

**Images of War:
Confronting the demands of journalism, citizenship, and peace-building**

*By Glenda M. Gloria
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The Philippines has been witness to too many domestic conflicts that the sight of blood and gore has, in specific periods in our history, become a regular media diet for all of us. This media menu consists of soldiers brandishing their firearms, of rebels staging an ambush, of children being hogtied by their kidnappers, of dead bodies being dumped in Army trucks.

For three decades now, the Philippine government has been at war with two rebel movements: the communist insurgents and the Muslim separatists. The images of war were the first images I encountered as a young reporter in the 1980s. I remember spending my first years in journalism in evacuation camps, interviewing families dislocated in a series of military campaigns against the communist rebels. Every family had a sob story to tell, and the sight of a hungry and crying baby in an evacuation camp always tugged at the hearts of our readers.

Various human rights groups that sprouted after the end of the Marcos dictatorship in 1986 encamped themselves in conflict areas, and the media tagged along with them. For a time, photographers had a heyday taking pictures of mass graves—where bodies of anti-dictatorship activists were buried—while reporters listened to the cries of their families. The sight and smell of the mass graves was wrenching. Newspapers, which were the dominant medium at the time, had a field day with these images.

In many ways, using powerful and revolting images of conflict under the Marcos regime unmasked the inhumanity of Marcos's dictatorial rule. This was what principally motivated journalists to use these, because they themselves were victims of the dictatorship.

I was convinced then that this was the correct way of doing it. To defeat war, one must first expose it and all its gory elements.

Dominance of TV

But if you have spent time in the Philippines and have studied its colorful political landscape, you will have to agree with me when I say that the battlefield has ceased to be as simple as that. Moreover, the media system and values have likewise grown more complex over the years.

For one, TV has dominated the news and our lives. Military encounters and rebel offensives began visiting our living rooms in visuals more graphic than we have ever seen in our lifetime.

Because war images and stories sell, because they tug at our raw emotions, the Philippine media, like most media institutions in the world, have been caught in this vicious cycle of story-telling and story-selling.

In most newsrooms where journalism values are not so clearly defined, the line gets blurred between the need to sell a story and the obligation to tell a story. Armed conflict, of which the Philippines has plenty, carries both—a gripping story to tell and a gripping story *that* sells.

At the height of former President Joseph Estrada's "all-out" war against separatist rebels in the southern island of Mindanao in year 2000, the media were criticized for their frenzied, almost obsessive search for headlines and footage of the 21 foreign and local hostages held by the Abu Sayyaf, a band of radicals.

The Abu Sayyaf

The Islamic radicals kidnapped priests, nuns, children, teachers, housewives. They beheaded whom they wished to behead. They sent videotapes to media organizations of their hostages. And the media organizations, without giving a second thought, used them.

In the newsroom of a Manila newspaper where I worked during that time, we did not have second thoughts in using the photographs of children and women upon their release from their kidnappers. It was, we believed, a picture of the survival of the human spirit.

When the Abu Sayyaf beheaded their victims, and the victims' bodies were found, practically all media organizations used these images—prompted largely by rage. You have to understand that the Philippine media were not quite prepared for the viciousness displayed by the Abu Sayyaf. Up to that point, it had seemed unthinkable that crimes like this could happen in the 1990s.

We were too shocked by the brazenness that our instinct was to print all these images. I guess we needed some shock therapy. The tabloids, of course, used these as well along with their screaming headlines.

Needless to say, these were images of victims of Islamic radicals in Asia's largest Catholic nation. Needless to say, too, most newsrooms in Metro Manila are dominated by Catholics.

Thus, you can almost predict what happened next. The stereotype of the Filipino Muslim as a headhunter once again reverberated. The airwaves resonated with fiercely anti-Muslim discourse. Soon, we were like back in the 1970s, when Muslims in the south, deprived of land and resources, staged a separatist rebellion that was met with unrelenting military force and Christian prejudice.

Missing the Context

Should we blame the media for this?

Partly yes, because truth to tell, during those times, the images buried the context of the conflict. Journalism, after all, is not just about telling a story. It is also about giving meaning to events and making sense of the rapid events in a day.

We journalists learned that from school. But things get different in the newsroom. It is not easy to play neutral in a conflict situation. We were angered by these beheadings, we were at a loss as to how and why these happen, and because we were outraged, we splashed these photos on the front pages of our newspapers, hoping for two things to happen: 1.) that the images will force authorities to move fast and put a stop to this 2.) that the images will move other people to do something about the deteriorating peace and order situation.

TV stations went to town with the photographs of women and children who were kidnapped by the rebels. Government officials did not want to be left behind, too, so they grabbed their three minutes of fame by posing with rescued children, the so-called victims of terrorism, during press conferences. Since this was a televised conflict, even a movie actor volunteered to act as negotiator between the Abu Sayyaf and their kidnap victims. Of course, when the movie actor succeeded in having the children released, he posed with their innocent faces before the cameras, like they were his hard-earned trophies.

All the televised cruelty had one sorry consequence. It not only reinforced the old stereotypes on Muslims, it agitated Christian communities in the province of Basilan in Mindanao to the extent that they started arming themselves. No less than a Catholic priest boasted to the media that he had formed a vigilante group to defend Christians from abuses of the Abu Sayyaf. Of course, this group also brandished their firearms in clandestine interviews with the media.

The almost daily footage of firearms and poor victims inevitably caused cynicism among the local populace. Soon, they began accepting conflict as a norm and not an exemption in their lives.

This was 10 years ago. Today, the province of Basilan is calm and quiet, marred by a few incidents here and there. Local business is thriving. Livelihood projects for rebel returnees seem to be working. Are the media there to chronicle this change? No, they're in another conflict area somewhere in Mindanao.

Unethical Media Practices

Many would argue that war and all its gory details must be shown to the whole world precisely to prove the evils of violence.

I completely agree. But this assumes one thing: that you have a professional media that upholds the highest standards of journalism while covering conflict.

Sadly, there is an ugly story behind some of the most powerful war images that have chronicled the conflicts in the Philippines. It's a story of voyeurism-*cum*-commercialism disguising as journalism.

In 2000, at the height of the hostage crisis involving the Abu Sayyaf and the foreign tourists whom they kidnapped on the island of Sipadan in Malaysia, photographers from all over the world descended on the battle-scarred, impoverished island of Jolo in Mindanao, where the hostages were held.

A lot of money changed hands during this period between journalists and the Abu Sayyaf. The kidnapping—even before ransom could be paid—was made more lucrative by the presence of foreign journalists in the area. In exchange for access to the hostages, the Abu Sayyaf demanded thousands of dollars from the foreign journalists. Some of them paid their way through just to get a video and a photograph of the hostages.

Since they were already earning before they could even release the hostages, it would not have made sense for the Abu Sayyaf to release the hostages early. So the kidnap drama dragged, the foreign journalists stayed, and they haggled over entrance fees to the camp so they could photograph the victims, such fees including a pair of rubber shoes or a pair of pants. Soon, even the residents of this poor province, most of them without work or livelihood, began benefiting from the kidnapping. They set up businesses that catered to the journalists—hostels, restaurants, grocery stores, rent-a-car, rent-a-motorcycle.

Paying your way through is just one of the unethical practices that are behind the broadcast and published images of war. A TV station fired one of its reporters who was found to be engaged in what we in the local media refer to as “drawing,” or as the word connotes, concocting images. While covering the military campaign against Muslim insurgents in the late 1990s, this reporter would report live from the battlefield against the backdrop of military gunfire. It turned out that he would ask military commanders to fire shots while he was doing his live report—just for effects.

Because war stories sell, because they involve two parties that view the media as a battlefield, and because journalism practice needs to be transparent as well, I believe that the use of photographs and images does not deserve a blanket approval from editors. It's no longer just enough to look at a picture and say it captures the essence of human suffering or of a message we want to convey. I have seen photographers in the battlefield coaching victims on how to pose before the cameras, positioning them for a better angle. I have seen these photographers “fix” dead bodies for better viewing.

We have to know how these images were taken—for us to determine if we ourselves are not guilty of prolonging a conflict or playing with victims' weaknesses just to get a story.

Journalists based in Manila like myself are always accused by our counterparts based in the provinces of being party to the prolonging of conflict. Reporters and photographers who live in the conflict areas are more attuned the “more humane” aspect of the war and would pitch “softer” stories and pictures that tell of the other side of war. They are, after all, citizens of their communities as well, who don’t want any of these conflicts in their own backyard.

It would be difficult and even unfair to dismiss their views and their perspectives—for they are the field people, the journalists who suffer the brunt of complaints and rage when newspapers publish false stories and false images about the war.

5 Critical Questions in the Newsroom

Five critical questions bear asking then, in the light of what I have discussed above:

- 1.) Can we do both, tell and sell a story, without sacrificing the highest standards of journalism?
- 2.) What do these images of suffering really trigger? A sense of empathy? Vigilance? Cynicism?
- 3.) How do we know if the images we use are real and not made up?
- 4.) Are we always journalists first, citizens second? How we do deal with the sensitivities of a community?
- 5.) How do we balance the demands of journalism and citizenship, especially when dealing with an editorial staff that lives right in the area of conflict?

We can talk about all these and learn from each other.

Thank you very much.