

War on Reality TV

By Marites N. Sison

Last February, leading television stations in Manila showed gory video footage of alleged Filipino Muslim extremists belonging to the dreaded Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) beheading victims—supposedly captured soldiers.

The video, aired on primetime, shows a group of armed men with machetes questioning their captive, a man begging for mercy. He's stripped to his waist, his hands tied, knees bent. Just when he's ordered to pray, someone approaches from behind and swiftly lops off his head, which rolls on the hilly ground. The succeeding footage shows another victim sprawled on the ground as he's repeatedly hacked in the neck with a machete.

The broadcast of the gruesome images, which the networks said were released by sources from the presidential palace and the military, raised a ruckus not just from critics of the government of President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo but also from her own Cabinet and supporters.

Critics called it a “propaganda ploy” meant to drum up support for the controversial Philippine-American war games that for the first time were launched in the heart of the war between government troops and the ASG in Mindanao. The United States has made it no secret that the drills are part of its “war against terror,” and insists, despite failure to disclose hard evidence, that the ASG is linked to the Al-Qaeda

network of Osama Bin Laden. The ASG, which has whittled down to a band of about 100 armed men making a living from kidnap-for-ransom activities, has been holding an American missionary couple and a Filipino nurse as hostages for more than a year now. *(Martin Burnham, the American missionary was killed in the crossfire in June 2002 during a rescue attempt by government troops, as was Ediborah Yap, the Filipino nurse. Martin's wife, Gracia, is recovering from a knee injury and has returned to the United States.-Editor)*

Others questioned not just the timing, but also the effect of expos-

ing children to the violent video.

There were also endless questions about the origin of the tape, in the absence of a plausible explanation regarding the source. A presidential spokesperson said the amateurish video was discovered by troops who overran an ASG stronghold two years ago in the island of Basilan, at the southernmost tip of the Philippines. The military said a Filipino migrant worker had seen the video in the Middle East (where it was allegedly circulated by the Muslim separatist rebels to raise funds among anti-Catholics). Out of concern, the worker sent a copy to the military. The president's archenemy, deposed president Joseph Estrada, claimed that the video was recovered by soldiers when they captured a military camp of another Muslim faction, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), some two years ago. The machete-wielding men



Charlie Saeada/AsiaPix

shown on the video were therefore not members of the ASG but the MILF, Estrada claimed. He added that he had shown the video to the local Catholic Church hierarchy during his term to justify his all-out war campaign against the MILF.

Some Filipino Muslims, on the other hand, said the “beheaders” were not members of the ASG nor the MILF, but of a cult called Tadtad, which served as paramilitary support in the counterinsurgency campaign of deposed dictator Ferdinand Marcos in the 1980s. The Tadtad, the Muslims noted, are known to have committed numerous human rights abuses against suspected rebels at the time.

Baffling quickly turned surreal when days later, a farmer emerged to say that he was the one shown beheading the victim. He claimed that he is not a member of either the ASG or an MILF, but was in fact a hostage of the ASG at the time, forced to behead a fellow hostage at gunpoint.

Everyone, it seemed, had his or her own version of the origins of the video, leading one confused foreign journalist to call it a “one-video-fits-all-enemies.”

Lost in the debate, finger pointing and confusion was the culpability of an institution in Philippine society that has, over the years, gotten away with many acts of irresponsibility: the media, specifically the broadcast media. The showing of the video backfired on a government hard pressed to defend the Philippine-American warfare training exercise,

and drowned out Arroyo’s excuse that “the people have the right to know” of the extent of brutality of the ASG. Yet no one seemed to care that the video would not have been exhibited at all had the major networks not agreed to be the conduit for it. The news directors were not hostages with guns at their temples or guillotines hanging over their heads, unlike the unidentified victims captured on the video. They were, in fact, all-too-willing collaborators in an obvious propaganda war.

However, more important than questioning the wisdom of whether to broadcast the video is that the networks did so without due diligence—that is, without the benefit of a little fact-checking. The networks reported that the ASG had hacked captured soldiers not because they had the witnesses or facts to back this up, but on the say-so of spokespersons from Malacañang (the Presidential residence) and Camp Aguinaldo. Where was the corroboration of independent, credible sources crucial to handling such a sensitive story?

The media, not exactly known for its respect for the privacy of anyone, all of a sudden turned coy. It showed the video without the basic who, what, when, where, and how. The military said it had the videotape in its possession two, maybe three years ago. (Why it couldn’t even remember the exact date and method of its acquisition of the video it wanted everyone to be outraged about is equally puzzling.) If the beheaded victims were indeed soldiers, the military should have established their

identities by now. Were their families notified? Or is the military as unsure as the viewer who the victims, and for that matter, the perpetrators, were? If so, would not that have been the truth that the public has “the right to know”?

When did the incident take place? Where? Who shot the footage? How did it reach government hands? Why is government showing it only now? Is it, gasp, authentic to begin with? These and many other questions were left unanswered when the networks went to town with “the big story” that could not wait.

Questions have likewise been raised regarding the decision to show the raw video. Was it necessary to show the actual beheading? Or the head of the victim as it rolled on the ground? Clearly, the aim wasn’t to educate the public about the atrocities of war because history has proven that one does not need to see the Holocaust to be convinced that Hitler butchered thousands of Jews. It was for pure shock and one would even venture, pure entertainment. Reality TV at its most real.

In the end, the video left the public none the wiser.

What makes the release and airing of the video frightening was not only that it showed the extent to which a government would go just to win a war. It is that there is hardly any credible media to question such deception. ☺

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