Media as Site of Social Struggle: The Role of Philippine Radio and Television in the EDSA Revolt of 1986

Elizabeth L. Enriquez

The media are an arena of social and political contention. While they are more often regarded as a force for the status quo, they also have the potential to arm their audiences with information these audiences need to effect change. The liberative potential of the mass media is enhanced by the growth of media technology, which, while enforcive of the rule of the dominant forces in society, also has the potential to empower forces challenging the status quo.

For its capacity to transcend geographical and political boundaries, broadcasting is particularly crucial during crisis situations. By sending information to virtually any audience within technoligical reach in real time, television and radio create an immediate impact on public understanding, perception and opinion as a crisis unfolds and demands citizen response and reaction, thus helping mobilize the critical mass change requires. This was most tellingly and dramatically demonstrated during the 1986, or first EDSA revolt, when the broadcast media played a significant part in bringing Filipinos in their millions out into the streets to overthrow the Marcos dictatorship.

While it is often argued that the mass media are a force for the status quo, the media are also an arena for social struggle where change is negotiated. This liberative potential of the media is expanded by the growth of media technology, particularly in the area of broadcasting, even if the same expansion can be said to be another structure by which the dominant enforces its culture. Broadcasting, whose signals transcend geographical and national boundaries, is particularly significant during crisis situations when the status quo is under threat and under pressure to accommodate change. With their ability to send information to virtually any

destination in real time, and thus create an impact on public perception and opinion during fast-developing situations, television and radio have been crucial to the process of transformation and the inclusion of a critical mass of people in this process.

This point is proven by several tumultuous events in recent Philippine history, but probably most dramatically by the first EDSA revolt, punctuated not only by the stunning demonstration of a people that they would take no more from the dictator, by pouring out onto the country's main highway, but also by the significant and amazing part the media, particularly the broadcast media, played in the uprising. The historic episode happened 20 years ago this year. A few attempts have been made to duplicate the display and impact of what has come to be known as People Power, but none has created the astonishing result of the first one, including the media waves that were created by and in turn helped create the 1986 revolt.

The Historical Context

A review of the history of broadcasting in the Philippines should help explain the conditions the media were in at the time of the revolt.

In another paper, I traced the birth of radio in the Philippines during the United States (US) colonial period, its use for propaganda as well as resistance during the Japanese occupation of the Philippines in the Second World War, its phenomenal postwar growth, and the introduction of television. The coming of broadcasting to the Philippines should be understood in the context of the colonial occupation of the country by the US. US entrepreneurs brought in commercial broadcasting in the 1920s both as a business enterprise – as a medium of advertising for US products as well as for the product potential of radio sets – and as an agent for the "Americanization" of the Filipino consciousness, the better to make the natives receptive not only to US products but also to US values (Enriquez, 2003: 6-18). In yet another paper,

I suggest that, because the Americans were conscious of the impact of radio on the growing legion of audiences as well as of the usefulness of the new technology in times of war, the colonial administrators of the period encouraged and supported the growth of radio as a mass medium. However, while Filipinos appeared to have embraced alien cultural expressions learned by listening to the radio, the local broadcasters inserted elements of the local culture – such as local music, literary practices like the *balagtasan* and the Tagalog language – which was very well received by local audiences, suggesting a measure of resistance to a foreign culture by insistence on local traditions (Enriquez, 2006: 157-163).

In the Second World War, radio became one of the cultural arenas where the invading Japanese, on the one hand, and the Filipino resistance groups, on the other, waged a fierce propaganda battle. The brutal Japanese censorship of radio, newspapers, film, stage shows, publications such as magazines and books and artistic expressions like music and painting, heightened Filipino consciousness of the value of free expression. At the same time, the experience proved the power of broadcasting to capture the imagination of audiences (Enriquez, 2006: 164-217). Thus, after the war and upon the declaration of Philippine Independence from the US in 1946, radio experienced explosive growth. It took almost 20 years before the war to put five stations on the air. After the war, 33 stations went on the air within a decade. By 1968, there were over 200 radio stations all over the country; 280 by 1972 when Marcos declared Martial Law (Enriquez, 2003: 16-22). Half a dozen television stations were operating in Manila by this time, including a government station, and two others outside Luzon. All but one television station and a few radio stations run by government and by schools and religious groups were in the hands of powerful elite families with stakes in both politics and the economy: the Lopezes, the Sorianos, the Elizaldes and the Roceses (***Pinoy Television***, 1999: 202-204).

Elite control of broadcasting, as well as other fields of cultural production, was assured by a Congress – likewise controlled

by the same class – that exercised the exclusive power to award broadcast franchises. This control may not have been too apparent to the audiences as Philippine broadcasting, obviously run by commercial interests, took the appearance of the free-wheeling commercial media of the West as stations seemed engaged in healthy competition. Perhaps less evident but not less significant in their impact were the political interests supported by the media, including broadcasting, proven particularly during election when media exposure helped get the votes that kept one in power. The oligarchic control of power and resources in the country, including the cultural arena of broadcasting, was problematic, however, even for the oligarchs themselves. The 1960s saw an increase in the amount of airtime dedicated to news programs, coverage of live news events and commentary, partly helped by developments in broadcast technology but also provoked by opposing political forces that increasingly used broadcasting, as well as other media, for political gain. Heated election campaigns plus an increasingly strident and militant leftist youth movement that took to the streets to rally against "isms" like US imperialism, capitalism and fascism, all covered by the media, posed a serious challenge to the stability of the government of then President Ferdinand E. Marcos, who, it is widely believed, intended to perpetuate himself in power. Marcos used the discord and the vociferous clamor for social change to justify the move he made to execute his plan.

A Baffling Silence

In the morning of September 22, 1972, Filipinos were surprised to find their radios silent. They knew something was afoot when they found there was no television broadcast either and no newspapers. Later in the day, a government announcement simulcast on government radio and television informed the people that President Marcos had signed a declaration of Martial Law the previous night and ordered the closing of all media outlets. Among the liberties that the new political order suspended was freedom

of the press, which by definition included radio and television. Marcos accused the media of lawlessness, sympathy for the leftist movement, and of waging a propaganda assault against the government (Maslog, 1988: 27). Marcos' first letter of instruction upon the proclamation of martial rule was the transfer of all communications media to the control of the Press Secretary and the Secretary of National Defense (Maslog, 1988: 27).

Marcos authorized on the same day, however, the continued operation of government radio stations and the radio-television stations of Kanlaon Broadcasting System (later Radio Philippines Network), owned by his friend Roberto Benedicto, as well as the resumption of publication of the newspaper ***The Daily Express***, published by another crony, Juan Perez (Maslog, 1988: 27). After new systems of media control were put in place, newspapers, magazines, radio stations and television stations reopened, except those owned by Marcos' political rivals, including the Lopezes, the Roceses, the Elizaldes and the Sorianos.

Marcos was critical of the oligarchic control of the mass media. When he declared Martial Law to prolong himself in power, he built his own oligarchy and put the media under the control of either the government or his family and friends, effectively suppressing dissent expressed through the media. The Lopez and Roces families were soon edged out of the media, replaced by Benedicto and Benjamin Romualdez, Marcos' brother-in-law, even if some old players were allowed to reopen their networks under an atmosphere of censorship. Benedicto soon built the largest radio-television network in the Philippines at the time. Meantime, several publishers, editors and other journalists were put in jail, including a few broadcast journalists.

Within a few days Malacañang began issuing various orders regulating the media. For radio and television, a string of offices replaced the old Radio Control Office. In 1973, broadcast operators organized the Kapisanan ng mga Brodkaster ng Pilipinas (KBP), purportedly a self-regulatory organization of broadcasters but controlled tightly by the government through the Broadcast Media

Council (BMC) headed by Teodoro Valencia (BMC-KBP Training Manual, n.d.). The government and its military arm exerted control over the media by both coercive and persuasive methods: prior censorship, threats of legal sanctions, bribery, detention, physical intimidation, and the ultimate method of death when nothing else worked (Maslog, 1988: 30-32), particularly to those suspected of having links with the underground resistance. The climate of suppression corrupted many and broke the spirit of some others.

This climate produced a heightened consciousness not only among radio/television workers but also among their listeners and viewers. Particularly in radio, this consciousness led to the forging of protest radio, which was part of the alternative media – alternative to the crony media, that is – of the early 1980s.

Protest Radio

Beginning in the late 1970s new publications came out that dared to be critical of the dictatorship. The first ones were the ***We Forum***, ***Malaya*** and the student paper of the University of the Philippines, ***The Philippine Collegian*** (Maslog, 1988: 32-35). Despite military harassment of the papers' publishers and journalists, the alternative press persisted. When chief Marcos rival Benigno Aquino was assassinated on August 21, 1983 upon his return from exile in the United States, the floodgates of press freedom burst open (Maslog, 1988: 35). A slew of newspapers and magazines, emboldened by public indignation over Aquino's murder, began rolling off the presses (Pineda-Ofreneo, 1986: 25-26). In radio, the Catholic radio station DZRV was the first to join the fray and was the only radio station that covered blow-by-blow the airport assassination of Aquino (Dalisay, 1990). with its correspondent annotating the event through a pay phone (Santos & Domingo-Robes, 1987: 79), and the funeral of the slain former senator (Maslog, 1988: 35). Some other radio stations attempted to cover the 10-hour funeral procession attended by two million

sympathizers, but their frequencies were jammed (Pineda-Ofreneo, 1986; Dalisay, 1990).

Many citizens in the predominantly Catholic nation took DZRV's stance as indicative of the Catholic clergy's increasing displeasure with Marcos. For many, it was also their cue to begin taking an oppositional stand.

The charged situation encouraged radio commentators in several AM stations to view more critically the unfolding events that would lead to the end of Marcos's rule. As the political opposition led by Aquino's widow, Corazon, mounted street protests and launched civil disobedience campaigns that had the public boycott the crony press among other things, some radio stations braved the government restrictions that were still in effect, and covered and commented on the escalating opposition to Marcos. Some provincial stations also began to stir (Punay, 1984: 25-27).

In late 1985, Marcos, reacting to foreign criticism brought about by increasing international coverage of his regime, announced he would call a snap election for the presidency and vice presidency in February 1986. The opposition organized a ticket and fielded Corazon Aquino. Radio stations covered the heated campaign and election, the fraudulent counting of ballots by the Commission on Elections (COMELEC) as well as the discrepant count of the National Citizens' Movement for Free Elections (NAMFREL), the howls of protest that soon followed, and the citizens' revolt that ousted Marcos. In fact, radio did not merely cover the revolt; it was a crucial participant.

Radio in Revolt

With the increasingly high-pitched clamor for a free press, more media outlets began covering the turmoil. DZRV started its coverage of election-related events days before the February 7 snap election. With the still considerable pro-Marcos media reluctant to cover the opposition, DZRV concentrated on the

activities of the NAMFREL (Santos & Domingo-Robes, 1987, p. 81) whose mission was to ensure free and clean elections, but which was also perceived to favor the opposition. There were other radio stations though that began to air a more balanced coverage of what was happening. In the provinces, radio operators monitored the Manila stations, and several patched onto DZRV and aired its coverage throughout the country (J. Keithley, personal interview, March 27, 2003). This was how people in the regions were kept informed of what was happening in Manila.

Among the memorable images radio created in the minds of the listeners during the historic election of February 1986 were those of groups of ordinary citizens holding vigil at election precincts and guarding the ballot boxes with their lives, the COMELEC computer tabulators walking out in the middle of the vote count to protest the electronic manipulation of the election returns, and the millions of people at the Luneta who heeded Corazon Aquino's appeal for a boycott of the establishment media that proclaimed Marcos winner of the election. With its advantage of immediacy of reporting that newspapers did not possess, and with television yet unable to balance its coverage, radio was alone in those days in presenting in real time a true picture of the outrage of the nation at the massive fraud with which the regime conducted the election to ensure the perpetuation of the despot in power.

While the tumult was rising, restive elements in the military led by then National Defense Secretary Juan Ponce Enrile and Philippine Constabulary Chief General Fidel Ramos announced a break from the government in a press conference at around 6:30 p.m. on February 22 (Stuart-Santiago, 2000: 61). They also publicly recognized Corazon Aquino as the winner of the election and appealed to Marcos to give up power. The media were in full attendance, including foreign correspondents (Stuart-Santiago, 2000: 55, 60-61, 133) and the news was out instantly throughout the country and all over the world.

Within two hours, the late Senator Aquino's brother, Butz Aquino (Stuart-Santiago, 2000: 70), and Filipino Catholic leader

Cardinal Jaime Sin went on the air over DZRV to rally the people to EDSA – Epifanio Delos Santos Avenue, the main highway that cuts across several municipalities and cities that comprise Metro Manila – to support and physically guard the newly-declared rebels holed up in Camp Crame and Camp Aguinaldo against the loyal forces of Marcos (Johnson, 1987: 78; Stuart-Santiago, 2000: 67-71). At first Enrile and Ramos had only 200 men (Karnow, 1989: 417). As the throng on EDSA between the two military camps swelled into a multitude that some radio commentators estimated to have reached a million at one point during the four-day revolt, other soldiers joined the rebel forces. As the people kept watch on EDSA through the night, the siege began. Marcos loyalists in the armed forces began to surround the area but failed to get close to the rebels as the people formed a formidable human barricade around the camps. For the first time, civilians protected the military.

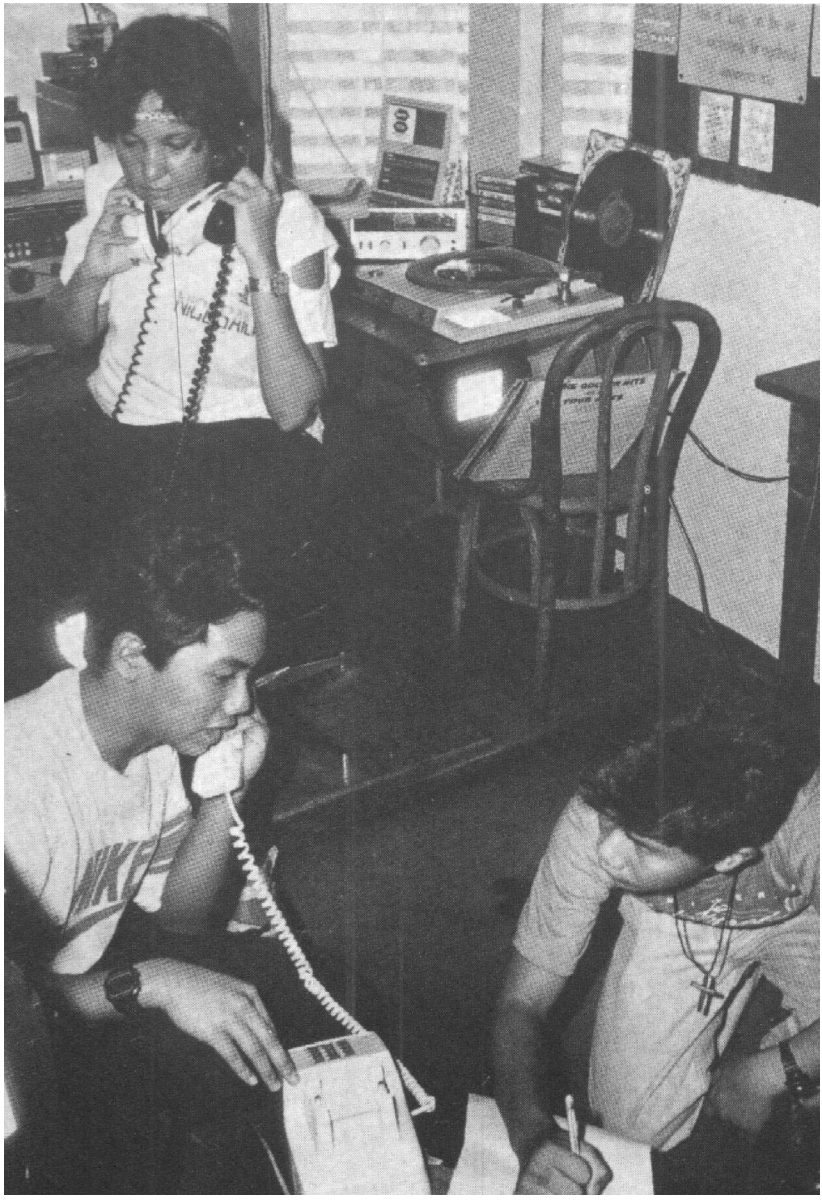
Meanwhile, an unlikely voice was on the air at DZRV informing the people of the brewing revolt. June Keithley, until then better known as a television comedienne and children's show host, had been commenting on the conduct of the election on the air. Coached by Jesuit priest James Reuter (J. Keithley, personal interview, March 27, 2003), who was once detained by Marcos on sedition charges (Johnson, 1987: 175), Keithley became the voice that alerted the rebels about government troop movements, rallied more people to EDSA, and appealed to the military groups that remained loyal to Marcos to switch their loyalty to the people. Both sides were listening, including the people on EDSA who brought portable radios (Stuart-Santiago, 2000: 126-160). And both sides understood the psychological impact of her broadcast on the revolt. Meanwhile, the crowd on EDSA multiplied, with whole families, including children, and armies of nuns keeping watch, praying and listening to the radio all day and all night. By this time other radio stations had begun to cover EDSA (Stuart-Santiago, 2000: 114).

But DZRV lost its nerve. Having just imported state-of-the-art transmitters for which Marcos waived the import tax, it

buckled under the constant harassment of the military occasioned by its critical coverage since the Aquino assassination (J. B. Reuter, personal interview, October 31, 2001). On February 23, with the EDSA revolt on its second day, station manager Orly Punzalan requested Keithley to leave and apologetically explained that management ordered it (J. Keithley, personal interview, March 27, 2003). Realizing that the absence of Keithley's voice on the air might cause the crowd on EDSA to assume that the rebellion was lost, Reuter quickly sent Keithley to the DZRH studios in Makati City (J. Keithley, personal interview, March 27, 2003). However, station manager Rey Langit refused to let her go on the air, explaining that they had their own people covering the event already (R. Langit, personal interview, April 2, 2003). Reuter again marched Keithley, this time to a small station on Santa Mesa in Manila, the rock music station DZRJ (J. Keithley, personal interview, March 27, 2003). DZRJ was among the many stations the military took over upon the declaration of Martial Law and put under the control of Enrile as Defense Minister (Johnson, 1987: 185). Its studios were also practically on the backyard of Malacañang, just a kilometer away.

By midnight Keithley was back on the air, on DZRJ. It had been five hours since she was last heard on DZRV, and the human barricade was beginning to unravel as there was no one to sound the alarm about tank movements and no one to issue inspirational messages that kept the civilian rebels going (Johnson, 1987: 169). Ramos was worried. Deprived of a communication system other than the telephone (Stuart-Santiago, 2000: 66), he and Enrile had counted on civilian radio broadcasts to sustain the propaganda battle with Malacañang, which had preempted television programming to put Marcos on the air. In fact, it was civilian radio broadcasting that Ramos and Enrile used to issue military orders to the field as well as appeal to military units to defect to the rebel side, another first in military history (Stuart-Santiago, 2000: 84).

DZRV itself had gone off the air, with its brand-new transmitters in Bulacan destroyed by the military (Von Brevern,



June Keithley (top) with Paolo and Gabe Mercado manning ***Radyo Bandido*** (photo by Noli Yamsuan from the book ***Chronology of a Revolution: 1986*** by Angela Stuart-Santiago, 1995).

1986: 143). DZRJ technicians adjusted the station frequency to get it closer to the DZRV frequency on the dial, which was next to DZRJ's (Johnson, 1987: 170). When Keithley went on the air again, many listeners thought she was back on DZRV, while others surmised it was DZRV broadcasting from a clandestine studio. Keithley did not identify the station as DZRJ, and instead called it simply bandit radio, an identification which in a few hours evolved into Radyo Bandido, acquiring for the station the temporary call letters DZRB (J. Keithley, personal interview, March 27, 2003).

EDSA throbbed with more people, not a few coming by the busloads from all over Luzon, taking their cue from Keithley. Provincial stations hooked onto Radyo Bandido, delivering to audiences throughout the country a minute-by-minute account of the turmoil. Later, it will be known that thousands of people from the Visayas and Mindanao, inflamed by radio reports, were poised to come by boat to Manila towards the end of the revolt, preempted only by later radio reports that Marcos had left the country (J. Keithley, personal interview, March 27, 2003).

Television Joins the Protest

On the morning of February 24, the third day of the revolt, Marcos went on government television Channel 4 to belie earlier reports that he had fled the country. He was unable to finish his announcement, emanating from Malacañang palace, as the Channel 4 studios in Quezon City were taken over and put off the air by rebel troops. Thousands of rebel civilians quickly surrounded the television complex to protect it from counterattack by Marcos loyalists. Among those who came were broadcasters, some of whom had been unable to go on the air since the declaration of Martial Law, and many of whom had been on the air throughout the Marcos years but had begun to distance themselves from Marcos-controlled media since the Aquino assassination. Of course there were some who were in crony media up to the beginning of the revolt, who overnight changed their color (Stuart-

Santiago, 2000: 162, 173-174, 183, 191, 220). By 1:30 p.m., Channel 4 was back on the air, this time on the side of the rebels (Arillo, 1986: 93). The panel of announcers included Jose Mari Velez, Ma-an Hontiveros, Orly Punzalan and, coming from Radyo Bandido, June Keithley. At 4 p.m., Ramos and Enrile addressed TV audiences through the government channel (Santos & Domingo-Robes, 1987: 87).

By February 25, the final day of the revolt, practically all radio stations carried the coverage of Aquino's inauguration at Club Filipino while the television coverage of Marcos's inauguration at Malacañang over Channel 9, the last broadcast media outlet still in government control, was interrupted as rebels took over the station (Santos & Domingo-Robes, 1987: 88).

The capture of Channel 4 and the subsequent takeover of other television stations by the combined forces of rebel troops and civilians are believed to have been the turning point that led to the ouster of Marcos. Deprived of a propaganda medium, the dictator's position weakened. It was, after all, not a shooting battle but a media war, with the international community as spectators through the up-to-the-minute reports via satellite and international phone lines of the foreign press. But most of the participants in the most unusual revolt – which newspaper columnists later described as a combination of angry protest, holy crusade, picnic, melodrama-cum-comedy and religious retreat (Mamot, 1986: 108) – agree that it was radio's sustained effort at informing and mobilizing the citizenry in the struggle for the restoration of freedom and democracy that galvanized the people to rise against an oppressive regime. Radio's singular role that it had been performing for three years before the EDSA revolt stoked the people's simmering resentment and ignited them into action when the moment of truth finally arrived, while television's fall to the rebel forces secured the victory in the psychological battle with the dictator.

Conclusion

Critics of the 1986 EDSA revolt argue that it was not a revolution because it failed to radically change the social structure that produces inequalities and threats to freedom. It merely allowed, the criticism goes, a change in the cast of players: from one set of oligarchs to another. Moreover, the participants, representing different, some markedly opposed, ideologies and interests, were one only in their desire to oust Marcos, but were divided in their post-Marcos agenda. Media freedoms seemingly were restored, but the power to control the media returned from blatant state management to the more concealed form of elite control through commercial and private administration of the media. Nevertheless, what the experience shows is the potential of media, especially broadcasting, to be a force for social change, which both broadcasters and audiences, I would say, appear to continue to struggle to negotiate.

References

Books

Arillo, C. T. (1986). *Breakaway: The inside story of the four-day revolution in the Philippines, February 22-25, 1986*. Manila: CTA & Associates.

Johnson, B. (1987). *The four days of courage: The untold story of the people who brought Marcos down.* New York: The Free Press, MacMillan, Inc.

Karnow, S. (1989). *In our image: America's empire in the Philippines.* New York: Random House.

Mamot, Patricio R. (1986). *People power: Profile of Filipino heroism*. Quezon City: New Day Publishers.

Pinoy television: The story of ABS-CBN. (1999). Pasig: ABS-CBN.

Santos, A. L. & Robes, L. D. (1987). *Power politics in the Philippines: The fall of Marcos.* Manila: Center for Social Research.

Stuart-Santiago, A. (2000). *Walang himala! Himagsikan sa EDSA*. Manila: Foundation for Worldwide People Power.

Tordesillas, E. & Hutchinson, G. (2001). *Hot money, warm bodies: The downfall of Philippine President Joseph Estrada.* Manila: Anvil.

Von Brevern, M. (1986). *The turning point: Twenty-six accounts of the February events in the Philippines.* Manila: Lyceum Press.

Monograph

Enriquez, E. L. (2003). *Radyo: An essay on Philippine radio.* Manila: Cultural Center of the Philippines/National Commission for Culture and the Arts.

Essays

Maslog, C. C. (1988). A brief history of Philippine mass communication: From Spanish times to the present. In Maslog, C. C. (Ed.), *Philippine communication: An introduction* (1-40). Quezon City: Philippine Association of Communication Educators.

Pineda-Ofreneo, R. (1986). The press under Martial Law. In Del Mundo, C. Jr. (Ed.), *Philippine mass media: A book of readings* (15-36). Metro Manila: CFA Publications.

Periodicals

Daily Globe. (1990, April 30). RV's blow-by-blow account of August 21.

Punay, J. Y. (1985, June 15). Inday Nita Cortes-Daluz: Joan of Arc of Cebu politics. In *Mr. & Ms.*, pp. 25-27.

Government Publications

Broadcast Media Council & Kapisanan ng mga Brodkaster ng Pilipinas. (1979, January). *History of Philippine radio stations*. Manila: National Media Production Center.

Broadcast Media Council. (n.d.). Broadcast Media Development Program, Modules I & III.

Unpublished Dissertation

Enriquez, E. L. (2006). Appropriation of colonial broadcasting: A history of early radio in the Philippines, 1922-1946. Unpublished dissertation, University of the Philippines College of Mass Communication.

Elizabeth L. Enriquez *is an associate professor at the Department of Broadcast Communication, University of the Philippines (UP) College of Mass Communication in Diliman. She earned her Ph.D. in Philippine Studies (major in History and Sociology) degree last April 2006. At present, Dr. Enriquez is also the Vice-Chancellor for Student Affairs of UP Diliman.*