

## **Under Siege and Fighting Back**

An Assessment of the State of the Philippine Media

University of the Philippines College of Mass Communication (UP CMC) led by Dean Roland B. Tolentino, 24 faculty members, 5 staff, 11 student organizations and the UP CMC Student Council

Philippine media have been under siege since Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo came to power. The hostile environment her watch has created, unprecedented since the Marcos period, has undermined the constitutionally protected freedom of expression in general and press freedom in particular.

The killing of journalists persists. More than half of the journalists killed during the post-Marcos period were killed during the Macapagal-Arroyo administration. Only in three cases – the murder of Edgar Damalerio, Marlene Esperat and Armando Pace – have the killers been convicted. However, no mastermind has been prosecuted.

A slew of libel cases, of which those filed by First Gentleman Mike Arroyo are the most obvious evidence of regime hostility to criticism, transparency and press freedom, have been filed against critical journalists. Media groups and at least one journalist, Carlos Conde, have been tagged as enemies of the state either by the military's infamous "Knowing the Enemy" presentation or its 2007 Order of Battle in Davao.

The imposition of a state of national emergency in 2006 highlighted the hostility of the administration towards the free press as media organizations were put under surveillance and threatened with sedition charges. The mass arrests of journalists during the Manila Peninsula siege in November 2007 also show not just the government's ignorance of the workings of the press but also its contempt for press freedom.

Macapagal-Arroyo and other officials profess their commitment to press freedom, but their statements have proven to be nothing but lip service. The list of cases of media repression since 2001 is endless. The imprisonment of Davao broadcaster Alex Adonis as a result of a libel case filed against him by the Speaker of the House of Representatives shows how government officials can use the law to silence and intimidate those who are critical of the powers-that-be. Broadcast journalist Cheche Lazaro was sued for wiretapping by a government official as a result of her work in exposing corruption. Journalists who went to Maguindanao were briefly detained when they covered the conflict there. All are the result of an atmosphere the Arroyo administration has created which encourages media repression.

It should not come as a surprise therefore that the country has been tagged as the second most dangerous place in the world after Iraq to practice journalism.

Not only are journalists targeted by this repressive regime. Even those in the broadcast and film industries suffer from harassment and intimidation, mainly in the form of prior restraint. The Movie and

Television Review and Classification Board (MTRCB) has been criticized for giving an “X” rating to films that are critical of the administration like “Ang Mabuhay para sa Masa,” “Rights,” “Mendiola” and “A Day in the Life of Gloria.”

Under these circumstances, the media have fought back to uphold and protect press freedom and free expression. There now exists a de facto alliance among media organizations and other cause-oriented groups as the former fight the administration's hostility towards the press. The Freedom Fund for Filipino Journalists (FFFJ) was established precisely in response to the unabated killings. Various media groups have issued position papers against onerous bills like the right of reply and to campaign for access to information and the decriminalization of libel. The UP Film Institute played a major role in the re-establishment of the Task Force Free the Artists (TFFTA) to fight censorship.

Aware of the current administration's hostility towards press freedom, the College reaffirms its commitment to help media and journalist organizations defend press freedom, and to be part of the de facto alliance that, by resisting the Arroyo administration's attack on the press and working for the enhancement of professional and ethical media practice, is at the same time defending what remains of Philippine democracy. The College will remain vigilant and continue to watch her, her government and all her minions; and remain critical of all her actions.

Consistent with the call of the University Council of UP Diliman as early as 2005 for President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo's resignation, the UP College of Mass Communication believes that her removal from office can help create a better media environment in the country. Let it not be said that the College chooses to be silent as media repression continues under this administration.

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1. League of Filipino Students-CMC
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3. Student Alliance for the Advancement of Democratic Rights in UP-CMC
4. Union of Journalists of the Philippines- UP
5. UP Broadcasters' Guild
6. UP Broadcasting Association
7. UP Cineastes' Studio
8. UP Cinema
9. UP Cinema Arts Society
10. UP Journalism Club
11. UP Sining at Lipunan

CMC Student Council represented by Rupert Francis Mangilit (chair)

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