AMUSED TO DEATH: The Perils of Peddling Noontime Dreams

In his [belated] critique of the television industry, American media scholar Neil Postman called attention to the pernicious effects of TV on the public mind. His 1985 book, “Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business,” describes the dangers of a TV-saturated world, where even politics and governance, religion, education and public information – public affairs in general – are reduced to the idiocy of show business. Specifically, he lamented the loss of rationality and the trampling of reason because the television – that pervasive purveyor of entertainment (or what passes off as entertainment) and fondly called the idiot box, and not for whimsical reasons – has already taken over the governance of day-to-day life.

Postman was of course aiming for hyperbole when he titled his book on TV “Amusing Ourselves to Death.” He had no way of knowing that more than two decades after publishing his book, in a poorer part of globe, some 71 Filipinos would actually die – trampled to death – while trying to get into a TV show. He did not foresee that people could actually die because of a TV program because there was no way that he could have imagined the misery and desperation of a population that would cling to television for their hope and daily survival.

What is now remembered as the ULTRA tragedy, that February 4, 2006 morning, was a tragedy waiting to happen. For four or five days before that grisly Saturday morning, tens of thousands of people were already massed up outside the gates of the Philsports Arena (also called ULTRA) in Pasig City.

Louie Montalbo, a professor at the Ateneo Graduate School of Business, lives right across the ULTRA gate. He saw how the crowd swelled up over the days. He recalls that as early as Wednesday night (February 1), people were already beginning to mass up outside the gates (Other reports say that the waiting outside the gates started on January 30, Monday). By midnight of Friday (February 3), he noted that “the lines that were formed during the past days began to spill over the roads such that those entering the village where I lived could not bring in their vehicles and were forced to walk.” He “assessed that unless something is done[…], people will get hurt.”

Montalbo also recalls that a friend of his “who first saw the crowd thought that they were victims of a fire. They looked that desolate, that desperate.”

That “desolate and desperate” swarm of “old women, children, mothers carrying babies” who slept on sidewalks, braved the cold nights, with little food, and meager toilet facilities, as Montalbo describes them, were waiting to be
allowed inside the stadium for the February 4, 2006 livecast of ABS-CBN’s noon-time show Wowowee. They had been lured there by the promises of big prizes. It was to be the show’s first anniversary, and by way of hoopla, it promised its audience a P1-million cash prize and other give-aways including two house-and-lots, 15 passenger jeepneys, two taxicabs with franchises, and 20 tricycles. Not only that, the show also promised that “early birds” will have raffle tickets to “door prizes” of as much as P20,000.00. Altogether, some P4 million in prizes were to be generously doled out that day.

‘Walang uuwi ng luhaan’

No wonder thousands of people – almost all of them from the impoverished communities within and near Metro Manila – flocked to the venue, with dreams of having a crack at the show’s largesse. And no wonder each one of those who staked out their respective places for several days and nights outside the ULTRA wanted to be among the first to enter the stadium. The program host, Willie Revillame, had reportedly drummed up interest in the anniversary show by promising prizes galore, with the guarantee that “Dito walang matatalo, lagging may pero” (literally, ‘here [in Wowowee] no one goes bust, there is always money’) and that “Walang uuwi ng luhaan” (literally, ‘no one will go home in tears’). Like a super-benevolent philanthropist speaking to a bunch of orphans, he further described the upcoming ULTRA show as “parang Pasko” (‘just like Christmas’) whether one is inside or outside the venue.

By Saturday morning, there was an estimated mass of more than 30,000 people waiting outside the two gates (other estimates put the mammoth crowd at 50,000). But the stadium could only accommodate about half of that number. Outside the gates, people were wedged hard against each other that it was not even possible to lift an arm to take a sip of bottled water, according to accounts. Most of those in the crowd had been camped out for days in the streets, without adequate food, exposed to the elements. Hungry, sleepless and tired, each one was understandably anxious to pass through the gate. What happened at around 6:30 at the stadium gate need not be described anymore.

The early morning stampede would leave 71 fatalities (according to the National Bureau of Investigation report), either crushed against a closed steel gate at the bottom of a slope leading towards the stadium, or trampled underfoot. Of those who died, 69 were women (one of them pregnant). The youngest fatality was four years old; the oldest, 81. The majority of those who were crushed and clamped to death were over the age of 50.

Over 600 others would suffer injuries.

According to official reports, the stampede was triggered by an announcement by the organizers that only the first few hundredst to enter the venue would get tickets, which in turn would entitle the holder to participate in the contests that would pick out the winners of the promised prizes.

On that day, and the succeeding days after, the entire nation watched in horror at the pictures and footage of the tragedy.

Responses

As fatalities started piling up in morgues and the wounded reached the hospitals, local and national authorities, along with the TV network, each responded in character.

ABS-CBN, the producer of Wowowee, promised to shoulder the funeral expenses of the victims and the medical treatment of those injured, even as network management denied that lack of security personnel at the venue caused the stampede.

But it was only by noontime that the cancellation of the anniversary extravaganza would be announced.

President Arroyo for her part ordered a speedy investigation of the tragedy. She required the investigation task force, headed by Marius Corpuz, Interior and Local Government undersecretary for public safety, to submit its report within 72 hours. The president assured the victims’ relatives that “the ends of criminal and social justice will be served and those responsible will be taken account for their negligence or misdeeds.” Later on, in an interview over dZRH radio, she would point out that the stampede showed the organizer’s “inadequacy and negligence”.

Politicians were also quick to contribute to the din of reactions. Senator Miriam Santiago, for example, called for a Senate inquiry “in aid of legislation.”

More remarkable was the public reaction. Unfettered by any corporate or political interests, public reaction went right to the heart of the matter, and perceived with unerring clarity the true cause of the tragedy. In jeepneys and street- corners, in the “text” messages that circulated and the blogs that were posted, critical minds accurately identified the real tragedy, the bigger tragedy in which the carnage at ULTRA is but one in a chain of daily tragedies: the extreme poverty, desperation and hopelessness of the majority of the Filipinos. The sight of so many bodies lined up in the streets and sidewalk “like fish in the market” painfully made people realize the extent of desperation of countless Filipinos who would cling even to the enticements of a Willie Revillame. To a lot of people, what happened at ULTRA proved how inutile the government’s poverty alleviation agenda really was.

Out of the horrified reaction came a cackle of calls for poverty reduction programs, specifically the creation of more jobs.

It likewise made the public realize the extent to which television programs have degenerated, in which the viewing audience has simply become commodities in the ratings war and the mad scramble for commercial sponsorship. Hopes were even voiced that the network gods would reassert and initiate changes in their programming, in the light of the tragic outcome of the anniversary hoopla.

Such realizations are of course dangerous. The Arroyo administration hastily dismissed the attempts to hold the government accountable for any poverty-induced tragedy. A chorus of similar avowals also came from administration-allied politicians, who asked Arroyo critics not to the use the government as a scapegoat for the stampede, or to use the tragedy as a staging-point from which to pounce on the Arroyo administration.

The giant TV network,
caught in a PR nightmare, could only reiterate its avowed noble objective. Host Revillame assured the public that they “just wanted to help and entertain” the poor, and that they did not expect anything like it to happen. Media reports described Revillame as “tearful” when he said these.

**After the mad rush**

By Tuesday, February 7, the Ultra task force submitted its report to the Department of Justice. The task force essentially held the TV network responsible for the tragedy, pointing out the lack of contingency plans for an event where tens of thousands are expected. According to the fact-finding team, the absence of such a plan “borders on irresponsible and incompetent management...at best, to criminal negligence and endangerment leading to the loss of life at worst.”

In a statement that would be quoted again and again by the media, Undersecretary Corpus, the task force head, said that “The decision of offering so few tickets to so many people can be likened to throwing a piece of meat to a hungry pack of wolves.”

The crowd, according to Corpuz, “were exploited, manipulated and treated like animals” by the event organizers. In its own investigation, concluded about a month after the stampede, the NBI recommended to the Department of Justice (DOJ) the filing of criminal charges against 17 persons. Twelve of them are officers and employees of ABS-CBN, including host Revillame. The other five included ULTRA officials.

The NBI report concluded that several network executives led by Executive Vice President Charo Santos-Concio were liable for “reckless imprudence resulting to (sic) multiple homicide and multiple injuries.” It also recommended that administrative charges be filed against Pasig City Mayor Vicente Eusebio for his failure to require ABS-CBN to submit a security plan before issuing a permit. The NBI however absolved the Metro Manila Development Authority and the police, saying the network did not coordinate with the MMDA and that what happened was not a breakdown in peace and order but “a failure in crowd control management.”

The NBI report, naturally, did not please a number of the victims and their families, who wanted ABS-CBN chair and CEO Eugenio Lopez III and Pasig police chief Raul Medina named among the culprits.

It was on the basis of the NBI’s report that the DOJ opened in late March 2006 its preliminary investigation to determine probable cause of criminal negligence.

The Lopez-owned network promptly challenged the DOJ, claiming “institutional bias” on the part of the latter. In its petition before the Court of Appeals, ABS-CBN claimed that the DOJ had already “prejudged the case.” Barely starting on its investigation, the DOJ immediately received a restraining order from the CA. (The order would stay for more than two months. The CA finally decided in late May that the DOJ may continue with its investigation.)

NBI officials, however, knew that the restraining order was just part of the network’s strategy “to bide time” while it negotiated an amicable settlement with the victims.

The authorities had reason to be jittery. Even as the tele-vision network was drowned to the gills in an injuriously-negative PR (and with a damaging lawsuit hanging over it), it was also industriously cultivating the stampede victims themselves. Within a few days of the tragedy, it put up “71 Dreams Foundation.” The foundation will “provide long-term aid not just to the families of those who died in the stampede but also to other less fortunate people,” according to Fr. Carmelo Caluag, member of the ABS-CBN board of directors. Aside from material aid and monitoring, the foundation will also continually give support in the form of livelihood and education. Fr. Caluag emphasized that it will not be a dole-out. He described the foundation’s vision using the trite “teaching them to fish” catchphrase.

Together with this overwhelming concern for the victims and their families, ABS-CBN was also busy crafting an out-of-court settlement. It initiated talks with the relatives of the 71 who perished and 900 other victims to settle civil liabilities.

If successful, this amicable settlement could lead to the dropping of the criminal case against those identified by the NBI as liable for the stampede. Ferdinand Lavin, an NBI official, told the media that “Because most of the victims are marginalized, they would be more than willing to talk things out with ABS-CBN to get financial assistance instead of spending more money to attend hearings at the DOJ.”

**After the weeping**

More than five months have already passed after that stampede. It is perhaps time enough to ask: what has happened since then? What did we gain from all those howls of outrage? What happened to the righteous indignation and the cries for justice, for serious action to end mass poverty and for an end to exploitative, demeaning and dehumanizing TV shows?

By March, Wowowee was back on air. For ABS-CBN and Revillame must obey that old showbiz dictum: the show must go on. Even if it be on the graves of someone’s grandmother. As network executives explained, there was “audience demand” for the re-airing of the show.

A cursory search through the news archives is very telling. The Wowowee tragedy certainly occupied the news in February and March. But by April, not much was being said about it in the national media. By June, the stampede had largely faded from the news pages. Sheila Coronel of the Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism (PCIJ) knew that this was going to happen. In her blog of February 4, she describes the predictability of the news cycle on disasters:

First the story breaks, followed by heartbreaking scenes from the disaster zone, an estimate of the casualty count and then reports on the government’s and citizens’ response. The next phase of the news cycle will likely be the blame-throwing, the attack and the defense. After about a week or 10 days, the story will likely slide out of top of the newscast and the front
Let’s NOT talk about sex

By CAROLIZA TULOD-PETEROS

ARELY A week after classes opened, the Education Department found itself in hot waters - not because of the perennial problems concerning classroom shortage and textbooks, but over a lesson guide on adolescent reproductive health perceived by the catholic church to be promoting premarital sex.

A population education concept, the lesson guides were produced by the Bureau of Secondary Education and Tridev Specialists Foundation, Inc. in cooperation with the United Nations Fund on Population Activities and the David & Lucille Packard Foundation.

In her foreword to the lesson guides, Acting Education Secretary Fe Hidalgo noted that “the reproductive health needs of adolescents as a group have been largely ignored to date by reproductive health service providers.” She argued that “information and services should be made available...to help them understand their sexuality and protect them from unwanted pregnancies, sexually transmitted infections and subsequent risk of infertility.”

It was on this basis that the prototype lesson plans were made, integrating population education concepts in subject areas as Health, Araling Panlipunan, Technology and Livelihood Education, Science, English and Filipino. Called a “positive step” by the UN Fund for Population Activities, the plan to integrate sex education into existing school subjects would have required teachers to discuss issues like overpopulation, the dangers of pre-marital sex and unwanted pregnancy.

According to TRIDEV, the lesson guides were developed through the Youth Educators and Advocates for Reproductive Health (YEAH) project, a participatory campus and community-based adolescent endeavor that aims to make appropriate and friendly sexual and reproductive health information and services accessible.

The project was initially implemented in Parañaque City and Pateros.

What’s the fuss, children?
The Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines (CBCP), through its Episcopal Commission on Family and Life represented by Dr. Angelita Aquirre, Head of Human Life International, was disturbed by the inclusion of sex education in the high schools.

According to Aquirre, “the subject is devoid of full disclosure and truth-telling because it fails to inform the students that condom does not guarantee 100 percent protection from sexually transmitted diseases.”

The catholic bishops objected to the introduction of sex education because, they maintained, this would encourage teenagers to engage in premarital sex rather than remain abstinent. The bishops emphasized that the government had no business teaching the youth about such topics because, they said, sex education is the parents’ responsibility.

What is more objectionable to the catholic hierarchy is that the sex education program discusses artificial contraceptives and condom use, which violates the catholic church’s “teachings on human sexuality.”

In defending the program, acting Secretary Hidalgo stressed that the education department “is not tolerating pre-marital sex.”

“We are doing is telling them the consequences of such acts and what should be done,” she said. “It’s purpose is to educate young adults on “their physical, mental and social well-being.”

Cora Echano, Assistant Chief of the Bureau of Secondary Education said that the CBPC in particular called their attention to pages 50-57 of the module. This is a lesson plan in Science II (Biology). The general objectives include understanding the process of human reproduction and the ill-effects of Sexually Transmitted Infection (STI). It contains a discussion on the human reproductive system, a reading on common forms of sexually transmitted diseases and ways of preventing STIs, stated as "ways of promoting safer sex.”

Ms. Echano for her part, being one of those involved in the project, felt that the reaction over the lesson guides was “very unfair,” and in fact wanted the human right of the students to proper information. She further said that the lesson guides were pilot-tested and the feedback they got from the students were very positive. The parent-teacher associations of the concerned schools were also oriented on the module and they found no harm in the material.

So young and so active

Yet, with or without proper information and education, the Filipino youth are quite sexually active.

In its latest study on adolescent sexuality, the University of the Philippines Population Institute reported that Filipino youth are experiencing their first sexual acts as early as