On Campus

The Cynical Optimist

Investigative journalist Sheila Coronel was one of the most tenacious reporters in the politically turbulent Philippines. Now she brings her watchdog ethic to the J-school.

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|
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Joseph Estrada liked to give his mistresses houses. He built high-tech mansions for them in the fanciest parts of town, hulking fortresses half hidden behind gray stone

walls. One house came with a white sand beach and a wave machine. Another was equipped with a beauty parlor, a theater, and a sauna. Estrada, a cheerfully impenitent womanizer with a dyed black pompadour and expansive moustache, also was generous toward his male friends, whose loyalty he rewarded with midnight drinking parties and access to heavy influence in the world of business.

It was the sort of flamboyant behavior one might expect from such a huge movie star, but Estrada, who appeared in more than 100 films in the Philippines, was dispensing this largesse while serving as that country's president. And though the bon vivant charisma and blasé shoulder shrugging with which he flaunted his lifestyle made it hard for even the Philippine Catholic Church to restrain him — to say nothing of poor voters, who identified with him by virtue of the proletarian heroes he portrayed on the screen — there was a handful of journalists who, after Estrada's election in 1998, saw fit to dig deeper into his affairs.

One of those journalists was Sheila Coronel, now the director of the Toni Stabile Center for Investigative Journalism at Columbia. The excavation that Coronel led into Estrada's personal finances in 2000 would have been unthinkable just a decade and a half earlier, when the country was in the final throes of dictatorship. But while the fall of President Ferdinand Marcos in 1986 liberated the press, job conditions for journalists remained hazardous: Dozens of Filipino reporters have been murdered since.

It was in this uneasy climate in July 2000 that the Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism (PCIJ), an independent, nonprofit media agency cofounded by Coronel in 1989, released a report on Estrada's hidden assets titled, "Can the President Explain His Wealth?" The article, published in i Report, PCIJ's magazine, was one of a series of painstakingly compiled accounts based on months of research into public records, as well as interviews, tips, and the occasional stakeout. The probe revealed a pattern of cronyism and graft that was astonishing even by the standard set by Marcos and his wife, Imelda, in the 1970s and '80s.

At first, the reports were downplayed by the mainstream media, whose criticisms of Estrada tended to be met by libel suits, pressure on advertisers, and other tactics emanating from the president's office. (In 1999, the dissenting Manila Times, the oldest extant English-language newspaper in the Philippines, was bought by a friend of Estrada's and closed down.) But when a politician named Luis Singson accused Estrada in October 2000 of accepting payoffs from illegal gambling profits,

emboldened media outlets finally seized on the PCIJ's documentation, and the popular movement against the president became unstoppable. On November 13, 2000, Estrada was impeached by Congress, and some of the PCIJ reports were introduced into the proceedings. Then, in January 2001, after pro-Estrada members of the impeachment court voted to withhold damaging evidence against the president, thousands of anti-Estrada protesters gathered on the Epifanio de los Santos Avenue, or EDSA, the main highway in Metro Manila and site of the historic "people power" revolution that brought down Marcos. The military withdrew its support from Estrada, and on January 20, the Supreme Court declared the seat of the presidency vacant.

It was Coronel's reporting that brought Estrada's byzantine dealings to light. Written in English with intelligence, clarity, and dry wit, the articles built a devastating case. Like expert attorneys, Coronel and her PCIJ colleagues carefully laid out evidence of shell companies and private construction projects, undeterred by the specter of strong public backlash, lawsuits, and — though a lesser risk in Manila than in the provinces — physical violence. (In 2006, eight journalists were killed in the Philippines, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists, a nonprofit organization on whose board Coronel sits.)

That sort of adversity was nothing new to Coronel, who cut her journalistic teeth during the Marcos years, when reporters could be arrested for expressing even the slightest criticism of the president and his family. Back then, Coronel had to write subtly and allusively to dodge government censors, but she pushed the envelope where she could.

"Investigative journalists are a weird mix of cynics and optimists," Coronel says. "We know things are going wrong. What motivates us is a sense that the wrongs have to be exposed, and that by exposing them they can be changed."

"The [journalism] profession has acquired more than a sense of craftsmanship, more than a community of interest," said Ferdinand Marcos in a speech in February 1972. "It has acquired a revered place in the integral self of the nation. Great, then, are the expectations of our people from the men and women who compose the journalistic corps." Seven months later, Marcos, citing "grave threats" from Communist rebels, Muslim secessionists, organized crime, and others, declared martial law. One of his

first steps was to jail prominent journalists, editors, and publishers, who, along with opposition leader Benigno "Ninoy" Aquino, were among the more than 30,000 people arrested. Newspapers and radio and television stations were shut down. The Filipino press, widely considered to be among the freest in Asia — and, to its critics, one of the most reckless, libelous, and obstructive — was brought under government control.

Martial law was lifted in 1981 in advance of a visit from Pope John Paul II, but the stranglehold on the press continued. At that time, Sheila Coronel, a petite, soft-spoken writer in her early twenties, was working for an underground newsletter called News From a Free Philippines. One day, the paper's offices were raided, and Coronel narrowly escaped arrest. Several of her friends weren't as lucky. To avoid their fate, Coronel changed her hairstyle and went into hiding.

In December 1982, the Filipino journalist José Burgos was jailed for publishing an article in his underground weekly paper, We Forum, that revealed Marcos's WWII medals to be fake. That same month, Coronel emerged above ground and joined the staff of Philippine Panorama, the Sunday magazine of The Manila Bulletin, one of the country's largest newspapers. There she wrote on topics ranging from hunger among cane workers to the murder of an Italian priest in the municipality of Tulunan; and when Marcos's grip began to show signs of weakening, she dared to go after a corrupt presidential crony named José "Jolly" Benitez, using modifiers like "possibly" and "some observers say" to blunt her arrows. Magazines were monitored less strictly under Marcos than newspapers (the Ben’tez piece, published in 1985, could not have appeared as a hard news story), and offered Coronel the freedom to experiment with narrative forms.

The decline of the Marcos regime was precipitated by an event that occurred less than a year after Coronel was hired by Panorama. In a flash of a second, the Philippines was propelled into massive political convulsions that culminated in one of the more dramatic transfers of power of the 20th century.

From the point of view of a hungry young journalist like Coronel, the timing could not have been better.

Born in 1958 in Manila to a lawyer father and a mother who taught literature, Sheila Coronel was eight when Marcos was elected president in 1966. As a teenager, she developed what she calls "very opposite political views and sympathies" from her pro-Marcos father, though the two remained close. After graduating from the University of the Philippines with a bachelor's degree in political science (she later earned a master's in political sociology from the London School of Economics and Political Science), she became involved with a group of women journalists, novelists, and poets with whom she shared her work and whose advice and mentoring played a key role in her development. She also was influenced by Filipino writers like Nick Joaquin, José F. Lacaba, Gilda Cordero-Fernando, and Gregorio C. Brillantes — as well as by her literary mother. By the summer of 1983, Coronel was poised to provide the words to what she would call, in a piece published several months later in Panorama, "without any doubt, and by whatever reckoning, the story of the year."

That story unfolded on a bright August day, when Ninoy Aquino, the exiled opposition leader, returned to the Philippines in the company of several foreign journalists after an 11-year absence from his country. As he stepped off the plane at Manila International Airport, someone came up behind him, pressed a gun to the back of his head, and fired. Aquino fell to the tarmac, mortally wounded. Suspicion immediately fell on the Marcos regime.

"August 21, 1983, divided the time of the people's struggle," Coronel wrote. "Before it, an uneasy calm, an unspoken rage; after it, the deluge of protest." That protest spread quickly, with Corazon Aquino, Ninoy's widow, leading the opposition movement. Under growing domestic and international pressure, Marcos agreed to hold elections on February 7, 1986, a year ahead of schedule. Marcos's proclaimed victory in that contest was marred by widespread allegations of ballot tampering, which led two weeks later to a tanks-in-the-street showdown between Marcos loyalists and millions of unarmed Filipino civilians. The drama ended bloodlessly; Aquino was sworn in as president, and Marcos and his family were airlifted from Malacanang Palace by four American army helicopters to a U.S. base in the Philippines, and then flown to Hawaii. The "EDSA Revolution" was complete.

It was, as Coronel has said, a compelling time to be a journalist. The press was now free, and Coronel, one of the leading chroniclers of the EDSA, began thinking of new possibilities for what journalism could achieve. Reporting could go beyond the news cycle; it could be in-depth and truly revelatory, an active agent of justice in a fragile democracy where government institutions often failed. It could help build and

strengthen democracy by providing citizens with information that could inspire them to action.

It was in this of mood of hopefulness that the PCIJ was born in 1989.

That same year, another crisis struck. On November 30, a bloody coup attempt involving upward of 3000 troops was carried out upon the Aquino presidency. Coronel, who was filing stories for the New York Times, was nearly caught in a crossfire in Makati City in Metro Manila, and managed to escape in her car as soldiers' bullets flew past. She remembers it as her most perilous moment as a journalist. The coup attempt, though unsuccessful, crippled the economy and dealt a blow to the national psyche. But a democracy, and especially a weakened one, must be poked in order to make it respond, and Coronel never stopped poking. For the next 16 years, she guided the PCIJ through a series of investigations that yielded such results as the resignation of a Supreme Court justice, a local ban of the slaughter of dolphins, and, in 1995 — after reports revealed how two 12-year-old kidnapping suspects were tortured by members of the Presidential Anti-Crime Commission — the ordering of probes into the matter by the Philippine Commission on Human Rights. While the pieces in the summer and fall of 2000 on Estrada's ill-gotten wealth are perhaps the best known, it's worth mentioning that after Estrada's ouster in 2001, the PCIJ promptly began investigating the new government of Gloria Arroyo, whose Department of Justice had ruled to approve a controversial power plant contract with an Argentinean firm. That report was later used in a Philippine Senate investigation of the case.

Coronel's track record with the PCIJ made her one of the most respected journalists in Asia. In 2003, she was awarded the Ramon Magsaysay Award for Journalism, Asia's equivalent of the Nobel Prize. In its citation, the award committee praised Coronel's insistence that the press strive to remain free of government, military, and corporate influence.

But Coronel never saw the PCIJ as a lasting endeavor. When Columbia offered her the post at the newly established Stabile Center in May 2006, she felt the time was right for a change. "When you build an institution you should be able to leave it," she says. "You can't be the founding executive director for life."

At the opening ceremony of the Toni Stabile Center for Investigative Journalism in September 2006, Sheila Coronel said that she looked forward to "sharing with my students the techniques and ethos of watchdog journalism in the hope that they will do great reporting in the investigative tradition."

Of course, Coronel knows as well as anyone that technique alone won't make a great journalist, and she distinguishes between what can and can't be taught.

"You have to dig, you have to get documents, you have to interview people, you have to go to places where the stories are," she says. "A lot of it involves computer-assisted research and reporting, which means using spreadsheets, examining databases, looking at trends and patterns in the data, doing document searches, and using the [U.S.] Freedom of Information Act. Sometimes it entails using controversial techniques such as undercover reporting or surveillance." But, she notes, "it also takes a certain temperament, persistence, stubbornness, and courage, because you have to confront people. Some students come here and say, "I'm really interested in investigative reporting but I don't think I can go up to a person and say, 'Did you really steal?' And so you can teach the skills and the techniques. But I don't think you can teach courage."

The Stabile Center enrolls 15 students annually. Candidates must first be accepted to the journalism school, after which they are asked to write an essay for admission; previous training and experience also are considered. Once enrolled, students are required, for their master's project, to prepare an in-depth investigative report. Sometimes the dividends come quickly. Last year, three students conducted an investigation into looted antiquities in Greece; the story was bought by 60 Minutes.

"And now," Coronel says, "we're getting money so that we'll have fellowships over the summer, which will allow the students to do investigations that will hopefully then get published. We have two students now working on toxic substances in cosmetics, which is what Toni Stabile did back in the '60s."

Stabile, an investigative journalist and philanthropist who did her postgraduate work at the J-school, is the author of the 1969 book, Cosmetics: Trick or Treat?, a groundbreaking exposé in consumer-affairs reporting.

Coronel has been in New York for a little over a year and already sees great advantages in working within the American system, for herself as well as for her students. "Access here is definitely enviable," she says, noting that many

government documents and records are available on the Web. "In the Philippines, a lot of public records are still on paper. We built a database of the assets of members of the Philippine Congress in the 20 years since the fall of Marcos, and had to photocopy boxes and boxes of records and encode the information in a spreadsheet. So, in terms of the availability of information, in terms of the safety of journalists, in terms of the legal protection of journalists, American journalists are very, very lucky."

On September 12, 2007, a Philippine court convicted Joseph Estrada, 70, on charges of plunder. He was sentenced to a life term.

For Coronel, the Estrada case has been a bold reminder of the human factor.

"When a journalist is pursuing the trail of some kind of wrongdoing, there is always this euphoric moment where you say, 'I've got it! I've got him!'" Coronel says. "And then that passes, and you think, 'What would the impact of this story be on him?'"

Part of Coronel's deceptive toughness lies in her ability to deal with the consequences of her reporting. For her, journalism's mission to seek the truth in service of the public interest trumps the psychic burden of watching, say, a likable politician face his ruin.

"In the Estrada case, the reporting was validated by the fact that there was an uprising in the streets," she says. "The whole process showed that (a) reporting makes an impact, (b) that there is interest in investigations on wrongdoing in high places, and (c) that people can make change possible.

"I do feel a sympathy for Estrada. He's a charming man. But he also had to be held responsible. He had to be accountable for what he did."

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