

The Future of Community Newspapers

Pachico A. Seares

U.P. Gawad Plaridel 2008 Awardee

Pachico A. Seares of Sun.Star Cebu received the 2008 U.P. Gawad Plaridel for his dedication to community journalism. In the citation given to him, Seares was commended for instilling the highest professional and ethical standards among journalists, as well as their sense of accountability to the community; for inspiring his colleagues to excel in their chosen profession; for advocating the rights and welfare of community journalists; and for being a journalist worth emulating by current and future media practitioners.

Seares delivered the Plaridel lecture during the awarding ceremonies held on July 4, 2008 at the Cine Adarna of the U.P. Film Institute. Around 800 people attended, including U.P. Vice President for Academic Affairs Amelia Guevara, U.P. Diliman Chancellor Sergio Cao, U.P. Assistant Vice President for Academic Affairs Florinda Mateo, UP Diliman Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs Elizabeth Enriquez, and previous U.P. Gawad Plaridel awardees Rosa Vilma Santos (Film, 2005) and Cecilia Lazaro (Television, 2007). Also in attendance were media practitioners from various media organizations like Sun.Star Cebu, The Freeman, Philippine Daily Inquirer, GMA 7, and the National Union of Journalists of the Philippines (NUJP); and faculty members and students of the U.P. College of Mass Communication (CMC) and from other colleges of U.P. Diliman, as well as those from U.P. Manila, U.P. Los Baños, Centro Escolar University (CEU), Lyceum of the Philippines, Miriam College, Polytechnic University of the Philippines (PUP), and St. Scholastica's College (SSC).

UP CMC student Joaquin Valdez and alumna Mariz Umali hosted the event. Prof. Roehl Jamon of the UP Film Institute directed the audio-visual presentation and awarding ceremonies, with Prof.

Shirley Evidente of the Department of Broadcast Communication as production manager.

The U.P. Gawad Plaridel is one of the major activities of the CMC Office of Extension and External Relations (OEEER) under the supervision of Prof. Maria Rosel San Pascual of the Department of Communication Research. Coca-Cola Export Corporation is its major sponsor.

What's Happening in the Countryside

In 2001, the Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism (PCIJ) asked me to write for its book *Investigating Local Governments* an article titled “The Future of Community Newspapers.”

In 1999, during a gathering of Asian community editors sponsored by a German foundation, we tackled the same question: How much longer will community publications stay around?

Earlier, in 1992, the Philippine Press Institute (PPI) asked me to write and deliver a seminar paper titled “*Sun.Star*: The Cebu Success Story.”

Prof. Crispin Maslog later included that in his book *The Rise and Fall of Community Newspapers*. The book pretty much dwelt on what lay ahead for community publications, many of which were then struggling for survival and some have long since fallen on the wayside.

Last year, the *Sun.Star* board of directors, in an executive meeting with the paper's editors, discussed the issue on the future of community papers and how *Sun.Star* will cope.

It is not just a local concern. It is an issue in newsrooms and boardrooms all over the world. And it's not only community papers that worry over the problem of dwindling circulation, diminishing credibility, and increasing threat from new media.

The big papers based at the capital are fretting if not jittery. Shouldn't the much smaller local papers in the countryside panic?

The collective work of community journalists all over the country may have persuaded the University of the Philippines to consider community journalism as worthy of recognition and to look beyond Manila to pick the awardee for this year.

Largely responsible for my being on this stage today are the journalists in *Sun.Star* with whom I have worked through

the years, and outside our newsroom, the other local journalists with whom I have worked on projects aimed to improve community journalism and the journalists' well-being.

In 1982, Jesus "Sonny" Garcia Jr., president and chairperson of the board of Sun.Star Publications, Inc., persuaded me to embark with him on an exhausting yet exhilarating journey called community journalism.

To the question up front, in the face of near-doomsday forecast about the future of print media, should community publishers and journalists fear for the worst?

Community journalists are hardy and pragmatic, virtues produced usually in harsh and gruelling environment. They have gone through problems of lack of equipment, inadequate training, financial woes, and a lukewarm market whose economies can barely support the weekly or daily paper.

I noted then in the PCIJ book the weaknesses of community papers and journalists:

- Newsrooms were understaffed with journalists heavily multi-tasked and obscenely underpaid;
- Papers and their workers were highly vulnerable to corruption and exploitation by vested interests; and
- Standards and values were often sacrificed, the compelling task being to get the paper out and make enough money for the next issue—a "come-out-when-able" grind.

We used then the cliché "vicious cycle" to describe the trap in which community papers were caught: Not enough resources to improve the paper and attract readers and advertisers. Not enough readers and advertisers to make money and raise the resources. Not enough resources... And so the vicious cycle goes.

How much has the landscape changed since then? There have been improvements, to be sure.



Pachico A. Seares, the 2008 U.P. Gawad Plaridel awardee (second from right) after receiving the trophy and the citation from CMC Dean Elena E. Pernia (extreme left), U.P. Diliman Chancellor Sergio S. Cao (second from left), and U.P. Vice President for Academic Affairs Amelia P. Guevara (extreme right).
Photo by Ria Eloise S. Regino.

Sun.Star Publications Network (SSPN) is a network of seven community papers in regional centers of the country with *Sun.Star Cebu* as the flagship paper. SSPN, headed by editorial services chief Michelle So, a U.P. Visayas College in Cebu alumna, has extensively studied local newspapers. And the network noted these:

- Desktop publishing is generally used, though not many papers own pre-press equipment and printing presses. Papers that own equipment accept printing orders, with newspapering as side business. Laptops and digicams are used by some journalists but remain in wish lists of most other reporters and photographers; and
- Competition among newspapers and training provided by organizations like PPI and Center for Media Freedom and Responsibility (CMFR) has led

to substantial changes in newspaper content and form, but deficient resources continue to hound most publications.

What brighten the landscape are the few publications that have overcome adversities. They are not only making money and expanded services to readers. They have made community journalism respectable.

It's not by chance that some of the successful papers are in Cebu. There are two reasons:

- Historically, Cebu has blazed the trail in community journalism. As early as the 1960s, while the rest of the countryside only had weekly and monthly papers, Cebu already had dailies. Cebu journalists have had longer exposure to culture and practice of the craft; and
- Economically, Cebu is a strong bastion that has prospered despite woes besetting most other parts of the country. The “island in the Pacific” tag is not imperialist snobbery or isolationist strategy. It's a tribute to Cebu's capacity to weather economic storms.

Newspapers can only be as stable and vigorous as the economy of their respective communities. *Sun.Star* papers that are flourishing are in regions whose economies are alive and well.

The dilemma of many community papers is how to improve standards and uphold values and, at the same time, struggle for survival.

Bad reporting or editing, conflict of interest, or any other lapse of standards or ethics is set aside when the newsprint supplier and other creditors with unpaid bills are pounding on the publisher's door.

Often, trade-offs are made. In some community papers, the publisher orders his editor to charge fees for news stories, the rates depending on location and display. In those papers, news pages sell more briskly than the classified ads, especially during elections when there's frenzied bidding for page 1.

In some community papers, the columnist pays for the space his column occupies. These columnists, like many block-timers on radio and TV, raise the money from what they write or don't write, public good being just pretext for personal fundraising.

A columnist once asked his editor to pay for what he writes. "What?" the editor reacted, "I already give you a column and you want to be paid? *Ano ka? Sinusuwerte?*" ("What makes you think you're lucky?")

Much of the corruption is bred largely by economic problems in community papers—and values not strong enough.

But it's not just a matter of ethics: Corruption in community papers inflicts a more telling blow and holds local journalists in tighter grip of professional decay.

Community papers are important in the countryside. The reason is apparent and real.

Many communities don't read Manila-based papers because they don't target those communities.

In Cebu, the biggest-circulated Manila-based paper runs third to the two largest local papers, one of which is in the vernacular Bisaya. In Mindanao and many other parts of the country, there are many localities reached only by community papers.

Manila-based papers can never report as extensively as local papers do on local events and issues. A "Nation" section of a Manila-based paper cannot compete—in depth, detail or frequency—with a local paper's reports on a community concern.

It's no publishing whimsy that in Cebu, the *Philippine Daily Inquirer* opened a satellite paper, *Cebu Daily News*, and



Pachico A. Seares delivering the 2008 Plaridel Lecture. Beside him is the U.P. Gawad Plaridel trophy designed and crafted by National Artist Napoleon V. Abueva. Photo by Ria Eloise S. Regino.

Philippine Star bought into *The Freeman*. These Manila-based papers recognize the edge of local papers.

Kinship with the community is the community papers' major strength. It is what beats outside competition and holds the dogs of new media at bay.

One may wonder how local papers, many of which lead hand-to-mouth existence, can still brace for the threat of the Internet and other new media.

Many community publishers just ignore it and focus on problems at hand. Others, as they did with the advent of television, adopt in their papers concepts and techniques from the new media.

Sun.Star Cebu opened its website in 1997, which in four years evolved into a network website with the addition of news and features from affiliate papers and news bureaus nationwide. Today, www.sunstar.com.ph—managed by Sun.Star News

Exchange (Sunnex) under the leadership of Nini Cabaero, a U.P. Diliman alumna—ranks as a leading Philippine news website.

For almost two years now, *Sun.Star*'s corporate leaders have been planning about convergence and synergy, of tearing down real and imagined walls between newsroom and other departments.

Our publishers and editors keep an eye on the future and look at what's yapping on our heels, friendly or hostile.

We test "new ideas," many of which turn out to be just labels for the kind of journalism that every paper ought to practice—civic journalism, preventive journalism, peace journalism, and, yes, conscience journalism. Don't you think they are but facets of good journalism?

What we continue to practice and hone are the best practices that we in *Sun.Star* believe will help any community paper in dealing with the present and facing the future.

We believe that even community papers, despite limitations, can help meet demands of a public increasingly dismayed by performance of media in general. We believe we can strive:

- To seek clarity and avoid clutter in presenting facts and ideas in our stories and opinions;
- To distinguish the important from the merely urgent;
- Not to take seriously all statements of important people and "not to simply respond, like puppets, to the pull of strings by the powerful";
- To remember that being objective doesn't mean having no conviction — "mind-less" objectivity achieves little;
- To be informed and fair in our opinions; and
- To know that the closest the media can get to elusive truth is to get the facts right.

Now and then I have been asked why *Sun.Star* and other Cebu papers are doing better than their counterparts elsewhere.

What has made *Sun.Star*, new kid in the block and brash upstart in November 1982, survive, grow, and eventually dominate the field in less than two years? How did *Sun.Star* free itself of a millstone on the neck that it started as a “Marcos crony paper” in 1982 and, in 1986, was owned by a family some of whose members are into Cebu politics?

Mayor Tomas Osmeña called *Sun.Star* in at least two local elections a “propaganda mouthpiece” of the Garcia family. Large billboards once proclaimed that a competing paper was “the only independent paper” in Cebu. “We don’t kiss ass,” the message read.

Creative, but that and other forms of assault haven’t made any dent on *Sun.Star*’s circulation and readership. An explanation may be *Sun.Star*’s credibility.

Since its first issue on November 25, 1982, *Sun.Star* has tried to use energy and passion to improve journalism skills and uphold values of the craft.

To be sure, there were hits and misses and we made a lot of mistakes. Most of the time though we’ve been learning and gaining: The paper has won most of the local and national journalism awards (182 during my watch) and has dominated readership and advertising markets.

There is no finish line for a newspaper unless it quits the race. Conditions are dictated by the news cycle and shifts in public mood and taste, as well as changes in method and technology.

Good journalism is huge to us and *Sun.Star* has always been pursuing good journalism to remind our public and ourselves that it is what we do.

The paper carries stories about people in the community and how events affect them, their triumphs and failures, and visions and dreams of their leaders. Yet, we don’t miss stories in the rest of the nation and the world that shake our community.

We harp on accountability and how our public can make the paper answer to that accountability. We help readers become more media-literate. We stress the right of our public to speak out and, for news sources, the right to reply. We tell them our duty includes fairness and getting the facts right and when we err we must publicly eat our slice of the humble pie.

Being accountable is often tricky. It can be used against the paper and its journalists. *Sun.Star* documents like the *Sun.Star Code of Standards and Ethics* can be a weapon in the hands of those who wish us harm. I once took the witness stand for more than an hour, grilled by a libel lawyer who used a copy of the *Sun.Star Code* in his cross-examination.

Embracing journalism values has its price. It can embarrass or put the paper to shame. But it has its rewards too.

The ultimate prize is public trust which translates into public patronage and profit for our stockholders. Good journalism is good business, I always say. Given the results, our bosses at *Sun.Star* apparently agree. Profitability means:

- More independence, since we can stand up to unreasonable threats of advertisers and other vested interests;
- More than decent pay and benefits for our journalists;
- Better equipment for reporters and production people; and
- More extensive news coverage and opportunity to do the best practices of the craft.

We've done more intensive special reports on social problems gripping the community. We've espoused causes other papers might skip, or cut back on, for lack of resources—stories and features on good governance, protecting women and children, exposing and curbing abuse of power and injustice, promoting respect for environment and heritage, and helping fight illiteracy and poverty.

We use prime space for articles that explain the news and what they mean to our readers. We help boost community spirit in news features and house advertisements. We encourage citizens' help in solving community problems by printing "good news" stories and extolling the feat of "Citizens of the Year". We trumpet achievements in journalism competitions. Yet, we also announce our adherence to journalism values and ideals. We push advocacies of the paper in relation to local and national concerns.

An idea inspired by street protesters' placards is to use newspaper pages to push the paper's crucial message that may only be barely noticed in editorials and opinion columns.

In our Monday editorials, unlike the other editorials of the week, we use essay format and length to make a stronger plea on a social issue. The editorial writer does the interviews, seeking details and context that give the problem a face.

There's also an upside to good journalism that we help spread in the *Sun.Star* network papers and with other practitioners: Good journalism can help prevent filing of oppressive libel suits and the murder of journalists.

Through the Cebu Citizens-Press Council (CCPC) which I help manage as executive director, we've been listening and talking to specific sectors on media issues.

The CCPC mediates in complaints on right to reply and correction of factual errors. Outsiders looking at the council note some success, seeing CCPC as an instrument for convincing the community that it's not a "boys and girls club" and we are serious about trying to do our job responsibly.

CCPC studies bills affecting media, compares existing standards against actual coverage practice, reviews performance of media such as how it reported elections, threats to press freedom, and expresses its views and recommendations in resolutions and letters. At times, it produces short documentary films on issues affecting journalists and news sources. CCPC is



Pachico Seares with (from left) UP CMC Dean Elena Pernia, Vilma Santos (2005 U.P. Gawad Plaridel Awardee), Martin Lorenzo (his grandson), Fatima Seares (his wife), U.P. Vice President for Academic Affairs Amelia Guevara, Cecilia Lazaro (2007 U.P. Gawad Plaridel Awardee), and U.P. Diliman Chancellor Sergio Cao. *Photo by Ria Eloise S. Regino.*

only one of the groups the Cebu News Workers Foundation (Cenewof) spawned.

We have the MBF Cebu Press Center, site of most media activities, the Cebu News Workers Cooperative (NewsCoop), Cebu Media Medical Aid Fund (Cemmaf), and Cebu Media Legal Aid (Cemla).

Through activities of the media community, we promote unity in diversity and friendship in competition. If community journalists in other parts of the country envy us for anything, it must be our capacity to talk to one another despite our spirited, even fierce, rivalry in the market place.

In September this year, we will hold our 14th Press Freedom Week celebration during which, even as we continue putting out our papers and doing our broadcasts, we find time to hold fellowships, discuss common problems, and reach out to other sectors of the community.

The Press Freedom Week reminds the public that in helping us protect press freedom, it is helping protect all the other freedoms as well. Its features that have been included as *Sun.Star*-sponsored activities every year include a forum with journalism students, publication of Cebu Journalism and Journalists (CJJ), and, with the photographers group, the journalism photo exhibit.

It has been my fortune to be actively involved in all these activities—helping conceive, helping organize, helping lead and inspire, helping uphold the values we espouse.

I've been teaching part-time for several years now at U.P. in the Visayas Cebu College. It's not a job. It's pleasure I look forward to each week, when I swap information and ideas with young and perpetually skeptical Mass Communication students, some of whom someday will help fill newsrooms or at least become better media consumers and better-informed citizens.

Sun.Star has worked with U.P. Mass Communication students on special reports outside of the usual internship programs, and, with CCPC, the survey and research on how media performed in the last elections. A project initiated by the auspices of *Sun.Star* renovates and equips a multi-media laboratory of U.P. Cebu.

Thank you, University of the Philippines, for making community papers and community journalists a part of your 100th anniversary celebration.

There's no higher recognition of the work of community journalism than the U.P. Gawad Plaridel that honors the great Marcelo H. del Pilar, who died 112 years ago today.

With the new media, there are myriad questions to hound community journalists: "Must they go online and if they already are, must they boost their online offerings? Must they blog? Must they allow citizen content to come out unfiltered?"

The crucial question, however, is still: "Will community newspapers survive?"

I don't know. But whatever vehicle or platform, print or broadcast, hard copy or digital, wired or wireless, this I believe: Good journalism will help community papers and community