

# People Power as a Media Experience

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"People Power II" is what Filipinos called the recent upheaval that caused the downfall of their president Joseph Estrada, who had been accused in an impeachment trial of corruption and bribery, and culpable violation of the Constitution.



Because of the non-violent nature of the protest, relying on the weight of numbers and just cause rather than arms, communication undeniably played a key role in mobilising people and in raising awareness of the issues. Unlike the first People Power campaign against Ferdinand Marcos, however, the communication tools with the most impact in the recent change in the Philippines have been the

mass media, and in particular, the electronic media - television, radio and mobile phone text-messaging. In contrast, under the late President Marcos, people had to contend with martial law conditions and lack of press freedom, so they had to use alternative media to disseminate information and conduct their campaigns.

The final struggle against Marcos lasted two and half years from the assassination of his rival Benigno Aquino to his February 1986 overthrow and the accession of Aquino's widow, Cory. The final campaign against Estrada took just over three months, from the time he was accused of receiving bribes from illegal gambling syndicates to his fall on 20 January 2001. The television broadcast of Estrada's impeachment trial provided the first chance that Filipinos had to watch their senators, congressmen and Chief Justice of the Supreme Court in action, as cameras are normally not allowed inside the Houses of Congress and trial courts. There is a joke going around that the reason why Filipinos revolted against Estrada is that they were upset that he had sabotaged what had become the most popular soap opera on Philippine television. Certainly, millions of Filipinos had become addicted to the impeachment trial when it was broadcast on television and radio from December 7 to January 16th -- and it was the senator-judges' vote to suppress vital evidence that effectively ended the trial and sparked the final protests that led to Estrada's fall four days later.

For six weeks, many Filipinos stayed at home from 2:00 to 8:00 p.m. to watch the live trial proceedings or stayed up late to watch the replays until past midnight. Even restaurants and electronic shops that normally displayed sports or M-TV programmes showed the impeachment trial instead. It had even replaced "Rosalinda", the most popular telenovela (imported from Mexico and dubbed into the local language), as the most widely watched programme on TV.

The trial drama had its own larger-than-life characters, including a womanising ex-movie star president who, while not appearing in the trial, acted like a Godfather behind the scenes, the pro-Estrada senators and defense lawyers who were typecast as colourful villains, a feisty

congressman named Joker who was considered the ace among the prosecutors, and the surprise witnesses, especially the women, who gave the most devastating testimonies.

The trial, which many civil society groups viewed with cynicism from the start because the senators sitting as judges were mostly from Estrada's party, gradually became a valuable tool in civic education. The language of the impeachment court became part of national everyday speech, and it was not unusual to hear children addressing each other formally as "Your Honour". People learned just how their senators -especially the ones who should never have been elected in the first place - operated. They learned how presidential power was wielded in the various levels of government bureaucracy, and even in the backrooms of banks, the stockmarket and gambling enterprises. And in the end, they learned that all this power was no match for the power of truth in the testimony of courageous witnesses, the force of conviction of persistent prosecutors and judges, and the vigilance of an informed public.

Throughout the course of the trial, radio was the public's favourite medium for feedback. In the mornings, radio phone-in programmes would be flooded with calls from various kinds of people with strong opinions on proceedings the day before. As in the first People Power uprising, radio was also the most useful piece of media equipment to have at rallies. It provided live coverage of events happening at the same time in various parts of the country, bringing a sense of solidarity among protestors clamouring for good government and social change.

Other mass media such as newspapers were very much in demand, and new weekly titles cropped up, focusing just on the impeachment crisis. The Web sites of the major Philippine newspapers became the main source of news for millions of Filipinos overseas, and instant surveys were conducted on-line to determine how people felt about the crisis.

The most popular newspaper, The Philippine Daily Inquirer, saw its web site soar in popularity, making it one of the top ten news sites in the world, according to an international internet company listing in January. Mobile phones were used almost as a mass medium through multiple text-messaging. Filipinos had adopted "texting" as a substitute for e-mail, as the home ownership of computers was still not widespread and the cost of sending text messages by mobile phone was 10 times cheaper than making a voice call. People used it to send the same message to hundreds of mobile phone numbers in their personal directory. In the Philippines, there are more than 4 million mobile phone owners, and they reportedly generated over 10 million text messages a day during the impeachment crisis. After that fateful Senate vote to suppress evidence, for example, text messages were immediately circulated, asking people to come that night to the EDSA shrine (where the first People Power crowd had gathered to stop the tanks in 1986) and to wear black "to mourn the death of democracy". A day later, the text message that was passed on advised people to gather at the EDSA shrine supposedly because the military needed to see a crowd of one million before they could throw in their support behind the protest.

The rallies at EDSA brought another kind of media experience. The shrine is situated at the corner of two busy highways in Manila, with several levels of elevated expressways on either side. People massed not only at street level surrounding the shrine, but also occupied the expressways, blocking traffic and displaying banners and posters all around. NGOs organised programmes on stage to keep people awake, and recruited the help of activist entertainers who sang or cracked jokes or improvised skits. One Philippine columnist thought it felt like a "theatre-in-the-round". But when it was time for loudspeakers to blast out taped anti-Estrada songs using new lyrics on 1960s hit tunes, then it looked like a disco party, with the crowd singing and dancing to the music. Other times it felt like a prayer rally, with people shouting "Amen" and "Alleluia!" The mood was almost festive, as there were no tanks to face as in the 1986 revolt, and the military this time stayed in their barracks. People brought food and water for others, so rallyists who stayed overnight never ran out of food. Sometimes sandwiches even rained from the expressways to people below, like manna from heaven.

At the EDSA shrine on January 20th, Vice-President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo was sworn in as the new president by the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, in front of around a million people. The Supreme Court had unanimously decided to pave the way for the constitutional succession after the collapse of Estrada's government, invoking the legal doctrine that "the people's welfare is the supreme law."

Like all good soap operas, the story continues. Estrada claims he is still president as he has not formally resigned, but people recognise this as a legal ploy to retain his immunity from suit. There is no public clamour for him to be returned to office and recent surveys have shown a large majority endorsing the new president. The new administration is fully in place, and many leaders of People Power II, including some NGO representatives, have been appointed to government. But the campaign is on for people to remain vigilant after People Power II, so that never again would there be a need to stage a sequel.