

OPINION & FEATURES

Last newspaper boom

THE celebration of the 10th anniversary of the Asia News Network last week served as an occasion for a great sector of the Asian media to examine themselves and to discuss the challenges that lie ahead.

The ANN, an association of 20 newspapers in 17 countries, was founded in 1999 to reduce dependency on Western news agencies and to give the readers the Asian perspective. Starting from seven newspapers with a readership of seven million, it has increased to 20 member-newspapers with a readership of 30 million.

The ANN operates in what is the most vibrant and most dynamic region in the world. Asia and the Pacific accounts for nearly 56 percent of the world's population and for over one-third of the global domestic product. Kishore Mabubhani, author of *The New Asian Hemisphere: The Irresistible Shift of Power to the East*, says that Asia and Asians are "reclaiming the prominent role they played before the surge of Western industrial and imperial power over the last two centuries."

In Asia, the media exhibited amazing growth before the global economic meltdown occurred. The World Association of Newspapers last June said that three of the largest markets for newspapers are in Asia: China with 107 million copies

sold daily; India with 99 million copies; and Japan, with 68 million copies. Last Feb. 19 Hannah Beech, in an article on time.com said, "Fueled by a growing literacy rate and press reforms in some parts of the continent, Asia is enjoying what may be the world's last great newspaper boom."

But in the wake of the global financial crisis, all this optimism is being tempered. In most Asian countries, newspaper circulation is declining and advertising revenue is down. The member-newspapers of ANN, like other newspapers in the world, will have to reinvent themselves and look for new business models that will help them survive in an unfavorable economic environment.

They will also have to revise their editorial models to better meet the needs of their readers. A study made by the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University in 2007 said that as rapid changes in technology make the Web more reader-friendly, more and more people are turning to the Internet in their search for daily news. Convergence now appears to be the name of the game.

A more liberal political environment in many Asian countries could also help greatly in increasing readership of newspapers and other media in the continent and help them weather the storm of the current global financial crisis. (*Inquirer.net*)

GUEST EDITORIAL

Healing the wounds of EDSA

THE wounds are too deep and painful. Thus, it would be asking too much for former President Corazon "Cory" Aquino and her children to stop thinking it was a political vendetta by the incumbent administration. The Aquino family may not be saying it but people close to the former President branded that way the en masse grant of executive clemency to the soldiers convicted and jailed for the assassination of the late Sen. Benigno "Ninoy" Aquino Jr.

The assassination of Sen. Aquino at the tarmac of the former Manila International Airport, along with the killing of his alleged gunman, Rolando Galman, on Aug. 21, 1983 set off a series of events chronicled in the annals of our country's history of struggle for democracy. And as history later unfolded, Marcos was ousted by the widow of the assassinated arch opposition leader during the EDSA People Power Revolution on Feb. 22-25, 1986.

Fourteen military and airport security men were convicted and jailed for their part in the assassination. But no one has ever been charged as the brains

or mastermind behind the assassination of Sen. Aquino. Two of the convicted soldiers died while in jail, one due to old age and the other killed in a brawl with fellow inmates. The two others were the first ones granted executive clemency. The two were freed from prison one after the other last year, one due to old age (after reaching 70) and the other for deteriorating health condition.

Call it bad timing. The grant of executive clemency to the remaining 10 who were serving life term for the Aquino-Galman double murder case came a week after the 23rd anniversary of EDSA-1. Being in prison for more than 26 years, the 10 Aquino-Galman convicts happily left their jails at the National Bilibid Penitentiary in Muntinlupa City and finally rejoined their respective families as free men.

Many conspiracy theorists and political analysts in our midst argue that a cunning and wily politician like ex-President Marcos

would not have been stupid to have ordered the killing of the late Senator who was known as his arch political enemy. Marcos was himself also reportedly suffering from very serious illnesses at that time and may not have been aware of such plot.

A blindly loyal Armed Forces Chief of Staff General Fabian Ver was also implicated in the Aquino assassination. But Ver was never put on trial for the crime. Ver, who fled with the Marcoses during EDSA-1, died of illness in self-exile while in Thailand in 1998.

The widow of the late President, former First Lady Imelda Marcos and a prominent crony-businessman, both of whom have since returned to the Philippines, were also loosely mentioned among people possibly onto the assassination plot. Other than innuendoes, no charges were filed against Mrs. Marcos and others being implicated in the Aquino-Galman murder cases.

Sen. Benigno "Noynoy" Aquino III, namesake of the assassinated

leader, disclosed their family remains convinced there was a conspiracy behind his father's murder. While he declined to give any names, Noynoy agreed investigators should search for Air Force captain Felipe Valerio, who was then in charge of the Aviation Security Command at the airport. Valerio fled abroad even before EDSA-1.

Public Attorney's Office chief Persida Rueda-Acosta, who lawyered for the freed soldiers, noted that the newly released convicts "are afraid because some of the conspirators are still at large." She did not elaborate except to say the government should exert efforts to extradite Valerio. He is believed to be in the United States. Even while during Mrs. Aquino's term in office from 1986 until she stepped down in June 1992, there were no efforts by government authorities to track him down.

There is no equal to the pain of knowing the brains behind the murder of her late husband who remains unpunished. On the other hand, the convicted soldiers in this case have already served theirs. While it hurts to say this to

the ones who lost a loved one in such brutal manner, it is time for our country to move on.

This should be viewed in the spirit of reconciliation as we join the rest of the Christian world prepare for the upcoming Lenten period. A devout leader like Mrs. Aquino is one who believes in Divine Justice. Afflicted with cancer of the colon, she is currently undergoing chemotherapy. We continue to pray for her and we do not wish to add anguish to her and her family.

Some heartless politicians were obviously trying to cash in to this national tragedy we share with the Aquino family. They were the ones who decry supposed motives to spite Mrs. Aquino as reason behind the release of the rest of the convicted soldiers. They relate this to the bitter parting of paths between Mrs. Aquino and President Arroyo who were allies in the January 2001 EDSA-2 which saw the ouster of another sitting President, Joseph Estrada.

Incidentally, the President also had her own EDSA-3 when loyal Erap followers stormed the Palace in May 2001. Those arrested were later released from prison. She also granted executive clemency to Estrada after his plunder conviction.

The break-up between Mrs. Aquino and President Arroyo came after the "Hello, Garci" election fraud scandal that erupted in 2005. This was after Mrs. Aquino joined the resignation calls against the President. While the alliance of the two women leaders has been definitely severed, being vindictive would be stooping too low for the Chief Executive to get back at the Aquino family.

In fairness to her, reconciliation has been one of the 10 policy commitments she announced in her inaugural speech after she won the questioned May 2004 presidential elections. Mrs. Arroyo spelled it out in short form as BEAT-THE-ODDS. It stood for: Balanced budget, Education for all, Automated elections, Terminate hostilities, Heal the wounds of EDSA 1, 2 and 3, Electricity for all, Opportunities for jobs and livelihood, Decongest Metro Manila, Develop Clark and Subic.

At first, I thought it was too generic for her to include administration goals that are not quantifiable, or something that could not be gauged or checked against delivery in terms of numbers or figures. How can we quantify something like "healing the wounds of EDSA 1, 2 and 3?" Now, we know. (*Philstar.com*)

COMMONSENSE

Marichu A. Villanueva

Places to visit



SKETCHES

Ana Marie Pamintuan

THIS summer break, drive around the lakeside towns surrounding Laguna de Bay, starting from either Rizal province or Laguna, birthplace of national hero Jose Rizal.

That area is rich with history and folkloric enchantment. The greenery is lush and you can stop in several areas to sample regional cuisine. There are artists' villages along the way, natural hot springs, churches for your visita Iglesia, waterfalls, rivers, and that strange sloping road on Mt. Makiling. From the Antipolo hillside you can enjoy a panoramic view of Metro Manila.

Recession woes have devastated the international travel and tourism industry. The country manager of a top airline told me that while the immediate impact on their business has not been as bad as in the period after the terrorist attacks on 9/11 or the outbreak of SARS, they expected this downturn to be longer and worse for their finances.

But we can't limit ourselves to our daily commute from home to the office or school and back, or hang out forever at the mall, especially during the Lenten break when even the malls would be closed.

Those who are on a recession budget can still drive around destinations near Manila: Anilao in Batangas for diving, Tagaytay for the weather and scenery and then down to Talisay for the best fresh-

water fish plus a boat ride around the volcano lake and a horse ride up to Taal's crater. Or else you can take that drive around Laguna de Bay.

All economists are saying that we have to spend if we want speedy recovery from the global slump. So even if we are on a severely restricted budget, we can still travel. After all, gas is cheap, the oil industry being one of the worst hit by the recession.

We have a beautiful country with numerous attractions, from quaint Batanes in the north to Sarangani in the south and the southwestern tip of Palawan. Even the islands of Tawi-Tawi, Sulu and Basilan, where there are great spots for snorkeling, can benefit from tourism development.

Unfortunately, the country suffers from weak marketing, tourism infrastructure, business development and other problems such as security and pollution.

With so much tourism potential, the country should have given priority to the development of the travel and tourism industry ages ago. But as in many other aspects of national life, the international race in this area seems to have passed us by.

In the third annual report prepared by the World Economic Forum on tourism and travel competitiveness, we fell five notches among 133 countries, from last year's already dismal 81st place to 86th.

The criteria of the competitiveness survey included management of natural and cultural resources, focus on environmental sustainability, the quality of transportation and telecommunications infrastructure as well as tourism infrastructure such

as the availability of hotels and ATM access. Also factored in were prices, hygiene and sanitation, security, locals' attitude toward visitors, the priority given by the government to the development of the travel industry, and policies governing foreign investments in the sector.

Tiny Singapore jumped six notches from last year, landing in the Top 10 in the latest survey, and becoming the highest ranked among Asian countries. Singapore was rated No. 1 in the quality of its human resources as well as policies governing travel and tourism investments. It was also considered one of the safest countries in the world to visit, with excellent transportation and telecommunications infrastructure.

This is what the WEF had to say about the Philippines:

Among the country's strengths are its natural resources: it is ranked 23rd for the number of World Heritage natural sites and 40th for the total known species in the country. The Philippines also benefits from excellent price competitiveness (ranked 16th), with low prices overall, particularly hotel prices, and low ticket taxes and airport charges. There are also some aspects of the policy rules and regulations regime that are conducive to the development of the sector, such as few visa requirements for foreign visitors (ranked third) and bilateral Air Service Agreements that are assessed as comparatively open (28th), although other areas – such as the protection of property rights, rules related to foreign investment, and the difficulty of starting a business in the country – remain a challenge. Other matters of concern are safety and security (ranked 113th), health and hygiene levels (87th), and transport, tourism and ICT infrastructures that require upgrading.

We were ranked behind Hong Kong, Japan, China,

Taiwan, South Korea, India and Sri Lanka. We lagged even in Southeast Asia. Apart from Singapore, Malaysia was ahead of us at 32nd spot. Thailand placed 39th, Brunei 69th and Indonesia 81st. At least Vietnam and Cambodia, despite the popularity of Siem Reap, were still behind us in ranking, although Vietnam has overtaken us in tourism arrivals and receipts. Laos and Myanmar were excluded from the survey.

Ranked the most competitive were the most developed destinations. Switzerland was tops, with its focus on environmental sustainability, its preservation of its natural and cultural heritage, and its excellent infrastructure for everything.

Next in ranking were Austria, Germany, France, Canada, Spain, Sweden, the United States, Australia and Singapore.

These are, of course, among the most affluent countries, with money to spend on the development of their human, natural and man-made resources.

But even developing countries such as Thailand and Indonesia were rated better than us. Colombia, Peru and Namibia also rated higher.

The countries in the Top 10 can host tourists, the largest business convention or a summit of global leaders without needing special preparations. Paris can host the Olympics with its eyes closed.

These countries have long been ready to welcome the world: their people, the environment, the attractions both natural and man-made, the infrastructure, the rules and laws that are enforced. Their tourist spots have clean public toilets and safe drinking water. Their roads are not riddled with potholes after every downpour.

They show that if you make your country a great place to live, the world will come to visit. (*Philstar.com*)

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