

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

Please save those majestic trees behind UP

CALLING all University of the Philippines (UP) students, professors, alumni and environmentalists: Metropolitan Manila Development Authority (MMDA) Chair Bayani Fernando's storm troopers are set to remove the line of trees in front of the UP Integrated School in Diliman, Quezon City, to widen Katipunan Avenue into the C-5 highway. The line of centuries-old acacia trees farther on, in front of the Balara Filtration Plant, the offices of the Metropolitan Waterworks and Sewerage System (MWSS) and the Local Water Utilities Administration (LWUA) may also be massacred.

The irony is that the majestic trees don't have to be sacrificed. The line of acacias can be made into an island separating the lanes of Katipunan. They provide beauty and shade to pedestrians and motorists. But contractors are casting covetous eyes on those huge acacia trees whose trunks are so big it would take three or four men to encircle a trunk with their spread-eagled arms. They would bring plenty of money when sold to furniture-makers and wood carvers. There is now extreme hunger for wood in these two industries.

I told Environment and Natural Resources Secretary Lito Atienza at the Kapihan sa Manila media forum about the impending massacre and he said no, he would not allow it. But he better have the trees watched 24 hours a day because the MMDA contractors may strike in the dead of night. Fernando's tree-cutters strike at night, like they did in front of the Ateneo de Manila University.

Chainsaw-wielding man can mow down those trees in no time at all while everybody is asleep. When people wake up the next morning, the acacias would be down, officials would cluck their tongues and shake their heads, but the acacias would be dead and nothing could be done for them anymore except haul the wood to the wood carvers.

Promises (by the MMDA and the Subic Bay Metropolitan Authority) to plant 100 tree seedlings for every mature tree cut is *consuelo de bobo* [fool's consolation]. It will take those seedlings a hundred years to grow as big as the trees that will be cut. Even if they plant a million seedlings for every mature tree cut, it is not the same. And then nothing happens to the workers who cut the trees and the officials who ordered them to do it except run laughing all the way to their banks.

Please save those noble trees. They are God's creations, same as us. They deserve to live like we do. And they make that part of Katipunan much more beautiful, shady and useful.

Still on the environment, you will recall that part of the Marikina Watershed Reservation was set aside by President Corazon Aquino, and later expanded by President Fidel Ramos, to be the dump for Metro Manila's garbage. Fruit-bearing orchards were bulldozed to give way to the dump now known as the San Mateo landfill.

Former senator Jovito Salonga, representing displaced farmers, the municipality of San

AS I SEE IT

Neal Cruz

Mateo and concerned citizens of Rizal province, filed a case with the Supreme Court contesting the order. On Dec. 13, 2005, the Supreme Court en banc handed down its decision declaring the two presidential proclamations illegal and ordering its return to the watershed and its control to the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR).

"This writes finis to any remaining aspirations respondents may have of reopening the San Mateo site," the Court said. "Laws pertaining to the protection of the environment were not drafted in a vacuum. Congress passed these laws fully aware of the perilous state of both our economic and natural wealth. It was precisely to minimize the adverse impact of humanity's actions on all aspects of the natural world, at the same time maintaining and ensuring an environment under which man and nature can thrive in productive and enjoyable harmony with each other, that these legal safeguards were put in place. They should thus not be so lightly cast aside in the face of what is easy and expedient."

The watershed was returned to the DENR.

Even Proclamation 635, issued by President Ramos, which excludes from the watershed parcels of land to be used as the sanitary landfill by the MMDA, says that "when no longer needed for sanitary landfill purposes or the related waste disposal activities, the parcels of land subject of this Proclamation shall revert back as part of the

Marikina Watershed Reservation."

The landfill has been closed for seven years now, so why is the MMDA still lording it over that part of the watershed? The DENR now has jurisdiction and authority over it and Atienza should assert his control over it. The owners of the orchards that were bulldozed and who have lease contracts with the DENR on the parcels of land are demanding their return so they can continue cultivating them.

The MMDA has hired a security agency to guard the area, but the guards are allowing squatters to come in. The guards and their relatives themselves have squatted on the land, building their houses on the land as if they own it.

Meanwhile, hordes of squatters have invaded the whole reservation, cut the trees for charcoal and polluted the Boso-boso River which feeds Wawa Dam, which will soon be harnessed by San Lorenzo Ruiz Development Corp. to add to the water supply of Metro Manila and environs. I have written many times about the Wawa Dam, the original source of water for Manila, and how the water impounded behind it just flows over the dam and is wasted in the Marikina and Pasig Rivers and Manila Bay, at a time when Metro Manila is suffering from water lack every summer. San Lorenzo Ruiz offered to harness Wawa Dam at no cost to the government, but the MWSS and the National Water Resources Board (NWRB) took almost 20 years to give their approval.

Talk of red tape that Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo wants to be cut. (*Inquirer.net*)

When men and women don't see eye-to-eye

MORE women have eye damage than men. You can read these words in big, bold letters in billboard advertisement along EDSA. It goes with a picture of a young, pretty and fair complexioned woman in the arms of a dark, goofy-looking guy. So at a glance, one would laugh at the not-so-subliminal message of this ad by an optical firm. While the message may come funny, it might offend the sensitivities of others. But obviously, it has not.

But in the case of Ombudsman Merceditas Gutierrez and Special Prosecutor Dennis Villa-Ignacio, they don't see eye-to-eye on the handling of the "big" graft cases filed before the Office of the Ombudsman. The feud between the two anti-graft officials is no longer funny but is getting to be ridiculous. The intramural between them apparently has divided their office and getting in the way of discharging their respective duties and responsibilities.

Gutierrez lost her cool during the regular flag-raising ceremony at the Office of the Ombudsman in Quezon City last Monday, March 9. This was after seeing Villa-Ignacio raised a clenched fist while singing the popular EDSA song *Bayan Ko*. Gutierrez reportedly summoned her lead prosecutor in her office and reportedly dressed him down. Actually, he was also reprimanded for showing up to work after being absent for several days. A kiss-and-tell Villa-Ignacio confirmed their latest public quarrel.

Supposedly, the row started after Villa-Ignacio has accused Gutierrez of clipping the powers of the Office of the Special Prosecutor after he criticized her policies in the handling of the more controversial cases pending before the Ombudsman.

Gutierrez is now facing impeachment complaint that was formally filed against her before the House of Representatives. It, among other things, alleged that she coddled respondents in big cases pending at the Ombudsman, especially those that involved people close to the Arroyo administration.

Under attack by impeach moves in Congress, a media-shy Gutierrez lashed back at her critics in a rare press conference she called last week. The tigress came out from her den and fought back at her impeachers. We saw a very bitchy Ombudsman in hurling tirades against ex-Senate president Jovito Salonga and other endorsers of the impeach case on her. Gutierrez gets a reprieve of sort from her impeachers, at least for one month. This is because Congress adjourned for their month-long Lenten break last Thursday and will be back in session on April 13.

Also not seeing eye-to-eye are Commission on Human Rights chairperson Leila de Lima and Public Attorney's Office chief, Persida Rueda-Acosta. The two women lawyers are at odds over the handling of the alleged rubout of suspected carnappers who were killed by responding Quezon City policemen. The PAO chief lambasted the CHR chair for her being all over the media and pre-judging the alleged guilt of 29 cops who were immediately placed under preventive suspension. But De Lima lectured Acosta on the finer points of lawyering.

Conflicts among these officials are getting uglier and uglier by the day. Although the Ombudsman and the CHR are supposedly constitutionally independent bodies, President Arroyo must step in and put a definite end to these feuds between and among these constitutional officers and key government officials.

Fortunately, there are Filipino women leaders who are not at each other's throats but are assisting the government in its task to work for the country's economic growth and national prosperity. They come from the private sector who have achieved their goal through unity. The women leaders are headed by Atty. Alejandra "Dading" Clemente, founder of Rajah Tours and is the president of the Federation of Tourism Industries in the Philippines. Last March 10, she led a group of her fellow women leaders who came to *The STAR* office to enlist our support to their cause for the immediate signing into law of the newly Congress-approved Tourism Code of 2009.

She was accompanied by fellow women leaders in the tourism industry—Rose H. Libongco, president of the Hotel Sales & Marketing

Association; Ma. Paz Alberto, president of the Philippine Travel Agencies Association (PTAA); Rosvi C. Gaetos, chairperson of the Incentive Travel Executives; Adel Majaba, vice president of the Association of Professional Congress Organizers; and, Punch F. Jose, board of trustee of the PTAA.

For more than four years, these women banded together and joined their resources and forces to work for the legislation by Congress of the Tourism Code. Citing tourism industry as the key to keeping the Philippine economy crisis-free, they are asking the President to sign the Tourism Code into law at the soonest possible opportunity.

Also programmed to help boost Philippine tourism is the expansion project of the Diosdado Macapagal International Airport (DMIA) at Clark Field in Angeles City, Pampanga. Nestor Mangio, chairman of the board of Clark International Airport Corp. (CIAC) corrected us about an item in my March 9 column where I discussed the proposed investment being considered under a Build-Operate-Transfer (BOT) contract for the DMIA expansion project. Mangio clarified the Pacifica Avia Group Inc. is a local consortium and is different from the Al Mal Investment of the Al Kharafi Group of Kuwait. Mangio disclosed Al Kharafi Group is challenging the bid of Pacifica Avia. As mandated by the BOT law, Mangio cited, the P3 billion DMIA expansion project is undertaking this week the so-called "Swiss challenge" system of competitive bidding.

Hopefully, this ambitious project won't be tainted with any controversy later on. It reminded me of a comment from Justice Secretary Raul Gonzalez in a recent TV talk show where he represented the government on the alleged "rigged" bidding cases exposed by the World Bank on infrastructure projects funded by WB loans. The Justice Secretary bitterly noted that in the Philippines, contractors who lose in the bid for a big government contract are like candidates losing in elections. Both claim afterwards they lost because they were cheated. Gonzalez bemoaned this tactic among losing contractors to allege the bidding was either "rigged" or "over-priced." Gee whiz, what else is new? (*Philstar.com*)

COMMONSENSE

Marichu A. Villanueva

while singing the popular EDSA song *Bayan Ko*. Gutierrez reportedly summoned her lead prosecutor in her office and reportedly dressed him down. Actually, he was also reprimanded for showing up to work after being absent for several days. A kiss-and-tell Villa-Ignacio confirmed their latest public quarrel.

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Articles published in this paper do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the publisher. Letters to the Editor are welcome. Letters must contain complete name and return address. The materials, however, are subject to editing and revisions.

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