

OPINION & FEATURES

Old problems

PRESIDENT Arroyo visited a public school near Malacañang last May 25 to inspect preparations for the start of classes including preventive measures against Influenza A(H1N1). The President, who demonstrated flu etiquette as well as the health benefits of hand washing, was reportedly peeved when she could not find a garbage bin for the tissue paper that she used to wipe her hands at the Geronimo Santiago Elementary School.

The President should get angry more often, and the target of her ire should include the lack of water in many public schools. Health experts have called attention to this problem, which has been blamed for outbreaks of diseases including typhoid and cholera especially among grade school students. Bottled water is too expensive for the poor; many children in public schools get their drinking water straight from the tap. But in several schools, there isn't enough water even for hand washing. Where there is water, soap is rare.

When there is a shortage of water, toilets cannot be flushed regularly and general hygiene throughout the school suffers. In many public schools, toilet facilities are limited, and the lack of water for sanitation and regular cleaning turns these toilets into breeding grounds for all types of germs. Young school children, especially those whose immune systems have been weakened by malnutrition, are particularly vulnerable to diseases contracted through dirty hands.

Even as the government goes on full alert for the possible spread of A(H1N1) with the opening of classes, it should also watch out for the other health hazards that have long been around in many public schools. Dirty surroundings and contaminated water expose school children to health hazards. Breeding grounds for mosquitoes are created, posing the risk of dengue especially during the rainy season. By this time all local governments should be launching mosquito-eradication campaigns, through clean-up drives and by spraying insecticide even in private neighborhoods. Drainage systems and even the smallest creeks should be cleaned up.

These problems have been around long before the first confirmed case of A(H1N1) in the world was recorded in the US state of Wisconsin four years ago. These problems have been around even before SARS and avian influenza popped up. Perhaps it would take the threat of a pandemic to bring soap, water and garbage bins to all Philippine public schools. (Philstar.com)



Photo courtesy of Philstar.com

The attractions of underground porn

SEN. Ramon “Bong” Revilla Jr. says starlet Katrina Halili didn't approach him for help before he delivered that steamy privilege speech at the Senate practically calling for the public hanging of Dr. Hayden Kho, a doctor to celebrities and a “budding” filmmaker.



AT LARGE

Rina Jimenez-David

“I happened to watch the video of Kho and Katrina and it made my flesh crawl,” said Revilla, although he failed to mention how he managed to get his hands on the video.

It was then that he decided to go public with the issue, which had long been the subject of much speculation and gossip over the last few months and in fact had been mentioned in a lengthy article in *Yes Magazine* detailing the break-up of two celebrity doctors: Kho and Dr. Vicki Belo.

After the TV networks went to town with the issue, and after Halili showed up at Revilla's Senate office and asked him to accompany her to the National Bureau of Investigation (NBI), the videos, “starring” Kho with a bevy of female celebrities in intimate scenes, became the best-selling items in Quiapo and were heavily downloaded on the Internet.

And that is how, driven by an impulse to denounce a serial Casanova and protect the honor of his unwitting victims, a senator and the media ended up creating a bigger sensation, fanning the

flames of public curiosity, and exposing the women all the more to the prurient interests of an inflamed audience.

Kho's lawyer, Lorna Kapunan, who is respected in women's circles for her many years' advocacy for women (she heads a group working on the issue of trafficking), says the current imbroglio should focus legislators' attention on pending bills that would impose graver penalties on those engaged in pornography and in cyber-sex trafficking. When I asked Revilla about these pending measures, he said he had heard the bill on pornography, including the cyber-sex trade, until the Senate committee on rules transferred it to the jurisdiction of another committee.

I did hear about this pending bill before, but mostly from advocates of freedom of expression, who said the anti-pornography bill, as then being debated, would curtail artistic freedom and put too many shackles on creative thought and imagery.

This, then, is the dilemma and the choice we have to make as a society: What is it we want, exactly? Do we want to put a curb on sexually explicit and exploitative materials, at the expense of artistry and expression? Or is it possible to both punish the producers and purveyors of smut, while protecting the interests and rights of truly artistic and creative individuals?

We also need to wrap our minds around the evolving media situation, especially the new technologies that allow images to be broadcast around the world with a few seconds' downloading on YouTube and other such sites.

In the United States, and I heard even here in the Philippines, gangs of youthful rapists have been entrapping young women and gang-raping them, all the while recording the assault with videocams and even cell phones. They then threaten the victims that if they go public with their complaints, they would soon find the rape scene broadcast on YouTube, causing them

untold shame.

What these video rapists and other sexual predators rely on is the stigma attached to rape and sexual assault, even if what transpired is none of the women's fault, with blame falling squarely on the perpetrators. But given our society's double standard, it's the women who end up bearing all the shame and embarrassment, the condemnation and curiosity, while the men's “macho” posturing even gets an added boost. If our society were set up differently, and if there wasn't so much hypocrisy surrounding sex, then these sexual sharks would not be so confident and so brazen in their actions.

So it is with the entire Kho-Katrina scandal. While most everyone who've seen the video claim to have been repulsed by what they saw, it is Katrina who has had to bear the brunt of the scandal.

In the first place, why on earth would you want to watch such a spectacle? There are thousands of commercial products on the market, starring men and women who at least, as far as we know, entered into the film market of their own free will and were paid for their talents, available for your viewing. Why encourage the clandestine filming of a private act, and the illegal downloading and reproducing of it, with your patronage?

Unless, and this we need to face squarely, it is precisely the criminal and clandestine nature of the video that attracts us? Maybe that's why even the media have been feasting on the issue, not just because it involves celebrities, but also because the very nature of the incident tickles our imagination.

We've long needed to do some soul-searching on our attitudes regarding sex—licit or otherwise—and our own public posturing on it, whether we be a senator, a commentator, or a patron of underground porn. (Philstar.com)

The freedom to read

“THE man who does not read good books has no advantage over the man who can't read them.”—Mark Twain



ROSES & THORNS
Alejandro R. Roces

Next month is National Book Development Month, as specified by Republic Act No. 8047. How important are books? We quote Clarence Day: “The world of books is the most remarkable creation of man. Nothing else that he builds ever lasts. Monuments fall, nations perish, civilizations grow old and die out and after an era of darkness new races build others. But in the world of books are volumes that have seen this happen again and again and yet live on, still young, as fresh as the day they were written, still tell of hearts of men centuries dead.”

Ignorance is a form of slavery. Wisdom begins with an awareness of ignorance. And although it

is a fact that education is costly, ignorance is the only thing that is even costlier than education. And education is still the cheapest defense of any nation. It is a better defense than any army. Education should teach us not only how to work for a living, but how to live so that we will be of service to the country and our fellowmen. In short, education should not merely be teaching people what they do not know, but more important give their lives purpose and meaning. The primary tool of education is books. And not just text books, but any book or printed material, no matter great or small, is important. There is a saying that knowledge is power. Knowledge is found in books, of any type.

In 1950, the Florence Agreement on the Importation of Educational, Scientific and Cultural Materials was developed and approved by the UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) in Florence, Italy. The UNESCO was formed after World War II. In its constitution it was tasked to, “collaborate in the work of advancing mutual knowledge and understanding of peoples and to that end recommend

such international agreement as may be necessary to promote the free flow of ideas by word and image.” Their major tool was the Florence Agreement. The goal of the agreement was to encourage the free exchange of materials across national borders. This includes books, manuscripts, newspapers and periodicals; essentially, any and all printed and visual materials (including artwork). This was a landmark international treaty. It proved that across borders in every nation, education is important.

We are a global village. Part of being a global village is the free exchange of ideas, information, thoughts and philosophies. The ease with which we can read the latest bestseller from the United States, or read the latest news in The International Herald Tribune is thanks to the Florence Agreement. Over 100 countries became signatories, including the Philippines. At no point in our history (even during the Marcos Regime) has there been an attempt to circumvent the Florence Agreement. To do so, we fear, will further undermine our education system. Ignorance is something to be eradicated, not encouraged. It is a proven fact that reading to children and

exposing them to books at a young age is good. It helps improve their mental acuity and develops their language skills and vocabulary at a young age. Children must be exposed to good books. They learn to read by being in an atmosphere of books. You do not only learn from textbooks. If this were true, there would be no point in people reading *Noli Mi Tangere* or *El Filibusterismo*. In history, stories were the medium for education. Epics, such as Homer's *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, were used to teach morality and values. Jesus Christ did not teach through lecture, but by telling parables and stories to illustrate his points. *Aesop's Fables* taught life lessons through story.

In the Philippines, we hope that the government develops programs to encourage reading from a young age. An important aspect is making sure that books from around the world are easily and cheaply available to the Filipino. They should build on the Florence Agreement, an agreement that the Philippines has been a signatory of for over 50 years. Our greatest enemy is ignorance. The only thing that can defeat ignorance is education. Reading is fundamental. (Philstar.com)



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