

**AMIC 25<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference  
Miriam College**

**Marian Auditorium, Miriam College; 9.30 am, 27 September 2017**

**Rethinking Communication in Times of Adversities**

**INAUGURAL SPEECH**

Conchita Carpio Morales  
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Inaugural Speaker

Dr. Crispin C. Maslog, Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Asian Media Information and Communication Centre, Inc. (AMIC); Prof. Ang Peng Hwa, chairman d' honneur of AMIC; Dr. Francisco B. Benitez, president of Philippine Women's University; Mr. Mel V. Velarde, president-CEO of the Asian Institute of Journalism and Communication (AIJC); officials and members of AMIC; my dear journalism and communication students from all over the country; participants to this AMIC 25<sup>th</sup> annual conference; esteemed guests, ladies and gentlemen, a pleasant morning.

I must admit that when I received your invitation to give the inaugural address of your conference, I was a bit reluctant, considering that I am not a communication scholar or a communication specialist like most, if not all, of you.

But your theme of “rethinking communication” intrigued me. Thus, I reviewed your background documents and discovered that you chose this theme because of your intent to question the seeming dominance of western theories and models in the Asian communication setting. In the words of your former chairman Prof. Arun Mahizhnan of the National University of Singapore, *“We have, for far too long, submitted to and submerged ourselves in western perspective, western theories, and worst of all, western validation of our own nascent attempts to create anything Asian.”*

I will not even attempt to examine the soundness and validity of this so-called western bias. It is for the many scholars and students of journalism and communication in this forum to debate upon. Your two-day conference provides a platform for the discussion.

Allow me to raise some “non-theoretical” bases on why there may be a need to rethink communication in the Philippines, and even in the entire Asia-Pacific region.

First, our society has entered the so-called “post-truth” era where truth does not really matter anymore. AMIC seems to agree with this, considering that you have included “Freedom of Expression in a Post-Truth Era” as one of your plenary sessions.

Post-truth—named by Oxford Dictionaries as the word of the year for 2016— means “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.”<sup>1</sup>

**What happens then in a post-truth era when truth becomes irrelevant and elusive? The answer is simple: rational discussions become irrelevant.** This is exactly what is happening now. The glaring evidence can be easily found in your Facebook accounts.

The advent of social media in the country, and elsewhere in the world, saw the birth of post-truth discourses where emotional impact rather than truth is what matters. **There is a lack of demand for truthful and honest discourse.** *Facebook* and *Twitter* have become searing battlegrounds for propagandists, apologists and, more alarming, trolls and bots, who foment discord among a vulnerable, ill-informed (and perhaps also over-entertained) population that acknowledges *Google* as the sole and primary source of information for just about

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<sup>1</sup> <<https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/post-truth>> (last accessed November 21, 2016); *vide* <<https://www.oxforddictionaries.com/press/news/2016/11/17/WOTY-16>> (last accessed November 23, 2016).

everything. Worse, new communication tools are being used to stir up hate towards individuals and groups who are different – politically or culturally. **There is little room for tolerance as pride, prejudice, and bigotry prevail.**

It seems that a big part of the population would rather believe, like, and share fake news sites and echo the baseless assertions of dubious (albeit popular) bloggers. They no longer care to verify the authenticity of information fed to them, unmindful that bloggers, unlike journalists, are not sworn to observe the basic journalism tenets of accuracy and verification.<sup>2</sup>

Given this alarming trend, rethinking communication should mean making your audiences, to use your term, media literate – empowering them to discern, distinguish, and detect false narratives, especially the products of systematic efforts to rewrite history.

Second, you need to rethink communication to fully understand how to make an impact in today's information-overloaded society. How can one craft messages that resonate?

To answer this question, perhaps communication scholars and strategists should carefully study the rhetoric and semiotic of so-called populist leaders around the world. **Does falsehood rather than truth resonate? Do people listen only to what they**

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<sup>2</sup> Bill Kovack & Tom Rosenstiel. The Elements of Journalism-What Newspeople Should Know and the Public Should Expect (Revised and Updated 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition,2014).

**want to hear and believe?** Does the public want to hear something different?

Crafting messages that resonate with the public is very important for the Office of the Ombudsman, which is a constitutional body in the Philippines mandated to fight corruption.

With less than a year to complete my six-year term, I must confess that I have yet to discover the magic formula on how to make the evils of corruption resonate especially among the marginalized. **My theory is that the average citizen still does not fully realize that he or she is the one being robbed by corrupt public officials, by the millions if not billions of pesos, and NOT THE GOVERNMENT.** To put it bluntly in Filipino: *Ikaw po na street vendor, classroom teacher, estudyante, jeepney driver at public health nurse ang pinagnanakawan ng mga korakot, hindi ang gobyerno.*

But is it also possible that the economically marginalized are fully aware of the impact of corruption, but they are not able to cry and protest because they are simply too busy (and dead-tired) eking out a living, fighting to survive, especially for their children?

Many others remain apathetic to corruption and human rights violations, untouched, as they live comfortably anyway – until the next tragedy hits home, a loved one becomes the next

victim. For this, I am reminded of the controversial quotation many attribute to Dante Alighieri's poem, *Inferno*.<sup>3</sup>

*"The hottest places in Hell are reserved for those who in time of moral crisis preserve their neutrality."*

Every peso stolen means less free medicine for indigent patients, less classrooms in remote villages, less farm-to-market roads to transport farmers' produce, and less food packs for victims of disasters and calamities.

In other words, engaging in grand corruption is rewarding one's self big time for depriving or denying the fundamental human rights of others.

Corruption and human rights are intrinsically linked. This makes the messaging even more complex, as **human rights have become incomprehensible or distorted even among those who are sworn to defend it.**

This linkage between corruption and human rights is best described by former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, to wit:

Corruption is an insidious plaque that has a wide range of corrosive effects on societies. It undermines democracy and the rule of law, leads to violations of human rights...This evil

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<sup>3</sup> Many famous personalities such as John F. Kennedy and Theodore Roosevelt have used this famous line and attributed it to Dante. However, Quote Investigator concluded that it did not appear in *Inferno* and further conjectured that the line may have evolved from a "flawed re-interpretation" of Dante's work (refer to <https://quoteinvestigator.com/2015/01/14/hottest/>).

phenomenon is found in all countries –big and small, rich and small – but it is in the developing world that its effects are most destructive. Corruption hurts the poor disproportionately by diverting funds intended for development, undermining a Government’s ability to provide basic services, feeding inequality and injustice, and discouraging foreign aid and investment (underscoring supplied).<sup>4</sup>

A recent study also concluded that when corruption thrives, human rights are denied, and correlatively, when denial of human rights continues, corruption persists.<sup>5</sup> This is one stark reality many countries must now face.

Third, we need to rethink communication because our media audience is now dominated by millennials.

They are digital natives who do not only “consume” media but prefer creating their own content. Their major fear is FOLO – Fear of Life Offline. Erstwhile, their fear was FOMO – Fear of Missing Out.

Preserving the status quo or being a mere passive spectator is out of the question, as their lifestyle and work style is ruled by engagement, creativity, innovation, and change.

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<sup>4</sup> Foreword to the UNCAC publication by the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (2004).

<sup>5</sup> Rafanan, A.T., “Asset Recovery as an International Human Rights Response to Violations of the Right to Corruption-Free Governance: Rethinking the Prospects, Potentials, Predicament and Purpose of an International Anti-Corruption Court” (unpublished) London, 2016.

Perhaps it is about time to let the millennials take the driver's seat in communicating to various stakeholders. It is time to review your existing theories and paradigms if only to check if they still fit the communication behaviors of our young publics.

Last, rethinking communication has become inevitable as many countries in Asia and elsewhere now live in perpetual VUCA.

VUCA what?

VUCA stands for Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, and Ambiguity.

We simply have to read the front pages of our favorite broadsheet to realize how perplexing our world has become: volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous. These four elements do not always happen independently. They can happen simultaneously and, worse, can be self-inflicted because of misgovernance.

The challenge to communicators is to craft communication strategies that can deliver effective messages especially in the worst of times, and craft messages which only reflect the truth and inspire and rekindle hope for the future amidst adversities.

Allow me to end with a quote from the historical novel, *A Tale of Two Cities*, by Charles Dickens more than a century ago, but eerily describes our present world:



*It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way—in short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only.<sup>6</sup>*

I wish you a successful conference. For our foreign guests, I also wish you an enjoyable and memorable stay in the Philippines.

*Maraming salamat po* (Thank you very much)!

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<sup>6</sup> Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*, Book the First, Chapter I.