

Random Thoughts from a Martial Law Youngster
A reaction to “The Philippine Press Under Martial Law”
by Domini M. Torrevillas

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When I was invited to give a reaction to Ms. Torrevillas’ paper titled “The Philippine Press Under Martial Law,” I was tempted to ask the person who invited me, “Are you referring to the period from 1972 to 1981, or from February 24, 2006 to the present?” It was only when Ms. Torrevillas emailed her paper early this week that I knew the focus of discussion.

Allow me to start with two confessions that are somewhat relevant to our topic. First, my birthday falls on September 21. Second, I was only four years old when the late President Ferdinand Marcos imposed martial law in our country.

I mention these two points because unlike Ms. Torrevillas who was directly involved in the struggle for a free press under martial law, I belong to that generation of youngsters who were indifferent to the abuses of the conjugal dictatorship and excesses of the Marcos cronies. It was not only because I was young and carefree whose idea of a good time was watching *Voltes V* and *Mazingher Z*. The venues for political awakening at that time were very limited since progressive organizations operated clandestinely and critical documents and publications like Ricardo Manapat’s *Smart Files* had limited circulation.

Awakening for me came on that fateful day of August 21, 1983 when news about the assassination of Benigno Aquino, Jr. was flashed on television. Our well-meaning social studies teacher assigned us to write an essay on the issue. Due to the limited information of the mainstream media, I referred to other publications. It was only much later that I found out that the “other publications” were part of the alternative or mosquito press. From there, I was exposed to both the truths and the lies about martial law and the so-called New Society.

When Marcos declared a snap election in late 1985, I, then a graduating high school student, helped in the campaign of Cory Aquino for President. I think I do not have to tell you where I was after the late Jaime Cardinal Sin urged all Filipinos to troop to EDSA in February 1986.

While martial law made me complacent and apolitical, the events leading to the first people's uprising in 1986 popularly called EDSA One prompted me to rage against the dictatorship even at such a young age when I was only supposed to only have raging hormones.

What lesson can we draw from this personal experience and Ms. Torrevillas' thought-provoking lecture? The mass media at that time definitely played a pivotal role in social awakening. In particular, the alternative media fulfilled the journalistic duty of truth-telling, without fear or favor. The likes of *Mr. & Ms.*, *Veritas*, *Malaya* and the *Inquirer* provided the information the people need to make sound decisions. As Marcos tried to muzzle the press, enterprising journalists at that time fought for their freedom and managed to get the truth out.

There are also some points to ponder in analyzing the state of press freedom under martial law and the government's attitude towards media. It is hoped that the following points can be used as bases for discussion when we ask questions to Ms. Torrevillas:

- In the history of our country, rulers that curtailed freedom ended up being overthrown. That was the case with Spanish and Japanese authorities who did not allow the Filipino people's exercise of freedom of expression and the press. That was also true for Marcos who declared martial law and for Estrada who was responsible for the closure of the *Manila Times* and the ad ban on the *Philippine Daily Inquirer*. Will the same fate await the current administration as a result of Proclamation No. 1017 and General Order No. 5? Pardon the digression, but when one talks about martial law, one cannot help but draw parallels especially when the last paragraph of Arroyo's 1017 was copied from Marcos' 1081.
- Reminiscent of the Marcos dictatorship, any move to legislate media practice must be opposed since this will compromise the strengthening of self-regulation in media.
- Self-regulation is the key to media development. Instead of muzzling the press, it is incumbent upon any government to promote self-regulation in media.
- While the government should leave the media organizations alone as journalists go about their duties, it is still necessary to protect the media from excesses of unscrupulous groups and individuals. Failure, say, to bring to justice those responsible for the unabated killings of journalists clearly shows that the current atmosphere is not conducive for the effective practice of the media profession. The government should be held accountable for this.
- Journalists will always find a way to fulfill their duty of providing relevant information no matter what odds are, no matter what the cost. From the Propaganda Movement to the martial law mosquito press to the current alternative press, the tradition of advocacy journalism continues. The dichotomy of mainstream and alternative media is a reflection of the polarization of social forces and the societal contradictions permeating Philippine society.
- Self-censorship as what happened during martial law is worse than prior restraint and outright censorship because the gatekeepers themselves have taken on the

role of the despicable “Big Brother” with government hardly lifting a finger. Given the manner of reportage of some media organizations during and after the implementation of Proclamation No. 1017, are we now seeing the repeat, albeit more subtly, of self-censorship in the news room?

While our topic this afternoon talks about the press during the time of an already dead but still unburied President, one still cannot help but relate the current goings-on to the time of Marcos. There are those who say that we are now in a regime of martial law that is euphemistically called state of national emergency, and that the mosquito press is now called the reckless magnifier of the Left-Right conspiracy.

Be that as it may, journalists, as in the past, need to observe the highest standards of ethics as they go about their duties. There is cogent reason to do so, considering that journalism is more of a commitment rather than a career whose only bias is for the truth. And journalists write not out of self-indulgence. They write because they must!