

THE MEDIA, THE MARKET AND DEMOCRACY: THE CASE OF THE PHILIPPINES

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Abstract

The popular mobilisation that led to the downfall of President Estrada in January 2001 was facilitated by the use of new communication technologies, notably text messaging on mobile phones and the establishment of web sites. Public awareness of political developments, fostered by these means and by independent media, eventually forced the main mass media to cover Estrada's impeachment trial, and it was the threat of the collapse of that trial that provoked mass demonstrations.

These events illustrate some leading themes in the history of the Philippine's mass media. Newspapers, radio and television have long been privately owned, and have developed into very market-oriented media. Most of the time, they are devoted to tabloid and sensational reporting, and they are mostly closely connected with large and diversified corporations. After a long period of repression by Ferdinand Marcos, his overthrow saw an explosion of genuinely independent media, although issues of ownership and traditions of bribing journalists put limits on what got reported. Estrada attempted to control the media more directly, particularly through systematic bribery, threatening the businesses of media owners with tax audits, and manipulating advertising.

For some time, he was successful, but as public awareness of his crimes grew, so audiences demanded better mainstream coverage. The media were forced by their audiences to adopt a much more critical stance, and this opened the way for independent journalism.

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Introduction

At about 10 p.m. on January 16, 2001, the majority of senators acting as judges in the impeachment trial of then Philippine President Joseph Estrada decided not to accept new evidence that would incriminate the President in charges of receiving millions in payoffs from businessmen. The trial, which had been aired live on television and radio for the past three weeks, reached an impasse. The Senate vote was an indication that the judges were inclined toward acquitting Estrada, and confirmed the worst suspicions of many Filipinos that the trial was merely a charade.

Within an hour after the court had adjourned, hundreds of citizens were out on the streets, honking horns, banging on pans, and demanding Estrada's resignation. By midnight, thousands had gathered on a highway called Edsa, the site of the 1986 "people power" revolt against the dictator Ferdinand Marcos. Many of those who came were watching the trial on television and had received text messages sent to their mobile phones. Because of SMS (short message service) that phone companies provided to some 4.5 million Filipino mobile phone users, the call to protest the Senate vote by staging a "noise barrage" and later, to gather on Edsa until Estrada had been ousted, was disseminated with lightning speed. In the next four days of the uprising that ended with Estrada's fall, SMS was used to coordinate the protests, keep protesters abreast of events as they unfolded, and to mobilise citizens to march, bring food, and to keep vigil.

Although the traditional media — newspapers, radio and television — were covering events freely and aggressively, they could not keep pace with the speed with which information travelled through the SMS. Moreover, they were not as interactive as the SMS was, nor did they have the capacity to link individual users to each other. Throughout the crisis, activists used SMS because it was secure: Text messages sent via mobile phones are difficult to trace.

From October 2000 to January 2001, when a series of exposés about Estrada's connections to illegal gambling and his accumulation of illicit wealth rocked the presidency, the mobile phone became a subversive weapon. People used text messages to mobilise for rallies, spread the latest news or rumour about presidential indiscretions, and raise awareness of how the impeachment trial was being compromised (Chandrasekaran 2000). The SMS was used for jokes as well, with "texters" (as they are called in the Philippines) making fun of Estrada and the senators who were seen as taking his side in the trial. Not since the dying days of the Marcos regime has the power of humour and rumour to destabilise a regime been so clearly demonstrated.

Apart from the SMS, email and the Web were also the weapons of protest. As many as 200 anti-Estrada websites and about 100 e-mail groups were set up during that period. Organised groups used e-mail to discuss position papers, reach a consensus on issues and mobilise numbers for rallies. The Internet was a bridge that linked protesters in the provinces, Metro Manila and even overseas. The Web played host to satire, polemical tracts, even virtual rallies.

The role that new technology played in the revolt was due in part to the fact that the established media were initially restrained in their reporting on Estrada, who had intimidated journalists and vented his ire on critical media outlets by closing down newspapers or threatening libel suits against them. Only when the anger on the streets was palpable did many news organisations become bold enough to print or air critical reports.

From December 2000 to January 2001, television played a major role by beaming the impeachment trial live to an unprecedented audience. On the night of the Senate vote, as much as 86 percent of those in the capital, according to one survey, were watching television. For the next four days, the media reporting on the protests helped keep them going.

The uprising against Estrada was a multimedia revolt. People came armed with mobile phones. They kept track of events through SMS and radio broadcasts. It is estimated that as many as 70 million messages were sent in the week of the uprising (telecomasia.net 2001). Those who stayed at home read newspapers, watched television or listened to the radio. The mainstream media enjoyed unprecedented sales. Websites were reporting on events in real time, so even those who were abroad could keep track of events as they unfolded.

The anti-Estrada uprising showed the role the media could play in providing information, encouraging participation in protests by reporting on them, and keeping protesters in touch with each other. The revolt renewed faith in the importance of media freedom in promoting Philippine democracy, a faith that had been eroded by an irresponsible press that often resorted to shoddy and sensational reporting to meet the demands of a crowded and competitive market. It also demonstrated the potential of new technologies to enrich democracy by providing alternative channels of communication and raising awareness of issues, not through traditional journalism but through text and visuals sent by individuals without the mediation of gatekeepers. Finally, the uprising showed that the market — traditionally seen as an obstacle to independent and hard-hitting political reporting — could actually compel the mainstream media to be more professional and to perform its watchdog role without fear.

A Fighting Tradition

The Philippines boasts a rowdy and vibrant press that likes to think of itself as the freest in Asia. With the fall of the Marcos regime in 1986, a 14-year-old system of media controls collapsed overnight. Into that vacuum rushed dozens of new newspapers and radio and television stations as old Marcos-controlled media outlets folded or were taken over by the new government. A pluralistic, but somewhat anarchic, media industry came into being.

There is strong popular support for a free media among Filipinos. In part, this is because of a tradition of a fighting, anti-colonial press. Successive waves of colonisers — the Spaniards, the Americans, and the Japanese during World War II — used the press in pursuit of the colonial agenda and imposed stringent censorship. But a series of anti-colonial movements also employed clandestine newspapers in their fight against the colonial masters. To this day, the *samizdat* tradition remains strong, with anti-government groups continuing to publish underground papers or, since the Internet, putting up guerrilla Websites.

The Philippine media are the products of a turbulent history, reflecting the upheavals and changes that have shaken the country since the advent of colonialism in the 16th century. They have been shaped by a succession of colonial regimes, which implanted in the Philippines a press system much like those in Europe and the United States. The aspirations and ambitions of the Filipino elites also moulded the media.

Unlike other Asian or European countries, there is no tradition of state- or party-owned presses or broadcasting entities in the Philippines. Through most of Philippine history, newspapers, radio and television have been almost always in private hands. Broadcasting, in particular, is heavily commercial in orientation. The development of broadcasting in the Philippines was spurred largely by the drive for profits and for political influence.

The tradition that defines Philippine journalism is polemical and political, influenced by the nineteenth century European press, when newspapers were the carriers of political ideas and were at the centre of political activity in the emerging nation states. In the late nineteenth century, newspapers clandestinely distributed in the Philippines helped in raising awareness about the evils of nearly 400 years of Spanish colonial rule and in birthing the idea of an independent Philippine nation (Corpuz 1989; Schumacher 1997).

Since then, newspapers proliferated during periods of war, revolution and other political upheavals. When the situation stabilised, many of the papers died. A longer period of relative quiescence would take over until the next upheaval — and the next newspaper boom — took place.

Summing up Philippine press history, the newspaper editor Jose Luna Castro (1967) wrote that since the 19th century, the Philippine press had been torn between “open and subsidised collaboration with the establishment” and “association with the dissenters of the day.” These twin, albeit contradictory, traditions of conservatism and dissent define the character of Philippine journalism.

Birthing the Idea of Nation

More than 100 newspapers were published in the Philippines in the 19th century, most of them Spanish-language newsletters containing announcements, mercantile and religious information and advertising. The Spanish colonial regime imposed heavy censorship, except for brief periods when liberal governor-generals were assigned to the colony.

Reformed-minded Filipinos, who criticised the oppressiveness of Spanish friars, who ruled most of the country, set up the first anti-colonial newspapers in the 1880s. Many of these reformists were later forced into exile to Madrid and Barcelona, where they published their own newspapers aimed at influencing Spanish policy in the Philippines. The most famous of these newspapers was *La Solidaridad*, staffed by young exiles from well-to-do Filipino families, and financed largely by rich Filipinos in Manila. The paper attacked Spanish colonial policy and played a key role in moulding a national consciousness among Filipinos, which made possible the revolution against Spain. The paper was smuggled to the Philippines and avidly read by would-be revolutionaries.

The Philippine revolution against Spain broke out in 1896, and within a few months, was publishing its own newspaper. As the revolution raged, and the fighting, first against the Spaniards, and later against the U.S. forces who invaded the Philippines in 1898, 16 newspapers were put out in support of Philippine independence from colonial rule (Taylor 1927).

The U.S. Press Legacy

American troops published newspapers almost as soon as they landed in Manila Bay to invade the Philippines. They established a military government and

imposed strict censorship. Although military censorship was abolished after a few years, strict libel and sedition laws were imposed, forcing Filipino journalists with nationalist aspirations to conceal their intentions with vague allusions. In the early years of American rule, pro-independence newspapers were suspended, their staff threatened with banishment, and journalists were arrested and tortured.

Meanwhile, as American rule was stabilised, English-language dailies were published, initially for the colonial community, but later for a Filipino audience as well. These papers laid the foundations for the modern-day Philippine media: They introduced American notions of a commercial press, brought in modern printing technology, and schooled a generation of Filipino journalists in U.S.-style newspapering.

Until the 1920s, the Filipino press remained an essentially political press staffed by politically active members of the landed native elite. But after two decades of American rule and the success of a U.S.-style school system in which English was the medium of instruction, a mass market for English-language publications was created.

Newspapering was also becoming a profitable business, with the expansion of the market for subscribers and advertising. The most important American innovation in the press field took place during this period, wrote the historian Lewis Gleeck (1967): "The conversion of Filipino journals of opinion run by politicians into newspapers run as business enterprises."

The pioneer of this trend was the Spanish *mestizo* entrepreneur Alejandro Roces who, by the 1920s, was running the *Tribune-La Vanguardia-Taliba* (TVT) chain of newspapers. Roces fancied himself the Philippine Randolph Hearst, and emulated American newspapers by using the same format and content and implementing the same editorial, advertising and circulation policies. To him, newspapering was a business, not a weapon in pursuit of a political agenda.

At the same time, Filipino politicians were seeing the power of mass-circulation newspapers. Manuel Quezon, then a senator, persuaded his millionaire friends to set up the *Philippines Herald* to serve as a mouthpiece for his political faction. The *Herald* introduced Philippine big business into the field of journalism. In the 1930s, the wealthy Elizalde family, which had helped bankroll the *Herald*, acquired other newspapers to form the *El Debate-Mabuhay-Herald-Monday Mail* (DHMM) chain. In 1938, on by then President Quezon's suggestion, the chain was leased to the wealthy Filipino owner of vast sugarcane plantations, who needed a voice to lobby for a bigger U.S. market for sugar. When he died, the DHMM chain was turned over to a prominent shipping family.

At the outbreak of the Second World War, the Philippine press was lively and increasingly in Filipino hands, although a number of newspapers were still owned by American publishers. The TVT and DHMM chains emerged as the most successful during this period. They had a mass readership and advertising revenues that were the envy of the U.S.-owned papers. By now, the economics of newspapering for a mass market entailed substantial capital outlays. The days of small newspapers, when any individual with a cause could come out with a paper, were over.

Newspapers were among the casualties of the Second World War and the Japanese occupation, which began after the attack on Pearl Harbour in December 1941. Newspaper editors were imprisoned or else fled to the hills. All publications were

padlocked. Later, the Japanese military administration took over the media and placed newspapers under the control of a Japanese publishing house. The Japanese Imperial Army and later the Filipino puppet government's Board of Information imposed strict censorship.

Under Japanese supervision, tabloid-size versions of several pre-war papers were published, with Filipino journalists working under the close guard of censors who checked their copy. But they managed to write between the lines. At the same time, there was a lively guerrilla press, made up of loose, typewritten or mimeographed sheets put out by journalists who had joined the anti-Japanese guerrilla forces.

The end of the war, as in other periods of upheaval in the Philippines, brought about a proliferation of newspapers. "The large pre-war newspapers being dead, any newspaper editor, reporter, proof-reader or advertising solicitor who could dig up a platen press and a box of type could put out a newspaper — and a number of them did," said one account. (Lent n.d.) Scores of newspapers were published in newly liberated Manila. Japanese censorship had created such a hunger for news that all sorts of entrepreneurs tried to meet the demand.

Before long, however, the pre-war publishers were back in business. In 1947, a prominent *hacendero* (wealthy landowner), Eugenio Lopez Sr., bought *The Manila Chronicle* to help boost his efforts to get congressional action on behalf of sugar planters.

For most of the post-war period, newspapering was firmly in the hands of big businesspeople, who sometimes used their newspapers to push for legislative and policy changes, put down their rivals and promote their allies (Ofreneo 1986). There were exceptions; the most outstanding among them was the *Manila Times*, owned by the Roces family, which established a reputation for independent journalism, becoming in the 1960s the biggest and most influential newspaper.

Dictatorship and Struggle

Ferdinand Marcos, who was elected president in 1965, ordered the closure of all newspapers and broadcasting stations when he declared martial law and abolished Congress in 1972. In addition, scores of journalists and publishers were hauled off to prison. When Marcos allowed newspapers to open a few months later, these were put under strict government supervision and owned by either his relatives or friends.

In addition, the Mass Media Council, later renamed the Media Advisory Council, regularly sent out instructions on what stories should not be used because they were not conducive to "an atmosphere of tranquillity." Although editors were already cautious, a military censor was still assigned to newspaper offices to go over every inch of copy.

Even small Catholic Church publications were ordered closed on sedition charges, and foreign correspondents that filed critical reports were harassed or refused entry to the country. Dissident newspapers were forced underground; all throughout martial law, the armed opposition to Marcos led by the Communist Party put out underground papers.

The controls were somewhat loosened in the second half of the 1970s, but draconian laws remained in force, including those that imposed heavy fines on sedi-

tion and the more harmless-sounding crime of “rumour-mongering.” For the most part, journalism remained obedient and unexciting.

But the 1980s saw the emergence of small, aboveground publications with a critical bent, which Marcos allowed, in part to prove to his critics that he tolerated a free press. Even in the Marcos-controlled newspapers, increasingly daring journalists tested the government’s tolerance by publishing critical articles. In 1982, nearly the entire staff of the opposition tabloid *We Forum* was arrested after it published a story that Marcos’s war medals were fake.

In 1983, Marcos’s chief rival, former Senator Benigno Aquino Jr. was killed, many believed, by government troops. This resulted in almost daily street protests, which Marcos tried to contain by banning publication of news of rallies and demonstrations in the controlled press. When their hunger for news could not be satisfied, Filipinos looked elsewhere, to the emerging opposition press — newspapers and magazines that braved the strictures of martial law and published stories and photographs about the assassination and its aftermath as well as exposed the regime’s abuses.

The media underwent a transformation after 1983. Citizens called for a boycott of the “crony press,” which continued to take instructions from the presidential palace. Meanwhile, dozens of opposition newspapers were printed, challenging the dominance of the big, well-established and well-financed dailies. The anti-Marcos press printed articles that stirred up popular dissatisfaction with the government and helped mobilise public support for Corazon C. Aquino, who became president after a three-day popular uprising in February 1986.

A Free and Powerful Press

As in other periods of change and upheaval in Philippine history, the fall of Marcos saw the rise of many papers catering to a news-hungry public. Many of them eventually disappeared, but many have remained up to the present day. In the post-Marcos era, the media situation became much like what it was in the 1960s. The economics of newspapering for a mass market meant that media ownership would be limited to a small elite. Thus, what started out as journalist-owned, anti-Marcos newspapers like the *Philippine Daily Inquirer* and *Ang Pahayagang Malaya* (The Free Newspaper) were eventually sold to more established entrepreneurs. Media ownership in the post-Marcos Philippines eventually ended up being dominated by big business families involved in a variety of other business enterprises.

The role played by the anti-Marcos press, and to a lesser extent, independent radio stations, in raising awareness about the excesses of the Marcos government and in encouraging citizens to take part in protests guaranteed that the media would play a central role in the post-dictatorship era. In the last years of the Marcos regime, opposition newspapers reported on anti-government demonstrations, showing Filipinos the extent of the protest movement and emboldening them to organise and participate in mass actions. The coverage of the massive cheating conducted by the government in the February 1986 elections that pitted Marcos against Corazon Aquino stoked the public’s ire, priming them for the uprising that took place two weeks after the polling.

The media explosion that followed the fall of Marcos was a response to the public’s hunger for news. There are currently 10 English and two Tagalog (the main Philippine language) broadsheets publishing out of Manila and circulated through-

out the country, compared to only three broadsheets during the Marcos era. In addition, there are 17 Manila-based tabloids and five Chinese-language daily newspapers serving the country's small but influential ethnic Chinese business community. In 1998, some 408 newspapers, mostly weeklies, were being put out in the provinces. (Philippine Information Agency 1998)

Except for one government-run newspaper chain, all newspapers are privately owned. In the 1980s, journalists and entrepreneurs set up new papers to cater to the demand for news and information. Many of these papers eventually folded up or were bought by prominent businesspeople. Within a few years, the owners of the nationally circulated newspapers were mainly businesspeople with a wide range of interests in other sectors of the economy.

Table 1. Newspaper Readership in Metro Manila (%)

Broadsheets	21.9
Tabloids	54.4
Business paper	1.5
Foreign Newspaper	0.3

Source: 1996 *MediaIndex*

In the last decade, the real growth in terms of audience reach has been in radio and television, although newspapers are important for their agenda-setting function. The policy-making elite responds to newspapers rather than the broadcast media. Moreover, radio and TV take their cue from the broadsheets as far as reporting on news and public affairs goes.

Radio. Much more than print, the broadcast media experienced dramatic growth since Marcos's fall. In 1996, the national organisation of broadcasters, the Kapisanan ng mga Brodkaster sa Pilipinas (KBP), reported 517 radio stations throughout the Philippines, of which 283 are AM stations. The bulk of these are commercial radio stations although the government has retained ownership of 32 AM and one FM station. AM radio is still the dominant format nation-wide, except in Metro Manila where FM radio controls 68 percent of the listenership. (KBP Website and AC Nielsen 1997)

Radio is the medium with the greatest reach, with nearly all households owning a radio set. Radio is also mainly in Tagalog and the other Philippine languages, although English is used by FM music stations. On the whole, radio reporting focuses on breaking news. There is no tradition of documentary or in-depth radio reporting in the Philippines. Radio commentators, much like newspaper columnists, have a wide following. Radio commentary, however, is known more for its piercing decibel level rather than its incisiveness or depth.

Table 2. Television and Radio Ownership

Households with Radio	%
Philippines	84
Metro Manila	93
Households with TV Sets	
Philippines	57
Metro Manila	91

Source: *Media Pulse*, 1995

Television. In 1986, the government took over all the television stations as part of the drive to ferret out the “illegal wealth” accumulated by Marcos and his associates. To this day, government-appointed boards still run two of six TV stations, pending their eventual privatisation. While these boards occasionally interfere to ensure that news reporting toes the government line, the stations have much the same commercially oriented programming as the private networks. The government, however, also kept PTV-4 as the official government TV station, broadcasting shows in support of government programs and officials.

Meanwhile, the ABS-CBN network was given back to its former owners, the Lopez family, who returned from exile in the United States after Marcos’s fall. ABS-CBN became the number one station through mass-oriented programming in Tagalog. The Lopezes run a diversified business empire that includes, apart from broadcasting, telecommunications, power, water and infrastructure. They also own radio station DZMM, the second largest in the country.

Table 3. Major Television Networks

TV Network	Radio Affiliate	Owner
ABS-CBN (Channel 2)	DZMM	Lopez family
PTV 4	DZRB	Official government station
ABC-5	DWET (FM)	Tan and Yuchengco families
GMA-7	DZBB	Jimenez family
RPN-9	DWAN	Taken over by gov’t after 1986
IBC-13		Taken over by gov’t after 1986

In addition to the Manila-based networks that have a national reach, over 150 smaller TV stations operate in the provinces. There are also five UHF channels. Cable television has grown phenomenally in the 1990s, with some 300 cable operators currently operating throughout the Philippines.

Until quite recently, the television audience was largely middle class; thus, TV fare consisted mainly of canned U.S. entertainment programs, as well as local news and public affairs shows done in English. In the 1980s, only a third of all Filipino households owned TV sets. But economic growth in the 1990s spurred the demand for television sets and other consumer goods. In the high-growth years of the ‘90s, broadcasting executives estimated that Filipinos purchased some 500,000 new TV sets every year. The consumer boom fuelled an advertising boom, which in turn financed the expansion of television networks. In addition, the re-establishment of democracy brought about a keen interest in uncensored TV news and no-holds-barred talk shows where people were allowed to speak freely. A 1997 survey found that 84 percent of Filipinos watched television, with the figure rising to 97 percent in the capital. (AC Nielsen 1997)

The television explosion caused major shifts in programming. ABS-CBN was the first to see the trend. From the bottom of the ratings chart in its first broadcast in October 1986, the station made it to the top in only six months. By 1993, it had an audience share of 62 percent. This phenomenal rise was due largely to how ABS-CBN re-engineered the concept of news and public affairs, producing glitzy, if often trivial, programs that focused on crime, sex and the occult rather than “hard” news. Its model was U.S. television’s “infotainment.” ABS-CBN also shifted to Tagalog and produced original programs in the local language instead of relying

on shows provided by U.S. distributors. The station was so successful that other networks soon followed suit. In the cutthroat competition that ensued, ratings became the sole criterion for programming (Rimban 1996).

While ABS-CBN's fortunes rose, those of the government networks fell, in part because of mismanagement and corruption. Like privately owned networks, government stations are oriented toward profitability rather than education or public service. In the last decade, they have suffered from mediocre programming, diminished viewership and plummeting profitability.

The Problem with Freedom

The Philippine media operate under one of the laxest systems of state supervision in Asia. The post-Marcos constitution, influenced by that of the United States, guarantees free expression. Article IV, Section 4 of the Bill of Rights says: "No law shall be passed abridging the freedom of speech, of expression, or of the press."

No government body oversees or supervises the press. No license or permit is required to publish a newspaper or magazine. There is no prior review or censorship, and in theory, the press can report on what it wants, subject only to restrictions set by libel, slander and sedition laws.

The new freedoms unleashed by the 1986 uprising gave the media wide latitude to report on events and issues. Media exposés have caused the resignation of officials, raised public awareness about such issues as environmental destruction and the rights of women, and prompted investigations of official abuse and wrongdoing.

Unfortunately, the media have also used their freedoms to outdo rivals in the race to peddle newspapers and television programs. Intense competition has distorted the conduct of journalism, the content of newspapers, and the programming of radio and television. In the crowded and expanding media market that emerged after the fall of Marcos, the most aggressive media organisations that came up with the most saleable formula emerged dominant (De Jesus 1999). The model, particularly for television, was the U.S.. American-style media have deeper roots in the Philippines than elsewhere in Asia. The expansion of this freewheeling, muckraking type of news organisations was put on hold by Marcos, but they re-emerged once the controls were loosened.

Competition has resulted in homogeneous reporting and programming. Newspapers and broadcast stations tend to produce the same kind of reports that are guaranteed to sell. The result is the tabloidization of news and public affairs.

Apart from ruthless competition, another factor, which hobbles the development of Philippine media, is the level of skills: There is a lack of trained journalists and editors who can raise the quality of reportage and analysis. After the media explosion in 1986, there was a shortage of experienced journalists to staff newspapers and broadcast agencies. There is not enough on-the-job training and the turnover is fast, with young journalists eventually opting out of the profession in search of better-paying careers.

The corruption of journalists by politicians or businessmen who want reporting twisted in their favour is another problem. "Envelopmental journalism," referring to envelopes of cash discreetly given out to reporters during press conferences, is acknowledged to be fairly pervasive. A 1998 survey of 100 beat reporters conducted by the Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism showed that 71

had been offered money by their sources. Of these, 33 percent admitted they took the money, with 22 percent keeping the cash for themselves, and 11 per cent turning it over to their editors. (Chua and Datinguino 1998) The generally low pay of journalists in comparison to other professions is partly responsible for this situation. But other factors, including the reluctance or inability of editors and publishers to enforce ethical standards and the egregious practices of public relations people should also be cited.

Another problem is media ownership, which is concentrated in the hands of wealthy business houses that sometimes use their newspapers to defend and advance their business and political interests. The major dailies and broadcast networks are owned by the giants of Philippine business, who operate a wide range of interlocking corporate concerns, including banking, manufacturing, telecommunications and real estate. While most owners rarely intervene in day-to-day editorial decision-making, they also put up real constraints on the freedom of journalists.

Newspapers have been used by their owners to promote their businesses, put down rivals and on occasion, contest the results of public bidding in which the press proprietors lost out. At the very least, editors tone down or censor negative reporting on their owners' businesses. Newspaper proprietors and network executives have also tended to take politically safe positions, discouraging reports or exposés that will incur the ire of government. Because business in the Philippines is subject to often whimsical government regulation, media owners who run business empires are vulnerable to government pressure.

Enter Joseph Estrada

Joseph Estrada, a former action movie star, was elected president in June 1998. A politician whose popularity was due mainly to his larger-than-life projection in the movies, he was very conscious of his media image and was intolerant of media criticism. He tried to control the media in two ways: by intimidation and corruption. Although derided by his critics for his lack of intellectual credentials, this unorthodox president was sophisticated enough to realise that media freedom can be better undermined through market mechanisms rather than the strong-arm of the state. Since the re-establishment of democracy in 1986, Estrada was the first Philippine president to systematically employ non-state mechanisms to clamp down on a critical press.

Early on in his two-and-half year presidency, Estrada recognised that the use of state power to control the media is not publicly acceptable and resorted instead to other forms of press control. One of these is "envelopmental journalism" or the bribing of journalists to ensure favourable coverage. For years, this has systematically been done by companies and by government agencies to skew reporting in their favour. It is well known that some journalists are on the monthly payroll of politicians or companies. Special pay-offs are made during periods like elections or the launching of new products. The bribes are so discreet that they are now often passed through automated teller machines (ATM), so they don't leave a paper trail (Hofileña 1998).

But Estrada brought this practice to new heights. As revelations in his impeachment trial showed, the president had a monthly budget of P2 million (about \$40,000) that was used to pay off editors, news anchors and reporters to ensure that they did not print or air unfavourable reports. This money, the evidence showed, came

from payoffs Estrada received from illegal gambling operators (Tiglao 2000). The funds were turned over to an official whose title was presidential liaison for legislative affairs. The official ran a semi-clandestine office that distributed cash to journalists, while the real Press Office went about the more routine business of issuing media releases and scheduling interviews and press conferences.

Estrada also muzzled the press by putting pressure on media proprietors. The fact that most of the Philippine media is owned by big business houses makes them especially vulnerable to being squeezed by the government or to being used to promote the business agenda of their owners. At the giant ABS-CBN, for example, the news department's unwritten rules say that subjects that have some sort of connection with the extensive business holdings of the Lopez family, the network's owner, have to be treated with kid gloves. This becomes difficult because the Lopezes are into, among other things, public utilities — from electric power to telephones to water. Moreover, the marriage of a member of the family to a daughter of President Estrada meant that the network had to tread carefully when reporting on the president as well.

Both Presidents Aquino and Ramos did not exploit the vulnerability of media owners. But Estrada, angry at a barrage of negative media reporting, made his displeasure known to media proprietors and did not balk at putting the squeeze on them to tone down on critical coverage. In February 1999, he bawled out the owner of the *Manila Standard* on the telephone for a news report that insinuated that he was using a BMW that belonged to a congressman known for brokering shady deals. One of the owners of the paper, a businessman who had cornered major contracts for servicing ports throughout the country, offered to fire his editors to appease the president (Coronel 1999). Then in July 1999, Estrada forced the closure of the critical *Manila Times* by threatening tax audits on the other businesses of its owners, a family that ran a business empire that spanned manufacturing, real estate and agriculture. The *Times* was later sold to an Estrada crony.

In addition to putting pressure on the businesses of media proprietors, the president used advertisers to tighten the noose around critical news organisations. He encouraged movie producers in July 1999 not to place ads in the *Inquirer*, which he said was unfairly critical of his administration. In addition, big companies with huge advertising budgets and sympathetic to the president also withdrew ads from the paper (Asiaweek 1999). That year, the paper lost about P80 (\$1.6 million) in advertising.

All these methods — bribery, pressure on owners and the withdrawal of advertising — silenced the press in various ways. These tactics constituted a virtual “privatisation” of media repression and allowed Estrada to argue that the government was not clamping down on the press. They also show that while constitutional and legal guarantees protect press freedom, the media can be bullied in many novel and different ways without outright violation of such guarantees.

Overcoming the Constraints

It was in such an atmosphere that an initially small group of activists, civic groups, organisations linked to the Catholic Church, and opposition politicians began a campaign to expose the wrongdoings of the Estrada presidency. Initially denied a voice in the mainstream media, they resorted to e-mail groups, Websites and to passing on information and jokes through SMS.

When a series of exposés by insiders began to rock the presidency in the last quarter of 2000, the mainstream media could no longer afford to ignore the allegations. For one, angry citizens were calling up newspaper and broadcast stations, demanding more information. The market was hungry for the real story of the Estrada presidency. An indication of the hunger was the phenomenal success of the *Pinoy Times*, a local language tabloid whose circulation rose from a few thousand in mid-1999 to several hundred thousand later that year after it began publishing reports on Estrada's mistresses and his accumulation of wealth, stories which the mainstream media had virtually ignored.

Editors then realised that they risked losing their readership if they did not follow the tide. At ABS-CBN, there was panic at the highest levels of network management. As TV ratings showed declining viewership of its news and public affairs programs and a corresponding increase in that of its more independent competitor, drastic steps were taken. Reporters were told to pull out all the stops in their reporting and anchors identified with Estrada were taken out of prime-time programs. More airtime was given to opposition views and the coverage of rallies and other anti-Estrada events. The initially cautious, even sycophantic, reporting on the presidency gave way to more independent and critical coverage. There was great demand for investigative reports, and for the first time since Estrada's election, journalists were encouraged by editors to go and dig the dirt on the president.

This change took place in nearly all newsrooms throughout the country, with the exception of one newspaper that remained loyal to Estrada (Teodoro 2001). Although the president's office continued to buy off journalists, the bribes no longer worked. Editors and media proprietors knew that the survival of their news organisations was at stake; news judgement was based on the realities of competition and organisational survival rather than the pecuniary gain that individual journalists could make from presidential payoffs. The fear factor no longer worked either, as it became obvious by November 2000 that there was a chance that Estrada could lose the presidency. News organisations, for their own survival, could no longer risk being so closely identified with a regime that could fall within months.

The crisis gave an opening to professional journalists to assert their voices against the sycophants in the newsroom. It also catalysed a great deal of self-examination in newsrooms and in the journalistic profession. E-mail based discussion groups among journalists were set up, as were small forums that discussed the problems of the profession.

When the impeachment trial began in December 2000, network executives knew that the audience wanted to see the trial as it happened. There was live coverage of the trial from day one. The trial was on prime-time news programs as well, and was the main content of public affairs programs. The live coverage made viewers part of the courtroom drama, and they saw the trial unfold, making up their minds on the relative merits of the arguments of lawyers and the testimony of witnesses, independent of the mediation of journalists and other commentators. It was as if the entire country had been converted into a courtroom. The average viewership of the trial was 80 percent (Rimban 2001). Those who did not watch television monitored the trial by radio. The trial itself was replayed on late-night cable news TV.

“It was television which may have been the most crucial medium of citizen information and opinion formation during the political crisis,” wrote Luis Teodoro (2001), editor of the *Philippine Journalism Review*. “Because of the live coverage of the impeachment proceedings — a coverage which did not permit slanted editing and the intervention of practitioner and network biases — millions of citizens all over the country were able to arrive at a reasoned judgement on the charges against Estrada without the disadvantage of those biases.”

When it appeared that the trial had been compromised by the refusal of the senator-judges to accept new evidence against Estrada, people were outraged. They had been spectators of the trial from the outset. The trial was like a long-running soap opera where good and evil were clearly delineated, and the audience had developed sympathy or antipathy for each member of the cast of characters.

The Estrada crisis showed the limits of the tactics of intimidation and corruption in silencing the press. It showed how a confluence of events forced the media, for reasons of survival, to overcome their fear and to set aside pecuniary gain. It showed, too, that in a market-conscious media industry, the market can dictate and demand better and more independent reporting.

In a State of Flux

The media as a democratic institution are in constant flux. Although determined by such factors as competition and ownership, the media can also be changed by social and political forces. In post-authoritarian regimes, the increasing dominance of the market — and the declining influence of the state — in determining media content and the structure of the media industry have meant that measures to either enhance or impair the media’s potential as a democratic force must be directed at the market.

The new-generation, market-oriented threats to media freedom and diversity, and indeed to democracy, can be countered by active and critical citizens and media consumers, the mobilisation of journalists’ organisations, and a community of committed journalists. This combination of forces can be used to build market pressure to force media organisations to tame their excesses, resist political and proprietary pressure, and be more responsive to the demands of democratic citizenship.

A conjuncture of events, such as those that accompanied the impeachment proceedings against President Estrada in late 2000, can mobilise such market pressure and compel news organisations to rethink their assumptions about what the market wants and become more appreciative of their catalytic role in effecting positive social change.

This had happened once before, in the early 1980s, amid the rising tide of anti-Marcos protest. During that period, news organisations controlled by Marcos cronies lost their readership as citizens sought alternative channels of opinion and information and found them in the opposition papers, most of which were put out by independent journalists without big business support. Citizens’ groups launched boycott campaigns against pro-Marcos newspapers and TV stations and held rallies in front of media offices. As a result, the anti-Marcos press became so successful that they dominated the market after Marcos’s fall and enjoy market leadership to this day. The Marcos-controlled newspapers that survived the change in regime were mainly those that took a more independent editorial stance, in part because

of the agitation of professional journalists within their ranks. News executives therefore don't need to be reminded of the fatal consequences of public alienation and of being too identified with an unpopular government.

Media markets are shaped by various factors, not least of them the preferences of media consumers and the attempts of the media industry to cater to them. These preferences, however, are not written in stone. They shift over time, responding to changes in for example, culture and demography. The media industry itself exerts a profound influence on consumer tastes by producing content that it thinks the public wants and which the public consumes simply because it is there. Consumer preferences in one market are also prone to the contagion of foreign influence.

A volatile political situation may alter consumer preferences overnight and turn upside down the media industry's most careful calculations about what consumers want. The history of the media in the Philippines is replete with examples of how political movements and popular mobilisation can raise market demand for independent and critical reporting, thereby forcing changes in the editorial policies of existing news organisations and creating openings for the entry of new media products catering to the needs of a politicised market.

In part this is because the Philippine media have mostly been privately owned and since the American colonial era been run mainly as profit-oriented enterprises with far less intervention from the state (except during the Marcos period) than in most other countries in Asia. By nature, commercially oriented media companies are sensitive to market demand. They therefore weigh the benefits of siding with unpopular governments with the potential loss of market share if they are seen as too uncritical or too partisan in favour of these governments. They also have to include in their calculations possible retribution from successor regimes if they are too identified with the current, increasingly ostracised government.

The threat of market retribution is real, as was seen in the demise of the pro-Marcos press in the period that followed the 1986 'people power' uprising. The activism of citizens' groups, kept alive even in periods of relative quiescence through email discussion groups and other networks linked by new technologies (such as mobile phones) provide alternative and ready-made channels of information and mobilisation that can be tapped during periods of crisis. These channels are much more democratic than those provided by big media because information is passed on without the benefit of media gatekeepers and free from intervention from either media proprietors or the state.

There is therefore great potential for alternative or small media to challenge corporate media's hold not only on the market but also on the news agenda and public opinion. In fact, it is this potential that keeps corporate media on their toes and compels them to be more responsive to the market. In truth corporate media knows that it is not just market that is at stake, but power over public opinion, the crafting of public policy and the future of regimes. In the end, big media companies stand to lose not just advertising revenue and audience share but also the power and the prestige that come with owning a newspaper or a TV network.

The fighting tradition of the Philippine press, a legacy from anti-colonial movements dating back to the 19th century, has also created a risk-taking journalistic culture that is different from the compliance and risk-aversion that dominates journalism in neighbouring countries like Singapore or Malaysia. That is why pressure

can also come from within media organisations, as professional journalists, especially in times of upheaval, are no longer willing to work within existing constraints and assert their independence from the dictates of media proprietors and their patrons. This was true during the anti-Marcos and anti-Estrada protests.

As media commentator Teodoro (2001) wrote:

Despite themselves and the environment which after [the election of Estrada in] 1998 had been forced upon them, the Philippine media played a positive role in providing the information crucial to the ouster of Estrada and in the installation of a new government which could preside over the renewal of a country battered by the incredible corruption and incompetence the Estrada government. Media freedom and transparency — and the demands of professional performance — were what made this possible despite the manifold problems and inadequacies that afflict the Philippine media.

What People Power II has shown as far as the Philippine media are concerned is that media freedom, and with it, many media practitioners' commitment to the demands of the media profession, can be the firm bases upon which media responsibility and excellence can be built.

What all these show is how deeply embedded media markets are in politics and society and how they are influenced by the actions and calculations of media proprietors, journalists and citizens. Media markets reflect the relationships of power in society. Political change and upheaval shake the equilibrium of power relationships; they shake up the equilibrium of the media market as well.

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