

“Huwag Magpakatuta!” Journalism Ethics in the Philippines

Eugenia Duran-Apostol
UP Gawad Plaridel 2004 Awardee

*The UP Gawad Plaridel is the sole award given to outstanding media practitioners in the University of the Philippines (UP) system. The award is named after Marcelo H. del Pilar (nom de plume, Plaridel), the selfless propagandist whose stewardship of the reformist paper **La Solidaridad** helped crystallize nationalist sentiments and ignite libertarian ideas in the 1890s. Like Plaridel, the recipient of the award must believe in the vision of a Philippine society that is egalitarian, participative, and progressive, and in media that are socially responsible, critical, and vigilant.*

For the year 2004, the award was given to a print media practitioner – Eugenia Duran-Apostol. She was cited, among others, for the “body of her publications and works which have been consistently marked by excellence, integrity, and social responsibility, qualities which the UP College of Mass Communication wishes to develop among students and professionals in the field of media”.

*As the 2004 awardee, Apostol delivered this Plaridel Lecture 2004 titled “Huwag Magpakatuta! (Journalism Ethics in the Philippines)” on November 22, 2004 at the UP Film Institute Cine Adarna (formerly UP Film Center). About 750 people attended the event, among them National Artists F. Sionil Jose, Napoleon Abueva, and Virgilio Almario; then UP President Francisco Nemenzo and former UP President Jose Abueva; **Philippine Daily Inquirer (PDI)** Editor-in-Chief Letty Jimenez-Magsanoc and other section editors; **PDI** Publisher Isagani Yambot and other staff members; Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism Executive Director Sheila Coronel; Foundation for Worldwide People Power President Maria Lim-Ayungco; faculty members and mass communication students from UP and other universities. Officials and faculty members from the Ateneo de Manila University, Centro Escolar University, De La Salle University (Dasmariñas), Far Eastern University, Kalayaan College, Manila Doctors College, Miriam College, Polytechnic University of the Philippines, University of the East, and University of Santo Tomas were also present.*

This lecture was originally scheduled for delivery on August 30, but my husband was called to heaven on August 14, so Dean Nicanor Tiongson and I agreed to reset the lecture to today. Nic and the UP College of Mass Communication have been very generous to me – the Plaridel Award was given to me at beautiful ceremonies held in the high-ceilinged ballroom of the Hyatt Hotel, and with centerpieces of artfully arranged flowers, a menu of the best Philippine food served with the music of Filipino songs performed by the UP Singing Ambassadors. That July 4, the 108th anniversary of Marcelo H. del Pilar’s death in Barcelona, Spain at the age of 45, was unforgettable to me.

In my acceptance speech that evening, I made it clear that the circumstances of Plaridel’s time were very different from ours. In the 1890s the Filipino was suffering from being subject to the Spanish colonizers. Today, after having gone through American and Japanese colonizers, we are free. But suffering just the same. From what? From our own injustice towards one another.

After the Japanese left in 1945 and the United States (US) gave us back our freedom, we enjoyed freedom of action and freedom of the press for some 20 years. But an Ilocano lawyer who became congressman, senator, and then president, thought we needed to become a New Society and thus declared martial law to achieve it.

In 1972, Ferdinand Marcos proclaimed himself president-for-life and closed all newspaper offices and radio and television stations. I am recalling this for the sake of those of you who are below 25 and therefore have no recollection of the 14 years of Marcos repression.

In general, during the martial law years, the Filipino remained quite docile. But there was one ex-newspaperman who became a senator whom Marcos identified as his most vocal critic. This was Benigno Aquino, Jr. who was kept in prison until he suffered a heart attack, leaving Marcos no choice but to allow him to travel to the US for medical treatment.

Seven years later, after he had fully recovered his health, Aquino learned that Marcos had become ill with erythematosus and so decided to return to the Philippines. Almost immediately upon arrival at the airport, Aquino was shot and killed.

The Filipinos were outraged and more than two million of them joined his funeral procession. But the Marcos media hardly took note of the event. That was when I decided to do a 16-page special issue on Ninoy Aquino’s funeral, using the resources of a woman’s magazine called *Mr. & Ms.*, which I was then editing.

The response to the funeral issue was unbelievable. The agents kept coming back for more, and so we had to print 500,000 copies. After that, I had to ask Letty Jimenez-Magsanoc to help me edit a weekly *Mr. & Ms. Special Edition* just to feed the hunger of the readers for more about Ninoy and the growing anger towards martial law and Ferdinand Marcos. Every week, we felt called upon to record the various demonstrations of civilians against Marcos, and when no reprisal came (except for an invitation to an interrogation at Fort Bonifacio in January 1983), we went on for three years, up to and beyond EDSA 1.

After a hundred issues, we grew bolder and brought out the Agrava Commission Report in book form. At this time also, the need for a daily newspaper began rolling in my mind.

The dream of a daily drove me to gather for breakfast one day in January 1985 the main stalwarts of what was then known as the “alternative press”: Joaquin “Chino” Roces of the *Manila Times*, Teodoro Locsin Sr. and Jr. of the *Philippine Free Press*, Raul Locsin of *Business Day*, Betty Go-Belmonte of the *Fookien Times*, and Joe Burgos of *Malaya*. I asked them if they thought it a good idea to band together into one combined newspaper, the strength of numbers supporting a united effort to oppose Marcos.

Chino said no, he would not be responsible for the safety of the reporters or editors of such a venture under the Marcos regime. The Locsins, father and son, did not think it was possible to operate freely while the Marcoses still ruled. Their properties having been forced into a sale, they did not want, they bitterly said, to honor the regime with legitimacy. Betty’s parents were in self-exile; a newspaper they owned had been closed. Joe Burgos’ *We Forum* was closed as well and some of his assets sequestered; he was not looking for new trouble. Raul Locsin was hiding safely behind the shield of business while reporting “subversive” political news. Why not be more patient, he advised.

Having had very little first-hand experience with media repression, I guess I was more stubborn than them. And so I went into the publication of a weekly called *The Philippine Inquirer*, which would bravely monitor the Sandiganbayan trial of the so-called Aquino 26 from February to November 1985. I had planned to close the paper and disband the weekly *Inquirer* after the trial. But Marcos called a snap election to try to prove to the world that the Filipinos still loved him.

Here was the opportunity for a daily newspaper to help the Marcos opposition. Shall we? Should we? We must. As Letty Magsanoc put it, “In the best of times (for commitment) and the worst of times (fun and games) we

managed to have both. Which is why, with fire in the veins, heart pounding, fist clenched, eyes closed and armed only with the courage of our doubt, we said, ‘Let’s do it.’”

Here was the chance to extend the life of the *Inquirer*, at the same time help anti-Marcos forces win that election. But the campaign period was to last only two months. What could a weekly do? What was needed was a daily.

So re-group for a daily we did, organizing a cooperative newspaper so that all those working for it could share the responsibility and hopefully, the rewards. I informed Juan and Cristina Ponce Enrile, who had shares in *Mr. & Ms.*, of the plan and he said, “A noble idea”. I emphasized that no politician could be part of it.

The new group bought the name *The Philippine Inquirer* from *Mr. & Ms.* and later paid P900,000 for it. The group also borrowed a million pesos worth of cash, paper, and equipment from *Mr. & Ms.* and paid it back (with interest) in two months.

In three months, *The Philippine Daily Inquirer (PDI)* had not only helped to oust Marcos, it was also making money! And in several coup attempts inspired by Enrile, the *PDI* stood by duly elected Cory and Doy. Johnny Enrile must have felt betrayed because in 1989 he (through Nora Bitong, his accountant) filed a suit against Apostol, Magsanoc, and Doris Nuyda for “breach of fiduciary duty, mismanagement, etc.”

For five years we went up and down the elevators of the Securities and Exchange Commission to attend hearing after hearing. In August 1993, the lower court ruled in our favor and lifted the injunction on our *PDI* shares.

I decided to sell my shares immediately so that Enrile would not be able to touch them in the future. My lawyer, Enrique Belo, was not in favor of my selling, knowing we had a good chance of winning the case. But I was not willing to take a chance with the unpredictable judiciary.

If Enrile or any other politician for that matter were to end up owning even a single share in *PDI*, I would never forgive myself. And I had a ready buyer for my shares: Edgardo Espiritu. I quickly negotiated the sale before Nora Bitong could file an appeal with the SEC. Sure enough, Bitong (or Enrile) went to the SEC en banc, only to find out that the Apostol shares had been “Espiritu-ed” away.

But a complication had arisen in Bitong’s favor.

In September 1993, the *PDI* had come out with the Baby Arenas-Fidel Ramos romance and we heard she was so angry she called her cousin, Joaquin Yasay, the SEC chief whom she had recommended for the SEC post. In three months, the SEC reversed the lower court’s decision.



Eugenia Duran-Apostol answers questions during the open forum,

Although my shares had been safely spirited away, we still had to go to the Court of Appeals with the case. Espiritu was then named in a separate pleading from Bitong. In mid-1996, Justice Pedro Ramirez ruled in our favor, saying Bitong was not the right party in interest.

Bitong took us to the Supreme Court in 1997, but the following year, the Supreme Court also ruled in our favor, saying Bitong was not the real party in interest.

This sidelight brings us to the subject of newspaper ownership in Manila. Sheila Coronel of the Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism (PCIJ) wrote about it in 1999 in the book *From Loren to Marimar: The Philippine Media in the 1990s*. In the chapter titled "Lords of the Press", she focused on the policies and practices of the owners of those newspapers with numerous and wide-ranging business interests: the *PDI*, the *Manila Bulletin*, *The Manila Times* (which was then owned by the Gokongwei family) and *The Manila Standard*. The *Philippine Star* and *Malaya*, being owned by the families of their editors, were not included in the report.

Sheila wrote:

Most of the businesspeople who own newspapers are too busy to intervene in day-to-day editorial decision-making, but that has not stopped them from inhibiting journalists from exercising their duty to report fairly and responsibly. Newspapers have been used, some to a greater degree than others, to defend their owners' political allies or otherwise advance their proprietors' business concerns. In many cases, newspapers have tended not to rock the boat on issues involving government officials and agencies regulating business. Newspapers have also been utilized by their owners to wage political and business battles.

Sheila, however, made an exception of the owners of the *PDI*. She wrote:

Editors are at the frontline of the battle against interventionist publishers. Certainly, one reason why the (*PDI*) has kept its independence is that its editors have jealously guarded their prerogatives. Moreover, its owners know that the paper is profitable because it is hard-hitting and that it risks losing its market if it is perceived to be losing its critical edge. At the same time, the business interests of the Prieto family, which owns two-thirds of the paper, are much less spread out and less vulnerable to government regulation than the Gokongweis'.

To its credit, the paper has printed stories alleging pollution by a Prieto-owned firm. But it has also been less than critical of a key stockholder of the paper, former banker and current Finance Secretary Edgardo Espiritu, who owns about a third of the (*PDI*'s) shares. When other newspapers were highlighting charges made by Sen. Sergio Osmeña III against Espiritu during the congressional confirmation hearings, the (*PDI*) was noticeably circumspect. Still, despite this, the paper has not exactly handled Espiritu's boss, Estrada, with kid gloves. Thus, critics say, the problem with the paper is not owner meddling but a tendency to shoot from the hip and to sensationalize stories.

The (*PDI*'s) strength is that it is the country's biggest paper, and politicians are wary about being perceived as intervening in its affairs for fear of being accused of muzzling the press. The smaller

newspapers are generally more vulnerable to outside intervention because they have less clout. But the news pages of even a big paper like the *Star*, whose circulation ranks third after the (*PDI*) and the *Bulletin*, are sometimes cautious because its main owner, the Go family, is itself wary of making too many enemies, whether from the private sector or from the government. If it is true, though, that the controversial beer and cigarette tycoon Lucio Tan is a secret shareholder of the paper, then the *Star's* defense of Tan on its editorial and news pages and its generally flattering reporting about the tycoon can be said to be due to proprietorial intervention.

Please note that those are Sheila Coronel's words, not mine.

It is relevant to add here that the *PDI*, to its credit, also has a manual of editorial policies which states that it is committed to excellence. The manual spells out in detail the mission, vision, and values of the paper, as well as how to ensure the accuracy of a story, fairness, objectivity, attribution, how to handle letters to the editor, the editorial cartoon, use of press releases, gifts in kind and travel invitations, canons of taste in stories and photographs.

All employees of the *PDI* are made to sign the Philippine Journalist's Code of Ethics formulated by the Philippine Press Institute and National Press Club, which reads:

1. I shall scrupulously report and interpret the news, taking care not to suppress essential facts or to distort the truth by omission or improper emphasis. I recognize the duty to air the other side and the duty to correct substantive errors promptly.
2. I shall not violate confidential information or material given me in the exercise of my calling.
3. I shall resort only to fair and honest methods in my effort to obtain news, photographs and/or documents, and shall properly identify myself as a representative of the press when obtaining any personal interview intended for publication.
4. I shall refrain from writing reports which will adversely affect a private reputation unless the public interest justifies it. At the same time, I shall fight vigorously for public access to information, as provided for in the Constitution.
5. I shall not let personal motives or interests influence me in the performance of my duties; nor shall I accept or offer any present, gift or other consideration of a nature which may cast doubt on my professional integrity.
6. I shall not commit any act of plagiarism.

7. I shall not in any manner, ridicule, cast aspersions on, or degrade any person by reason of sex, creed, religious belief, political conviction, cultural and ethnic origin.
8. I shall presume persons accused of crime of being innocent until proven otherwise. I shall exercise caution in publishing names of minors and women involved in criminal cases so that they may not unjustly lose their standing in society.
9. I shall not take unfair advantage of a fellow journalist.
10. I shall accept only such tasks as are compatible with the integrity and dignity of my profession, invoking the “conscience clause” when duties imposed on me conflict with the voice of my conscience.
11. I shall conduct myself in public or while performing my duties as journalist in such manner as to maintain the dignity of my profession. When in doubt, decency should be my watchword.

The *PDI* is the only newspaper in the country that has an ombudsman or reader’s advocate to ensure observance of this Code and of the provisions of the manual.

Its first ombudsman, who served during my time as board chairman, was the late Domingo Quimlat. He was succeeded by Alice Colet-Villadolid. The current reader’s advocate is Raul Palabrica, a writer-lawyer who has weeded out a few editorial people caught breaking company policy. Being a lawyer, Palabrica was instrumental in documenting evidence against two section editors who were found to be inefficient. Also removed was a reporter who was so clever in sourcing material that no evidence of blatant wrongdoing could be traced to her. But this reporter, like Al Capone, got fired through simple neglect – she failed to file the correct documents for a leave of absence.

From my nine years as board chairman, I have a few stories to tell in relation to the development of strict adherence to the company’s journalism ethics.

Our first editor was a lovable character who looked fat and fun-loving, like Garfield. He was such a talented writer and speaker he became not only editor of the *PDI* but also a radio and TV commentator. So eloquent was he. From the start, I was uneasy about his trimedia involvements. One day, he attacked President Cory Aquino’s executive secretary, Joker Arroyo, on his radio and TV programs and in his column in the *PDI*. Joker sent an answer but Garfield refused to run it in the *PDI*. So one night, Letty Magsanoc and I sat at the news desk and made sure Joker’s answer was printed on the front page of the next day. Garfield did not show up at the office the next day and the next, and on the third day, our board of directors met and decided he could no longer be editor

and columnist at the same time. He had to choose one or the other. He chose to resign, and I had to look for a new editor.

This one turned out to be a brown-skinned Clint Eastwood. He was okay for four years, during which time *PDI* continued to climb up the circulation and business ladders.

In the meantime, the business executives to whom I had given 49 percent of the shares in the company became more ambitious and wanted control. When I went to the US for a vacation, they saw in the company's books that I had forgotten to put a share in my name – and they took advantage by ousting me as chairman, despite the fact that I owned another 49 percent of the stocks. The remaining two percent were owned by Doris Nuyda, Vic Agustin, Ceres Doyo, and a few other members of the editorial staff.

At the next stockholders' meeting, we surprised the new board with the votes of the two percent minority, whom I brought in with me – and I regained ascendancy.

But this was four years before I decided to sell my shares to prevent Juan Ponce Enrile from getting any of them – which I described earlier.

How then was I to handle the Clint Eastwood at the editor's desk who had sided with the business group?

I had to fire him for loss of confidence. But he would not let go – until I asked the janitor to please take his computer and his desk to the boardroom, which functioned as my office, and then I locked the room.

Clint Eastwood went off to the National Labor Relations Commission and filed a suit against Mrs. Apostol. In a few months, the NLRC ruled victory for him and he was awarded P3 million from the *PDI* treasury – a mere pittance from what the company was making in 1991.

That was how Letty Magsanoc, who had been my choice as editor from the start, finally came in as editor-in-chief. Come December 9, 2004, she will have been editor for almost 14 years, and her record of crisis management can fill a whole book or even two.

But before I go into the many instances in Letty's record, let me share with you some valuable information which I found recently in the book *Elements of Journalism* by Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel. Its subtitle is "What Newspeople Should Know and the Public Should Expect". The book, by the way, should be required reading in all journalism schools today. It is perfect for us all.

For three years, according to this book, a committee of concerned journalists studied how excellence in journalism could be attained. They finally came up with nine basic elements:

1. Journalism's first obligation is to the truth.
2. Its first loyalty is to citizens.
3. Its essence is a discipline of verification.
4. Its practitioners must maintain independence from those they cover.
5. It must serve as an independent monitor of power.
6. It must provide a forum for public criticism and compromise.
7. It must strive to make the significant interesting and relevant.
8. It must keep the news comprehensive and proportional.
9. Its practitioners must be allowed to exercise their personal conscience.

Now, here are stories from the *PDI* experience as told by the editor-in-chief. Please judge for yourselves if they contain these nine elements.

October 1993

The day before *PDI* ran a two-part series by the Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism on the romance of Baby Arenas and then President Fidel Ramos, the press secretary in Malacañang called the editor-in-chief and told her to kill the story. But Letty Magsanoc said the story was solid and impacted on the national interest, considering how the lady in question conducted herself like a First Lady, complete with presidential guards and the other trappings of power paid for by taxpayers. Ms. Arenas herself had been flaunting her intimate relations with FVR.

The *PDI* was the only paper that ran the series although the PCIJ offered it to all the other print media outlets. For having used the stories, *PDI* was harassed and threatened.

A week after the series ran, the government, through the SEC, took a renewed interest in the ownership of a big block of allegedly disputed *PDI* shares. (Remember what I said earlier about Nora Bitong?) The *PDI* also got a bomb threat.

January 25-28, 1995

The *PDI* ran a four-part series on Speaker Jose de Venecia's behest loans for his Landoil Group of Companies during martial rule. During the Ramos administration, De Venecia came back to power in a big way for the first time since Marcos. It was an open secret that he was gunning for the presidency and was flexing his muscles, a hangover from the martial law regime. So the series had to go through a thorough legal scrutiny by an assorted number of people and lawyers, and even went all the way to the Supreme Court – to a retired SC justice, that is.

It took weeks before *PDI* could run the series. Finally, the paper was given the go-signal to publish, but on the condition that a series presenting De Venecia's side run parallel to the behest loan series.

With that condition, *PDI* had to hold publication again until the De Venecia interview was completed. Never mind the wait. The main thing was, the *PDI* ran the series and put on record De Venecia's still-unpaid behest loans.

May 1996

PDI ran a story on the North Luzon Expressway Rehab contract awarded to the Lopez-owned Benpres Corporation that the House of Representatives was investigating because of allegations that its members had been bribed by the Lopez group through then Rep. Albertito Lopez. The loudest voice came from neophyte congressman Mike Defensor, a member of the committee on public works and highways, who seemed determined to clean up the House. *PDI* backed Defensor in his lonely struggle in the wilderness of congressional corruption. But when it was time to subpoena Eugenio Lopez III, the ABS-CBN chair, Defensor lost his voice and his nerve. The probe fizzled out.

PDI was the only paper that gave the story page-one treatment for as long as it was news, despite retaliatory threats and pressure from ABS-CBN. In a subsequent news story, Jay Sonza, who had just quit the giant network, disclosed that his instructions from the network's top management had been to destroy the *PDI*.

To the credit of the paper's majority owners who are related to the Lopezes by affinity, they never asked the editors to go easy on the family, only that the editors be fair.

August 1996

PDI had the entire Congress on its back when it ran a series of special reports on the pork barrel and how it was enriching lawmakers, especially members of the Lower House. Some members of the House went so low as to demand that the *PDI* office be padlocked.

August 1998

PDI ran a series of stories that showed Erap's fondness for luxuries, among them the P100-million repair work on the presidential yacht and the P10-million kitchen makeover in the Palace Guesthouse. The paper was also assailed by the Palace for reporting that Erap's US-based cousin Celia Ejercito de Castro was on the Palace payroll (*PDI* had the payroll document) as a "consultant". Trade Secretary Jose Pardo himself called up *PDI* president Sandy Prieto. Press Secretary

Jerry Barican, on the other hand, called up the editor-in-chief. But both men failed to make first base. *PDI* went ahead and published the stories.

September 1998

PDI's series of stories based on eyewitness accounts and informants who provided documents alleged that Lucio Tan diverted income due Philippine Airlines (PAL) into his own companies. While PAL was barely operating on a wing and a prayer, Tan's airline-affiliated companies were prospering.

The series earned for *PDI* another libel suit.

These muckraking stories on Lucio Tan were extremely hazardous to *PDI*'s financial well-being, given that ad revenues are the lifeblood of a newspaper. Tan's group of companies by themselves can keep any paper afloat.

But *PDI* was not looking at the bottom line. Its ultimate line is the national interest. In this case, *PDI* was talking about the national flag carrier.

April 1999

PDI had looked up to Korina Sanchez as a broadcast journalist, but the staff were sorely disappointed when she called up the publisher and asked him to stop the *PDI* from publishing a story on a finance company repossessing her Mercedes Benz. The editor-in-chief turned down her plea. *PDI* believes that the profession required journalists to live thoroughly clean lives, and that includes paying one's debts. The paper does not believe in making exemptions. It exposes lower mortals for the same offense, so why spare those in the media? That wouldn't be fair. *PDI* dishes it out and should be able to take it on the chin as well. *PDI* published Korina's story with her side up front. Even so, it was the beginning of her obsessive hatred for the *PDI*, which rankles to this day.

The next time the *PDI* angered Erap, the paper was hit hard. His businessmen-friends, led by his colleagues in the movie industry, withdrew their ads from *PDI* starting in April 1999. Government institutions also pulled out. The boycott lasted five months. The *PDI*'s Palace reporter was also ostracized, excluded from informal chats with the President. The press secretary said that the paper "twisted" its reports.

In a formal letter, the Palace informed *PDI* that the paper was banned from covering the President's state visit to Brunei in August. As if on cue, the BIR also conducted a tax audit of *PDI*'s senior officers.

September 1999

Still in the grip of an ad boycott, *PDI* was attacked on the legal front by an Erap-identified lawyer. He filed several libel cases against *PDI* for committing

“terroristic acts” and inciting the public to sedition, citing its articles on the following: Erap’s alleged connivance with the Marcoses to hide the latter’s secret Swiss accounts; Jude Estrada’s flying on a military plane for a private trip with his friends to Cagayan de Oro and not paying his hotel and food bills, which were picked up by the local tourism people; and Erap’s extramarital relations with Laarni Enriquez. Other stories at about this time included Enriquez’s link to a bribery attempt in connection with an anomalous textbook deal.

The ad boycott appeared to be over by late November 1999. Malacañang may have finally given up on the *PDI* as it continued to report the news about its occupant with neither fear nor favor.

An unexpected outcome of the ad boycott was the unprecedented outpouring of public support which translated into the projection of Erap’s image as a bully and further eroded his authority to govern.

But it was really after Chavit Singson’s friendship with Erap died that the people were outraged. Like the death of Ninoy, the whole country was outraged by the sins of Erap as told by Chavit.

Whereas only *Mr. & Ms.*, *Malaya*, and *Radio Veritas* covered and reported the truth in Ninoy’s time, in Erap’s time all newspapers, radio, and TV covered the impeachment trial every minute of the day.

Our own *Pinoy Times* sold hundreds of thousands of its Special Edition, which photographed his mansions, mistresses, and money. We even foretold two months early the outcome of the voting by the senators on the opening of the envelope. Eleven to 10, the Erap diehards would vote in Erap’s favor, we said.

Sinabi nang “Huwag magpakatuta” – nagpakatuta pa rin! This cover came about because at a rally in Makati, one anti-Erap dog lover showed up with her dog all decked out with little placards that said “Erap, Resign”. At about this time, one of our reporters submitted a story that ex-President Cory Aquino was warning the people to watch the impeachment proceedings because Malacañang was bent on influencing its outcome. The story led us to count 11 senators who seemed to be pro-Erap. Using our photo of the dog at the rally, we asked our artist, Nonoy Marcelo (God rest his soul), to lay out the message to these 11 senators: *Huwag magpakatuta* (Don’t allow yourselves to be used by Erap as puppy dogs). This we published on November 19, 2000. Two months later, on January 17, 2001, our cover became real – those same 11 senators voted not to open the Jose Velarde account of Erap.

The people were furious. Their outrage triggered the gathering at the EDSA Shrine which led to Erap leaving Malacañang, to be replaced by his vice president, Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, as the new president on January 20.



A dog is used by anti-Estrada forces to creatively exhort senators during the impeachment trial of former President Joseph Estrada not to be puppy dogs of the administration. (cover of *Pinoy Times*, November 19, 2000)

It was mass media's finest hour.

That admonition to the 11 senators, "Don't be puppy dogs of the ruling elite", should be addressed as well to all journalists of the world.

To be beholden to any news source is tragedy for a reporter. To be beholden to any advertiser is tragedy for a newspaper. To act like puppy dogs to public relations officers makes the editorial staff lose confidence in the editorial desk.

The main job of the newspaper is to be a watchdog, not to be anybody's puppy dog or *tuta*.

It is now time to end this lecture, although we have not had the space to talk about community journalism and its 400 practitioners whose lives are endangered because of their dedication to local reporting that is so important to nation-building.

Nor have we had the space to discuss the Philippine Press Institute, the supposed watchdog of local journalism, and how it lost its teeth. I hope you are concerned enough about these issues and others, such as the impact of technology on journalism, to bring them up at the open forum.

But I cannot leave you without paying homage to our best literary writer and journalist Nick Joaquin, whom we lost in April 2004.

Nick said that “journalism is responsible writing. The reporter is duty-bound to communicate – and to communicate as sensibly as possible. He must not play games with the reading public. Communication is serious business.”

Thank you all for being here today.

OPEN FORUM

Question (Q): *What is your stand on the proposal to change the 1987 Constitution to allow foreign ownership of media? How will this affect news content?*

Answer (A): This is our country, we love it, and we don't want foreigners to meddle with it. And if they were to own newspapers, our media in the Philippines, that would be like giving up our own ownership of ourselves. Never should it happen.

Q: *Do you think journalists should be given licenses, just like engineers and doctors? There are those who argue that journalists, like licensed professionals, also serve the public welfare.*

A: I wish I knew the answer, but maybe someone can tell us why journalists should not be licensed. If they were not licensed, anybody can call themselves journalists. However, there is a reason why we should not require licensing of journalists. To be a lawyer or doctor, you'd have to go through many years of schooling. But in journalism, sometimes even if you don't finish your high school, you can be a very good writer. Take the case of Nick Joaquin who never finished a course in journalism but turned out to be one of the best journalists in this country. That is one of the reasons why it is not necessary to license journalists.

Q: *What is your reaction to the argument that the media should support government policies and programs, and shun its adversarial role, on the premise that it is counter-productive to national development? How will the media help in finding the solutions to the crisis besetting the country?*

A: To have the media and the government go hand-in-hand is not very healthy. How can the media be the watchdog if who you are watching is also your friend? There should be a very clear definition of roles. Government is government and media are media. There are certain things that government does that are worthwhile and should be encouraged. I don't see why media have to quarrel with everything that government does. I think all newspapers have to encourage government when they see something good. Corruption is really the number one factor that works against everybody – against government and against ourselves. If there were no corruption, then the fiscal crisis would not have happened. That is a very difficult thing to do, but we should try to understand more why fiscal crisis happens.

Q: *The PDI is very much identified with you and vice-versa. How come your name as founding chair is no longer in the staff box?*

A: I had my name removed from the *PDI* in July 2002 because I was not happy with the fact that the *PDI* was hiring a columnist, one more society columnist, who, I thought, would only aggravate things in the lifestyle section which has a lot of entertainment materials, society gossip, and society news at that time. When I heard that they were hiring another society columnist, I said that the day the name of that society columnist comes out in the *PDI*, please remove my name. That was my silent protest. Of course the editor, Letty Magsanoc, didn't want to do it. I said please remove my name because if you don't remove my name, then I would be forced to sue the *PDI*, and I didn't want to do that. Just do it quietly. So this has been very quiet, until today.

Q: *How can journalists help mend the Filipinos' broken spirit? What is the true meaning of being a journalist?*

A: Are your spirits broken? (*Audience: No.*) Your spirits here, I think, are very hopeful. But it can be easily broken if things that are happening today continue. Now, I feel that many of our problems are caused by our

education system. I feel that our young people are not given the right kind of education that they are entitled to. This is why you have given me the right opening to introduce the education revolution which I am into these days. You see, in the elementary schools, of which we have 40,000 all over the country, half of them don't have enough facilities needed to educate the young people. And on top of this, half of the teachers that we have are not really very well qualified to become good teachers. In this program that I am advocating, the "education revolution", we are asking people power to be used in the local level to improve the physical needs of the children in the schools. And secondly, to improve the teachers in what we call "mentoring the mentors" because not all teachers seem to be aware of the importance of their jobs. We feel that if our students were better qualified, then hopefully we will have fewer problems.

Q: *With regard to the ownership structure of the PDI, what lessons can we learn from its past cooperative structure?*

A: The cooperative structure in the *PDI* was my dream but it did not happen. In the beginning we were getting P50 from each of our employees and this served as their share in the cooperative. After the first 15 months, a group of other employees were able to convince them that unionism would be better than cooperativism. We partly blame ourselves for not being able to project to the officers and members that cooperativism might be the best idea, so that everybody has a say in the running of the newspaper. But since the rewards of unionism had a greater appeal at that time, especially to our reporters, they voted down the cooperative and unionism was adopted in the *PDI*. Now, we're just lucky that the eventual owners of the *PDI* are not so heavily burdened by duties that have to do with the government. The owners, the Rufinos-Prietos, have businesses but they are not dependent on the government for any of these things. They can stand up to government and not suffer from it. And then when the government goes up to them for taxes, their tax papers are clean. They have nothing to worry about.

Q: *We all know that after Iraq, the Philippines is said to be the most dangerous place in the world to practice the profession. Given this, how would you encourage aspiring journalists to pursue their goals? Is it right to say that once you become a journalist, you must be prepared to die?*

A: If you're going to become a journalist, especially if you want to go to the provinces, then yes, be ready to die. But isn't it [dying] just like going to a higher form of life? We have to know that that is always a price we have to pay.

Q: *What advice can you give to students who want to go to the mainstream media or the alternative media if and when they graduate?*

A: You'll have to love your country. If you love your country and you have the talent, for journalism, the spirit to want to improve your life and improve the life of others, then do it. To be a journalist, you really have to be very special. And all of you here are very special, I'm sure. So continue to study, so that our country will be much better in the future.

Q: *What advice can you give to students who want to go to the mainstream or alternative media if and when they graduate?*

A: You have to love your country. If you have the talent for journalism and the spirit to improve your life and those of others, then do it. To be a journalist, you have to be very special. And all of you here are very special. So continue to study so that our country will be much better in the future.