

12-2004

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L. Magno
Philippine Daily Inquirer

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Recommended Citation

Magno, L., Battling media corruption in the Philippines: Profile interview: Chay Florentin Hofileña, Center for Journalism, Ateneo de Manila University, *Asia Pacific Media Educator*, 15, 2004, 221-225.

Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/apme/vol1/iss15/20>

Battling Media Corruption in the Philippines



Profile Interview:

Chay Florentin Hofileña

Center for Journalism, Ateneo de Manila University

In 1998, Ma. Rosario “Chay” Florentin-Hofilena exposed what journalists in the Philippines acknowledge is a perennial problem in the media industry but are hesitant to discuss in public-- corruption in media. Her extensive documentation and interviews with media practitioners resulted in a book in 2004 - “*News for Sale: The Corruption of the Philippine Media*” - published jointly by the Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism (www.pcij.org) and the Center for Media Freedom and Responsibility (www.cmfr.com.ph/). The book focuses on the rampant media corruption during the May 2004 presidential election in the Philippines.

Chay covered the 1986 “*People Power*” Philippine revolution for the *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, was a freelance writer for publications in Dallas and San Francisco, a senior reporter for *The Manila Chronicle* and ABC-5 television in the Philippines. She was deputy editor for *The Manila Times* and associate editor of *Newsbreak Magazine*, which she writes for regularly.

She is currently Director of the Master of Arts in Journalism Program at the Konrad Adenauer Center for Journalism at Ateneo de Manila University in the Philippines. **Leo Magno** (email: lmagno@inq7.net) IT editor of the *Philippine Daily Inquirer* and executive editor of *INQ7.net* spoke with her about her latest book.

Magno: Six years after the first “*News for Sale*” saw print, not much has changed for the better regarding corruption in Philippine media. The 2004 edition of your book even points to the fact that more ingenious ways of bribery have been developed by media handlers and “shepherders,” especially with the rising influence of entertainment reporters in the coverage of the elections. Should we brace for more unethical practices to come?

Chay: There will be more creative innovations in media corruption as the electoral arena becomes more crowded and competitive. In the last few years, the usual targets were print and radio. For year 2004, political camps tried to penetrate television, and for good reason -- TV enjoys the highest credibility rating among the three media. Economics will be one limiting factor to the magnitude of media corruption. As was seen this year (in the May, 2004 Philippine elections), corruption was more targeted and focused because there was less money to go around with. With tough times ahead, it will become increasingly harder for those who engage in it to stop.

Magno: So corruption begets corruption. As politicians buy news space, media continue to sell news space. Then the same politicians may end up doing corrupt practices in the performance of their duties after they win. The cycle continues in six years. Isn't corruption more of a systemic problem than merely a problem of media?

Chay: Yes, obviously corruption is a systemic problem that plagues not only the media but various institutions in most developing countries. The corruption we see in the media today cannot be isolated from the corruption at various levels of government and even the private sector-- they are all intertwined. But viewing the problem this way could be very intimidating and overwhelming; one might think it's a lost battle because the problem is just too huge to overcome. Thus, one way of making it more manageable is identifying the immediate factors and players that cause it. Public relations professionals, advertisers, politicians, media practitioners and owners are among those who are part of the immediate solutions. If they are included in discussions and efforts to reduce corruption, some headway can be made. As they say, you have to win several battles to win a war. And if media corruption is regarded as a microcosm of societal corruption, any victories in the battle against media corruption could provide clues as to how battles in other institutions could be fought with equal success.

Magno: Television is king, according to the first chapter of your book. And during elections, entertainment news get mixed with political articles, no thanks to the increase in the number of celebrities running for elective positions in the Philippines. However, one of your sources also mentioned that entertainment reporters are more open to *payola*. How can we enforce an industry-wide code of ethics if each beat has its own standards, and some of them have a different set of rules?

Chay: Publishers, media owners, and editors who act as gatekeepers must sit down and seriously address the problem of media corruption. There cannot be a different set of standards for beats because reporters assigned to these beats are all practising journalism. When we speak of upholding the ethical standards of journalism, we speak of one standard, otherwise the credibility of the profession suffers. Entertainment or lifestyle reporters are no less bound by journalism ethics as are political reporters, for example. Common ethical ground must be found by decision-makers in the media -- they must talk and they must agree.

Magno: With entertainment news being utilized by candidates to get media mileage, could information being fed the voting public sink to low levels of discussion, such as gossip, showbiz and popularity contests?

Chay: We are already seeing this now. We have politicians appearing in shows that thrive on gossip and entertainment news. The viewing public is getting tired of the news and its negativity and is turning to showbiz for distraction. And politicians are quick to pick this up. The intelligent and enlightening discussion of issues on television and radio, for example, is becoming a rarity. Newspapers, both online and print, are perhaps the only media where in-depth discussions and reports can still be found. But then again, newspaper readership is on the decline and although it is the decision-makers who still read, the pie is rapidly shrinking. This raises the specter of an elitist newspaper readership and a mass audience exposed to trivia and gossip. It also poses a dilemma to the aspiring politician: how to effectively govern and lead such a constituency with disparate levels of knowledge and information.

Magno: How then, do you think newspapers can reverse this trend? With the masses turning to showbiz and shallow pseudo-political news in the form of entertainment and gossip, and with newspaper credibility on the decline, how can media inform and entertain at the same time? How can newspapers reach out to spark critical thought among the masses?

Chay: Given its power and credibility, television carries tremendous responsibility on its shoulders. Given the competition that television poses, newspapers must work double time to decipher the quirks of the market and their readership. They have to listen to what readers are saying and they have to find out what the youth -- their source of stable readership in the future -- are thinking and saying, too. This is where the delicate balance of providing readers what they need and what they want comes in. There are no short-cuts to such a complex problem of declining readership and the media must do their homework. They must make sure that they are still making a connection with their reading, viewing, or listening public. Once the connection is lost, it's downhill all the way.

Magno: Your book indicates a near-admission by leading TV networks in the Philippines that during elections, the entertainment agenda is being prioritized over legitimately informative news stories, mainly due to the demands and whims of a mass-based market. How do you propose to strike a balance between market-driven content and truly informative content that may benefit voters?

Chay: It's an art. Television bosses must be clear about what they regard as information that the public needs to vote intelligently and more market-driven content that can make the delivery of such information possible. It cannot be all market-driven content, otherwise television abdicates on its responsibility to inform the public. Thus, entertainment shows that rake in the ads and boost the ratings should raise the tolerance level for quality shows that do not necessarily rate as well. In an ideal setting, TV journalists should find quality stories that can also sell. They should be able to identify which issues resonate with their viewers and which affect their lives and their future -- this is essentially the relevance test. Then they should be able to tell the story well. Concretely, (television station) *GMA-7* did a series of reports on the presidency (I referred to this in the book) and these stories rated well. The network's success here means it can be done.

Magno: After Martial Law, the press' newfound freedom made journalists even more influential. If we argue that a tightly controlled and regulated press would end corruption, what good would such regulation do today, considering that media corruption was never solved by the repressive press environment brought about by Martial Law?

Chay: A tightly controlled and regulated press is no guarantee of a "cleaner" press. The experience of the Philippine press under Martial Law is precisely an argument against government control being an effective antidote to corruption. What is needed is more effective self-regulation rather than government intervention. Self-regulation can work if there is active participation from members of the press, especially the decision-makers from the big media outfits. The decision-makers must actually sit in the regulatory body so that enforcement of sanctions and decisions can be guaranteed. A body that has no power to enforce its own rules is totally useless. But there must be involvement also from other sectors that have a stake in a free, credible, professional media. Thus, eminent persons representing sectors such as academe, business, civil society, or the judiciary (retired justices) can be invited to sit in a council that decides on complaints or issues brought against erring or abusive journalists. This is not a perfect set-up or a guarantee that corruption will be eradicated, but it is a good starting point.

Magno: In your book, *Malaya* publisher Jake Macasaet said the problem with media corruption is that businessmen and politicians are afraid of the press, that's why they resort to bribing journalists. Has the press become too powerful and too drunk with power en route to gaining freedom that it feels it could now throw its weight around?

Chay: There is no such thing as absolute freedom. With freedom comes great responsibility. The press in the Philippines enjoys tremendous freedom and it has become terribly irresponsible. This irresponsibility will have its costs as credibility is continuously eroded. Look at print – diminished credibility has affected readership, circulation and sales. This is the future of the media that insist on being obstinate and irresponsible.

Magno: You mentioned in your book that in the 1998 and 2004 Philippine elections, media -- particularly radio and tabloid newspapers -- came up with "creative" arrangements (from big-ticket menus to "sachet" packages) offering guaranteed coverage of candidates and the "toning down" of negative publicity. This flirted with the bounds of ethical journalistic standards, and yet was, and is still is, tolerated. Again, six years after you first wrote about such practices, do you think today that six years from now such a practice would become standard offerings of the marketing and advertising arms of media outfits?

Chay: Unless drastic self-regulatory measures are introduced and unless electoral expenses are effectively regulated, nothing will change. A symbiotic relationship exists between the media and politicians and the wealthy candidates seeking public office will use all means, including paying for whatever is out there in the market. At a time when advertisers are looking to get more for their money and the media are competing fiercely to get their share of advertising, the marketing and advertising arms of various media outfits will most likely try to outdo each other in coming up with "creative packages" to lure advertisers. This could include ad strategies that would blur the line between advertising and news. Today we have advertorials that

are properly labeled. But we hear of arrangements where the labels disappear and paid-for content, which should normally be labeled as advertising, is now being passed off as legitimate news. Obviously, it's the readers who are being cheated without their knowing it. Will the trend continue? Yes, unless readers wise up.

Magno: "Subsidized" coverage, or the practice of footing journalist's transportation and lodging bills during regional campaigns, is becoming accepted by smaller media firms that cannot pay their way. In Asia, many media entities cannot pay their way when it comes to international or even local coverage. There are no explicit policies in the code of ethics about this practice. Could this, like the practice of offering "creative" packages mentioned earlier, glide unconsciously into accepted norms in the future?

Chay: Economic realities make it difficult for smaller media organizations to be as independent as they should be when it comes to campaign coverage. Again, this is something that is already happening at present, it's not something that is yet to happen. Justifications and compromises are being made -- media outfits say that so long as reportage is not influenced by the freebies, then it's perfectly all right for food, airfare and accommodations to be shouldered by candidates or political parties. Others have come up with pooled coverage as a solution or have chosen to be very selective in their coverage. The practice of subsidized coverage is becoming the norm because no one is questioning it or challenging its propriety. Unless more critical journalists or the public do so, the practice will continue and become even more widespread.

Magno: What is your take on the endless debate about economic conditions forcing poorly paid journalists to accept bribes? How can one reconcile the low pay journalists get with the high intellectual capital needed to become a journalist? Does better pay dictate the quality and integrity of a journalist?

Chay: Poverty is no excuse for corruption. At the same time, it is not the only cause or reason for corruption. We know of well-paid journalists who still indulge themselves, debunking common belief that it is poverty that drives reporters to accept bribes. It is also true that journalists must be paid well -- it gives dignity to the profession and it recognizes the skill and integrity that is required of its practitioners. A militant and discerning public, an effective self-regulatory mechanism, an awareness and recognition by owners of the importance of journalism, and the continuing education of both journalists and citizens about the role of journalism in public life could help minimize the problem of bribery and corruption.

CHAY FLORENTIN HOFILÉÑA can be contacted via email: mhofilena@ateneo.edu