

Pressures on the Press

Interview by Sarah Jane S. Raymundo

“Social malaises only have visible existence when the media talk about them, that is to say when they are recognized as such by journalists” writes Patrick Champagne (1999: 46). But what happens when journalists themselves are hit by the social malaise they themselves try to expose?

Rowena Carranza-Paraan, secretary-general of the National Union of Journalists of the Philippines (NUJP) addresses this pressing issue by contextualizing journalism within the larger social milieu that shapes predominant media practice, one that has not been spared from repression, corruption and violence. This, however, is not the whole picture. The year 2004 saw the participation of media practitioners in a mass action held in the sidewalk of EDSA, in a not-so-long march along Camp Crame and Camp Aguinaldo. Journalists were waving banners condemning the killings of their colleagues; and how these crimes are committed with impunity.

The following interview sheds light on the killing of journalists and the efforts of media organizations like NUJP to promote and uphold press freedom.

Question (Q): *Is there an identifiable trend in the murder of journalists?*

Rowena Carranza-Paraan (RCP): Our reference point is the year 1986 when civil liberties have been supposedly restored. Since then, we have recorded a total of 87 cases of murder. There is a clear pattern to these murders. There was an average of three cases yearly prior to 2001. The numbers escalated since then. In fact, the highest number of killings ever recorded occurred in 2004.

Q : Is this in any way related to the 2004 elections?

RCP : It is in every way related to the 2004 elections. I think it has to do with the crucial role that media play during national elections. Pulse Asia came out with a survey revealing that when voters were asked where they get information on how and who to vote, almost 80% responded that they do so from radio and television. Less than 10% cited campaign flyers and posters as sources of information. Senatorial candidates like Jamby Madrigal and Pia Cayetano are a few examples of winning candidates who benefited from the heavy placements of ads and effective media coverage. These two were virtually unheard of prior to their candidacy, right?

Q : Good point. But we have yet to explain the escalation of violence and killings among media practitioners during this year.

RCP : Yes. You see, most of the killings happen in the provinces. We are no longer alien to the kind of manipulation that local politicians exercise through media, whether through actual ownership of station or by way of corruption through bribery and the like. In a manner of speaking, the stakes are so high during election season yet life is so cheap in this forsaken land. You can actually hire a gunman for only PhP2,000 to make sure that the media person who gets in your way bites the dust.

Q : *Do you observe a pattern to the killings? Human rights organizations like Karapatan report that political killings are usually carried out by motorcycle-riding men wearing bonnets or masks. Is it the same in the case of the killing of journalists?*

RCP : There is a striking similarity. Usually, the killers consist of two helmet-wearing men on a motorcycle. One of them shoots the victim. The scene of the crime occurs at a fixed point – either in the victim’s house or somewhere near the victim’s office or station.

Q : *Can you give me a general profile of the victims? Are there more men than women? Do victims fall under a definite age range? Are there more victims in the regions than in Metro Manila? Did the victims receive death threats prior to their murder?*

A : There are more men working as media practitioners than there are women so given that ratio, the probability of targeting male victims is higher. The age range is from 25 to 45 years old. Note that the age range falls under that stage where majority of media practitioners are most productive. The killings occur in the provinces, particularly in major urban centers where stations are based. Most of the victims had been receiving death threats before they were killed. Only a few took those threats seriously. And when they do, they would seek protection from the Philippine National Police (PNP). This is true in the case of Marlene Esperat.¹ But the moment her bodyguard took a day off on Maundy Thursday, she got murdered the very same day.

Q : *Do you include all cases of murdered journalists in your count? Or does your count follow a set of qualifications?*

RCP : We count all media practitioners who were killed in the line of duty. We exclude cases wherein the killing was a result of a personal conflict but only after a thorough investigation of the case. Until we have proven that a murder did not have anything to do with the victim's profession as a journalist, he or she remains in our list.

Q : *Does this mean that you assume any murdered journalist a victim of the pervasive killings until proven otherwise?*

RCP : Yes. Considering our flawed justice system, it takes a long time for the police to determine the hard facts of the crime. Out of the 87 cases, only four have been solved. And for some of these cases, the mastermind was never sought and remains free to this day. If we were to wait for the conclusive results of the police investigations, then we would have only swept a considerable number of the killings under the rug. We almost made that mistake in the case of a murdered cameraperson from RPN 9. At first, the murder looked like a robbery. So we dismissed it as such. It turns out that the victim was an award-winning cameraperson and an environmentalist who got in the way of an activity of a syndicate consisting of retired military officers. Two out of the three robbers were killed in the course of the investigation. The remaining perpetrator squealed that the crime was designed to look like a robbery to prevent the investigators from getting into the bottom of things. That incident warned us against hastily dismissing cases of killings as not related to media practice.

Q : *What is NUJP's official position on the killings?*

RCP : In a very general sense, what is happening in media is a reflection of the overall Philippine social situation. For example, the economic issues faced by the majority of the Filipino people are the same issues that journalists encounter. Corruption is pervasive in other fields, the same is true for media. Majority of media practitioners are not well-paid. The glitter and glamor of the media are far from the actual circumstances of the people who do media work. Korina Sanchez is not your typical journalist. Our workers and farmers are victims of human rights violations and so are people from the media.

NUJP's position on the issue of the killings is guided by its avowed principle that the media have a special role in society. They are supposed to promote the people's right to information and our right to know the truth. These rights can be ensured through press freedom and the right to tell the truth. Meanwhile, the killings have resulted in a chilling effect among practitioners in the field. For instance, if a colleague was murdered because of an exposé, the tendency is for one to precisely avoid issues vital to the life of the community especially if it means keeping oneself alive. There are cases wherein the identity of the perpetrator or the mastermind has been identified, but nothing is done to seek justice.

We at NUJP condemn the killings and we continue to seek justice for these.



Rowena Carranza-Paraa stands in front of a list of slain journalists during the commemoration of World Press Freedom Day last May 3, 2007. Photo retrieved August 15, 2008 from <http://cache.daylife.com/imageserve/0fgvbC56J46IO/610x.jpg>

Q : *It seems that your quest for justice goes beyond media's power to play its crucial role. I understand that the promotion of press freedom is precisely what the government should ensure. How, in your view, has the government performed this task, especially in the context of the killings?*

RCP : Yes, that is precisely my point. The killing of journalists is a violation of human rights. We do not blame the government for the killings but we are not satisfied and assured by the way it has acted upon them. We cite the government's lack of political will in solving the murder cases. We raise the issue of impunity. If laws are not enforced, crimes such as the killing of journalists will be committed with impunity.

Q : *I assume that you are not satisfied with the measures that government has taken in view of the killings. Can you cite examples of these measures and state why you find them wanting?*

RCP : President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo has come up with several solutions. Among these are the creation of Task Force Newsmen, Task Force Usig, and the Melo Commission. She has offered rewards for witnesses. The licensing of firearms among journalists was also floated at some point.

The task forces were not efficient since those assigned to investigate the crimes against media practitioners are the same people investigating other crimes. And so it boils down to the creation of a new structure with a new name and a spokesperson but with no actual people to realize its special tasks. Nonetheless, NUJP coordinates and cooperates with whatever structures are formed to investigate the killing of journalists. But they can only match our efforts with their inefficiency.

As for rewards, I do not think such strategy is really effective. We are talking here of empowered political families who have practically maintained a fiefdom in areas far from central government. Considering the feudal and authoritarian relations in those places and the mode of influence these political families may have on military and police institutions and even on Malacañang, how can we expect a reward system to work?

The licensing of firearms and the permit to carry them which are being floated by the government are very limited solutions to the killings. NUJP does not blame journalists who are so threatened that they think they

have to arm themselves to survive. But let us remind ourselves that there are conditions for such fear and they are not supposed to be inherent in the profession. The case is that neither the police nor the courts are solving the crimes by punishing the perpetrators. The permit to carry firearms is not a solution to the killings. The government even peddles its army to serve as protectors. But these do not, in any way, eradicate the conditions or the reasons for the killing of journalists. The point is not to encourage the journalists to defend themselves or to provide them with a bodyguard from the PNP or from the military. The government has to make the justice system function. It should investigate, secure the witnesses, and punish the perpetrators. More importantly, the task of journalists is to report the truth and to learn how to do this well; and not to learn how to hold a gun and to shoot or to learn how to look over one's shoulders.

Q : *Are the killing of journalists considered by NUJP as “political killings”?*

RCP : No. We do not label them as political killings. But the political killings have a great impact on the killing of journalists. The spate of political killings in the country is part of a systematic anti-insurgency program of the government. Political killings have a definite target. Media killings are not a consequence of a systematic and deliberate plan to strike at a perceived enemy. They are usually perpetrated by crime syndicates or powerful political clans. However, when you have government officials like ours who say that it is okay for certain journalists to be murdered since they are corrupt, or you have a provincial PNP chief who makes a public statement that “Tuwing makakakita ako ng reporter, gusto kong pumatay” [*Every time I see a reporter, I feel like killing*], the message is crystal clear: that it is fine for

drug syndicates, or any other politician to strike at every media person who gets in their way. The climate of state violence, to a large extent, encourages the killing of journalists.

Q : *That is a very enlightening distinction. Still in the light of the political killings that have escalated under the Arroyo administration, what is NUJP's analysis of this regime?*

RCP : NUJP does not take a position on the Arroyo regime. But we take a stand on specific issues that affect the media. For instance, NUJP took a firm position against Arroyo's Presidential Proclamation No. 1017 which blatantly suppressed press freedom when it raided the *Tribune*, when it deployed soldiers to ABS-CBN and GMA 7, and when it ordered the media not to cover militant groups. This regime's barefaced censorship includes official statements like "Those are the kind of questions you should not be asking." Another one of its attempts at censorship is when the Movie and Television Review and Classification Board (MTRCB) released a memo requiring news and public affairs program to submit their videos prior to airing. NUJP also takes a position against the proposed Charter change which deliberately obfuscates the law that will guide media practice. The

proposed amendment to the Charter states something to the effect that media should observe “responsible exercise of press freedom.” This revision makes the definition of “responsible exercise” highly arbitrary, making it a threat to press freedom.

Q : *Do you think that a critical stance against a government like ours will jeopardize media’s credibility?*

RCP : Not necessarily. The thing is media practitioners work in different institutions. You have beats in Malacanang, in Congress, etc. Those practitioners are also members of NUJP. There is a commonly held opinion, and I am not saying it’s true, that a journalist’s credibility is tainted once he or she takes a definite position towards a government entity since he or she can no longer report on a particular issue or disseminate information objectively. That may be true for some but definitely not for all practitioners. Whether that dominant perception is true or not, it has an impact on the media agency. That is why, we at NUJP make use of calibrated strategies when dealing with issues that affect the media. Our campaigns or courses of action have to have a clear basis and a particular focus about them because we want to maintain our credibility as we struggle to become critical watchdogs of society.

Q : *We have tackled the relationship between the political killings and media killings. You have also described how media practitioners walk on a tightrope in a profession where criticality, while necessary, may not always be in favor of the much-needed credibility that media have to assume. Pursuing this theme, can you now discuss how the killing of journalists affects press freedom?*

RCP : Aside from the chilling effect which I said earlier, I think that one of the unfortunate impact of the killings is the kind of message that is put across when government cannot take adequate measures to solve the crimes. And it doesn't really help that the military released a document titled "Enemy of the State" which erroneously links several media organizations, NUJP included, as among its enemies. Cases which were resolved were less a product of the mindful efforts of government than the devotional support of media groups and international organizations.

Q : *How does NUJP as a media organization serve as a support group for media practitioners?*

RCP : NUJP has put up a media safety office which keeps three hotlines for Luzon, Visayas, and Mindanao. We seek justice for the killings through proper documentation and through our coordination with government and

other relevant agencies in order to push for the investigation of unsolved murder cases. More significantly, we put a lot of effort in bringing together media practitioners nationwide to conduct safety training and disseminate information on the state of the killings among journalists.

Note

- ¹ Marlene Esperat is a journalist from Sultan Kudarat who exposed the P728-million fertilizer fund scam.

Reference

Champagne, P. (1999). The view from the media. In Bourdieu, P., et al. *The weight of the world: Social suffering in contemporary society*. California: Stanford University Press.

Sarah Jane S. Raymundo is an assistant professor at the Department of Sociology, University of the Philippines Diliman where she teaches Sociology of Mass Media. She is the secretary-general of the Congress of Teachers/Educators for Nationalism and Democracy (CONTEND).