

Banging the drums of war

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Mainstream print media's coverage of recent events in Mindanao is manufacturing consent for war.

As Mindanao reels yet again on the brink of another all-out war, sections of mainstream print media may be helping push it closer to the edge.

A quick round-up of their coverage tells us what in their view has been happening: A rogue commander not supported by the rest of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and who is coddling "al-Qaeda linked" Abu Sayyaf and Jemaah Islamiyah members started it all by attacking the military. The military had no choice but to retaliate. Now things are spiraling out of control and it's all the terrorist-coddling rogue commander's fault.

Such a plot may well have been written by the public information office of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP). But it is precisely how the conflict is being passed off as truth to the public by certain sections of the press. The underlying message is hard to miss: the military are necessarily the "good guys" and they need our unconditional support.

Take for example veteran defense reporter Manny Mogato's dispatch for Reuters on April 17: "Fighting between government forces and rogue Muslim rebels is spreading in the southern Philippines, shattering hopes for peace and threatening local support for a U.S.-backed campaign to flush out militants." [1]

Note that the word "rogue" - a value-laden adjective synonymous to "rascal" or "scoundrel" according to a thesaurus - was not enclosed in quotation marks. Editors, usually allergic to the faintest hints of editorializing, apparently let it pass. The word "alleged," a convenient term for attributing a claim to a source, is missing. There is also no indication that the reporter was merely using a word used by the military to describe their adversaries. The writer himself apparently believes - and leads his readers to believe - that the other actors in the conflict are indeed "rogue." In another paragraph, Mogato describes the leader of the "rogue" rebels, Ustadz Habier Malik, as a "renegade" commander - again, without using quotation marks. The term "renegade" is likewise used without quotation marks by Anthony Vargas of the Manila Times and ABS-CBN's online news.

Reporting for the Philippine Daily Inquirer, Michael Lim Ubac, Christine Avendano, and Julie Alipala wrote: "President Macapagal-Arroyo... yesterday gave free rein to the Armed Forces of the Philippines to pursue Moro terrorists on Jolo island..." [2] Note that the word "terrorist," a highly emotionally charged term, does not have quotation marks around it and there is nothing to suggest that the reporters were merely using Arroyo's word. It was their own. The headline, "GMA tells AFP: Pursue MNLF rebel," proclaims who they are referring to. They also describe Malik as a commander of a "rogue faction" of the MNLF but without indicating that such a description was bestowed by the government, not something that they found out on their own. If such glaring editorializing was an oversight, there was no erratum the following day.

Alipala, in another Inquirer article published April 25, wrote: "Military clashes against Abu Sayyaf terrorists and their coddlers have triggered fresh evacuation of residents in nine towns on the island. "Having reported that the AFP has been running after the MNLF's "rogue faction" because it is accused by the military of coddling the Abu Sayyaf, Alipala and her editors seem to have gone one step farther. They explicitly accept the military's avowed rationale for the war and inform their readers that yes, indeed, without any doubt, the MNLF has been coddling the Abu Sayyaf and that this is truly the reason why the military is hunting them.

In this case, Alipala outdid even the AFP itself because as late as April 21, AFP Chief Hermogenes Esperon himself was quoted by the Inquirer as saying that they are still "validating" reports about the MNLF linking up with the Abu Sayyaf. [3] If Alipala had other sources of information to support her contention, she did not disclose them. The above is, with few exceptions, typical: reporters have taken to appropriating the military's explanation in their narrative and to adopting the military's labels and adjectives as their own. [4] Journalists normally attribute claims to their sources and take pains to put quotation marks around their sentences or phrases. For example, instead of saying, "fighting between government forces and rogue Muslim rebels," one could have, at the very least, said "fighting between government forces and Muslim rebels described as 'rogue' by the military." "Or" Moro fighters described as 'terrorists' by the government "instead of" Moro terrorists." (To be fair, one must also ensure that the Moro fighters' own description of the military should also be included.)

But choices are rarely innocent: that attribution has been deemed unnecessary points to just how much the world-views of the military and the reporters covering them have melded.

Another basic journalistic practice, that of allowing the other party to air its side, was, in all of the articles above, casually abandoned. No one bothered to find out what Malik or anyone who could speak for his group had to say. It was no secret, even then, that the MNLF and other independent sources from Sulu had, from the very beginning, maintained

that it was the military's attack on an MNLF camp the previous week, the killing of a Moro youth and other unresolved abuses they blame on the military, and the postponement of the tripartite meeting seven times in a row that, they claim, provoked them to fire back.

There is also no mention that the MNLF has consistently denied allegations that they are sheltering the Abu Sayyaf nor is there any reference to the military's failure to present proof to support its allegation. There is not even a passing mention of the MNLF's claim that, contrary to the AFP's pronouncements, Malik has not been disowned by the group.

There was no mention of all these because those with the MNLF were not even asked. Article after article on the situation lacked the customary "other side". If it was because Malik or anyone who could speak for him couldn't be found - an unlikely possibility - there was no mention that "Malik or any other representative from his group could not be reached as of press time." Interestingly, there was a reference to MNLF chairman Nur Misuari supposedly distancing himself from Malik in an ABS-CBN article. But who was the source? Not Misuari himself but a police superintendent. The other side does have a voice; the media allows the military and the police to speak for them.[5]

This is not to say that the MNLF should be given the final word. Beyond presenting both sides, the media is also expected to verify their claims independently because two contradictory sides can't both be true at the same time. But how can the MNLF's claims even be scrutinized when they are not even given the chance to air their side? That reporters ignored the need for balance, an elementary requirement of any news article, not only betrays complete faith in one side's pronouncements and a lack of any interest in finding out the truth.

Such faith is confounding given the military's record of contradiction. That the military has in the past claimed to be pursuing "terrorists" only to backtrack later is documented. In February 2003, for instance, the military adamantly claimed that the target of their offensives was the Pentagon gang in central Mindanao only to publicly admit later that they were actually going after the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) all along.[6] As early as 2001, National Security Adviser Norberto Gonzales had accused the MNLF of getting cozy with the Abu Sayyaf.[7] But up to November last year, when the AFP again claimed to be fighting the MNLF because it was coddling the ASG, Esperon contradicted his own superiors and subordinates by saying that they had no confirmation to back-up their allegation.[8]

When clashes broke out in the past, the military had repeatedly presented itself as the aggrieved party that was only provoked to fire back in response. Such was the case in February and November 2005. It turned out that, according to locals, the former began when a group of soldiers massacred an entire defenseless family in Kapuk Punggul and the latter started when the military knowingly attacked an MNLF camp. A more systematic and more comprehensive content-analysis of media's

reportage could yield interesting findings. But its coverage of recent developments in Mindanao's long-drawn out war is most likely not an aberration. This is not the first time, for example, that the media had adopted the military's labels. When fighting broke out in November 2005, article after article reported that the military was going after a so-called "Misuari Breakaway Group" - the name the military gave their enemies at that time - even when those who were being chased claimed to be with the mainstream of the MNLF and even as no other faction within the MNLF contested their claim.[9] Question: if Juan wants to call himself Juan but Jose wants to call him Pedro, should the media follow Jose and call Juan not Juan but Pedro instead?

The media's coverage of the barbaric beheading of seven construction workers also raises a lot of issues. The Inquirer devoted its front-page banner article discussing the heart-breaking killing of innocent civilians with simple dreams and on how Muslim leaders roundly condemned the crime.[10] Rightly so. But when was the last time the Inquirer - or any newspaper for that matter - devoted a banner article, or even one on the inside pages, on the beheading of innocent Moro youths blamed on the military? When was the last time reporters solicited the Catholic hierarchy's condemnation of Catholics who are accused of beheading Moros? Or are young Moros' dreams worth less in the calculus of newspaper lay-out? Is their religion irrelevant when the killers are Christian?

Interestingly, with the Abu Sayyaf probably mentioned in more news reports these days than any other group or individual, when was the last time a reporter bothered to interview someone from the group? Given that, in Sulu, the Abu Sayyaf seems to be whoever the military claims it to be and given that those who are labeled Abu Sayyaf, being buried six feet under, could no longer contest the military's claims, did the media have any other independent source of information on the beheadings apart from the military? With all the speculation and the unresolved reports that the Abu Sayyaf is colluding with the military and local warlords, isn't it high time that someone in the media actually tried to find out who they are and what they have to say and why they do the things they reportedly do? Or shouldn't we talk to the "enemies" and just allow the military to be their spokespersons?

Speaking of the Abu Sayyaf, no mention of the group now seems to be complete without the phrase "Al-Qaeda linked." News report after news report point out that the Abu Sayyaf is linked to Osama bin Laden's worldwide network and leave it at that - as though such a claim has once-and-for-all been established and is not to be questioned any longer.[11] Except for the occasional reference to unnamed "intelligence officials," there is often no mention as to who makes the claim and no discussion as to the bases of their claims.

We are never told that such a claim - which is central to the rationale for the "war on terror" - is hardly undisputed. In fact, even the Arroyo government is on record as saying that such a connection has not been adequately proven and the US Congressional Research Service has pointed

out that the government's claims are conflicting.[12] Other researchers have raised a lot of unanswered questions over the allegation. If they are unable to go to the bottom of things, then, at the very least, reporters could add a cautionary line or two saying that the 'al-Qaeda-linked' claim is still the subject of an ongoing debate. Such a disclaimer is rarely found. The phrase "al-Qaeda-linked" has become a permanent, self-perpetuating fixture that is questioned by no one and repeated by everyone.

What explains reporters' cavalier abandonment of the basic tenets of journalism in covering the war? The pressures of the news-cycle? The perils of parachute journalism? What makes among the most skeptical of professions suddenly accept what they are told without any question? Is there an underlying "us versus them" jingoism and prejudice underlying the coverage? Is there a confluence of interests between the military and the reporters "embedded" with them? These issues could be exciting academic questions in the field of media studies.

But it is an academic question only if lives were not on the line. For just as the media played a large part in justifying and rallying public opinion in favor of the invasion of Iraq by their failure - or refusal - to look into Bush's claim regarding Iraq's non-existent weapons of mass destruction - and indeed the New York Times later apologized for this failure, the Philippine media's coverage of developments in the South has been fanning the flames of war.

The unchallenged story-line that the military is purveying and the media is uncritically reporting to the public - i.e. that a "rogue" faction "coddling terrorists" started it all and that the military are necessarily the "good guys" who can do no wrong and who were left with no other choice - is precisely what is required to draw public support for aggressive military solutions to the complex problems in the south. The other possibilities - that hawkish military commanders backed up by other interests with the material incentives to kill the peace agreement have taken over Arroyo's embattled government, that Moros are being driven to a corner because of the atrocities being committed against them - will never be explored because they will not make it to the news. It is not reporters who are dropping bombs in Sulu. But by uncritically covering the war from the perspective of the military, they may be cheering on those who do.#

Endnotes

[1] Manny Mogato, "Fighting Spreads in southern Philippines," Reuters, April 17, 2007

[2] Michael Lim Ubac, Christine O. Avendano, and Julie S. Alipala, "GMA tells AFP: Pursue MNLF rebel," *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, April 18, 2007

[3] Juliet Labog-Javellana, "Beheadings Outrage GMA, Islamic Scholars," *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, April 21, 2007

[4] "Palace defends Sulu offensive vs Moro rebels," *abs-cbn.com*, April

17, 2007; "Beheadings spur AFP to press hunt for Abu Sayyaf," *The Manila Times*, April 21, 2007; "Sulu fighting uproots more than 40,000: WFP," abs-cbn.com, April 19, 2007

[5] "Sulu fighting uproots more than 40,000: WFP," abs-cbn.com, April 19, 2007

[6] Dona Pazzibugan, "MILF, not Pentagon gang, real target, says military," *PDI*, Feb 17 03

[7] "I didn't oust Nur, I was part of the process," *Newsbreak*, December 5, 2001

[8] Roel Pareno, "2,000 Sulu folk flee fighting," *Philippine Star*, November 15, 2005

[9] See for example Dona Z. Pazzibugan, Julie S. Alipala, Edwin O. Fernandez, Nash Maulana, "New fighting erupts in Jolo," *Inquirer News Service*, November 17, 2005, www.inq7.net, Sam Mediavilla, Al Jacinto and Anthony Vargas, "Jolo offensive to drag on until Christmas," abs-cbn.com, November 18, 2005

[10] Julie S. Alipala and Cynthia D. Balana, "Dreams of 2 Zambo Teeners end in Jolo," *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, April 21, 2007

[11] Julie S. Alipala, "9 soldiers, civilian slain in Army base shooting rampage," *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, April 8, 2007; Julie S. Alipala, "Military probes Sulu misencounter," *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, March 5, 2007; Andrew Marshall, "The Philippines' Unending Guerilla War," *Time Magazine*, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1582112,00.html>

[12] Larry Nicksch, "Abu Sayyaf: Target of Philippine-US Anti-Terrorism Cooperation," *CRS Report for Congress*, Jan 25, 2002

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