

# Write and Wrong

Thursday 23 November 2006, by [FITZPATRICK Liam](#) (Date first published: 14 March 2006).

**Outside of Iraq, the Philippines is the world's most dangerous place for journalists, who find themselves beset by poverty, corruption and murder. Figuring out who's to blame is the hardest part of all.**

Allan Dizon grew up to the shrill squeals of dying pigs. His family home—a humble, jerrybuilt affair of concrete, wood and tin sheeting—stands in the township of Lorega, Cebu, close to a municipal slaughterhouse, but a distant remove from the white beaches and luxury resorts that many people associate with the Philippines' second city. Lorega is a tough area of backyard swineries and poverty, where the chief alleviators of misery are cockfighting, illegal gambling machines and drugs. For a brief time at least, Dizon was one of its more fortunate sons, working as a photojournalist at a local paper called the Freeman. It was an impossibly glamorous job by the standards of the slum, but also a dangerous one. When he was gunned down last November, at the age of 30, Dizon became the fifth Filipino journalist to be killed that month, and one of 15 murdered around the country in 2004. By all accounts, he was a likable man. Ruth Mercado, an editor at the Freeman, smiles sadly when she recalls him: "He was a jolly person, and lively," with a mischievous sense of humor that sometimes got him into trouble. "One day there was flooding in the city," Mercado says. "The chief of police was seen riding piggyback on a citizen, to cross a flooded street, and Allan got that picture. We put it on Page One. The police were so mad, but it's not every day you catch that very moment. As a photojournalist, he had an eye for a good shot."

But Dizon's own story may not be, as it first seems, one of a crusading journalist whose commitment to exposing uncomfortable truths cost him his life. He was an ordinary, hard-up man, who had to support four children from two marriages on a salary of just \$110 a month. One way of earning extra money at the Freeman was to go after exclusives. "You get a bonus for exclusive photos," explains Mercado. For Dizon, the most prolific source of these was Lorega, where he knew how to track down local methamphetamine pushers and illegal gambling operators. According to the Sun.Star Cebu, another local paper, Dizon began the dangerous game of exploiting his underworld knowledge. The Sun.Star Cebu reported that he regularly fed information to the police, enabling them, for example, to successfully raid a drug dealer's house. He then went along on the busts, bagging his exclusive photos in the process. Indeed, Mercado says Dizon's colleagues often wondered how he knew that police operations were going to happen. "Of course," she says, "he did not tell us exactly."

In his last months, Dizon became increasingly scared. According to his widow, Amelita, he "began moving us from house to house every few weeks," eventually taking the family from inner-city Lorega to Mandaue, a suburb on the way to Cebu airport. "He didn't discuss his work with me at all," she says, "but I had the vague feeling that he stepped on the shoes of some people, and then I learned from people at his funeral that he had been receiving a lot of threats." Dizon's precautions proved hopelessly inadequate. On the evening of Nov. 27—a day that poignantly began with him telling his daughter Kyla that he had to go to work if the family was to have enough money for a meal out and a trip to the toy store—he took three bullets from a passing motorcyclist while standing outside a mobile-phone shop. He died half an hour later at the Cebu City Medical Center. A witness later testified that he overheard Dizon pleading with his assailant in the Cebuano dialect before he

was shot: "Don't do it, we're neighbors."

With more than 60 of its journalists killed since 1986 (the year that dictator Ferdinand Marcos was ousted and a free press restored), the Philippines is no ordinary place to practice journalism. In fact, after Iraq, it is the second deadliest country in the world for journalists. It's a sign of just how treacherous the profession has become that fledgling reporters are routinely given a booklet titled *Staying Alive*, published by a nonprofit group called the Freedom Fund for Filipino Journalists. It contains helpful hints such as, "Vary your regular routes and routines so that it is harder to keep track of your activities." It also offers advice for bloody situations, suggesting: "If the journalist has been hurt, bring him or her to the nearest hospital ... report the attack to the journalist's next of kin" and "ensure that the police properly store the evidence."

In Manila and a few provincial capitals like Cebu, the press is much the same as it is in other countries—with codes of ethics, press clubs and standard pay scales. But as the case of Allan Dizon illustrates, no place is immune from the murky interplay of poverty and crime that pervades many areas of Philippine society. Things are especially bad in the cattle towns and fetid jungle outposts, where the cowboys of publishing rule. Many journalists at small rural papers don't receive a salary, but are instead paid piecemeal, earning a few dollars per story (\$10 is roughly the going rate for a front-page exclusive at a provincial daily). To make ends meet, some take on public relations work or sell advertising, placing them in direct conflict with their supposed mission of impartially reporting the news. In some cases, journalists are paid nothing, but are instead expected to use their influence to extort money from local business owners and politicians. Inday Espina-Varona, chairwoman of the National Union of Journalists of the Philippines and editor in chief of the newsweekly *Philippine Graphic*, says, "In the provinces, there's a standing joke: 'When you get hired as a journalist, you won't need a salary. Why? Because you have a press card.'"

With \$60 a month considered a generous wage for a fresh, up-country reporter, the temptation to leverage one's press card is considerable. The system, says Espina-Varona, "is not just saying, 'Let's be a little tolerant of corruption.' It's actually saying, 'This is what you have to do in order to exist.'" Even if there were no economic concerns, it's hard to remain politically aloof in a small town, where everyone knows everyone, and local strongmen—from mayoral candidates to logging magnates to crime bosses—are often eager to win over the local press or silence it. "When you are a journalist living practically on starvation level," Espina-Varona explains, "and you are faced with a fat envelope of cash on the one hand, or a gun on the other, you're going to take the easy way out." Says Sheila Coronel, executive director of the Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism: "There is a lot of corruption, so much so that the public suspects that when a journalist attacks someone, it is because he is being paid."

In an environment like this, even the most determined journalists can be ineluctably drawn into the compromising circles of provincial patronage. Despite the popular perception of journalists as self-serving, streetwise operators, the truth is that many young, idealistic Filipinos entering the profession are simply too ingenuous to cope with the bruising feuds and bloody grudges that pass for local politics in the developing world. It's easy to make enemies in the rural Philippines. Given the wide availability of handguns and hit men, exacting revenge is also a trifle. And assassinating an irksome reporter strikes some media targets as a much easier and cheaper solution than going through the country's notoriously inefficient judicial system. "Some people have the feeling that the only way they can get back at critical or, in their view, unfair reporting is by killing journalists," says Coronel. "They feel that there are no other mechanisms to find redress for their grievances, whether those grievances are legitimate or not."

Encouraging these attitudes is the fact that many reporters who are murdered are not blameless heroes. The victims "are seen not as journalists killed in the line of duty, but as people who had it

coming,” says Letty Jimenez-Magsanoc, editor in chief of the Philippine Daily Inquirer. Suspects have been identified in many cases (including Dizon’s—Edgar Belandres, a swinery owner, is currently on trial for the murder, a crime he denies committing). But only a few have been convicted since 1986. Stung by criticism from organizations like the International Federation of Journalists and Reporters Sans Frontières, the administration of President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo recently set up Task Force Newsmen, a special group under Interior Secretary Angelo Reyes, to look into the killings. But Reyes, the hard-bitten former Chief of Staff of the Philippine Armed Forces, seems determined to downplay the problem. “There is no climate of fear here,” he insists. “These [journalists] who were involved in nefarious activities—if they were killed or threatened because of those activities, and not because they were crusading journalists, then I don’t think that is a crime against freedom of expression. I’m not saying that it’s not a crime. But the point is this: People get mad, no?”

Sometimes, of course, genuinely crusading journalists do get murdered. In 2002, for example, the highly regarded editor of the Zamboanga Scribe, Edgar Damalerio, was gunned down on the street. Famous for writing exposés of local malfeasance, Damalerio had also taken the extraordinary step of personally filing cases against allegedly crooked officials. Since Damalerio’s death, his paper’s publisher, Hernan de la Cruz, says he has hired three bodyguards and has taken to carrying a .45-cal. pistol for protection. These are logical precautions, no doubt, but what about the many journalists who cannot afford such measures? For now, they might have to content themselves with the advice offered on page 28 of *Staying Alive*: “Work out an emergency procedure with your office and your family. They should know what to do in case something happens to you.”

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\* From the Mar. 21, 2005 issue of TIME Asia magazine. With reporting by Nelly Sindayen/Manila.