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Filipino journalists speak out and pay the price

Eric Loo

There's the shepherd, the flock and the sacristan. Together they drive the media machine with their paymaster, in the back seat brazenly directing the way through the back alleys of Philippine politics.

The 'shepherds' are former journalists turned media publicists. 'Shepherds' take care of reporters covering the election campaign trails – from arranging accommodation to providing food and 'night' entertainment. This can rake in as much as 40,000 pesos monthly (about US\$729) for 'shepherding' a presidential election. That's equivalent to how much a broadsheet senior reporter earns in three-months.

Another story tells of editors pocketing P20,000 to P50,000 a week for running favourable stories of particular candidates. Top-notch journalists receive from errant politicians monthly 'smiling money' ranging from P100,000 to P300,000.

Then there's the 'flock' – reporters on the politics beat, handpicked, paid and coddled by the 'shepherds' to cover a candidate's campaign trail.

Finally, there's the 'sacristan' employed in government departments. A 'sacristan' looks after the contents and ornaments of a Catholic church. However, applied to the Philippine media, a 'sacristan' is somebody who runs the shepherd's errands, photocopies media releases, receives fax messages and campaign schedules for distribution to the flock.

It's a well-oiled machinery, culling millions

of pesos for under-paid journalists willing to sell their souls to political candidates sourcing for prominent news space and prime air time. 'Hacks for hire' has steered the course of Philippine politics and media for decades. But today, trading in personal gains at the community expense has become bolder – with higher stakes. To the incorruptible, such as news columnist Marlene Esperat, who blew the whistle on these corrupt transactions, they are killed.

Years of infamy

Esperat was an ombudsman in the Department of Agriculture in Mindanao. She had filed corruption charges against several local government officials. She resigned from government last year but continued on her anti-corruption crusade in her news commentaries for the *Midland Review* in Western Mindanao. She was shot in her home, reportedly in front of her daughter, on 24 March 2005.

On 4 May 2005, Klein Cantoneros, a radio announcer of a community station, dxAA-FM, was gunned down by three motorcyclists, while on his way home in Dipolog City, Zambonga del Norte in Mindanao. The 34-year old broadcaster was known for his hard-hitting commentaries and criticisms of 'errant public servants', alleged corruption and illegal gambling.

Eight days later, on 12 May, Philip Agustin, publisher-editor of local community newspaper, *Starline Times Recorder*, was shot dead by two assailants on a motorbike in the village of Paltic, about 70 miles northeast of Manila. The *Inquirer News Service* web site (www.inq7.net) reported that two weeks before the murder, Agustin, aged 54, had published stories implicating a local mayor of embezzling disaster funds that were allocated for resettling 1,000 families displaced by landslides in the November 2004 landslides. Agustin had published a special edition of the expose one week before he was killed.

Another special edition of the *Starline Times Recorder* focusing on corruption and illegal logging in the nearby town of Dingalan was to be published on 11 May 2005. [Details of these cases are accessible from the Committee to Protect Journalists, CPJ, special report 'On the

radio, under the gun' by Abi Wright, Aug.15, 2005.
http://www.cpj.org/Briefings/2005/phil_05/phil_05.html]

Indeed, 2004 was the 'year of infamy' with 13 journalists killed, three in August alone. As of September this year, six journalists have been killed. The Philippine National Union of Journalists website (<http://www.nujp.org/casualties.htm>) lists 69 journalists killed since 1986, with none of the killers ever caught or convicted, earning the country a notorious reputation, similar to Iraq, as one of the world's most dangerous place for journalists today.

President Gloria Arroyo had offered a two million-peso reward for information leading to the capture of the killers who have remained elusive over the years. To date, there have been no takers – because apparently squealers live very short lives in the Philippines.

Local radio stations targeted

Whether Filipino journalists were killed in the line of duty, or was it because they broke their contract with the devil is anyone's guess. The Paris-based Reporters Without Borders reckons 52 of those killings were directly related to the victims' work. But, in an environment where the average income of a cadet reporter is about US\$60 a month, the temptation to sell one's journalistic soul is ever present.

Sheila Coronel, the executive director of the Philippine Centre for Investigative Journalism, was quoted in London's *Guardian* (10 May 2005) that it was unsurprising that the majority of victims were those working for local radio stations, which in the Philippine context, are deemed to be often inflammatory, emotive, personal and strident in their on-air commentaries about local politics, commercial feuds and corruption.

Many of the victims are known as 'block-timers' – people who buy airtime on local radio to air their politics of discontent, allegations and counter-allegations with minimal awareness of ethical journalistic practice or the laws of libel.

The public perceives Filipino 'journalists' and the 'block-timers' to be self-serving corruptible 'shepherds' with their 'flocks' and

'sacristans' in tow. How else could reporters keep their faith in the profession when their public image is dragged through the mud and their bosses and colleagues are on the take – and that, with impunity? Other cases of media corruption are outlined, with a glossary of colourful descriptors, in Chay Hofilena's book *News For Sale* (2004) published by the Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism (www.pcij.org)

A sample of the trade terms:

'AC-DC' for 'attack-collect-defend-collect'.

This involves a reporter instigating animosity between two rivals, and collecting money from each rival for writing a rebuttal. Either way, the reporter earns a 'consultancy' fee.

'ATM journalism'. Reporters receive discreet and regular pay-offs through automated-teller machine accounts, which could be in the names of relatives or spouses.

'Blood money' for a pay-off to ensure a critical story is killed or slanted in the briber's favour before publication.

'Hao siao' ('bluff' in the Chinese-Hokkien dialect), which refers to charlatans posing as journalists in order to cash in on the pay-offs by news sources.

I attended a launch of Hofilena's book in Manila on 18 August 2004, five days after radio commentator Edward Balida was shot in the public market in Valencia City, Bukidnon Province. Reports attributed the attempt on Balida's life to his on-air crusade against the drug lords in the province. Balida survived. To protect themselves, some investigative reporters have resorted to carry a gun besides a note pad, such as the late Cantoneros who died with a .45 calibre Remington in his hand.

Ironically, while civil activists in Malaysia and Singapore fight for their rights to information and press freedom, Filipino journalists fight for a more basic 'right' – their right to life and occupational safety as reflected in NUJP's hot links – '*Report a threat*'; '*Journalists killed since 1986*'; and '*The Journalist's Safety Guide*'.

Corruption rules

How has the Philippine media, one of Asia's freest and robust, come to such a dismal state?

Is corruption a dysfunction of the forces of supply and demand in a culture of impunity – as long as there are givers, there'll be takers? Why is there more corruption in one place, time or culture than others? It is tempting to explain the scourge of corruption to the predominance of consumerism portrayed in the world's media, and with each day, they become more entrenched as a reaction to the symbols of a materialistic consumer society, which is so visible and yet so unattainable.

Malou Mangahas, former editor of *The Manila Times* wrote in *News For Sale* (p.94), 'We are so corrupt even as we are so free. We have so many good as we have so many bad journalists. The paradox is obvious but the answers, elusive.'

Unsurprisingly, corruption and gross national income are somehow inversely correlated. Over the last decade, the Transparency International Corruption Perception Index has scored countries on a scale of 1-10 with one for most corrupt and 10 for squeaky clean. The index for 1998, 2000 and 2004 respectively shows this distribution: Singapore (7.0 – 9.1 – 9.3); Malaysia (5.3 – 4.8 – 5.0); Thailand (3.0

– 3.2 – 3.6); Philippines (3.3 – 2.8 – 2.6); Indonesia (2.0 – 1.7 – 2.0). (Details at <http://www.transparency.org/cpi/2004/cpi2004.en.html#cpi2004>)

While Singapore's image of a clean efficient state seems to shine brighter by the years, the Philippines and Indonesia seem to grow dimmer, with Malaysia and Thailand being trapped where they are.

Where there is little access to the structure of economic opportunities – because of race, gender, ethnicity, lack of skills, capital or education – the temptation to get rich through innovative but criminal means is considerable. Cultures that stress economic success but restrict access to opportunities will inevitably see higher levels of corruption.

The sentiment in media circles is that overworked underpaid journalists in the Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand, Cambodia, and, to an extent – Malaysia – will always be drawn to *quid pro quo* deals. Coupled with the lack of effective media watchdogs, press councils, ombudsman or the lack of professional will among media practitioners to expose each other's commission of unethical journalism, weeding out media corruption does look like a losing battle.

Hofilena notes in an interview with *Asia Pacific Media Educator* (Dec. 2004, p. 225) that poverty is no excuse for corruption. 'We know of well-paid journalists who still indulge themselves. It's also true journalists must be paid well – it gives dignity to the profession and it recognizes the skill and integrity that is required of its practitioners.'

Corruption in Philippine journalism has become so organic that stemming its deluge into the pool of participants who are vulnerable to a get-rich-quick deal would require attacking the root causes within the public and commercial sectors. Hofilena notes in her book that the media corruption we see today cannot be isolated from corruption in governments and the private sector.

The remaining incorruptible Filipino journalist's crusade to reclaim the profession's traditional value of representing the public good could teach journalists operating in regulated media environments, notably Malaysia and

A dangerous profession

'53 journalists were killed while doing their job or for expressing their opinions in 2004, the most since 1995 at the height of attacks by Islamic radicals in Algeria that killed more than 50 journalists in less than two years. Iraq remains the world's most dangerous place for the media, with 19 journalists killed there in 2004 and more than a dozen kidnapped.'

***Reporters without borders
2005 Annual Report
See: <http://www.rsf.org/>***

Singapore, a lesson or two, where newsroom standards continue to hover on a level of mediocrity. Editors must lead not by their sycophantic editorials but by their professional creed in and out of the newsroom.

Failure in editorial leadership inevitably leads to failure in ethical practice. It's sensible that newsrooms put in place sound protocols for dealing with daily ethical issues, such as whether to accept free airline tickets to tour a major production plant, or, whether editors should accept appointments by their governments to public positions, or conferred with public titles.

Avoiding the *quid pro quo*

The Philippine Press Institute lists a few guidelines for its political reporters: 'Pay your way. Do not accept cash or gifts in kind from politicians and political parties. Do not moonlight with political parties. Draw the line between journalism and your own money ventures.'

One of the most telling reminder is: 'Staff members shall be discouraged from inviting (political) candidates to stand as godparents in baptisms, weddings and other church rites, or as *padrinos* in the employment of relatives or friends.'

Indeed, rubbing shoulders between journalists, ruling politicians and corporate leaders are as acceptable in Malaysia and Singapore as it is entrenched in the Philippines. The public perception that newspaper editors in Malaysia and Singapore are unapologetically political appointments does not help correct the image either that newsrooms are filled with sycophantic scribes. This was most evident in 2003 with the excessive adulation lavished by Malaysian journalists on former Prime Minister, Mohamed Mahathir on the eve of his retirement on Oct.30 when veteran journalists confessed that they then were 'takut takut' ('afraid' translated from the Malay language) of asking the hard questions out of respect and awe for the former Prime Minister. Which begs many unanswered questions of what the veteran journalists knew then but were 'takut' to ask, at the expense of fully informing their readers.

While Malaysian and Singaporean journalists' deference to *budi* ('values' in the Malay

language) in public life with its emphasis on empathy, respect for elders and compromise is culturally justifiable, extending the deferential value system to critical journalism where reporters ought to be representing the people's discontent is professionally inexcusable. As a Malaysian journalist once described, the 'tight-lipped' syndrome is the profession's weakest link to media credibility.

The current Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Abdullah Badawi's office has stirred much curiosity with last year's launch of a National Integrity Plan to address the problem of corruption in the public sector, and to an extent the Malaysia media practice with its close affinity with politicians. A 'Malaysian Institute for Public Ethics' has been set up. One waits with much anticipation of what the 'national integrity plan' could achieve when the integrity of Malaysian journalists are being eroded by the state's interference in their reporting of public affairs, and the more than 40 laws curtailing media discourse.

The National Union of Journalists and the Malaysian Press institute have so far been inadequately prepared nor resourced to be the people's watchdog of free and responsible journalism. Meanwhile, whatever remains of the alternative media watchdogs in Malaysia, which were active in 1998, they now channel their discontent onto the blog site, Screenshots (<http://www.jeffooi.com/>), and less so, Malaysiakini (www.malaysiakini.com) and the social reform movement, Aliran (www.aliran.com).

With the Philippine media and politics caught up in cold blooded murder of media messengers, and entrenched corruption, the issues that journalists face in Malaysia and Singapore may seem trivial. Nevertheless, the shepherds with their flock and sacristans in tow do exist in the Malaysian media, perhaps with smaller stakes. ■

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