news as it has come to be understood in journalism since the John F. Kennedy years of media manipulation implies the use of deceit, whereas the ABS-CBN 2 request was a straightforward request.

The details of the story were not yet known during the first hours of Drilon and company's disappearance. The first ABS-CBN 2 statement was itself not certain if she had been abducted, and referred to her only as "missing." Given the absence of details and certainty as to what happened, the story could have been held for some hours without harm to the public interest. It was not clear whether ABS-CBN 2 had only lost contact with Drilon or if she had been abducted, in which case there was not yet any pressing public interest to justify the release of incomplete and possibly inaccurate reports. In fact, public interest could have been harmed by the release of such reports.

Once what had happened had been fairly established, reportage served both public interest by providing the public an accurate account, as well as given ABS-CBN 2 the benefit of the assumption that it made the request because premature reportage could have imperiled Drilon and company's lives.

The caution needed included not only temporarily holding the story because it was not yet known what exactly *was* the story. Lives were also at risk. The ethical imperative of compassion extends to journalists' treating each other with the same concern with

which they are expected to treat their news subjects. This is a fairly clear assumption in most codes of ethics, including the Philippine Journalist's Code.

The Drilon episode raised other issues which should have been the major focus of any discussion on the ethical side of it. Certainly a major concern is whether the story—an interview with the Abu Sayyaf Group's new leaders—merited the effort at all. If Drilon had indeed obtained it, would the story not have thrust the Abu Sayyaf back into the national stage, putting it on the same level as such political formations

as the Moro National Liberation Front and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front despite its being no more than a bandit group?

The legitimization of a group whose depredations are no more than a police problem, in the context of a society in which there are other groups with far more legitimate demands, is the kind of news "management" we can do without. ■

*A longer version of this comment appeared in the June 27 issue of BusinessWorld, where the author writes the weekly column "Vantage Point".*

**The caution needed included not only temporarily holding the story because it was not yet known what exactly was the story. Lives were also at risk**



AKP IMAGES



# COVERING WAR TO END WAR

■ By Ed Lingao

**S** EVEN YEARS ago, I peered out into the jungle from a cramped pickup truck, with a loaded and cocked M-16 in my hand and my heart in my throat. All around me, in the darkness, a hundred eyes seemed to peer back from behind every tree in the forests of Basilan.

It was not one of my prouder moments, and I knew there could be ethical ramifications; but at that time and place it seemed to make all the sense in the world to hold on to that rifle. Journalists are trained to shoot with the pen; give us a gun and most of us would try to write a profile about it.

But I had taken the mayor's warning to heart. It was night, the road had disappeared, and we were in Abu Sayyaf/Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF)/bandit country. Just hold on to it, he said. When the shooting starts, you will know what to do. Behind us, in a dump truck with the rest of the mayor's security detail, my assistant cameraman was offered an M-60 light machine



Photos by LITO OCAMPO

gun. He wisely chose to hang on to his tripod instead.

To top off all the ironies of that night, the mayor was just headed back to his town after a meeting in Basilan's capital of Isabela. He was just going home.

Long after, I would ask myself: what would I have done had there been an ambush? Would I have jammed the barrel out the window and let loose a wall of lead like Rambo on a happy day, or would I have fallen to the floor, curled up like one of those

hard-shelled centipedes, and wept?

Seven years later, we faced the same dilemma. A small group of print and television journalists had converged again in Jolo to cover the kidnapping of an ABS-CBN 2 news team. They were all familiar faces, veterans of past conflicts. But it sometimes takes a veteran to know when the odds are stacked against him. Now we were all targets for anyone with a gun—and in Jolo, everyone has more than one.

So one night, we called a meeting. Colleagues from ABS-CBN 2, GMA-7, ABC-5, *The Philippine Daily Inquirer*—everyone was a competitor, yet at this moment, everyone was an ally. The first thing we agreed on was that we should all work together to see this crisis through. The issues involved here were bigger than any ratings game. So everyone should know where everyone

was at all times. Preferably, we would travel as a group.

Then someone popped the question—should we not arm ourselves? At least give ourselves a fighting chance? After all, this was Jolo, where guns were aplenty. If goons could easily get guns, so could we. The debate went around and around, with just as many for as against. The pros argued for an active defense while the cons pointed out that handguns are not a good match against rifles, especially if you

are trapped in a vehicle and the bad guys are standing around you. In the end, we decided to ask Task Force Comet for a marine security detail to tag along wherever we went.

I realize that editors would balk at the kinds of debates that go on at ground level among the newsgatherers in conflict areas. After all, I am an editor myself, and many times I have had these uncomfortable thoughts too. But coverage in conflict areas has its own dynamics, and while we would always argue against a double standard, it would be more unfair to foist the same set of expectations for those who cover press conferences on those who cover conflict.

#### Together

Travelling as a group, for example.

It goes against the grain for a journalist to surrender his competitiveness and roam with a pack. At least, it should. That smacks so much of cartel and pack journalism, where stories that are submitted differ only in their bylines. Still, on a dangerous deployment, I would at times consider travelling with a group of other journalists, perhaps from another medium like print or radio, although preferably not from the competition. But on a particularly hazardous assignment, I may merge my team with a much bigger group, sometimes to include the competition.

This does not happen often; like everything in conflict coverage, one considers everything logically, then weighs what it feels in the gut. But it does happen, and only someone who has never left a desk would call that cartel journalism. Ironically, I have seen more of that in beats where the most hazardous thing a reporter faces is a paper cut.

This sometimes happens in conflict coverage, not because of laziness or the mutual fear of being scooped, but because of the basic idea that there is safety in numbers. These are the times when it is more important to watch, than to stab, each others' backs.

In 2000, the unimaginable happened in Jolo, Sulu: journalists from bitterly competing networks and wire agencies banded together, covered together, ate together, and even slept together in one room. It was the height of a military offensive in Jolo, and authorities had banned all news-men from the islands.

The threats came from all sides. The military had orders to pick up any journalist found in Jolo and to deport him or her to



### Conflict reporting presents a unique set of realities and demands a different set of responsibilities from those that journalists lounging in press offices in Manila face

Zamboanga. The Abu Sayyaf probably had the same orders, except that journalists were to be deported to their lair for an involuntary vacation in their mountain resorts.

I remember how we watched each others' backs, not for fear of being scooped, but for fear of losing more colleagues. When soldiers approached, we ran together and hid. When travelling to the outskirts of Jolo (and there, it seems everything is in the outskirts), we took comfort in our collective misery.

When I disappeared for a few hours to phone-in some reports, my colleagues, including Raffy Tima of competing station GMA-7, looked for me for hours, before asking the local police for help in finding me. "*Inisip na lang namin, sana hindi pinahirapan si Ed* (We just hoped they did not make Ed suffer)," recalled former *Inquirer* shooter Dennis Sabangan. It was said half in jest, but there was a grain of truth to it. Then, as now, Jolo is not a place to let your guard down.

In Baghdad, my cameraman and I adopted a Lithuanian journalist, named Luthos. He seemed lost at first, until we learned that he had covered alone in Afghanistan and Chechnya. He would join us in cooking breakfast in our hotel balcony while the bombs fell. Laughing and joking we hardly understood each other, but kept each other sane.

#### A different reality

And then there are the escorts.



This will always be a touchy issue. The easiest thing for a journalist to do is to ask for an escort from local authorities, assuming they are friendly and not likely to be your next kidnappers. But riding around with an armed escort is not likely to endear you to the local populace. It also limits the places you can go to. You cannot, for example, talk to rebel sympathizers with a marine hovering behind you. But they provide a sense of security that, at times, keeps bad people away. Escorts give you more freedom and security to move; but they limit your access to real information. Plus, you never know who they are reporting to while you do your own reporting. Obviously, there is a trade-off; it's a matter of deciding what you want to achieve in a particular coverage. In the case of the ABS-CBN 2 hostage crisis, we decided it was more prudent not to add to the list of hostage victims.

The fact is that conflict reporting presents a unique set of realities and demands a different set of responsibilities from those that journalists lounging in press offices in Manila face. For this reason, conflict journalists require more latitude, more flexibility, and more freedom to do their job and come home alive. But at the same time we need to demand more accountability, more re-

sponsibility, and more discernment so that they do their job well and not endanger the people they report on, or the next team that takes their place.

If we allow conflict journalists all these freedoms, we should also impose a higher set of standards on them.

Better, more contextual reporting, for example. The bane of conflict reporting is the police reporter who thinks that there is no difference between covering crimes and covering conflict. During former President Joseph Estrada's all-out war against the MILF, some TV networks took the alarming step of sending police reporters to cover the war in Mindanao. Some fared well, and moved on to better things; others showed that they should have just stayed in their favorite police precincts instead of inflicting themselves on an already troubled land by merely reporting on body counts and stereotypes. A good number of them could not tell the MILF from the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) from the Abu Sayyaf. I thought that was an exaggeration, until I heard the anchor of a major TV network state, on the air, that they were all the same since they were all Muslims. Edwin Angeles would have scratched his head if he were still alive.

And, preparation. A lot of it.

How many reporters go to a war zone with even a rudimentary knowledge of the issues involved? How many reporters know about the 1996 MNLF peace deal, and why it was so troubled from the start; or the 1976 Tripoli Agreement? How many reporters even know where Tripoli is? How many know of the history of the Tausugs, and why they see themselves as the warrior society? Why do they seem to love weapons so much? I would not answer these questions, because every journalist who dares to travel to these places should have, at least, the courage to visit the library or do research on the net.

Then there is the physical preparation. I always carry a can or two of food in a pouch when I travel outside city limits, along with a camelbak full of water. Plus extra cellphone batteries, an extra cellphone, a waterproof parka, penlight batteries, a cellphone charger that works on penlight batteries, two flashlights, an emergency foil blanket that costs P200, and my own handycam with its own set of batteries and tapes. This is my primary load, designed to keep me alive, keep me in touch, and keep me and my equipment working. If I still have the space, then I bring an extra shirt, and maybe an MP3 player. When they ask me why I look like I am going off to war, I reply that I am.

Lastly, conflict journalists and their respective media outlets need to show much more accountability. Why do the TV networks never wonder why some reporters almost always seem to have those spectacular footage of firefights, where camera angles are so well crafted that they almost seem...directed! On many an occasion, I have had frontline officers offer to stage a "simulation" so that I would have good "combat" footage. They almost seem offended when I say no. What is wrong with that? They wonder. They have done it for this or that famous reporter in the past. This is war, by God! If you did not catch it on tape, we will gladly hold another one for you!

Unfortunately, war reporting has taken on the sexy image it does not really deserve, sending the ambitious but not necessarily scrupulous or bright in the direction of the gunfire. They forget that we cover wars because we want them to stop. We cover wars because we wish that someday we would no longer have to. ■

Ed Lingao is the head of the ABC-5 News Operations department.



Top awardees from *Newsbreak*: Glenda Gloria and Roel Landingin.



Prime Sarmiento receives her plaque from former Amb. Bienvenido Tan, CMFR board member Maribel Ongpin, and Ateneo de Manila University president Fr. Bienvenido Nebres, SJ.  
Photos by LITO OCAMPO

## NEWSBREAK, PCIJ LEAD JVOAEJ WINNERS

**N**EWSBREAK MAGAZINE and the Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism (PCIJ) won the top awards in the 19<sup>th</sup> Jaime V. Ongpin Awards for Excellence in Journalism (JVOAEJ) for works published in 2007. The results were announced during the annual JVOAEJ ceremonies at the Asian Institute of Management last June 26. The Center for Media Freedom and Responsibility (CMFR) has been the administrative and technical secretariat of the JVOAEJ since 1990.



The JVOAEJ this year scanned the print media for investigative and explanatory articles published in 2007, and then focused on the urgent issues of human rights, the environment and governance and corruption to encourage reporting on these issues.

This year, "Trapped in a web of lives" by Glenda Gloria published in the December 2007-February 2008 issue of *Newsbreak* and "The battle for Manila's gateway" by Roel Landingin published in the September-December 2007 issue of *Newsbreak* were judged the best human rights and governance reports, respectively. Each received a plaque of distinction and a cash prize of P70,000.

The board of judges named the environment story "What's swimming in your soup?" by Prime Sarmiento of the PCIJ and published in *Malaya* on Nov. 27-28, 2007 recipient of a plaque of merit and a cash prize of P25,000.

The selection of the prize winners was based on several criteria. Each entry must:

1. Have a minimum length of 1,000 words;
2. Be written by a Filipino journalist or a group of Filipino journalists, whether freelance or affiliated or regularly employed in a news organization;
3. Have been published in a newspaper or magazine of mass circulation in the Philippines for the period under consideration (Jan. 1, 2007 to Dec. 31, 2007).

In addition, the entries must adhere to the following:

1. *Sourcing* - For corroboration, there must be

more than one source of data, such as interviews, documents and/or studies;

2. *Ethics* - The article must meet the universally accepted standards of professional journalism in terms of relevance, fairness, accuracy, balance, and other ethical standards;
3. *Technical proficiency* - The story must exhibit an above average level of writing skill/style and must show ability to communicate complex material so that it can be understood in a manner that appeals to readers' interest;
4. *Timeliness and Impact on society* - The story must be of current relevance;
5. *Clarity* - The story must explain its subject to the ordinary reader/layman who is not a specialist on the subject.

The Canadian Embassy awarded the Marshall McLuhan Prize, a travel study tour of Canada, to Gloria. This is the 12<sup>th</sup> year that the Canadian Embassy has awarded the Marshall McLuhan Prize in the JVOAEJ.

The Australian Embassy named Landingin as the recipient of the Australian Ambassador's Award, a travel grant to Australia. It was the sixth time that the Australian Embassy presented the Australian Ambassador's Award in the JVOAEJ.

The JVOAEJ was launched in 1990 to honor the late Jaime V. Ongpin who was secretary of finance during the Aquino administration. A press freedom advo-



Some of the top prize winners and finalists.



Finalists from the *Philippine Daily Inquirer*.

cate, Ongpin was involved in the struggle against the Marcos dictatorship and was instrumental in harnessing public support for the restoration of democracy.

The JVOAEJ this year was sponsored by the Open Society Foundation Media Program and the Ateneo de Manila University.

The finalists in this year's JVOAEJ awards were:

"Palace document shows gov't plan to neutralize Left"  
Norman Bordadora and Michael Lim Ubac  
*Philippine Daily Inquirer*  
July 16-17, 2007

"The road to Italy"  
Gemma Luz Corotan  
*Newsbreak*  
September-December 2007

"Inside PCGG 21 years later"  
Fernando del Mundo, Margaux C. Ortiz, Jerry Esplanada, and Daxim L. Lucas with reports from TJ Burgonio and Lawrence de Guzman  
*Philippine Daily Inquirer*  
Feb. 22-25, 2007

"Environmentalists to govt: Manage garbage, don't promote landfills, dumps"  
Nora O. Gamolo  
*The Manila Times*  
Oct. 28-29, Oct. 31-Nov. 1, 2007



"Garci was here"  
Miriam Grace A. Go  
*Newsbreak*  
July-September 2007

"Bridging the digital gap"  
Allison Lopez, Riza Olchondra, and Juliet Labog-Javellana with reports from Julie S. Alipala  
Chief: Fernando del Mundo  
*Philippine Daily Inquirer*  
Dec. 27-29, 2007

"Malansang balak ng Hapon sa Pilipinas"  
Soliman A. Santos and Kenneth Roland A. Guda  
*Pinoy Weekly*  
Oct. 17-23, 2007

All the finalists received a plaque and a cash prize of P10,000. ■



Around 200 participants attended this year's JVOAEJ.



Journalists covering the Manila Pen siege

LITO OCAMPO

## NATIONAL

### Judge dismisses case filed by journalists against Manila Pen arrests

A MAKATI Regional Trial Court (RTC) judge dismissed a class suit filed by journalists and media organizations against government officials who caused the arrest of several dozen journalists covering a press conference by rebel soldiers on Nov. 29, 2007.

The P10-million suit was filed in response to the arrests and other forms of government intimidation that followed the arrests. The Center for Media Freedom and Responsibility (CMFR) is a co-petitioner in the case.

In a five-page decision, Judge Reynaldo Laigo of Makati RTC Branch 56 claimed that the arrest of the journalists was "justified" and in accordance "with police procedure."

Laigo also scored the conduct of the journalists present in the Peninsula Hotel incident, which included some of the plaintiffs, when they refused to follow the order of Geary Barias, Police Director of the National Capital Region Police Office, to vacate the area.

"Under the given dangerous situation, that order by defendant... Barias was but lawful and appeared to have been disobeyed by all those, including some of the plaintiffs, when they intentionally refused to leave the hotel premises," the decision stated.

"(An) appropriate criminal charge under Article 151 of the Revised Penal Code, which is applicable to all, including the media personalities, could have been initiated against them but

they were so lucky as none had been initiated against them," the decision said.

Article 151 of the Revised Penal Code pertains to penalties regarding the "resistance and disobedience to a person in authority or the agents of such person."

Laigo said the statements issued by government officials following the Peninsula Hotel incident—defending the arrests and warning journalists that the same thing could happen in the future should they refuse to follow police orders—have not violated press freedom.

"(The) pronouncements made by other defendants and that advisory of defendant Secretary Gonzale(z) following that Manila Peninsula Hotel stand-off, the same have not and will not in any way curtail much less avert plaintiffs from exercising freely their rights as such members of the press—covering or obtaining information on future events similar to what transpired at the Manila Peninsula Hotel," the decision said.

The decision was issued June 20, but the lawyers for the plaintiffs received a formal copy last July 1. The decision was first made known when a reporter for a daily newspaper obtained a copy from the office of Barias, who is also a respondent in the complaint.

"The ruling was dated June 20, 2008 but released on the 27<sup>th</sup>, a Friday, raising the perfectly reasonable suspicion of an attempt to catch the complainants flatfooted and suppress any adverse prompt reaction—in fact, the lawyers of the complainants were not provided with a copy of the ruling. The strategy is no different from getting an arrest warrant issued at the start of the

CMFR statement on the court dismissal of Manila Pen class suit

### A BLOW TO PRESS FREEDOM

THE CENTER for Media Freedom and Responsibility (CMFR) looks at the dismissal by the Makati Regional Trial Court (RTC) of the class suit it filed with other media organizations and individual journalists as particularly alarming, and agrees with counsel Harry Roque that it could yet be the biggest blow to press freedom to date.

The ruling was issued in the context of a clear policy by a regime hostile to press freedom and the people's right to information to do all it can, both within and outside the law, as well as to stretch to the limit what is legally allowed, to deny the press its Constitutionally-guaranteed right to cover events of public interest, and, therefore, the public's right to information on such matters. The arrest of journalists during the Peninsula incident was not only an attack on the press but on democracy itself.

In that incident, the regime stretched the definition of obstruction of justice to include press coverage, and used that excuse to abuse journalists even after the so-called military rebels had been taken into custody. It arrested and handcuffed the journalists and media technicians present without even the courtesy of stating why they were being so treated; and under the pretext of determining who were legitimate journalists and who were not, hauled them off to a police camp for "processing".

This incident was the worst of its kind in the history of the struggle for press freedom since 1946. It was worse than any attempt by government to restrain the press during the

several coup attempts against the Aquino government. The system for control of the press was clear during the Martial Law period, and there was little of this kind of manhandling of journalists at work. There is no such clarity for the protection of the press during this administration.

The license appropriated by this regime, its stretching the meaning of the "right" of the government to arrest those it claims to be obstructing justice above the constitutionally protected freedom of the press had to be stopped, together with its presumption that there is a right way and a wrong way for the media to respond to crisis.

Deciding whether to stay and to continue to cover a developing story, or to withdraw from the scene is the editorial prerogative of a constitutionally protected press. No regime has the right to dictate that a decision to stay and cover is wrong and can be penalized. These issues, all vital to the capacity of the press to do its mandated duty of providing the public the information it needs, are among those that the class suit sought to resolve in favor of press freedom.

And yet the RTC decision would not only legitimize an illegitimate attempt to subvert press freedom, the Constitution and democracy. It would now embolden and arm the regime with the license to repeat the offense, as it has several times threatened to do. CMFR is prepared to take the fight to reverse this decision and to affirm the primacy of press freedom all the way to the Supreme Court.

weekend, when the courts close business. It smacks of some conspiracy," Vergel Santos, editorial board chair of the *BusinessWorld* and CMFR board member, said.

Harry Roque, the plaintiffs' counsel, said that the decision "may yet be the biggest blow to our cherished civil liberties to date."

"(W)e maintain that restricting the movement of the press in such a threatening manner, taking into account the totality of the official acts of the police and the DOJ, constitutes an invisible threat of state retaliation by its police and prosecutorial forces should the press venture into ar-

reas that the police declare as a crime scene," Roque said.

Roque said that the complainants will appeal the case.

### Publisher convicted of libel

THE PUBLISHER of a daily newspaper critical of the Arroyo government was found guilty of libel last June 5 and sentenced to a minimum of six months to a maximum of two years in prison. She was also ordered to pay P5 million in moral damages and P33,732.25 in civil damages.

Makati Regional Trial Court Branch 59 Judge Winlove Dumayas found Ninez Cacho



Olivares

LITO OCAMPO

Olivares, publisher of *The Daily Tribune*, guilty of libel for a June 23, 2003 article, "Firm's Partners Ensure Victory of AEDC." The article alleged that then Ombudsman Simeon Marcelo chose people connected to his own law firm, Carpio Villaraza Cruz (CVC), to handle a complaint by one of its clients against the winning bidder in a controversial build-operate contract for the Ninoy Aquino International Airport Terminal III. Olivares is also the editor in chief of and a columnist for the *Tribune*.

Olivares's lawyer Alexis Medina said he is weighing their options on whether to file a motion for reconsideration to Dumayas or an appeal to the Court of Appeals. Olivares has posted bail for her provisional liberty.

CVC claimed in a court affidavit that the article "maligned and blackened the reputation" of the firm by "accusing them of being mere influence peddlers, unlawfully manipulating government institutions for their own ends and using their power against the good of the country."

Olivares stood by her story and maintained that it was not libelous. The story was also a matter of grave public interest, Olivares said.

There are 47 other libel cases filed by CVC against Olivares, each case corresponding to a story. Medina said that they have appealed 46 of the cases to the Court of Appeals, asking that they be consolidated into one, while one case is already being heard.

The *Tribune* has been critical of the Arroyo administration since it came to power in 2001. Police operatives raided the office of the *Tribune* on Feb. 25, 2007 when President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo declared a state of emergency. —with reports from abs-cbnNEWS.com/Newsbreak

CMFR statement on the conviction for libel of Ninez Cacho Olivares

### Escalating the Cost of Free Expression

THE CENTER for Media Freedom and Responsibility (CMFR) views with alarm the conviction for libel and sentencing to a prison term as well as payment of fines of *The Daily Tribune* publisher and editor Ninez Cacho Olivares.

The six months to two years' imprisonment sentence imposed by Judge Winlove Dumayas of Branch 59 of the Makati Regional Trial Court ignores a Supreme Court memorandum urging the imposition of fines rather than prison terms on journalists convicted of libel.

At the same time, however, the fine of over P5 million Judge Dumayas has ordered Olivares to pay is excessive, and underscores the truth of what CMFR has long argued: that not only libel's being a criminal offense in the Philippines, but also the often excessive fines imposed on journalists, hamper free expression, abridge press freedom, and compromise the democratic dialogue.

Unless overturned, the conviction of Olivares escalates the costs of free expression in the Philippines. It ironically comes at a time when the United Nations, precisely on the basis of such Supreme Court initiatives as its memorandum enjoining lower courts not to impose prison sentences in libel cases, has lauded the Philippines for its alleged commitment to human rights.

Congress must now take the necessary steps to amend the libel law. Criminal libel has always been a threat against the free press and free expression in general. The possibility—and, in the case of Davao journalist Alexander "Alex" Adonis, the reality—of imprisonment is a constraint on press reporting and fair comment. The threat of crippling fines has also had the same effect. Both will continue to threaten press freedom and free expression in the Philippines unless libel is decriminalized and a ceiling fixed on fines in libel cases.

### Media groups ask Supreme Court to release jailed broadcaster

TWO MEDIA organizations filed last May 30 a petition for a writ of habeas corpus before the Supreme Court asking for the release of jailed radio commentator Alexander "Alex" Adonis.

The Center for Media Freedom and Responsibility (CMFR) and the National Union of Journalists of the Philippines (NUJP) questioned before the Supreme Court the refusal of Supt. Venancio Tesoro to release Adonis despite a December 2007 parole order from the Department of Justice's Board of Pardon and Paroles (DOJ-BPP) and a release order from the Davao Regional Trial Court (RTC) Branch 14 issued last May 26. Tesoro is the warden of the Davao Penal Colony (Dapecol) where Adonis is serving a sentence for criminal libel.

Adonis was sentenced on Jan. 26, 2007 to a five months and one day to four years, six months and one day imprisonment and a fine of P200,000 in a libel complaint filed by House Speaker Prospero Nograles.

Nograles filed libel charges after Adonis claimed in his radio program that Nograles and his alleged paramour, Davao-based broadcaster Jeanette Leuterio,

had been caught by the latter's husband in a compromising situation at a hotel in Manila. Adonis was convicted after missing several hearings and forfeiting his right to present evidence. He now faces another libel case on the same incident, this time filed by Leuterio.

"There is no legal basis for the continued detention of Adonis since he already has a discharge order on the first case and a release order on the second case," said Adonis's counsel, lawyer Harry Roque.

The petition argued that "the pending case for libel now with Branch 14 of the city's Regional Trial Court...should not be a bar to his enjoyment of the parole already granted (to) him." It added that "Tesoro cannot arrogate unto himself the power to unilaterally declare that there is no legal ground to release petitioner (Adonis) from detention."

The DOJ-BPP granted Adonis parole on Dec. 11, 2007 after he had served the minimum sentence for the Nograles case. The order was received by the regional parole officer in February 2008, but Adonis was not informed about it. Tesoro decided not to implement the order because of the libel case filed by Leuterio against Adonis for the same incident. Adonis, his counsel, and fellow journalists only

found out about the parole order last May 2 when they accidentally ran into the Davao City parole officer.

A parole is the "conditional release of an offender from a correctional institution after he has served the minimum of his prison sentence."

Adonis, through his counsel Roque, asked Davao RTC Branch 14 Judge George Omelio last May 26 to allow him to post bail for the second libel case on the strength of his parole for the first case. The judge granted the petition and issued a release order after Davao media paid the

P5,000 bail bond.

The Davao journalists who went to Dapecol to secure the release of Adonis were however disappointed as Tesoro refused to release Adonis. "We were hoping that Adonis could be released today...but when we arrived the warden told us he could not release Adonis because of the pending (libel) case," *Davao Today* reporter Cheryl Fiel said.

Tesoro refused to honor the court order, arguing that Adonis has a pending libel case. "We have to inform higher authorities before obeying the court order to release Adonis," Tesoro

told the journalists who came to fetch Adonis last May 26.

"This is why many people have lost faith in the system. We have done everything by the book, yet this has happened," Roque said.

Adonis also sought the implementation of Supreme Court Administrative Circular No. 08-2008 on *Guidelines in the Observation of a Rule of Preference in the Imposition of Penalties in Libel Cases*, which encourages fines over imprisonment, on the libel case filed by Nograles. "We are questioning whether or not the SC Circular could be given a retroactive effect in the case of Adonis," Roque explained.

Last April, Adonis, with the help of Roque, also filed a complaint with CMFR and NUJP as co-signatories before the United Nations Human Rights Committee regarding Adonis's plight and calling attention to the country's archaic criminal libel law. Roque also asked the RTC to re-open the libel case filed by Nograles, on the basis of a Supreme Court memorandum urging the imposition of fines instead of imprisonment in libel cases.

### INTERNATIONAL

#### Junta confiscates video and photo equipment

THE BURMESE junta has seized photography and video equipment after footage on the aftermath of Cyclone Nargis came out in foreign media.

The junta confiscated still and video cameras being used by small-scale documentary filmmakers, professionals, proprietors of photography studios, and even those privately owned by households, including those from cyclone-hit Kungyankone town in Rangoon Division.

The junta has put foreign and local media on a watch list in cyclone-affected areas. Military Security Affairs officers have been positioned in every cyclone-affected town, and local political leaders have been told to report on the activities of media personnel and any individual with a camera.

The seizure of film and photography equipment followed reports in state-run newspapers about "anti-government elements and self-centered people" allegedly making money from peddling fabricated news and filming cyclone relief and reconstruction work.

Though the authorities said they had only temporarily confiscated the equipment, none has

Statement of the Freedom Fund for Filipino Journalists on the preliminary injunction granted to the alleged masterminds of the killing of Esperat

### Stop the Killing of Journalists; Prosecute the Masterminds

THE FREEDOM Fund for Filipino Journalists is gravely concerned over the granting last May 14 by the Cebu Court of Appeals of an indefinite preliminary injunction preventing the Cebu Regional Trial Court (RTC) from hearing the case against the individuals accused of being the masterminds in the killing of journalist Marlene Esperat.

The injunction was issued following a March 25 decision granting suspects Osmeña Montañer and Estrella Sabay a 60-day temporary restraining order and suspending the serving of the arrest warrant issued against them last Feb. 4.

The Court of Appeals decision cited an April 3 comment by the Office of the Solicitor General, which said the Supreme Court's transfer of venue order applied only to the actual killers, and was not binding in the case against Montañer and Sabay.

In 2005, the Supreme Court had transferred the venue of the case of the assassins of Esperat from Tacurong to Cebu on the strength of the argument that the suspects' influence in Tacurong could affect the outcome of the case.

The conviction of the killers of Esperat on Oct. 6, 2006 was a significant step in the battle against impunity, together with the conviction of the killer of Edgar Damalerio on Nov. 29, 2005. However, justice has not been fully served in either of these cases in that the suspected masterminds have yet to stand trial.

The Esperat case is particu-

larly important in dismantling the culture of impunity that has so far claimed the lives of 34 journalists since 2001 while in the line of duty. The trial of the suspected masterminds alone will send a signal to the killers of journalists that the judicial system is finally working. The conviction of the masterminds, on the other hand, will go a long way in helping dismantle the culture of impunity in which only a few killers of journalists and no masterminds have been punished for their heinous crimes.

We therefore urge the Supreme Court to issue a resolution declaring that its original order transferring the venue of the cases of the killers of Marlene Esperat applies equally to the suspected masterminds so that the trial can proceed at the Cebu RTC.

Meanwhile, our colleagues in the press and the media in general can provide significant support by disseminating the facts of the Esperat as well as other cases of slain journalists, including the need not only to prosecute the actual killers but also the masterminds in each case.

We hope that our colleagues in the media will use these materials to generate the articles, reports and commentary that can enhance Filipino awareness of the deleterious consequences to democracy of the killing of journalists, and, therefore, of the need to prevent further killings by prosecuting those responsible for those that have already occurred.

been returned to owners.

Last May, the Press Scrutiny and Registration Board ordered local newspapers to stop running stories depicting the destruction caused by Cyclone Nagris and to cover only the reconstruction efforts by authorities.

Junta officials were reportedly angry at the head of the censorship board, Major Tint Swe, for having permitted the publication of some cyclone stories that described damage to buildings and loss of property, supplemented by pictures. Junta head Senior General Than Shwe flared up when he found a front-page story from the bi-weekly *Eleven News Journal* that said: "The plight of storm victims should not be exploited."

"Because Burmese readers are clever enough to read between the lines, they immediately realized that the story did criticize the junta, who have been showing how 'kind' they are, in helping the victims by using international aid as if it were their own," said a journalist.

"We were also warned that we must not describe how people are starving," a senior journalist, who has five years' reporting experience, told *Mizzima*.

The Burma Media Association (BMA), a Burmese press freedom watchdog based in Thailand, condemned the junta for the restriction, saying it not only violates press freedom but also violates and suppresses the peoples' right to be informed.

"The Burmese government is trying to conceal the sufferings of the people and is making false claims that they are conducting rescue and relief missions," said BMA Secretary Son Moe Wai.

A journalist who returned from the worst-hit areas said she found nothing being reconstructed there by the junta.

"So, what should we cover under the title 'reconstruction phase'?" she asked. "They (the soldiers) haven't even finished clearing the towns yet, let alone undertaken the 'reconstruction phase'."

"Journalists are meant to tell the truth so that people will know of the situation in Burma. Suppressing the press at this time is outrageous and shameful," Son Moe Wai said.

The junta's earlier tolerance for local journalists to travel freely appears to have worn thin as nine Rangoon-based journalists from four weeklies who had gone to Hlaing Bwe village in Maw Gyun Township, Irrawaddy Division, to cover the devastation there, were reportedly told to leave overnight last May 18.

An editor for a weekly paper said the journalists arrived last May 18, but were ordered to leave the next morning after being forced to sign a document in which they promised not to return to the village to do any news coverage.

The authorities also detained the famous actor and comedian Zarganar, who had been assisting cyclone victims with relief materials, on the evening of May 4. They also seized from his home documentary video footage and musical recordings on the cyclone, and albums containing songs on the cyclone sung by children.

The documentary videos and photographs of the cyclone, which lashed some townships in Rangoon and Irrawaddy Divisions last May 2 and 3, were very popular among local people and were selling briskly. The video footage captured scenes of bodies strewn about, uprooted trees, collapsed houses and lamp-posts, and debris heaped on the streets. -Mizzima/IFEX



Rohani [HTTP://WWW.BBC.CO.UK](http://www.bbc.co.uk)

### BBC reporter killed in Afghanistan

AN AFGHAN journalist was found dead last June 8 near the city of Lashkar Gah, capital of Helmand province in southern Afghanistan. He had been abducted by unidentified armed men.

Abdul Samad Rohani, a reporter for the Pashto service of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), was found dead a day after he disappeared in the suburbs of Lashkar Gah. Rohani had three gunshot wounds. A pathologist also said he appeared to have been tortured before he was killed.

A group of unidentified armed men stopped his vehicle last June 7 in Lashkar Gah and took Rohani. According to *Reuters*, local reporters saw Rohani at a drug-burning ceremony at the airport in Lashkar

Gah on the morning of June 7. After lunch, he left home without saying where he was going.

Local authorities believe Rohani was killed by the Taliban.

"We believe this murder was perpetrated by the Taliban to intimidate journalists and attack press freedom," the Afghan information ministry said in a statement.

The Taliban spokesperson denied any involvement in the killing in an interview with *Reuters*. The Taliban spokesmen in the region, Qari Yusuf Ahmadi, even offered his condolences to Rahimullah Samandar, the head of the Afghan Independent Journalists Association when the body was found.

Many journalists working in Helmand feel all the more powerless and threatened for not knowing clearly who was behind Rohani's death.

"We do not know who is the enemy," the Institute for War and Peace Reporting was told by Aziz Ahmad Shafe, a journalist who worked with Rohani for the BBC. "There are people who do what they want and put the blame on the Taliban," Shafe said. "Journalists are in danger, they are vulnerable."

"We offer our deepest condolences to the journalist's family and colleagues. Abdul Samad Rohani was typical of many contributors to the BBC who risk their lives to ensure the independence and pluralism of news in their countries. They cover fighting in the south of Afghanistan despite the risks and report on atrocities against civilians," *Reporters Without Borders* (RSF) said.

Rohani was the head of the BBC's Pashto service in Helmand province. He had also worked with the Afghan independent news agency Pajhwok since 2004. His colleagues told RSF that he had received several threats from a local chief who accused him of supporting the Kabul government and of "boycotting" news put out by the Taliban. Rohani's home was the target of an attack in his absence in 2006.

"He was one of our best journalists. He covered a very difficult region. It is a serious blow for press freedom, but they will not manage to silence people with these kinds of acts" said Lotfolah Latif, editor for the BBC in Afghanistan. Danish Karokhel, director of Pajhwok, told RSF of his fears for the safety of journalists who "come under a huge amount of pressure for their independent and impartial work." The Af-

ghan authorities strongly condemned "this vicious murder."

Rohani was the second journalist killed in Afghanistan this year, *Reuters* reported. A Norwegian reporter died in a Taliban suicide bomb attack on a luxury hotel in Kabul in January.

Nasteh Dahir Farah, who was working for the BBC in Somalia was killed last June 7 was shot dead by armed men as he returned from work to his home in Kismayu, southern Somalia. His killers have not been identified. -RSF



Medvedev

[HTTP://WWW.FLICKR.COM/PHOTOS/WORLDECONOMICFORUM/374718226](http://www.flickr.com/photos/worldeconomicforum/374718226)

### Does Medvedev support media freedom?

RUSSIAN PRESIDENT Dmitry Medvedev has called last June 2 for parliament to scrap a bill that would have given authorities the power to close down media outlets suspected of libel, a move welcomed with cautious optimism by the Center for Journalism in Extreme Situations (CJES), Glasnost Defence Foundation (GDF), and other International Freedom of Expression Exchange (IFEX) members.

The amendment would have allowed the government—even without a court decision—to prevent media outlets from operating if a libelous statement was perceived to have been printed or aired. Russia's media community warned that it could have been used to stifle independent and critical reporting.

In a letter to the State Duma, Russia's lower house of parliament, Medvedev said the bill would hinder journalists while failing to reduce defamation. He criticized the proposed amendment and warned that it would "create obstacles to the normal functioning of the media."

The amendment "will not help to achieve the desired goal

to protect the interests of citizens against the circulation of defamatory information," he said. "It would be expedient to withdraw the bill from further hearing," he added.

The State Duma approved the proposed amendment on first reading last April 25. The bill would have added anti-libel measures to a law that bans the publication or broadcast of material encouraging terrorism or extremism, and which has already been criticized as being open to abuse by officials.

While CJES welcomed the move, it noted that the legislation was already doomed. Vladimir Putin's United Russia party, which holds a majority in the State Duma and effectively controls which laws are passed, withdrew its support for the bill last May 19. The party also decided to create a special working group to prepare a new and "improved" draft of the media law, which CJES and GDF fear may result in even tougher legislation.

GDF agreed that the President's actions were positive, but warned media groups not to rush to conclusions about Medvedev, whom the Kremlin is trying to paint as the "progressive new President." "It is possible that this is an evil political game in the spirit of the Byzantine traditions so popular in present day Russia," GDF said.

Many IFEX members rank Russia low on the media freedom scale, highlighting the unsolved murders of more than a dozen journalists during Putin's eight years as President, as well as increased state control over major television channels and newspapers.

Regardless, the move has awakened cautious hopes of greater media freedom under Medvedev, a former corporate lawyer who was sworn in as President last May 7, succeeding Putin. Last month, Medvedev met with the head of the Russian Union of Journalists, which journalists hope is a sign of the Kremlin doors' opening up to a new and constructive dialogue.

In another positive development, a Russian court recently ruled as unconstitutional criminal charges brought against Manana Aslamazyan, the former head of the journalism training organization Educated Media Foundation, Article 19 said. She had faced up to five years in prison on "trumped-up charges" of smuggling foreign currency, and the foundation was forced to shut down after police raided its office. -IFEX ■



Winners at this year's PPI awards

LITO OCAMPO

## Sun.Star Davao, Cebu Daily News lead PPI awardees

SUN.STAR DAVAO and *Cebu Daily News* bagged the most number of awards during the 2007 Annual Community Press Awards organized by the Philippine Press Institute (PPI) at the Diamond Hotel, Manila last May 29.

In the daily category, *Sun.Star Davao* took home a total of three awards for best in photojournalism, best in science and environmental reporting, and best editorial page, while *Cebu Daily News* bagged two for best edited paper and best in business and economics reporting.

Named awardees in the weekly category were: *Mabuhay* for best edited community paper; *Balikas* for best in science and environment reporting; *Baguio Midland Courier* for best in business in economics; *Pampanga News* for best in photojournalism; and *Metro Post* for best editorial page.

*Mabuhay*, *Sun.Star Cebu*, and *Sun.Star Davao* were awarded special citations for their contribution to civic journalism.

The 2007 Annual Community Press Awards was the culmination of PPI's 12<sup>th</sup> National Forum and the 2008 Annual Membership meeting held last May 27 to 30.

PPI's newly-elected board were inducted during the meeting. They were: Amado Macasaet of *Malaya* as chairman-president; Isagani Yambot of the *Philippine Daily Inquirer* as vice-chairman; Dalmacio Grafil of the *Leyte Samar Daily Express* as corporate secretary and trustee for the Visayas; and Antonio Katigbak of *The Philippine Star* as treasurer.

Elected trustees were: Quirino Alban of the *Makiling Journal* for Luzon, Fr. Jonathan Domingo, OMI of the *Mindanao Cross* for Mindanao; Juan Mercado of the Press Foundation of Asia; Vergel Santos of the *BusinessWorld*; Rogelio Salazar of the *Manila Standard Today*; Augusto Villanueva of the *Journal Group of Publications*; and Jose Pavia of *Mabuhay* as executive director.

The PPI, a national organization of newspapers, honors the best daily and weekly newspapers through its annual community press awards.

## GMA-7 wins 7 awards in US Festival

GMA-7, ONE of the biggest television networks in the country, won seven major awards in the 41<sup>st</sup> US International Film and Video Festival (USIFVF) held in Hollywood, California last June 7.

The network received Gold Camera awards including one for Jessica Soho's *Philippine Agenda: Edukasyon* (Education) in the Documentary for Public Issues and Concerns category.

Winning Silver Screen Awards were *Philippine Agenda: Kalusugan* (Health), also in the Public Issues and Concerns category and *Kapuso Mo, Jessica Soho* (One at Heart with Jessica Soho) in the Documentary/Social Issues category.

Two documentary programs of the network, *I-Witness* and *Reporter's Notebook* also received Silver Screen Awards in the Documentary/Social Issues category for their entries "*Iskul Ko, No. 1!*" (My School is Number 1!) and "*Batang Kalakal*" (Child Scavengers), respectively.

GMA-7 also received minor awards including certificates for *Reporter's Notebook's* "*Pulong Diablo*" (Devil's Isle), *I-Witness's* "*Batang Kalabaw*" (Child Beasts of Burden) and "*Gapos*" (Chained), and *100% Pinoy: Kalabaw* (100% Filipino: Carabao).

Founded in 1967, the USIFVF recognizes outstanding productions in Business, Television, Documentary, Educational, Entertainment, Industrial, and Informational fields. This year, 23 countries participated in the competition. ■

## OBIT



RUSSERT

[HTTP://WWW.FLICKR.COM/PHOTOS/TALKRADIONEWS](http://www.flickr.com/photos/talkradionews)

### RUSSERT, 58

TIM RUSSERT, a political journalist known for his interviews with Washington's most influential politicians through the program *Meet the Press*, died last June 13 at 58. Russert suffered a heart attack while recording a voiceover for the program.

Russert was National Broadcasting Company's (NBC) senior vice president and chief of NBC News's Washington bureau. His career in NBC that started in 1984 was notable for his coverage of several US presidential elections. He spearheaded NBC News's broadcast in South America, China, and Australia from 1986 to 1987.

Russert established himself as one of America's most prominent political journalists when he started hosting the weekly American television program *Meet the Press* in 1991. His almost 17 years with the program enabled Russert to interview various national leaders on US foreign policy and economics.

Aside from being a television journalist, Russert also worked as the press secretary of former New York governor Mario Cuomo and chief-of-staff to the late Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan. He also authored two books, *Big Russ and Me* in 2004 and *Wisdom of Our Father* in 2006.

*Time* magazine this year named him one of the 100 most influential people in the world. Russert also received an Emmy Award in 2005 for his coverage of former US president Ronald Reagan's death.

### ROSENTHAL, 95

NOTED JOURNALISM educator Irving Rosenthal, who for four decades mentored a number of notable and distinguished journalists, died last May 18. He was 95.

In his 40 years of teaching at the City College of New York, Rosenthal became an inspiration to many prominent journalists in-

cluding the late executive editor of the *New York Times*, A.M. Rosenthal; CBS reporter Daniel Schorr; CBS and NBC News reporter Marvin Kalb; and former editor of *Business Week* Stephen Shepard. His influence among these notable journalists and his immense contribution to the profession earned him the title "one-man school of journalism."

Rosenthal's interest in journalism was already apparent even at an early age. He became editor of a campus newspaper when he was in high school and also wrote sports articles for the now-defunct newspaper *The Brooklyn Eagle*.

His career in the City College included his establishment of two journalism courses in 1936. He retired from the academe as a professor emeritus of English and chairman of communications and mass media in 1976.

Apart from teaching, Rosenthal co-wrote two books—*Business English Made Simple* (1955) with Harry Rudman and *The Art of Writing Made Simple* (1958) with Morton Yarmon. He also wrote for the *Times*, *The Saturday Review*, *The New York Herald Tribune*, and the *Public Opinion Quarterly*.

New York-based newspaper *Newsday* quoted Rosenthal's son Robert, executive director of the Center for Investigative Reporting in California, as saying: "(Rosenthal) always believed a well-written, well-reported, (and) accurate story would be important, even with all the changes (in journalism)."

The Communications Alumni Association which Rosenthal founded in 1976 is awarding scholarship grants through the Irving Rosenthal Journalism Award, established by the association in honor of him.



ABADILLA

ILANG-ILANG QUIJANO

### ABADILLA, 67

JOURNALIST, POET, teacher, and activist Bayani "Ka Bay" Abadilla succumbed to lymphoma last May 14. He was 67.

At the time of his death, Abadilla was *Pinoy Weekly's* associate editor. He was well-praised by his col-

leagues in the paper. *Bulatlat* quoted Kenneth Roland Guda, editor-in-chief of *Pinoy Weekly* as saying "(I)agi siyang bukas sa pagbabago. Kahit master niya ang wikang Filipino, hindi niya pinipilit ang paggamit sa ilang mga salitang may ibang pakahulugan para sa iba (He is always open to change. Even if he had mastered the Filipino language, he did not insist on using words that may have a different meaning to others)."

Known as "Ka Bay" to many of his colleagues, Abadilla fought the Marcos dictatorship. He participated in the historic First Quarter Storm along with other youth who yearned for social change. Together with activists such as National Artist for Literature Bienvenido Lumbera, Abadilla became a member of the progressive writers' group Panulat para sa Kaunlaran ng Sambayanan formed in 1971.

Lumbera, in his statement on the death of Abadilla, described his colleague's contribution as not limited to arts and literature. "*Walang pagod ang kanyang paglilingkod sa sambayanan* (he was tireless in his service to the people)," Lumbera said.

His bravery and passion to serve the Filipino masses were evident in his works as a columnist, poet, and essayist. In November 2006, Abadilla launched *Sigliwa Kamao*, a collection of poems.

Abadilla also taught at the Polytechnic University of the Philippines until 2003 and had written for critical newspapers *Ang Masa* and *Diario Uno*.

### AGLAY, 41

DOLORES "DOLLY" Aglay, business reporter for the Manila bureau of Reuters News Agency (Thomson Reuters), died last May 26 after three years of battling cancer. She was 41.

Covering mostly the commodities beat, Aglay joined Reuters in 1995. *abs-cbnNews.com* in the article "Manila-based Reuters journalist dies of cancer" quoted Raju Gopalakrishnan, the Philippine Bureau chief of Reuters as saying: "She (Aglay) worked across all parts of the business file and pitched in on political and general news whenever she sensed it was needed, but completely owned the commodities beat."

Aglay also worked as a business reporter for *The Philippine Star* before joining Reuters. ■

# CONFESSIONS OF A SMALL TOWN JOURNALIST

■ By Redempto Anda

**B**EING A community journalist can be trickier than pounding the beat in the big city. Having covered the major beats for the *Manila Chronicle* back in the early '90s and now running a weekly paper in Palawan while writing for the *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, I have come to recognize the nuances.

One would think that the difference is just the geographic factor, when in fact the provincial milieu that a community journalist wades into is very different from the norms of the big city.

In the provinces, people generally know one another. It usually happens that you cover a story in the morning and then you bump into the person you interviewed in your favorite coffee shop or the town's grocery store later in day. Depending on how you have angled your story, you end up either engaging in awkward banter or getting a nasty stare. I mean, I have had my share of covering presidents and several of their Cabinet secretaries, but I do not remember saying hello to anyone of them while shopping for personals in the neighborhood 7-11 outlet.

I once did a story on an expatriate who had serious legal issues with his government. The guy slapped me a libel suit that took over five years to finally get dismissed by the court. While the case was on trial, we got so used to bumping into each other in cheese club meetings and on the sidewalks that I do not know anymore if the case was dismissed because we sort of became friends, or if there was not a libel issue to begin with.

In many ways, the small town factor affects provincial journalists in both good and bad ways. I have always been very careful with my facts as I would not want to be harangued by local news sources about errors when we cross paths the next day. I tend to be more engaged in my stories, as opposed to being detached.

Hard stories that probe into issues of public accountability in the local setting are difficult for provincial journalists to grapple with. A number of people I know tend to shy away from reporting on something that they know will get the goat of the governor or the mayor or congressman, or an entity with deeply rooted economic interests. Either they would not prefer the aggravation, or they simply cannot

hack it anymore because they have long compromised their independence as journalists. Or even if they

file the story, the treatment would be bland if not totally skewed. Sad but true, but I know self-censorship happens in the big cities too.

As a basic tenet in media goes, no story is worth dying for. Reason enough why recently I have become picky about reporting controversial mining projects in Palawan after I started receiving nasty and threatening text messages on my phone.

Mining stories in particular are interesting to cover because they tend to be laden with conflicts and oddities. Government corruption and irregularities, or at least the evidence of it, leak out of many mining projects. A lot of mining companies tend to do short cuts in the permit process or apply unusual tactics in meeting their goals, but are bad at hiding them from prying eyes.

Perhaps like reporting on illegal gambling and drugs, or even covering war-torn areas that expose a journalist to physical harm in a more direct and evident way, writing about political and social controversies in general can be bad for a journalist's health, especially in the provinces.

As soon as I decided to pick up on such topics again, I realized I still had the fear factor to shed. Yes, I should just arm myself with a handgun and run after stories like I used to. No, I can just concentrate on writing about the wonderful flora and fauna of Palawan. Then, when you sit down and write, you realize that everything that happens in your beat is inter-related in context.

The cold statistics seem to support this assumption. Nearly all of the journalists who have been killed in the exercise of their profession are based in the provinces. That should say something about the risks faced by those in the profession who have to practice their craft in an objective and detached manner in a physical and cultural environment where they are virtual sitting ducks. ■

Redempto Anda is editor of the weekly Palawan Sun and is a correspondent of the Philippine Daily Inquirer.



MANIX ABRERA