THE 2003 RAMON MAGSAYSAY AWARD FOR JOURNALISM, LITERATURE, AND CREATIVE COMMUNICATION ARTS

BIOGRAPHY OF SHEILA S. CORONEL

Two decades in journalism and Sheila Coronel can still be shocked by the brazenness of the corrupt. "They think they'll never be caught," she says. In one Manila land development deal in 1995 between a government agency and a foreign construction firm, the Coronel-led Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism (PCIJ) unearthed evidence that the bribes alone totaled three billion pesos—U.S.$120 million at the exchange rate then. More tainted money gushed when the scandal broke. "Boxes of U.S. dollars were being sent at midnight to a senator's house so he would shut up about the investigation," Coronel recalls.

The "Grandmother of All Scams," as the PCIJ headlined the case, is one of hundreds of hard-hitting reports the Center has produced since Coronel and eight other journalists founded the nonprofit media agency in 1989. Other stories laid bare corruption in the executive branch, Supreme Court, military, and media, leading to the resignation of two cabinet officials and a Supreme Court justice. In 2001, a series of PCIJ articles on President Joseph Estrada's rapid accumulation of wealth contributed to his impeachment and ouster.

Meticulously researched, exhaustively reported, and backed by verifiable evidence, PCIJ's newspaper stories, television documentaries, and books command respect across the Philippines. Coronel's goal is to help aspiring and practicing journalists, especially in the provinces, gain the same credibility. To this end, the Center conducts training, grant-writing fellowships, and publishes how-to manuals on beat reporting, computer-assisted research, unearthing corruption, and other journalistic skills.

The Center is also acting beyond the Philippines. "We've done training courses for Indonesians, Malaysians, Thais, and even East Timorese journalists," says Coronel. "Sometimes we bring them [to Manila] and it's great that we can share the techniques that we have learned here." A group in Nepal has already set up a PCIJ-style center, and journalists in Indonesia, Bangladesh, and Pakistan are considering similar initiatives. "How can I not be hopeful?" Coronel asks. "How can I not think that a determined effort can make a difference? We tend to be consumed by the cynicism of the moment. But, if you look at it from the broad view, I think there's been a lot of positive change."

Sheila Coronel had originally set out to become not a journalist but a lawyer like her father. Born on July 25, 1958, she grew up in a book-lined middle-class home filled with the laughter of a sister and four brothers and assorted visiting cousins, aunts, and uncles. At one time or another, the household also took in a convicted criminal or two. Her father, Antonio Coronel, was a high-profile lawyer and law school dean. Exposed early to the profession, Sheila, his eldest child, wanted to be a lawyer as well.

Antonio was a self-made man. His own father, a school teacher, was a resistance fighter during World War II, when the Japanese Imperial Army invaded the Philippines. Antonio was not yet ten when the elder Coronel was captured and executed. "He was the eldest [so] he had to be the last one to see his father alive and get all the *huling habilin* [last instructions]," Sheila recounts. Pluck, ambition, and ability won the financially strapped

Antonio scholarships that eventually led him to leave his home province of Ilocos Sur in the north for Manila, the capital. He attended the Philippine Law School and launched a well-regarded practice.

One of Sheila's early memories is of her father holding forth after dinner. "He was a performer," she recalls. "He would play out his courtroom arguments in front of us." When she and her sister started school near the colleges where he taught, Antonio would pick them up in the car and sit them at the back of the class while he lectured. "All the students gave us candies," Sheila laughs. "It was great." She almost seemed to be learning the law by osmosis. In high school, she would type out his lecture notes. "I learned about the law and I appreciated it. It was a very elegant system, in theory."

Sheila's mother, Dorotea Soto, taught English literature in a public high school before becoming a full-time stay-at-home mother. "Both my grandparents from my father's side were school teachers," says Coronel. "Nearly all my aunts on my mother's side were school teachers also. I wanted to be a school teacher myself, and I was for a time. My sister is a professor at the University of the Philippines." Dorotea had encouraged her two daughters to develop careers. Her constant refrain: "I did not raise you to be in the kitchen."

Dorotea was herself more than a housewife. While taking care of her six children, she translated Kapampangan literature into English. Kapampangan is the local language of Pampanga in central Luzon, Dorotea's home province. One of her uncles was Juan Crisostomo Soto, a well-known Kapampangan poet. Sheila traces her love of literature to her mother. "My mother read a lot and there were always books in my house," says Sheila. "Sometimes we just all were reading together. This was before TV became such a big thing in family life."

Dorotea was a devout Roman Catholic, but not a strident believer. "We went to mass every Sunday but it was more like a family gathering than a religious event," says Coronel. Her father was less observant and more cynical about human nature. Many of his students were military men furthering their career by studying the law. When some were accused of human rights abuses, they asked Antonio to defend them. "I loved my father dearly, but I thought he was defending the wrong people," says his daughter. Antonio even lawyered for Imelda Marcos, the wife of the president whose dictatorial government Sheila would later fight as an underground journalist.

Educated by strict German nuns at the all-girls College of the Holy Spirit, the diminutive Coronel was a dutiful convent-school girl in early teens; only later would she become the activist enamored with radical politics. "When I was in high school and short skirts became fashionable, we weren't allowed to wear them," she recalls. "They had a rule that you could only wear mini-skirts two inches above the knee when kneeling down. So we all had to line up and kneel to measure how long our skirts were." Still, she got a well-rounded education. There was equal emphasis on science and literature. "Saint Cecilia was one of the nuns' patron saints, so there was lots of music going on." The school also excelled in English elocution.

But the nuns tried to insulate its students from the ferment of revolutionary ideas. It was the 1970s and students were agitating against Marcos's dictatorial regime. The school was not always successful. The College of the Holy Spirit was near Malacañang, the presidential palace, and the chants of protests could be heard almost every day. Gunfire would sometimes erupt. Coronel remembers ducking under a car to avoid being hit by bullets fired by riot police. "When you look back, I don't know how we could have been so sheltered from all of what was going on at that time," she says.

The protests waned after Marcos declared martial law in 1972, the year Coronel turned fourteen. Scores of opposition politicians, activists, and student leaders were arrested. "I remember being woken up by my parents," she recalls. "But I didn't really understand what

martial law meant because none of my relatives were directly affected either by arrests or imprisonment. And it was never discussed in school. We were just quiet. There was silence—and fear."

Meanwhile, Coronel wrote for the school paper and joined the drama club. She experimented with beer, surreptitiously drinking with friends in the nuns' graveyard. She read an unauthorized and unflattering biography of Imelda Marcos, the First Lady. (The government had forced its author, Carmen Pedrosa, into exile.) Coronel remembers just one moment of real rebellion. "We had religious classes from grade school and I felt that they were teaching us the same thing year after year. So I stood up and said: 'We're not learning much here. I don't see what the relevance of all these things is to what we'll eventually end up becoming.'"

After a long argument, the teacher said she should go if she was not learning anything. Coronel walked out—followed by the rest of her classmates. Her parents were summoned. The mortified Dorotea told her daughter: "If you don't behave, I'll make you an *interna* [intern]"— girls who lived in the school dormitory, sleeping on hard beds and waking up at 6:00 a.m. to hear mass. In the end, Coronel was told to do her own research in the library and to write a term paper instead of attending religion class. "I just had a sense that we were missing out on something that wasn't being taken up in school," she says now.

She found the missing pieces in college. Her mother and a number of other relatives had attended the University of the Philippines (U.P.), the country's premier institution, which was near the family home. There was never a question of Coronel going anywhere else. She passed the tough entrance examinations and signed up for course work in political science. "I wanted to study literature, but I was told you can't make a good living out of that. So I ended up in political science because I wanted to become a lawyer."

A collision with the real world came almost at once. Despite martial law, U.P. remained a hotbed of anti-Marcos sentiment. One day, a march was held around the campus to protest the arrest of staff members of the college newspaper. Coronel and two friends watched as the rally participants chanted slogans. Suddenly, the police arrived and began beating anyone they could reach. The three petrified girls stood rooted on the spot. "It was my first experience to see such brutality firsthand," Coronel recalls. "That was when I started being interested in politics and what was going on."

The sheltered convent-educated girl learned to ride the bus and participate in public discourse. She read Marx and *The Brothers Karamazov* and reveled in the world of ideas. "For someone who had been in a Catholic school, U.P. was the most liberating experience," says Coronel. "It was very intellectually stimulating. I had all of these classmates from the provinces, from Mindanao and other places, that I would otherwise not have met. I kept thinking, 'I should have had this much sooner.' I felt I wasted a lot of time in Catholic school."

She found new things in literature. "Professor Concepcion Dadufalza was my English teacher and she would make us read [Fyodor] Dostoyevsky. You would walk around thinking Dostoyevsky the rest of the afternoon." She took courses with leftist professor Francisco Nemenzo. "He would smell of beer or whisky by the time he entered the room. He would start talking about Machiavelli as if he lived next door. We would all go around him and discuss theory, discuss politics." Nemenzo had joined anti-Marcos forces underground and had been arrested and later resumed teaching. (He became U.P. president in 1999.)

At home, Coronel engaged her father in polemics. "I told him what I read from Marx," she recounts. "And I said, 'The law is the instrument of the ruling class.' It struck me as true at that time because my father was defending military torturers and they were in my

living room!” She remembers in particular the men who were accused of torturing urban-poor activist Trining Herrera. Her father believed that every person was entitled to a proper defense. “But do you have to pick the worst person?” his daughter would retort. Antonio would liken himself to a doctor. Whoever knocks on your door, he would say, you have to defend.

His clients included a man accused of burning down a municipal hall to destroy evidence of corruption—he hid in the Coronel home for three months—and a policeman convicted of killing his girlfriend. The ex-cop later became an aide to the lawyer. “He was eventually released but he had no job, so he hung around my father’s office and ended up carrying my father’s briefcase,” recalls Coronel. “Sometimes he would drive us to school, so we were being driven around by this convicted murderer.” The man was inspired to enroll in law school, but could not take the bar exams because of his criminal record.

Coronel’s affection for her father remained strong even after her parents separated. Antonio was a complicated man. While he defended military officers connected with the Marcos regime, he also befriended some of the dictator’s opponents. When Antonio died in 1993, among those who spoke at the funeral were anti-Marcos newspaper publisher Jose Burgos and journalist Luis Beltran. “He may be a hardliner, but when I was joining rallies, when I became an activist during the Marcos years, he was very supportive and understanding and helpful to my friends who were arrested,” says Coronel.

At university, one thing had become perfectly clear to her. “It was the dictatorship that was at fault,” says Coronel. “It was U.S.-controlled, which was U.P.’s standard line. It was the control exerted by all these feudal landlords that was wrong with our society. The poor had been always kept out of the loop. There was such great injustice and inequity in our society.” It was incumbent for a scholar of the people—U.P. students pay little in tuition because their school enjoys tax subsidies—to help right political wrongs.

So, when Marcos held legislative elections in 1978, Coronel voted for the opposition slate, which was led by imprisoned senator Benigno “Ninoy” Aquino Jr., the man Filipinos expected to become president had Marcos not declared martial law. Incredibly, Aquino and his team lost in Metro Manila. “Of course there was heavy cheating,” says Coronel. The opposition asked the voters of Metro Manila to make their displeasure known with a noise barrage. “Even our neighbors were out in the streets banging pots and pans,” says Coronel. “It was very moving to see.”

Not long afterward, Coronel became features editor of the *Philippine Collegian*, U.P.’s weekly student newspaper. “We did a lot of national issues. We were doing strikes in factories, sex tourism, Japanese investments. It was very exciting because none of the newspapers at that time, except for the underground ones, were coming out with these kinds of articles.” The assignment revived Coronel’s fascination with journalism. She loved pulling all-nighters with the *Collegian* staff at a small printing press in Quiapo, a working-class district that could be dangerous in the wee hours. The press workers would tell the students stories about the pre–martial law U.P. activists who ran the *Collegian* before them.

When Coronel graduated in 1979, she had become unsure about proceeding to law school. Instead, she signed up for a master’s degree in political science and taught social studies at the Philippine Science High School. She never completed the first and felt she did not have the temperament for the second. Years later, she met a former student who told her: “I remember you because you were the one who told us, ‘If you don’t shut up, I’m going to throw my shoe at you.’” Says Coronel wryly: “It was fun but that’s when I learned I didn’t have what it took to teach.”

Her father continued to urge her to take up law, but Coronel opted to do freelance journalism for wire services such as Depthnews. Unknown to her family, she also joined

the staff of the underground *Balita ng Malayang Pilipinas* (News of a Free Philippines), a newsletter for the communist New People's Army, which was operating in the country's mountains. Later, she moved to the publication *Liberation*, which aimed to bring together various antigovernment groups under the umbrella of the left-leaning National Democratic Front. Coronel worked with high-profile figures on the military's hit list, among them Horacio Morales, former executive vice president of the Development Academy of the Philippines, and activist priest Edicio de la Torre.

It was dangerous work. Government soldiers raped and tortured women they suspected of being members of the underground. Coronel remembers reporting for the ten-page *Balita* and then typing stories directly on stencil on a manual typewriter. The staff had no access to a mimeograph machine, so each page had to be silk-screened by hand to produce five hundred copies. "It was like printing T-shirts," says Coronel. "And then you had to put a copy in an envelope and mail it to all sorts of people, including journalists and wire agencies." The staff would move from house to house, including Coronel's, drying the pages inside a room or outside in the garden.

Things were a bit easier at *Liberation,* which was printed on a real press owned by one of the religious orders and staffed with layout artists. "We were just doing the writing side of it," says Coronel. "But we were also doing other things. That was the time Boy Morales and Ed de la Torre—this was how I first met them—were putting the National Democratic Front together. I would find out later that Gloria Macapagal Arroyo [who became Philippine president in 2001] was helping draft the movement's economic program."

Liberation ceased publication when Morales was arrested in early 1982. Told the news, Coronel rushed to the safe house to burn correspondence and take away incriminating materials such as car plate numbers. Father de la Torre did not believe that Morales had been caught, saying he was to meet him later. Coronel drove the priest to the appointment. He, too, was arrested after she had dropped him off. Later, Coronel was at the bus station on her way to an interview for *Liberation* when her sister arrived and told her she had to hide. The authorities had taken note of the car de la Torre had used.

She lay low in her grandmother's house in Pampanga and, later, in a family farm in Tanay town. Her father helped clean up the paper trail, such as the lease to the underground's safe house. Coronel resurfaced several months later, when things settled down. She could have hunkered down in communist-influenced hamlets in the mountains. But she was not ready to give up her family and the possibility of a career. In this, she was typical of the generation that grew up under martial law. "We wanted our comforts and yet we believed that we needed to do something to fight this dictatorship. It was very difficult, very confusing."

Coronel returned to mainstream journalism and found a support network in a group of women writers who inspired her to hone her craft. "They have really been one of the profound influences on my work in journalism for the last twenty years or so," says Coronel. The first members included now senior journalists Ceres Doyo, Jo-Ann Maglipon, Paulynn Sicam, and Marites Vitug, and distinguished literary figures such as Lilia Quindoza Santiago and Mara Llanot. "We became really good friends," says Coronel.

The women would have long discussions about their career goals and would critique each other's pieces, suggesting ways to improve the reportage and writing. "They were kindred spirits, more than the underground was," says Coronel. "I felt this was where I belonged, this was where my heart and mind belonged." The group began targeting magazines because the authorities kept a less attentive eye on these

publications, compared with their vigilance over the newspapers. Coronel herself contributed to *Panorama,* the Sunday magazine of the leading daily *Bulletin Today*.

She got a break in late 1982. A rare vacancy opened up in *Panorama* and she was offered the post of junior staff writer. Because Marcos allowed only three newspapers to circulate, "you had to literally wait for someone to die before you could get in," she says. Coronel mastered the art of reporting under government restrictions. When Marcos's health was fine, journalists could write about human rights abuses in a roundabout way. But, when the president's kidney condition worsened (he suffered from lupus), it was time to review restaurants and interview celebrities. "I ate a lot of good food and watched a lot of good movies," Coronel laughs.

Other young people, members of what Coronel calls the "Lost Generation," were also drifting to the various newspapers and magazines. Malou Mangahas, a former editor-in-chief of the *Collegian*, joined the *Bulletin*. "Again a fluke," says Coronel. "Somebody died." Other friends ended up at the new tabloid *Tempo* and the two other newspapers, *Daily Express* and *Times Journal,* which were undergoing generational change. The young people could not report everything they knew, but they brought vigor to newsrooms. "The editors loved us because we worked hard, unlike all of those people who had been in their jobs for such a long time," says Coronel.

But it was also a frustrating time. The people had lost respect for the government-controlled media. Even some veteran journalists were disheartened. One senior editor at the *Daily Express* told Coronel and other reporters: "I've never felt so ashamed in my life. Even my own son who is in U.P. is ashamed to tell his friends his father is a journalist." Still, the newcomers felt they could make a difference. "We did things such as sign statements saying how frustrated we were with the profession," recalls Coronel. "And we became involved in Press Club politics." She was less frustrated than her contemporaries because her father's work had long exposed her to moral ambiguity. "I could take it, other people could not. I think I was less judgmental in that sense."

A turning point came in 1983. Ninoy Aquino, who had been exiled to the United States, flew back to Manila and was assassinated on the airport tarmac. "To be honest, most of us in journalism were very cynical about Ninoy and didn't even give his arrival much notice," says Coronel. "When he was killed, things became different. For a lot of people, there was a sense that we could not go on like this, even in journalism." She and her group of women journalists joined the massive funeral cortège from Santo Domingo Church in Quezon City to the cemetery outside Manila tens of kilometers away.

"You could not have been in that crowd and not felt moved, not felt that something was going to change, that the anger must have some result somehow," Coronel recounts. "Even for Marcos's hacks, if you had a sense of the journalist in you, you knew that history was happening." The Marcos-controlled press was ordered to downplay the funeral and the ensuing protest marches. There were to be no crowd photos, no pictures showing the intensity of the outrage. On the day after Aquino was buried, the *Times Journal* splashed its front page with the innocuous headline: "Two Killed by Lightning."

But the nation had been galvanized. Worried by the growing anger, the United States and international creditors pressured Marcos to widen the democratic space. Alternative publications sprang up and siphoned readership from the established periodicals. At *Panorama*, Coronel wangled plum assignments: hunger in sugar-rich Negros Province in the central Philippines, the murder of a crusading priest in Cotabato, the killing of anti-Marcos mayor Cesar Climaco in Zamboanga. "The editors who in the past would have said, 'No, this might upset Malacañang,' began saying: 'We don't really care anymore. We'll lose our credibility if we go on like this.'"

Weakened by kidney disease, Marcos buckled under domestic and international pressure in 1985 and scheduled snap presidential elections for February 7, 1986. Against the odds, the fractious opposition united behind Ninoy's widow, Corazon Aquino, who ran against Marcos. Coronel recalls covering her courageous campaign. "She had this very drab voice and she went: 'I am just like you, I am a victim of Marcos.' I was looking at the journalist beside me and she was crying. I was going to point that out to the other journalist beside me, but he was in tears, too."

In the opposition stronghold of Cebu, people lined up in the streets to welcome the widow in her trademark yellow dress. The fervor reminded Coronel of religious processions where devotees came out in the thousands to worship the saints on parade. "What we journalists thought was that there was no doubt she was going to win the election but there was also no doubt that she was going to be cheated." The polling was indeed the dirtiest in memory, with thugs snatching ballot boxes and voters bribed to vote for the incumbent. In some places, nuns, students, and housewives formed human chains to safeguard the ballot boxes during the night.

At one point, computer programmers helping with the count walked out after noticing that the numbers they were inputting into their machines, which showed Aquino in the lead, were coming out differently on the tally boards, which had Marcos with the edge. When the Marcos-controlled Commission on Elections and the legislature completed the official count, the president was proclaimed the winner. Aquino refused to recognize Marcos's victory and called for nonviolent protests.

By this time, Coronel had left *Panorama* to join the revived *Manila Times*, a leading newspaper that Marcos had padlocked when he declared martial law. A politician she was interviewing on February 22, 1986, told her: "I think something is going to happen today." When Coronel returned to the office, she learned that Defense Minister Juan Ponce Enrile had scheduled a press conference. It was a Saturday and there was no other available *Manila Times* reporter. Dressed in all-white pants and shirt and high heels, she rushed to the military camp where Enrile was to meet the press.

It was the beginning of the end for Marcos. Earlier that night, the president had discovered a coup plot against him. The implicated rebel soldiers, among them armed forces vice chief of staff Fidel Ramos, barricaded themselves in Camp Aguinaldo along Epifanio de los Santos Avenue (EDSA), the capital's main thoroughfare. Cardinal Jaime Sin, the country's senior Roman Catholic prelate, called on citizens to protect the mutineers. At one point, more than one million people were estimated to have streamed to EDSA. They stopped the rumbling tanks Marcos sent to root out the rebels and, with flowers and prayers, persuaded the president's soldiers to put down their guns.

Coronel remembers spending the night on a leather sofa inside Camp Aguinaldo. When she woke up, she saw the well-known comedienne Mitch Valdez cutting up watermelons for the soldiers. The public address system announced that the famous actress Nora Aunor had donated two hundred briefs so the mutineers could change their underwear. "Very surreal," says Coronel. "It was funny, it was festive, it was great. It was a moment when anything was possible." By the time she returned to the *Times* to file her story, her all-white outfit was muddied and dirtied. "I had been stepped on by the surge of people in EDSA."

Journalism became a respected profession again. On EDSA, a path through the mass of civilians would magically open whenever a car with press credentials appeared. Readers were snapping up new dailies such as the *Manila Times*, in business for only two-and-a-half weeks but already selling three hundred thousand to four hundred thousand copies a day. Its team of young reporters was tireless in covering every minute of the four-day

“People Power Revolution,” as the civilian-military takeover became known. When events were especially fast moving, the paper would come out with two editions on the same day.

On February 25, Marcos and his family fled the country for exile in the United States, and Corazon Aquino became the new president. It was a time of transition for both the Philippines and Coronel. Soon after the People Power events, she left the *Manila Times.* “The staff was very idealistic and had high expectations, and there were some questions about the real ownership of the paper,” she explains. “We were told one Marcos crony, [Energy Secretary] Geronimo Velasco, owned shares.” In the ensuing controversy, the paper’s editor was fired. Coronel and others on the staff walked out.

Unemployed and still recovering from the stress of the People Power revolt, the young journalists relaxed at the luxurious Manila Hotel. “We thought we would be jobless in style,” Coronel quips. There, she ran into *New York Times* bureau chief Seth Mydans, who held office at the hotel. Coronel agreed to string for the American daily. She maintained the relationship even after joining the *Manila Chronicle* several months later. A major daily like the *Manila Times* in the pre–martial law years, the *Chronicle* was revived mainly by the returning Lopez family, whose leading members had been hounded into exile by Marcos.

Reporting for the *Chronicle* and the *New York Times*, and from 1988 also for Britain’s *The Guardian,* Coronel charted President Aquino’s progress in delivering on her promise to restore democracy. “As a person, I liked her,” she says. “She was simple and unaffected and she didn’t act like a politician.” But Aquino was also inexperienced and could be indecisive. Marcos loyalists attempted to unseat her as early as July 1986, when some five hundred soldiers and thousands of supporters gathered at the Manila Hotel to witness Marcos’s former vice president take his “oath of office.” Coronel was at the *New York Times* office at the hotel when the failed coup attempt occurred. “I was just going to the ladies room,” she recalls, “and there were all these soldiers walking in the lobby.”

Several other attempts followed, with the most serious in 1989. Elements of the Reform the Armed Forces Movement (RAM), the group of rebel soldiers that sparked the People Power revolt, turned against the president. “As early as 1987, you already felt the dissatisfaction of the RAM people and of [Defense Secretary] Enrile,” Coronel recalls. (The president had retained Marcos’s defense chief, but eventually fired him.) “It was very clear when they started asking for the resignation of the so-called leftists in the cabinet and started protesting the investigations into human rights abuses.”

Aquino did promulgate a new constitution, organize free and fair legislative and local polls, and scrupulously respected the Bill of Rights, even during the short period when she headed a revolutionary government. “She was firm in her insistence on democracy,” says Coronel, “and in her belief in the free press, even if that press, especially toward the later years, really gave her a hard time.” Despite her evident weariness of politics, Aquino persevered and successfully held a presidential election in 1992, which was won by People Power hero Fidel Ramos.

Coronel, too, was growing weary of the daily grind at the *Chronicle*. She was a columnist and special reports writer there, but often had to cover beats as well. “When Malou Mangahas was outside the country, I would cover Malacañang for her. That was really frustrating because it was mainly waiting outside until someone came out and then thrusting a tape recorder at them.” She wanted to do all sorts of stories, but had to fight for resources with other sections of the paper. And she had to be careful about hogging all the big assignments to avoid resentment.

The last straw was the appointment in 1988 of a news editor “whom we knew was going to make life more restrictive for the reporting side.” Coronel and several others left

in a huff—again—thus proving her mother's oft-repeated prognostication: "I know when someone walks out [of an organization], one of my kids would be there." But she continued to report for the *New York Times* and the *Guardian*. Her stories and byline were on the front page of the *Times* for three days in 1989, when the RAM's coup closed the international airport and kept foreign journalists out.

Meanwhile, Coronel and the other resigned *Chronicle* staffers were contemplating the future. "We realized that there were very few options, actually. One was to go to another newspaper, where you would have more of the same. The other was to set up your own newspaper, but we didn't have the money for that." Financial backers could probably be found, but that would have meant protecting the owners' political and business interests. Only one real option was left: Form a media group that was truly independent.

The idea for the Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism (PCIJ) came from Rigoberto Tiglao, who later became President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo's chief of staff. Tiglao had just returned from a fellowship at Harvard University. He had visited a center for investigative reporting in San Francisco and suggested that the group form a similar organization. The new agency would not do day-to-day coverage of the news, which the newspapers were doing reasonably well. Instead, it would focus on special stories that the dailies and other media outlets were not touching. These pieces would be offered for publication in the same way that wire agencies sell their features and reports.

The PCIJ started life in 1989 in a tiny unoccupied room on the premises of the offices of the Inter-Press Service. "We bought secondhand furniture, a secondhand typewriter, and I volunteered to man the office since I could survive on [assignments from] the *New York Times* and the *Guardian*," says Coronel. The other incorporators—Tiglao, Mangahas, Pete Daroy, husband-and-wife Virgilio and Maritess Vitug, Lorna Kalaw-Tirol, Howie Severino, and Rosario Tañedo of Inter-Press Service—pitched in while doing other freelance projects.

The first articles were not very hard-hitting, such as one on land reform in the pineapple plantations of Mindanao, but they were well-received. Then came a series on the politics of logging. It was well-timed. Congress had started debating the issue and the first article, reported by four people in as many different parts of the country, was quoted in some of the privileged speeches. The articles and, later, a book, *Power From the Forest: The Politics of Logging* by Marites Vitug, were published at a time when an environmental movement was emerging in the country alongside rising public interest in Green issues. Another PCIJ article, by Howie Severino, exposed the logging links of Edilmiro Amante, the then environment secretary. Amante eventually resigned his post.

PCIJ reportage led to other high-profile resignations. In 1993, the Center reported that the most senior member of the Supreme Court, Justice Hugo Gutierrez, faked authorship of a decision upholding the right of telecommunications giant Philippine Long Distance Telephone Company (PLDT) to block the operation of an international gateway owned by rival Eastern Telecom. Four days after the story broke, Gutierrez stepped down. Health Secretary Hilarion Ramiro resigned in 1996 two weeks after the Center charged that he was skimming as much as 40 percent off the value of government contracts.

Other PCIJ investigations had similarly profound consequences. For example, a 1990 series on how a seaweed farm was threatening a national marine park in the Sulu Sea resulted in an eviction order by the environment department; and a PCIJ story in 1995 detailing the torture of two twelve-year-old boys suspected of involvement in a kidnapping led to a probe by the Commission on Human Rights and formal charges against agents of the Presidential Anti-Crime Commission.

"We were stunned," says Coronel. "We ourselves were surprised at the impact of our stories. That encouraged more newspapers to use our work, gave us an easier time to get to sources, and also encouraged more people to come to us with tips or leads for stories." Naturally, the subjects of PCIJ's investigations were not amused. The Supreme Court even insinuated that Coronel had an axe to grind against it because the justices had at one time or another sanctioned her late father as part of its disciplinary oversight of lawyers.

About such insinuations, Coronel is unfazed. "You have just to learn how to grit your teeth and to take it," she says. "You write articles that could destroy the reputation of someone, so you should be able to take it when they hit you. We try not to draw too much attention to ourselves by hitting back. We just keep quiet and eventually the facts bear us out." The Center is very proud of the fact that it has not been sued—at least not until 2006, when Coronel was slapped with multiple harassment lawsuits after the PCIJ posted allegedly wiretapped conversations in which President Arroyo was heard talking to an elections official about rigging the 2004 vote. So far, none of these suits has made it to court.

The Center does choose its battles. "We have limited resources, so we have to use these resources well," says Coronel. The group typically undertakes only fifteen multipart reports a year. High-impact stories such as the Supreme Court pieces are balanced with lower-profile issues such as child labor and rapes of women in jail. "Things like this would probably not cause resignations or Congressional investigation, but at least we put them out there in the public sphere." Also a priority: topics that are not explored by mainstream media, among them the environment.

Some stories can be too dangerous. "We would like to do the politics of [the illegal narcotic] *shabu* very much, but I don't know whether we would survive it," says Coronel. "People in the underworld really don't care who they bump off. I don't know whether we can provide the protection to ourselves or to the journalists who work with us." She also decided in 2000 that a story on the murder of Salvador "Bubby" Dacer was just too hot. The public relations practitioner was believed to possess evidence about then President Joseph Estrada's involvement in stock market manipulation. The Center's two most senior staffers had cautioned her: "Sheila, we have families, we have children."

The PCIJ was already on delicate ground at the time. It was investigating allegations that Estrada had been rapidly accumulating wealth since becoming president in 1998. "I was actually approached by someone who had inside information from the [presidential] Palace to say that the president was very angry, and that we should be careful because there were certain people who might take the cue from him and do something mischievous," Coronel recalls. As a precaution, she told a non-PCIJ journalist about the threats and left instructions on which lawyers and other people to contact should anything untoward happen. She also put in place a system to constantly monitor the whereabouts of reporters involved in the project.

A movie-star-turned-politician beloved of the masses, Estrada had shown he could play hard ball with Manila's freewheeling media. "We were skeptical about him, but we also knew it was possible he could really do something good," Coronel recalls. "So we gave him the benefit of the doubt. But towards late 1999, he cracked down on the press." The *Manila Times* had been critical. Estrada put pressure on its businessmen owners, who sold the paper to his crony Mark Jimenez. Mangahas, the daily's editor, was forced to leave. The popular *Philippine Daily Inquirer* also incurred Estrada's ire. Suddenly, it was hit by an advertising boycott from movie producers and some of the country's biggest companies.

Tales of corrupt deals and payoffs began to circulate. "It was only when there was talk about mansions that we finally thought we could do something because you cannot

build a house without a sack full of documents and an army of people," says Coronel. The Center formed an investigative team in January 2000. Five journalists, three researchers, and several sets of interns combed through Estrada's statements of assets, land records, and incorporation papers of companies associated with the president. They also hunted down realtors, architects, construction workers, and other people connected to the properties.

"We ourselves were amazed at what we found out," says Coronel. "We didn't think it was going to be that bad." A friend of a friend of a friend of the president said he was building a house in the tony neighborhood of Wack Wack for one of Estrada's many mistresses. The residents were cooperative with the media, complaining about presidential guards urinating on their lawn, among other things. But the property was not registered under Estrada's name. "We thought we could prove ownership if we showed there was a pattern in the use of dummies [front companies] for the houses, especially if it was the same set of people that was being used," says Coronel. "So that's why we had to look for more real estate."

The team visited the most expensive neighborhoods and asked what was being built there. In New Manila, they heard about the so-called Boracay mansion, a palatial home with a pool area supposedly paved with fine white sand from famed Boracay resort island. The land was said to have been bought from the wealthy Madrigal family. The transaction would have been documented in the Madrigals' tax declarations. But at the Quezon City Hall, a PCIJ researcher was shown a thick pile of documents. The Madrigals owned so many properties in New Manila that it was difficult to tell which one was the Boracay mansion.

Here, again, local residents came to the rescue, telling the investigative team the exact address. "That cracked the rest of it for us," Coronel recounts. The relevant tax document listed the name of the buyer's law firm, which employed one Edward Serapio, who happened to be a member of Estrada's staff. The researchers went to the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) to find out all companies the firm formed after 1998 and the real estate these companies owned. Six months after starting the project, the PCIJ published its first report, "Can the President Explain His Wealth?" It followed with exposés on the mansions being built for presidential mistresses.

These struck a chord among the public, especially after the airing of a television report based on the Center's work. New information poured in. An e-mail message came from someone who claimed to have made curtains for Estrada's houses. The man who supplied red roof tiles came forward. A contractor on the Wack Wack house showed a blueprint detailing the rooms for Jerica and Estrada's other children with mistress Laarni Enriquez. "The daughter even chose the color scheme for her room and she was very picky," said someone who worked for the interior decorator. By November 2000, the Center had published the last of the stories. Weeks later, impeachment charges against Estrada incorporating the team's evidence were filed in Congress.

Coronel has made it her business to unearth wrongdoing—and there is no shortage of that in a country where corruption is deeply entrenched. The perpetrators "really have a sense that they can get away with it and that is what really shocks me," she says. The 1995 so-called Amari deal was a particular eye-opener. A property boom was then at its height, with one of the most desired areas a huge tract of reclaimed land in the capital's Manila Bay district. The development rights were awarded to a Thai property firm, but charges soon flew that the terms of

the deal were disadvantageous to the government. PCIJ's investigative reports unearthed evidence of bribery at various levels.

"It was really mind-boggling that the scale of corruption could exist in a deal that had been publicly scrutinized by the media, the courts, and the Senate," says Coronel. "I know that this takes place, but the amounts involved and the brazenness with which it was conducted, that shocked me." She learned of payoffs in hotel lobbies and armored vans delivering crisp notes to the house of a top politician. Some low-level bureaucrats were indicted in the incident, but the big politicians remained untouched and were even reelected. "It's amazing to see the corrupt resurrected," says Coronel sadly. "Our work makes an impact in some cases, but in a lot of other cases it does not."

And yet, she points out, think how much worse it would be if there were no independent journalists prying into anomalies. This is why the Center forges on despite the setbacks and why it is constantly looking for new ways to communicate. It happily cooperates with documentary makers on filming television programs based on its stories—in Filipino, the national language. English-language publications, the main outlets for PCIJ stories, are read only by the middle and upper classes, a tiny portion of the population. "To reach a mass audience, you need television," says Coronel.

On its own, the Center now produces videos in VHS (Video Home System) and VCD (Video Compact Disc) formats that schools use as supplementary learning materials. Its website at www.pcij.org is being enhanced to carry additional data sources such as statements of assets of legislators and local officials. The library at the PCIJ's offices in Quezon City is open to everyone. "We have a librarian who files everything," says Coronel. "And we make all documents public except those that are given to us under strict confidentiality." After the Estrada exposé came out, everyone from the presidential palace to the office of the government ombudsman to the Senate visited the Center and gained access to the evidence it unearthed.

Books have further extended PCIJ's franchise. The first was *Kudeta,* which tackled the 1989 military takeover attempt and the inside story of the RAM. More than a dozen books followed, among them *Saving the Earth: The Philippine Experience* (1992), now on its fourth edition; *Women in Brackets: A Chronicle of Vatican Power and Control* (1997); and *Investigating Estrada: Millions, Mansions and Mistresses* (2000). In 2002 came *Investigating Corruption: A Do-It-Yourself Guide* (2002), part of a series of how-to manuals for journalists, students, and the public at large.

Also among the Center's long-lasting contributions have been its efforts to push government agencies into improving access to information and the training courses it conducts to institutionalize the practice of responsible investigative journalism. "When we first asked for statements of assets from public officials, they weren't filed in any systematic way," recalls Coronel. "So we just kept asking and asking. What use is the law [on the public's right to information] if the information is not stored in a way you can retrieve?" Some agencies, including the Supreme Court, now have a system in place to respond to public queries.

In its seminars, the PCIJ tells participants which government bodies are the best sources of which information, and how they should go about getting the data they need. Reports by the Commission on Audit (COA) on government finances and operations are mines of information, but these public documents are not always made available to journalists, especially those in the provinces. "So we bring them to COA [central offices] and have them talk with the public information people and the directors," says Coronel.

“Now, these people in Manila say, ‘Okay, come straight to us if you need the reports.’” The main office has copies of every provincial report.

Participants are also taught how to approach government officials. “You don’t have to be confrontational all the time,” says Coronel. “We inform journalists of what their rights are. We tell them, ‘This is the chapter and verse to quote when you write a letter.’” The standard operating procedure is to inform the addressee that a copy is being furnished to the Office of the Ombudsman. This is the agency that receives complaints of violations by the bureaucracy of the Law on Disclosure. The Center also helps trainees decide on their plan of attack for their reporting projects and, on occasion, even funds, edits, and markets the resulting articles.

A pleasant surprise has been the discovery that most of what the Center has learned in the past many years is applicable to other countries. The PCIJ is a founding member of the Southeast Asian Press Alliance and has collaborated on a book about access to information in the region. “There’s a lot you can do in terms of raising [levels of] skills, in terms of protecting journalists and in terms of the creative aspects.” In the Philippines, an example of the last is a planned joke book aimed at furthering political education.

Then, there is the never-ending task of safeguarding the Center’s credibility. “One inaccurate story and you’re totally destroyed,” says Coronel. The PCIJ is almost paranoid about being incorruptible and being seen as incorruptible. Offers of free air tickets have been politely declined. When someone sent over a fax machine, a mattress, and bedsheets, the items were donated to charities. “You know the guy didn’t really mean to bribe you. He was just appreciative of the story we did on his enemy.” When a staffer has no choice but to graciously allow someone else to pick up the tab for a meal, he or she makes sure the host receives PCIJ books in return.

PCIJ funds its operations by marketing its investigative reports to the mainstream media and through book sales and fees for its training courses. But it has also enjoyed the support of the Asia Foundation, which in 1990 gave the group a small grant to fund training fellowships, and the Ford Foundation, which has provided half a million dollars as seed money for an endowment. Hundreds of local supporters also contribute from three thousand to ten thousand pesos a year each in donations.

Sheila Coronel stopped reporting for the *New York Times* and the *Guardian* in 1995. Except for a year off in 1991 to complete her master’s degree in political sociology at the London School of Economics—and until September 2006, when she became the inaugural director of the Toni Stabile Center for Investigative Journalism at Columbia University in New York—she dedicated most of her working hours to the Center, winning many awards along the way. Her brief as PCIJ director was to make sure, always, that the Center lived up to its difficult motto: “Journalism With an Impact. We Tell It Like It Is. No Matter Who. No Matter What.”

Even so, Coronel says that an important lesson of her years as a journalist has been that “you have to highlight the positive, even in an investigative report.” Thinking of her often beleaguered country, she says, “We’ve struggled so hard to be free and we just have to make the most of what we have, instead of being weighed down by this very destructive, although very fashionable, cynicism.”

“If you think it’s hopeless,” she says, “what’s the point?”

Cesar R. Bacani Jr.

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