

Fragments from the Past: Towards a History of the Philippine Press

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The Philippine press has a very rich history. A thorough history of the Philippine press, however, has not yet been written. This essay examines what has so far been written, and how these articles and studies have developed through time. Some detailed studies of specific periods, newspapers or journalists have appeared, but there are others that have not been written about. What have thus been written are fragments of a proud past, a past which still has to be written. Gaps are pointed out, and a preliminary bibliography presented to aid prospective researchers and writers.

The history of the Philippine press is vibrant and full of episodes which can make any journalist – nay, Filipino – proud. However, only fragments of this rich history have been written, and what has been written tends to be too specialized or too general. This is a history yet to be written, though long overdue. This article aims to present the historiography of the Philippine press, and to examine briefly the chronological framework and highlights of each period. It also points out gaps in the history of the Philippine press, and raises questions interested writers may try to answer. A selected bibliography is appended to appraise readers of some of the basic written works available.

In the early 1980s, I was asked whether I could teach Journalism 100 (History of the Press) in what was then the University of the Philippines (UP) Institute of Mass Communication. It was a challenge, but did not seem too difficult. I was a young historian teaching at the UP Department of History. The link between journalism and history is close. Historians rely on newspapers as basic sources and in fact I knew some practicing

journalists personally. I had also written some articles on history for newspapers and magazines.

It was easy to draw information and general outlines of the history of the European, United States (US), Japanese and even the communist presses. There were classic works which were being used as standard references and texts for History of the Press classes abroad, and many of the titles were still in print. For the US press, a basic work is Edwin Emery's *The Press and America: An Interpretative History of Journalism* (1954), the latest update of which is 1999¹. Many American journalists I later met had used the book and even knew the author, an expert on the history of the US press.

The problems came upon studying the history of the Philippine press, which was quite frustrating. A quick look at the card catalogue (at that time; the OPAC now), showed that the basic histories, at least as evidenced by their titles, were Carson Taylor's *History of the Philippine Press* and Jesus Valenzuela's *History of Journalism in the Philippines*. The two books seemed promising, but the first was published in 1927 and the second in 1933! There was a third book by Wenceslao Retana, *El Periodismo Filipino*, but this was even older, having been published in 1895 but reprinted in the 1970s. Moreover, it was in Spanish and there was no English translation at the time of my research in the 1980s. The coverage of the Spanish period was all right, as were the revolution and the early American period, but there were data gaps. The three works did not even cover the Commonwealth period, much less World War II and the Japanese Occupation. Brief overall histories there were, such as John Lent's pioneering short history in *The Asian Press' Reluctant Revolution* (1971). Even this, however, only went up to the 1960s until he edited a follow up volume, *Newspapers in Asia: Contemporary Trends and Problems* (1982). But Lent was an American, an outsider. Very brief, but useful from a Filipino's perspective, was the chapter in Jose Luna Castro's *Handbook of Journalism* (1990).² There were

many articles on various newspapers, individuals and specific periods or events relating to the press; many of the old journalists from the American period were still alive and were willing to tell their stories, but there was no up-to-date general, interpretative history of the Philippine press which came close to Emery's book. Had Valenzuela's book been updated, it might have solved the problem – but Valenzuela had not written anything else on the press, at least not book length. Thus, to prepare for the class, I had to do considerable research, including interviews.

Journalism is, they say, history in a hurry. Both journalists and historians place much importance on primary sources – documents or interviews. There is a basic difference: journalists have to beat deadlines to be able come out on time; and their basic task is to get the facts and write them down as soon as possible. The time element for journalists is of extreme importance, as readers expect to get the information and interpretation as soon as possible; otherwise the competition will have won. Editors breathe down the necks of the reporters and the columnists. A little delay and the story becomes stale. The article has to be readable; otherwise it is of little use.

Historians have a little more time to do research, examine various angles and come out with analyses. Historians pay more attention to citing sources and following logical, academic lines of thought. Some historians can afford to spend years tracking down leads, accumulating information and trying to piece things together before they think they have it right. Timing is not of the essence, although it helps. Unlike in journalism, the desk editor is nonexistent.

But why is there a lack of historical studies on the Philippine press? Actually, there are many, from different sides, covering different time spans, issues, personalities, even events. There is, however, no single basic history which can serve as a basic reference, and many newspapers, individuals, scoops and triumphs are forgotten.

How has historical writing about the press developed? This development – historiography – is usually taken for granted. The first person to try to write about the Philippine press from a historical perspective was Wenceslao Retana (1992), who amassed and organized as much information as he could on publications in the Philippines³. The information on publications, editors and writers, dates and even actual quotations from the periodicals, is invaluable. However, Retana was a Spaniard, and his compilation exhibits the style and bias of his day. The literary style and frequent use of the first person typified Spanish writing. His criticism of



A copy of Katipunan's *Ang Kalayaan* newspaper. (Retrieved May 16, 2006 from <http://www.comcentrum.ph/mediamuseum/thehall/the-hall-evol-newspaper.htm>)

Filipinos (whom he calls *indios*), painful to read now, was clearly a sign of discrimination. Thus, *El Periodismo Filipino* is valuable, but has to be used in context. Retana published his opus before the Philippine Revolution broke out, and thus there was no mention of the Katipunan's *Ang Kalayaan* or the revolutionary press. Since he wrote about publications in the Philippines, he did not include *La Solidaridad* in his list. The data he presented, however, are important and can serve as a guide to a more academic study of the press in the Philippines during the Spanish period.

Carson Taylor's *History of the Philippine Press* (1927) took off from where Retana ended, and brought the story up to the mid-1920s. Taylor was a prominent man in Philippine journalism during the American period, being the publisher of the *Manila Daily Bulletin*. An American, he was in a unique position

to write this book as he had been in Manila since 1900, when he started his newspaper. His style was still mainly factual – which newspapers started when, who edited them, when they closed. It was not an interpretative history yet, but it did fill the need for basic data.

Recognizing the richness of the history of the Philippine press, Jesus Valenzuela, who was then teaching at UP, published his classic work in 1933. *History of Journalism in the Philippine Islands* was a landmark book because he wrote as a Filipino, and gave much prominence to the press during the reform movement and during the revolution. By citing many editorials and articles, he has preserved them for future generations since many of the original newspapers were destroyed in World War II. Although he could write about *Ang Kalayaan* and *La Independencia*, he could not yet get into the behind-the-scenes stories during the American period, much less into the political leanings and economic aspects of the newspapers closer to his time. Valenzuela presented much data, but he had not reached the point where he could link the newspapers with the milieu in which they were published, assess their impact, and analyze the vested interests which are part of the newspaper world.

No book-length history of the Philippine press appeared after Valenzuela for many years; World War II intervened, followed



La Independencia, another newspaper published during the the revolutionary period. (Retrieved May 16, 2006 from <http://www.comcentrum.ph/mediamuseum/thehall/the-hall-evol-newspaper.htm>)

by the political turmoil accompanying the establishment of the Philippine Republic in 1946. There were several articles in weekly magazines on different epochs of the Philippine press: Articles on the press during the Philippine revolution, the guerrilla press during the Japanese occupation, reminiscences of what the press was like before the war, the journalistic greats of older days. But virtually all of these were journalistic articles, items of interest for general readership. Armando Malay, seasoned journalist from before, during and after World War II wrote many of these. He taught at UP and, an inveterate collector, accumulated papers from his students relating to various aspects of the Philippine press, past and present, aside from newspapers themselves. He planned to write much more, and by the 1980s he was still active as a journalist, writing columns and joining rallies against Martial Law. Indeed, his biographers called him the “Guardian of Memory” because of his wide experience and familiarity with journalism history (Sison & Chua, 2002). While he wrote a book, it was on Jorge B. Vargas during the Japanese occupation and not the history of the Philippine press he planned to write.

In the 1960s, Jose Luna Castro, editor of the *Manila Times*, wrote the *Manila Times Handbook of Journalism* (1967). The Manila Times being the preeminent newspaper in English at that time, this guide to journalists became a classic. Its first chapter gave a useful summary history of the Philippine press, which served as quick introduction to the major phases and important titles of Philippine press history. It also summarized changing orientations and styles. However, it was just a chapter and the rest of the book was on journalistic methods and skills.⁴

The basic information and data thus far presented were very important. While the technical aspects of the press were tackled in the above works, they were not full and interpretative histories in that the many questions a historian or an academician would seek to answer were not yet addressed. How did the press reflect or project Filipino sentiment in the past? What were its relations with the powers-that-be? What were the vested interests

which affected publishing and editorial policy? What were the links between the press and politics, the press and business? How successful was the press in molding public opinion? And what impact did it have on Philippine history?

Some of these issues were analyzed by then Lt. Col. Jose G. Syjuco in his 1968 thesis at the National Defense College, titled "The Press in the Republic of the Philippines: Its Role and Activities." After giving a historical background, Syjuco examined various elements in the Philippine press in the post-World War II period through the 1960s: the role of the columnists, reporters, editors, publishers; press organizations; policing bodies; government and private publicists; and various issues and problems. Syjuco looked at the press no longer from a journalists' perspective, but from a military officer's detached point of view as a graduate student.

A more perceptive look at the press, not just as an institution but as an institution subject to various factors from inside and outside, emerged in other studies as well. John Lent, an American journalism professor, spent one year (1964-1965) in the Philippines to teach and do research, and wrote a brief history and analysis of the Philippine press, which was published in many versions but whose most lasting edition was as part of the book he edited, *The Asian Newspapers' Reluctant Revolution* (1971)⁵ The advantage of Lent's work was not only the academic perspective he used, but also the ability to compare the Philippine experience with that of its Asian neighbors.

Lent could subject the Philippine press to analysis, but he was an American scholar and an outsider to the dynamics of the Philippine press, society, government and business. A move to a more Filipino perspective utilizing a framework highlighting foreign (US) and big business pressures in the post-World War II press was Rosalinda Pineda-Ofreneo (1984) with her landmark and incisive book, *The Manipulated Press*. Her analysis cast doubt on previous observations that the Philippine press was the freest in Asia, and provided a perspective with which to view the Philippine

press, particularly during the time of Martial Law. It was the first book to provide such an overview, from a critical Filipino perspective, concluding that the Philippine press was a tool for US neocolonialism and to perpetuate the interests of the upper class. While pioneering, it did not acknowledge the attempts of publications like the *Philippines Free Press* and the *Manila Times* to rise above the fray and remain true to their calling.

Equally trail-blazing was the book of Alfred McCoy and Alfredo Roces, *Philippine Cartoons*, which came out a year after Ofreneo's book in 1985. Recognition of political cartoons as legitimate sources with which to view Filipino thoughts and views came into sharp focus with *Philippine Cartoons*, as the cartoons had previously been taken for granted. Although the best of those published in 1969 was compiled and published, this publication had no commentary. *Philippine Cartoons*, which showed Filipino comment and criticism in cartoon form from the early American period through the Commonwealth and the eve of World War II, brought to sharp focus those years and how the press reflected (or projected) them, showing burning anti-American sentiment and criticism of the ruling class. The incisive commentary by perceptive writers gave depth and analysis to the cartoons, and also to the newspapers which published them, papers which had only been mentioned by name in previous press histories.

By the 1980s and 1990s, other serious historical accounts of some newspapers following the precepts of rigorous research, appeared. Works like Ricardo Jose's history of the *Tribune* (Jose, 1990: 38[1] & 38 [2]) during the Japanese occupation and Maria del Carmen Pareja Ortiz' study of *Del Superior Gobierno* (1993) brought out the detail and the dynamics of these publications. New information was brought out by returning to the actual newspapers themselves, interviewing surviving journalists (in the case of the *Tribune*), and benefiting from knowledge of Japanese and Spanish. This type of research into the press during colonial times had not been reached previously.

There were attempts to provide more holistic general histories, such as that of Doreen Fernandez (*The Philippine Press System, 1811-1989*) and Alice Colet Villadolid (*Featuring... the Philippine Press: 1637 to 2005*). Both provided the younger generation access to information that was by this time harder to find, and in the case of Villadolid, the places of importance, some of the personalities involved and first-hand experience in the case of the Martial Law press. Neither Fernandez nor Villadolid were historians and unfortunately they were unable to tap the fruits of recent study on parts of the Philippine press.

The most recent contributions to the history of the Philippine press are Georgina Reyes Encanto's *Constructing the Filipina: A History of Women's Magazines (1891-2002)* (2004) and Helen Yu-Rivera's *Patterns of Continuity and Change: Imaging the Japanese in Philippine Editorial Cartoons, 1930-1941 and 1946-1956* (2005). Both are landmarks in their own right, examining and analyzing two aspects of the Philippine press.

Encanto's work showed the changing face of the Filipina as presented in Philippine women's magazines. Utilizing contemporary analytical methods, a feminist perspective as well as research into primary sources and interviews, Encanto brought to light the world of the women's magazines – publishers, writers, rationale, and content - and how they mirrored the changing position of women in Philippine society.

Yu-Rivera examined editorial cartoons at a more selective and interpretative level. Yu-Rivera situated the cartoons in their context, after giving a brief historical background of the newspapers and the cartoonists, if identified. As in McCoy and Roces' work, the cartoons showed Filipino concepts, views, criticisms focused on Japan and the Japanese. Yu-Rivera's background in art studies allowed her to evaluate and analyze the cartoons not only for their editorial content, but also from the artistic side.

From the above titles, it is obvious that writing and research on the Philippine press has gone a long way. However, it is likewise obvious that while certain topics have been dealt with in current

research methodology and analysis, there is still much that has not been either researched on or reexamined. Several of the works mentioned above stand alone and are definitive, or nearly so, but for other aspects or periods of Philippine journalism history, large gaps abound or the research is not up-to-date.

In a way it might seem that journalists were busy writing about people, events, institutions and others but not about themselves or their newspapers, except during special anniversaries. Most newspapers and magazines have their anniversary issues which highlight their triumphs, the excellence of their staff and so on. These are, of course important in the eventual writing of history, but sometimes have to be dealt with care, since they are in themselves public relations material. Occasionally the facts were not right: The *Chronicle* put out a special issue to supposedly commemorate its 50th anniversary in 1996 when it actually appeared in 1945! Somehow no one bothered to check the original issues or even to interview Armando Malay, who had been an original member of the paper in 1945. By the time the error was pointed out, it was too late. After the anniversary issue, things are usually set aside, and no lasting publication came out.

Many journalists were probably too busy writing about their subjects but not about themselves. A few, fortunately, wrote autobiographies (such as Hernando J. Abaya's *Looking Back in Anger*); fewer still were subjects of sympathetic researchers who wrote their biographies (such as Armando J. Malay). Writings of some other writers were compiled to leave a legacy to the next generation. A partial list of autobiographies/biographies and compilations is appended below as a preliminary bibliography. Unfortunately, many of the other greats in Philippine journalism history have little that was written for their successors.

Historians, on the other hand, have not generally looked at the press as a legitimate topic of research until recently. Teodoro Agoncillo did write about the press of the Revolution, but then only as part of his two-volume work on the 1896 and 1898 revolutions (*Revolt of the Masses and Malolos: Crisis of a*

Republic). But the topic is legitimate and in fact long deserving of scholarly research.

In a sense the lack of histories of the Philippine press is due to a language problem: there are not too many in the academe or in journalism who are fluent in Spanish, or other local languages, which thus shuts the door on trying to read newspapers of the nineteenth century. *La Solidaridad* has been translated, but its bulk is daunting. Issues of the vernacular press are also



A copy of *La Solidaridad*. (Retrieved May 16, 2006 from <http://www.comcentrum.ph/mediamuseum/thehall/the-hall-evol-newspaper.htm>)

out of reach of many journalists and historians first because of their scarcity, and second because of their language.

Another problem would be the accessibility of primary sources other than the newspapers. Many of the newspapers are available⁶, and historians know that Vol. I No. 1 would be the issue to start with as it would set the tone and basic editorial stance of the paper or periodical. Anniversary specials such as the 5th year, 10th, 15th, 20th or 25th anniversaries usually are published which allows the researcher to identify the highlights of a particular publication. The *Fookien Times Yearbook* carries annual summaries of the state of the press, and it had carried various summaries for 25-, 30-year periods. But documents relating to the inner workings of the paper – the relation between the publishers and the editorial staff; details on funding, advertising, circulation; vested interests and manipulation– these are frequently unavailable

for research. While some of the data can be gleaned from interviews, many or most of the journalists from the American and Japanese period are now gone.

The theories of the press currently in use are Western, such as the four concepts or theories of Mass Communication (authoritarianism, libertarianism, Soviet Communist, Social Responsibility) (Rivers & Schramm, 1969). Filipinos should ask if these are still valid, particularly in the Philippine case. Does the Philippine press fit into this? Villadolid makes an interesting case by trying to push back Filipino concepts of journalism to the pre-Spanish days, citing the possibility of considering *baybayin* as a precursor (Villadolid, 2005, pp. 1-4). Would there be other indigenous concepts for news gathering and dissemination which have remained to the present day? Could the *umalohokan* (village crier) be considered the precursor of journalism in the Philippines? Are there specific characteristics which differentiate the Philippine press from the presses of other countries? One of the first guides to journalism written by a Filipino, Juan C. Orendain's *Writing for Newspapers* (1937)⁷, seems to parrot the American journalistic canons exactly. However, closer reading brings out several court cases relating to the press in the Philippines, and shows that the press system was not exactly the same as in the US. For one, Orendain points out: "Libel, an editor's nightmare, is a more serious offense in this country than in the United States" (Orendain, 1937, p. 111). Recent works by McCoy and Roces, Yu-Rivera and Encanto show a distinct Filipino flavor in political cartoons and women's magazines. Further study would probably yield more.

Given Retana's bias against indios, a reexamination of the Filipino press during the Spanish colonial period is needed. The actual papers – *Diariong Tagalog*, *El Pasig* and all the rest – are deserving of more sympathetic treatment, and should be brought out from the dark. The questions asked of the later periods can also be applied here: who were the publishers, staff members? What were their objectives and how successful were they? How were they funded? How did they relate to the colonial government?

How did the colonial government carry out censorship or otherwise seek to curtail the press?⁸ Answering these questions for this – and all periods succeeding – would enable historians and journalists to identify highlights, continuities and tradition, and change.

The Propaganda Movement and *La Solidaridad* are known to most Filipinos who took up Philippine history. Although an English translation of the paper is now available, there have been few recent studies or reexaminations based on a reading of the actual text. What was the impact of *La Solidaridad* and its staff on Filipino journalists and on Filipinos in general? (That is, apart from the College of Mass Communications' building and journal, and an award, Gawad Plaridel, being named after del Pilar, and aside from a bookstore using the newspaper's name).

Similarly, the Revolutionary press – *Ang Kalayaan*, *La Independencia*, *El Heraldo de la Revolucion* – can also be reexamined and the actual papers studied. These papers are well-known at least in name, but lesser known are the dynamics of how they were published and how they related to each other. President Aguinaldo's views of Gen. Luna's *La Independencia* might be disturbing to find as a possible precedent to government views on an independent press. Interestingly, *La Independencia* was able to support itself initially by ads, unlike *El Heraldo*; and it also managed to obtain wire stories. What was its impact on the people? Who read it? The other nationalistic papers which arose at this time and during the early American period also deserve full treatment.⁹ Unfortunately, there is no full history of this extremely important period in Philippine journalism.

While there is a lot on US censorship during the early years of occupation, particularly with reference to the *El Renacimiento* case, much else that has been written has not been tapped. On the centennial of Teodoro M. Kalaw's birth in 1984, the National Historical Institute held a conference with good papers on Kalaw as a journalist, as a nationalist and so on. However, the proceedings were not published and thus this body of papers is not generally known to the wider public.

Giants of the American occupation press such as the *Philippines Free Press*, the *Philippine Teacher* (later *Philippine Magazine*), Vicente Sotto's *The Independent*, *Lipang Kalabaw* and *Philippine Review*, among others, have not been given the attention they deserve. Virtually unknown is the *Philippine Republic*, published in Washington D.C. – in the dragon's lair, so to speak - in the 1920s by Filipinos to further the cause of independence in a Republican United States. Further studies on these periodicals and their staffs would further flesh out the traditions in the Philippine press.

What is not too well known is that by the 1910s, the restrictions on the press were generally rescinded or lifted, save the laws on libel. Governor General Francis Burton Harrison, supporter of Philippine independence and Filipinization, was extremely popular with Filipinos, but he did have an axe to grind against the press and almost closed down the *Philippines Free Press*, because it had ridiculed a project of his. Harrison in fact sought to deport R. McCulloch Dick, founder of the *Free Press*, and followed the case to the finish. Fortunately the case was dismissed (Pascual, 1966; Paredes-San Diego, 1985). This and other key cases form part of the history of the press and the courts, which would be a topic to research on its own.

It may be belaboring the point but it is obvious how so much remains to be researched and written on the Philippine press. Many newspapers and periodicals left their mark but are now forgotten, and the same is true for press luminaries and legends. Celso Cabrera's classic eavesdropping on the Liberal party caucus in 1948 (where he was able to report, dramatically, how one congressman arrogantly stated, "What are we in power for?") and other high points of reportorial ingenuity and determination should be written for the inspiration of future journalists, and to buoy the pride of Filipinos. There are so many incidents, personalities, publications, which should be given their share of publicity. The 1950s and the 1960s; the Martial Law press; the alternative press – all have lessons for today and the future.

But apart from rediscovering the facts, there is the need for interpretation and analysis. There are many themes or lines by which histories of the press can be written. The oft-used theme of the Filipino press vs. censorship and government control can be updated to the present day, utilizing fresh sources and perspectives. The collaborationist, established press vis-à-vis the press of dissent and resistance is another line which can be developed. Ofreneo's framework of manipulation can be expanded to cover other periods and can serve as one point of focus. The relationship between owners/publishers and the editorial staff or press workers can also serve as another focal point. Changing perspectives of the Filipino as seen in the press of different periods is another theme.

Has the Philippine press come full circle or has it followed a spiral? Has it progressed? Has it learned from its experiences? These questions cannot be answered unless we go deeper into our own history of the press, to explore continuities and change, triumphs as well as downsides. It is a task that has to be done, not only for posterity, but more so that the Philippine press can be better understood and appreciated.

Notes

- ¹ The 1999 version is the 9th edition.
- ² The revised edition updated the first edition, published by the *Manila Times* in the 1960s and which had become scarce.
- ³ The original Spanish version of Retana's book (1992) was published in 1895. Reprinted editions are available in various libraries in Metro Manila.
- ⁴ A slightly different version of this chapter appeared in Gloria D. Feliciano and Crispulo J. Icbán, Jr.'s *Philippine Mass Media in Perspective* (1967), pp. 1-21. Feliciano and Icbán's compilation also has a useful history of Philippine periodicals by Leon O. Ty.

- ⁵ This also appeared as *Philippine Mass Communications: Before 1637, After 1811* (1967).
- ⁶ Shiro Saito and Alice W. Mak's *Philippine Newspapers: An International Union List* (1984) is a basic guide, but is now dated, and more newspapers and periodicals are available than before.
- ⁷ It would be interesting to compare Orendain's guide to Castro's handbook thirty years later.
- ⁸ Lecaros' article, "Retana's 'Press Censorship in the Philippines'" published in the *Philippine Colophon*, (Vol. 3, No. 1/2, January-June 1965) is an interesting record of how printed material was examined and censored.
- ⁹ Rafael Palma wrote about his experiences with *La Independencia* in *My Autobiography* (1953). Vivencio R. Jose wrote about the friction between Aguinaldo and *La Independencia* in *The Rise and Fall of Antonio Luna* (1991). Vicente Albano Pacis – a noted journalist – wrote about Sergio Osmeña's stint as a journalist publishing *El Nuevo Dia* in Cebu in *President Sergio Osmeña: A Fully Documented Biography, Vol.I* (1971).

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Note: this bibliography is only a preliminary bibliography to show some of the available works which have been written on the history of the Philippine press and media in general. It focuses more on books; there are many more articles and thesis on various aspects of the Philippine press.

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