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Women Journalists In Southeast Asia: Trends, Opportunities And Issues

By

Margarita T Logarta
WOMEN JOURNALISTS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA: 
Trends, Opportunities and Issues

The first time I felt any stirrings of wanting to become a reporter was not because I saw my parents hunched over their typewriters dashing out exciting copy.

No, it was because I saw two magazine interviews, side by side of film stars Michael Caine and Cliff Robertson, who were in Subic (Olongapo City) for the movie "Too Late the Hero."

But what really caught my eye were the accompanying photographs of then-young reporters Julie Yap-Daza and Nancy T Lu interviewing the also then young actors.

Hmmm, I thought - what a splendid way to meet Hollywood celebrities. You just interviewed them.

Well, I haven't interviewed that many movie stars since but I sure have interviewed a lot of politicians who couldn't draw the line between real life and reel life.

Of my twin inspirations, Julie went on to write columns, edit magazines - she still runs "Lifestyle Asia," which is sold in some bookstores here - host a long-running talk show and publish books on love and the human condition. Her latest is a naughty number called "Etiquette for Mistresses." The best-seller was aptly launched in a motel, one of those in Manila promising, "No brownouts. We have generators."

Nancy, an ethnic Chinese, is now a top editor in Taiwan's only English daily, "The China Post."

Julie and Nancy have been just two of my many role models. Philippine media, despite a sometimes licentious and rumbunctious image, has generally been progressive when it comes to providing equal opportunities for its female members.

In a country famed - or should I say, infamous - for its obsession with talking, women columnists have always held their own very nicely with their male counterparts in the the editorial pages. This was quite evident during the Marcos years.

Names like Arlene Habst and Ninez Cacho-Olivares were taken regularly with one's morning toast and coffee, their biting insights on the Marcos dictatorship lapped
female editor-in-chief, Letty Magsanoc; and the pioneering and prize-winning Centre for Investigative Journalism was established and is run by a predominantly female executive board.

Women journalists have been recognised by award-giving bodies which include organisations as disparate as the Catholic Church and the Rotary Club. And others will come up through the ranks, I’m certain, inspired by these examples.

An area, which I still feel, could be improved upon is the soft or lifestyle section – traditionally considered a woman’s territory. While there have been attempts to address issues affecting women and their environment, this section is still considered by many publishers and editors as a forum for entertainment and

But even that is slowly changing as more and more homemakers take on careers and outside interests, and their men assume more household responsibilities.

Advertisers’ attitudes are also improving. Once rattled by consumerist-type reports, they have been hopping on the bandwagon and trying to produce more eco-friendly products and re-shaping their company policies into more environmentally conscious ones.

While newspapers and magazines will always attract their share of communication graduates, the electronic media is proving to be a new frontier for new and veteran female journalists. However, this medium will require a fresh set of skills as well as a different mind set.

Philippine media, reflecting a society so accustomed and adapted to change, has never lacked the challenges for journalists of either sex. At the end of the day, men and women are equal at deadline time.
up eagerly and discussed later in the day with friends. Opposition publications such as "Malaya," "Veritas Magazine" and "WHO Magazine" were either founded or run by women.

Towards the end of that regime, the formidable team-up of publishers Eugenia D. Apostol and the late Betty Go Belmonte produced the "Philippine Daily Inquirer," which signalled a new era in Philippine newspapering.

The turning point was without a doubt, the 1986 EDSA uprising, which spawned a bewildering number of broadsheets and tabloids for just one city of eight million. In 1988, the count was said to have even risen to 20.

Such developments necessitated more bodies to fill top executive and reportorial positions - fast. A lot of reporters became editors overnight while junior reporters suddenly found themselves covering sensitive beats such as Malacanang Palace (the President's Office), Congress, Defense and Foreign Affairs.

During my father's time in the 50s, these slots were considered plum assignments and reserved for very senior - usually male - reporters with experience and erudition. Most of these reporters went on to become senators, cabinet secretaries, ambassadors and even newspaper publishers.

Philippine media's so-called renaissance upset the old order. Competition was fierce and filling beats became the utmost priority. People had to find their own way quickly, without the luxury of growing into the beat. Those fragile uncertain times for the fledgling Aquino government - with threats from the Left and the Right - didn't leave us much time for reflection or formal training.

In this new environment, Filipina journalists found themselves crossing boundaries they were not expected to in the past or they themselves thought were not capable of crossing.

At the "Manila Chronicle" where I last worked before coming to Singapore, major beats were almost equally divided between both sexes. Much later our lifestyle editor became one of two managing editors responsible for overseeing the entire weekend paper. Our rival, the now defunct "Philippine Daily Globe" boasted a female news editor.

Another rival, "Malaya" has had Yvonne (Chua) here on the desk for some time.

In other recent developments, the "Manila Chronicle" recently appointed its first female business editor; the "Philippine Daily Inquirer" has the industry's first

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