

# Competing with the Television: The Decline of the Philippine Comics Magazines Industry in the Nineties under the Lenses of Media Displacement Theory through Functional Equivalence

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## ABSTRACT

Widely regarded as a national pastime of the masses, *komiks* has been a part of the cultural fabric of the post-war Philippine society due to its appeal, affordability, and accessibility to the public. However, this popularity would eventually fall into a steady decline by the nineties due to the increased competition brought by the television. Based on primary and secondary sources supplemented by oral history interviews of various comics illustrators, writers, and editors, the difficulty to compete against television was further compounded by internal issues such as the downfall of the Roces monopoly, employee compensation, comics quality, management, and distribution. Using the lenses of media displacement theory through functional equivalence, the proponents look to uncover the causalities behind the dwindling comics magazines industry in the Philippines in relation to the television as the rising entertainment medium for the masses in the nineties. While the mainstream comics magazines industry continued to decline, a consequent independent movement supported by young artists continued the legacy of Philippine *komiks* up to the present day. The study intends to contribute to the enrichment of scholarly works pertaining to the demise of the comics magazines industry.

**Keywords:** *komiks, television, mass media, media displacement, oral history, Philippine comics*

## Introduction

**K**omiks, a colloquial term for comics magazines, was a popular pastime in the Philippines that have continually entertained generations of Filipinos since its initial publications by the end of the Second World War.<sup>1</sup> The colorful prints and captivating stories have manifested

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<sup>1</sup> Although comic strips have existed as early as the twenties with series like *Kenkoy* and *Ponyang Halobaybay* by Antonio Velasquez in *Lidayway Magazine*, comics magazines only appeared in the forties popularized by Don Ramon Roces when he established Ace Publications in 1947.

the feelings, thoughts, and attitudes of the common man. The medium had been deeply ingrained in the Philippine cultural fabric that it was widely considered as the national book.<sup>2</sup> To understand the popularity of the medium, it is necessary to look at the industry, which helped the comics magazines.

Throughout its long history, the *komiks* industry had shown resilience and adaptability to overcome challenges posed by the larger society. In its early decades, the medium had attracted strong opposition from conservative and religious groups who were citing the immorality of the stories they featured.<sup>3</sup> In response to the strong public outcry, the industry employed a self-censorship code patterned after the American Comics Code of the fifties, which set the guidelines and rules for content creation.<sup>4</sup> Even with the early challenges faced by the burgeoning industry, the meteoric rise of the comics-magazine was inevitable. In fact, by the 1950s and 1960s, the most popular comics magazines were already selling an estimated 100,000 copies for their weekly or bi-weekly issues.<sup>5</sup>

Even in the tumultuous times of the 1970s and 1980s, comics magazines continued to magnetize the masses. Restrictive state policies on print media had spurred the industry to employ an expanded self-censorship code. As regulators relaxed restrictions with the industry-wide promise of self-censorship, comics writers and illustrators saw the opportunity to continuously challenge the limitations of their own code.<sup>6</sup> By doing so, they were able to salvage a semblance of independence when it came to content creation. While other platforms such as the television and radio slightly struggled from government control, *komiks* continued to flourish with one-third of the population or twelve million Filipinos as its readership base, endowing the industry of an estimated PhP 80 million annual sales volume by the late 70s. Weekly circulation ran at about two million copies with an estimated pass-on readership of six individuals per copy. By this period, sales and distribution were robust that the industry operated with minimal advertisements and subsidies.<sup>7</sup> Commercial success continued in the following decade resulting in the increase of the number of comics magazines in the market.<sup>8</sup> With more pages to fill and stories to write, the industry was beginning to encounter issues on the production of weekly and bi-weekly titles.<sup>9</sup> Even so, by the end of the decade, *komiks* still retained its title as one of the strongest amongst all entertainment media. In a survey conducted by the Philippine Information Agency (PIA) in 1989, *komiks* was hailed second in terms of reception and popularity as an entertainment medium, beating the other popular platforms such as television, film, newspaper, and magazines.<sup>10</sup>

Contrary to the tremendous growth of the previous decades, the 1990s was a challenging time for the industry as readership and sales dwindled. Based on

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<sup>2</sup> Clodualdo del Mundo and Jose Mari Magpayo, *Philippine Mass Media: A Book of Readings*, (Manila: Communication Foundation for Asia, 1986), p. 179.

<sup>3</sup> Patricia May Bantug Jurilla (ProQuest LLC., 2017), 209-210.

<sup>4</sup> John A. Lent, "Comic Art in the Philippines," *Philippine Studies* 46, no. 2 (1998), p. 241

<sup>5</sup> John A. Lent, *Asian Comics*, (Oxford: University Press of Mississippi, 2015), p. 384.

<sup>6</sup> Soledad Reyes, "The Philippine 'Komiks': Text as Containment," *Southeast Asian Journal of Social Science* 25, no. 1 (1997), 90.

<sup>7</sup> "Komiks: No Laughing Matter," *Expressweek*, August 15, 1979, 39.

<sup>8</sup> Lent, *Asian Comics*, 398.

<sup>9</sup> Del Mundo and Magpayo, *Philippine Mass Media*, 185.

<sup>10</sup> Corazon Villareal, "Ang Industriya ng Komiks: Noon at Ngayon," *Kultura* 4, no. 3 (1990), 47.

oral history interviews, *komiks* content creators point out to the increasing popularity of television or TV as one of the primary reasons for the decline of the comics magazines.<sup>11</sup> Personalities in the industry revealed that the popularization of more technologically advanced forms of entertainment had a direct effect on the comic readership figures. There were also opinions on some internal issues, which could have exacerbated the demise of the industry. In the 90s, the most valuable institutions of *komiks* had been decimated, and by the new millennium, only vestiges of the once revered industry remained. The dearth of scholarly works on the *komiks* industry during this crucial period of the 90s has spurred the researchers to undertake the study. Utilizing primary and secondary sources supplemented by oral history interviews of various comics magazines illustrators, writers, and editors, the proponents seek to understand the causations behind the decline of the Philippine comics magazines industry during the 1990s.

In order to explain the decline of the comics magazine industry and its relation to the rise of television during the 1990s, the researchers anchored the study on the theory of media displacement through functional equivalence. Studies on media displacement have shown that it is possible for a new technology to displace functions of the incumbent medium, without extinguishing the latter's existence.<sup>12</sup> While earlier works have supported the idea of absolute displacement, newer perspectives on the matter have surfaced, accepting the possibility of the old medium continuing to exist, even after the displacement by the new medium.<sup>13</sup> The continuous existence of television, print, and oral tradition, despite the presence of computers are a confirmation of its non-absolute nature.

Amongst the different factors which could affect the displacement process, current literature seems to suggest that functional interchangeability provides the strongest impetus for displacement.<sup>14</sup> Depending on the degree of functional interchangeability, the two communication technologies may be characterized as functionally differentiated or functionally equivalent. When two forms of media exhibit little to no interchangeable functions, they are identified as functionally differentiated. In this case, the old and the new medium are said to have the ability to co-exist wherein both can enjoy stability and growth in production and consumption.<sup>15</sup> On the contrary, similarity of function may lead to the domination of the new and the displacement of the old. This situation, referred to as functional equivalence, hypothesizes that "as new media come along that better serve a particular function, the use of the previously dominant medium that served that function declines".<sup>16</sup> Under functional equivalence, the redundancy of function and content as well as the supremacy of the new technology displaces the incumbent medium.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Oral history interviews were conducted through personal and online methods. The proponents have interviewed the following: Terry Bagalso, Leopoldo Dayo, Oli Roble Samaniego, Roni Santiago, Budjette Tan, and Randy Valiente.

<sup>12</sup> Karen McIntyre, "The Evolution of Social Media from 1969 to 2013: A Change in Competition and a Trend Toward Complementary, Niche Sites," *The Journal of Social Media in Society* 3, no. 2 (2014), 9.

<sup>13</sup> Jay Newell, Joseph Pilotta, and John Thomas, "Mass Media Displacement and Saturation," *International Journal on Media Management* 10, no. 4 (2008), 132.

<sup>14</sup> Hillel Nossek, Hanna Adoni, and Galit Nimrod, "Is Print Really Dying? The State of Print Media Use in Europe," *International Journal of Communication* 9 (2015): pp. 365-385, 367.

<sup>15</sup> Nossek, Adoni, and Nimrod, "Is Print Really Dying?," 367.

<sup>16</sup> W. Russell Neuman, *Media, technology, and society: Theories of media evolution*, (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 12.

<sup>17</sup> Richard Van der Wurff, "Are news media substitutes? Gratifications, contents, and uses", *Journal of Media Economics* 24, no. 1 (2011), 140.

Scholars focusing on the effects of television in reading have already studied the manifestations of the functional equivalence of comics and television. The research conducted by Brown et al. titled *Displacement Effects of Television and the Child's Functional Orientation to Media*, observes that television not only changed the child's pattern of social interaction but also displaced comics as a source of gratification for entertainment in several towns in Scotland.<sup>18</sup> Schramm et al. also explored the dynamics between television and the youth in their book *Television in the Lives of Our Children*.<sup>19</sup> In their analysis of children's exposure to television, the authors reported a significant decrease in comic book reading in television towns compared to radio towns in America. Similarly, Kippax and Maddox's *Children's social behavior in three towns with differing television experience* found consistent findings as Brown et al. and Schramm et al. that television had a detrimental effect on comic book reading in Australia.<sup>20</sup> Interestingly, Kippax and Maddox also concluded that while TV resulted in the decrease in comic book reading, it ironically increased a child's propensity to read books. The study underlines that there are multiple ways to understand the uses of television as a medium for education and entertainment.<sup>21</sup>

In this regard, the present study looks into the demise of the comics magazines industry resulting in the displacement of *komiks* as a medium for entertainment by television. The proponents argue that by the 90s, TV had become functionally equivalent to *komiks* in terms of providing entertainment to the public. In addition, TV's more superior technology had clearly outmatched the comics magazines in the realm of recreation. Furthermore, the inability of *komiks* to differentiate itself from the competition posed by the television due to internal issues on matters such as management and labor also contributed to the collapse of the once famed industry. The study will not divulge into films or television shows adapted from comics as a way to compete with newer forms of media. Instead, the paper will focus on the comic industry's growth and decline and comics' functional equivalence to television as recounted by illustrators, comic writers, and publishers.

### Functional Equivalence: Komiks and Television

In a span of several decades from the 1950s to the 1980s, the medium was virtually unchallenged as a platform for entertainment and recreation. However, the growing television viewership of the nineties posed a serious threat to the supremacy of the comics magazines. Industry illustrators, writers, and editors have attributed the decline of the comics magazine to the introduction of more technologically advanced entertainment platforms such as the TV and TV-dependent consoles such as the family computer, Nintendo

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<sup>18</sup> J. R. Brown, J. K. Cramond, and R. J. Wilde, "Displacement effects of television and the child's functional orientation to media," *The uses of mass communications: Current perspectives on gratifications research* (1974), 93-112.

<sup>19</sup> Wilbur Schramm, Jack Lyle, and Edwin B Parker, *Television on the Lives of Our Children* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1961).

<sup>20</sup> John Murray and Susan Kippax, "Children's Social Behavior in Three Towns with Differing Television Experience," *Journal of Communication* 28, no. 1 (1978), 19-29.

<sup>21</sup> John Murray and Susan Kippax, "From the Early Window to the Late Night Show: International Trends in the Study of Television's Impact on Children and Adults," *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* 12, no. 1 (1979), 265.

Entertainment System, and Super Nintendo Entertainment System.<sup>22</sup> The content creators of the 90s believed that increased competition with television as a medium of entertainment had instituted a mass consumer shift from *komiks* to TV. The effects of the television boom were so devastating that by the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it rendered the institutions of traditional comics magazines extinct. It had seemed that *komiks*' ability to stir readers with their illustrated short stories and serialized tales stood no match to the content variety and frequency offered by the TV. As a result, *komiks* being the incumbent medium was displaced by the more technologically advanced television in the realm of entertainment.

Even as the displacement process came during the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the industries of comics magazines and TV were first introduced during the post-war years. The pioneering comics magazines were established during the late forties<sup>23</sup> while initial local television broadcasts were transmitted in the fifties.<sup>24</sup> In their early years, the growth of *komiks* clearly outpaced TV. With a few centavos, readers may purchase or rent out copies of the comics magazines. On the contrary, televisions were considered expensive appliances reserved for the wealthy. Back in those days, a consumer could buy *komiks* at around 25 ¢<sup>25</sup> while the cheapest television sets in the similar period would have been priced at PhP 2,400.<sup>26</sup> The popularity of *komiks* over television could be further understood by looking at the large gap between TV prices against the prevalent daily minimum wages of the period, which spans only from PhP 2.50 to PhP 4.00.<sup>27</sup> Thus, while TV and comics magazines coexisted during the period, both continued to thrive because the two mediums catered to different audiences based on cost: television for the wealthy and *komiks* for the masses.

In terms of content, *komiks* was also ahead of TV. In the early years of television in the country, there was a shortage of programs and shows because of extremely high production costs. TV stations were reluctant to fund the production of in-house content due to the absence of advertisers and low viewership figures.<sup>28</sup> As a result, TV programming was confined to only a few hours per day. Local TV stations were outsourcing content from abroad, which were not received warmly by the public. Also in this period, TV reception only accommodated areas within the 50-mile radius from Manila.<sup>29</sup> Elsewhere, televisions were considered as practically absent.<sup>30</sup>

The challenges affecting television on accessibility and appeal were not felt by the comics magazines industry. Accessibility was not an issue since the comics magazines had a wide distribution network all around the

<sup>22</sup> Randy Valiente, interview by authors, 28 July 2018.

<sup>23</sup> Lent, *Asian Comics*, 384.

<sup>24</sup> Orly Mercado and Elizabeth Buck, "Media imperialism in Philippine television," *Media Asia* 8, no. 2 (1981), 97.

<sup>25</sup> Crispin Maslog, *Philippine Communication Today*, (Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 2007), 207.

<sup>26</sup> Crispin Maslog, *Philippine Mass Communication: A Mini-History*, (Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 1990), 23.

<sup>27</sup> Jurilla (ProQuest LLC., 2017), 225.

<sup>28</sup> Mercado and Buck, "Media imperialism in Philippine television," 97.

<sup>29</sup> Ramon R. Tuazon, "Philippine Television: That's Entertainment," [ncca.gov.ph](https://ncca.gov.ph) (National Commission for the Culture and the Arts), <https://ncca.gov.ph/about-ncca-3/subcommissions/subcommission-on-cultural-disseminationscd/communication/philippine-television-thats-entertainment/>.

<sup>30</sup> The sixties would be a better decade for TV as it was able to reach several milestones such as the establishment of the first provincial station in Cebu (1961) and the introduction of broadcast in color (1965).

Philippines.<sup>31</sup> Logistics was excellent that the industry was able to deliver weekly and bi-weekly titles to every nook and corner of the country. In addition, *komiks* widely appealed to the general public because of its relatable stories. Although the industry drew heavily from American titles, writers and illustrators were able to inject local myths, legends, and cultures into their creations.<sup>32</sup> Because of the obvious contrasts between the television and comics magazines, a state of functional differentiation between the two mediums occurred - allowing both to mutually exist at the same time.

In the decades preceding the 90s, the larger political and social environment exerted a strong influence on the two industries. The declaration of martial law and the implementation of strict censorship rules challenged both platforms. In the case of television, private stations were sequestered and converted to propaganda machines for the regime.<sup>33</sup> On the other hand, *komiks* evaded much of government scrutiny by enacting a revised comics code.<sup>34</sup>

Even with government control, television enjoyed a growing audience fueled by lowering costs of TV sets.<sup>35</sup> This was further bolstered by the dictatorship's electrification programs and large scale duty free importation of black and white television sets for the countryside.<sup>36</sup> The growing viewership is evidenced by TV ownership statistics which shows that the 1975 TV owning households numbering 756,000 doubled in 1985 with 1.5 million.<sup>37</sup> During this period, TV's large expansion was overshadowed by the *komiks* industry's stellar performance. However, by the following decade, TV would finally edge out *komiks* as the prime entertainment medium of the country.

The television boom of the 1990s was caused by several factors. First, the breaking of the government monopoly in favor of liberalization of the TV industry had been one of the key factors for the television boom. In the late eighties, the newly instituted Aquino government supported the liberalization of ownership and content in the industry.<sup>38</sup> Sequestered stations were returned to their respective owners, and requirements for community antenna television services were relaxed.<sup>39</sup> Because of these changes, the TV industry grew to over 137 national and provincial stations with some 300 cable operators by the end of the 90s.<sup>40</sup> Second, the highly competitive atmosphere also propelled the industry to greater heights. The five major national TV channels were closely

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<sup>31</sup> Jurilla (ProQuest LLC., 2017), 253.

<sup>32</sup> Reyes, "The Philippine 'Komiks': Text as Containment," 85.

<sup>33</sup> Ricardo Manapat, "*Some are smarter than others: the history of Marcos' crony capitalism*," (Manila: Aletheia, 1991), 129-131.

<sup>34</sup> Soledad Reyes, "Romance and Realism in the Komiks," in *A History of Komiks in the Philippines and Other Countries* (Quezon City: Islas Filipinas Publishing Co., Inc., 1985), pp. 47-52, 50.

<sup>35</sup> Manapat, "*Some are smarter than others*," 130.

<sup>36</sup> International Trade Administration, *Country Market Survey: Communications Equipment Philippines*, (Washington D.C.: US Department of Commerce, 1981), 11.

<sup>37</sup> United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, *UNESCO Statistical Yearbook*, (Paris: UNESCO Publishing and Bernan Press, 1999), IV-227.

<sup>38</sup> Amos Thomas, *Imagi-nations and borderless television: Media, culture and politics across Asia*, (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2005), 85.

<sup>39</sup> Office of the President of the Philippines, "Executive Order No. 171 s. 1987, Regulating the Operation of Cable Antenna Television (CATV) Systems in the Philippines, and for Other Purposes," Manila: Presidential Management Staff.

<sup>40</sup> Ramon R. Tuazon, "New Media Create Their Own Niche," [ncca.gov.ph](https://ncca.gov.ph/about-ncca-3/subcommissions/subcommission-on-cultural-disseminationscd/communication/new-media-create-their-own-niche/) (National Commission for the Culture and the Arts), <https://ncca.gov.ph/about-ncca-3/subcommissions/subcommission-on-cultural-disseminationscd/communication/new-media-create-their-own-niche/>

competing for market viewership. While ABS-CBN and GMA were pioneers in bringing in new technologies such as satellite programming in 1991, other players were focusing on revolutionizing content like RPN's introduction of the 24-hour program broadcasts.<sup>41</sup> Third, in terms of content, TV stations were exploring ways in order to attract the general public. For instance, TV channels have capitalized on the growing popularity of TV amongst the younger demographic that they have heavily invested on soap operas, telenovelas and situational comedies.<sup>42</sup> The improvements on the production side had a definite impact on the demand side of the industry, with consumer purchases numbering around 500,000 TV sets each year.<sup>43</sup> These impressive figures are reinforced by the 1994 Functional Literacy and Mass Media Survey of the National Statistics Office, which shows that amongst all of the mass media, TV recorded the highest expansion numbers with an 8.7% increase in viewership from 1989 to 1994.<sup>44</sup> In the same survey, comics suffered the largest pullback amongst all of the print media with a contraction of 18.4%. Survey analysis had concluded that Filipinos were already starting to move to television at the expense of printed media. The growth of television as a mass medium continued until the latter part of the decade, with an estimated 84% of Filipinos watching television by 1997.<sup>45</sup>

By the 90s, TV had become functionally equivalent to the comics magazines. The competitive advantage of appeal, accessibility, and affordability enjoyed by *komiks* in the previous decades have slowly diminished. Television's appeal had already outpointed *komiks* by producing content, which were highly popular for the general masses. *Teleseryes*, soap operas and sitcoms challenged the supremacy of *komiks*. Just like the stories featured in comics magazines, television content also featured themes and characters who were relatable to the mass audience. In addition, TV programs offered consumers with a substitute which requires less effort. Content coursed through television screens are easier to digest relative to reading as it requires minimal mental effort.<sup>46</sup> While comics magazines already possessed mesmerizing visuals from its colorful illustrations, TV had raised the bar by providing the same colored images but with the addition of movement and sounds. Furthermore, TV provided a variety of frequent daily content which *komiks* could not match. In terms of accessibility, while *komiks* had comfortably utilized its wide distribution network for decades, the TV industry was also moving slowly towards creating necessary infrastructures, which would bring network television across the country. The increase of provincial viewership and provincial cable providers throughout the years are testaments of TV's success in the improvement of its distribution channels.<sup>47</sup> Lastly, although *komiks* remained affordable, TV prices also dropped to levels which were already economical for the people. The idea of a one-time purchase of a TV set which is the gateway to unlimited local programs perhaps

<sup>41</sup> "New Vision 9: Your 24-Hour Service Network," *Radio Philippines Network* (Quezon City: Radio Philippines Network, 1989).

<sup>42</sup> Nestor Torre, "TV Entertainment Programs in the Philippines: Opportunities and Limitations," in *AMIC Seminar on TV Content: the Asian Way* (Asian Media Information and Communication Seminar, 1998), [https://dr.ntu.edu.sg/bitstream/10220/2651/1/AMIC\\_1998\\_SEP2-4\\_19.pdf?fbclid=IwAR2RDvSJfvoxm36BhSxSxap4eLC6DZegmMIHnTMcTX8B84VnGsI\\_sCfzGn4,4](https://dr.ntu.edu.sg/bitstream/10220/2651/1/AMIC_1998_SEP2-4_19.pdf?fbclid=IwAR2RDvSJfvoxm36BhSxSxap4eLC6DZegmMIHnTMcTX8B84VnGsI_sCfzGn4,4).

<sup>43</sup> Sheila Coronel, "The Media, the Market, and Democracy: the Case of the Philippines," *The Public* 8, no. 2 (2001): pp. 109-125, 117.

<sup>44</sup> National Statistics Office, *1994 Functional Literacy, Education, and Mass Media Survey FLEMMS, Vol. 2 Mass Media* (Manila: National Statistics Office, 1996).

<sup>45</sup> Coronel, "The Media, the Market, and Democracy," 117.

<sup>46</sup> Judith Van Evra, *Television and Child Development* (Oxfordshire, United Kingdom: Routledge, 2004), 147.

<sup>47</sup> Coronel, "The Media, the Market, and Democracy," 117.

became more attractive to the public compared to purchasing cheap comics magazines once or twice a week.

According to the theory of media displacement, the functions of an existing medium may be replaced by a new medium.<sup>48</sup> In the case of the Philippines during the 1990s, the rise of television as the new medium of entertainment became the reason for the *komiks* industry to gradually decline. From this point, the displacement of *komiks* due to the popularity of the television because of the functional equivalence of the two as entertainment mediums triggered an impulse for the comics magazines industry to compete according to the individuals that were interviewed for the study. With the desire to bring back readers, *komiks* tried to borrow popular elements from the television industry. More particularly, it looked at the popularity of Japanese animated series in Philippine TV as an inspiration. The comics magazines saw the potential to increase readership numbers most especially in the younger market segments. *Komiks*, which once featured illustrations more akin to their American counterparts, began to take the form of the Japanese animations or anime. Characterized by exaggerated facial elements and expressions, comics titles with anime-esque qualities began to appear in circulation.<sup>49</sup> A popular example is *Combatron* of *Pilipino Funny Komiks* or *Funny Komiks* illustrated and written by Berlin Manalaysay. The smash hit title was heavily influenced by the Japanese character *Rockman*.<sup>50</sup> A handful of illustrators also followed suit in injecting Japanese anime undertones to the Filipino comics magazines. Aside from *Combatron* in *Funny Komiks*, Atlas Publishing Company Incorporated or Atlas also produced numerous Japanized titles such as *Jolly Kids Komiks* according to its former editor-in-chief Terry Bagalso.<sup>51</sup> However, the campaign achieved very little to capture the attention of the youth. There was a difficulty for *komiks* to compete against television anime shows, since the latter had movements and sounds as additional dimensions. In addition, veteran *Funny Komiks* illustrators Roni Santiago and Leopoldo Dayo opined that the deviation of style from the conventional illustration of comics magazines, may have alienated some of the readers who were already familiar with the traditional *komiks* drawings.<sup>52</sup>

Another strategy that the industry utilized is the strengthening of cash cow comics magazine titles. For Atlas, it placed significant effort to promote its *True Horoscope Komiks* catering to teenagers and adults. According to Bagalso, there were instances when the said comics magazine would reach chart topping weekly circulation numbers of about 300,000.<sup>53</sup> In fact, writer and illustrator Randy Valiente recalled that it was *True Horoscope* which garnered the largest circulation figure in the history of *komiks* in the country.<sup>54</sup> On the other hand, the sister company of Atlas, Graphic Arts Services Inc. or GASI also exerted effort to capture the adult male market by releasing naughty comics magazines which were filled with sexual innuendos. In an interview with *komiks* writer Samaniego, it was the pressure from the success of *True Horoscope* that spurred

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<sup>48</sup> Newell, Pilotta, and Thomas, "Mass Media Displacement and Saturation," 132.

<sup>49</sup> Randy Valiente, interview by authors, 28 July 2018.

<sup>50</sup> Armin Collado, dir., "Funny Komiks," narr. Jessica Soho. *Kapuso Mo, Jessica Soho*, GMA Network, Quezon City, 12 Oct. 2014.

<sup>51</sup> Terry Bagalso, Zoom conversation with authors, 16 January 2021.

<sup>52</sup> Leopoldo Dayo, interview by authors, 7 November 2015.

<sup>53</sup> Terry Bagalso, Zoom conversation with authors, 16 January 2021.

<sup>54</sup> Randy Valiente, interview by authors, 28 July 2018.



GASI content creators to push titles under the eighties' *Seksing Tapusan Komiks*. The material was not as bold as *bomba* or smut from the previous decades, instead it focused on lighter fare adult jokes.<sup>55</sup> While there was an effort to build strong titles, demand for these *komiks* eventually also declined together with the other titles.<sup>56</sup>

### The Troubled State of the Comics Magazine Industry in the Nineties

The plight of the comics magazines industry in the 90s was heavily influenced by the widening role of television in entertaining the masses. Technological advancements in terms of visuals and sounds, as well as the lowering costs of television, brought in increased ownership and viewership ensuring the displacement of *komiks* as the nation's favorite pastime. The inability of *komiks* to effectively compete against the threat of television was further hampered by numerous issues that confronted the industry at that time. According to the *komiks* content creators, one of the primary matters which could have affected the comics magazines' performance in the nineties was the death of Don Ramon Roces, the man synonymous to the industry itself. Essentially operating as a monopolistic industry since its inception in the post-war years, Roces, the grand old man of Philippine *komiks*, was responsible for the transformation of the medium into a multimillion-peso industry during its heydays. His initial pre-war ventures into newspaper and magazine printing had led him to explore the uncharted business of comics publishing, starting with the well-known Ace Publications or Ace in 1947. The booming success of Ace led to the creation of other publishing houses by Roces, such as GASI in 1961, and Pilipino *Komiks*, Inc. in 1964, which was later renamed as Atlas.<sup>57</sup> The two enterprises functioned as umbrella companies with several printing presses operating under their auspices. Comic titles such as *Aliwan*, *Pinoy Komiks*, *Tagalog Klasiks*, and *Pilipino Funny Komiks* were some of the best-selling comic books of the Roces publishing empire.<sup>58</sup> The two publishing companies are considered as the pillars of the comics magazines industry, as Atlas and GASI had net sales of PhP 86,117,000 and PhP 84,841,000, respectively in 1987.<sup>59</sup>

The strength of the Roces monopoly emanates from its owner's publishing pedigree as well as the monopoly's deep capital resources and large production capacity. Roces had descended from a family of publishers with his father Alejandro Roces who was considered as the father of Philippine journalism and also known for developing a chain of multilingual newspapers during his lifetime.<sup>60</sup> This endowed Ramon Roces with an unparalleled knowledge of the industry, as well as access to the family's printing machines, materials, and supply and distribution systems. The sheer size of his publishing empire is also a factor for his success, as his factories would often operate in economies of scale. While his smaller competitors struggled to make ends meet, Roces had the ability to sell his products cheaply into the market, since his companies are functioning at optimum levels of production. His thriving business also banked on employing the best possible talents for stories and illustrations. Having deep capital pockets had enabled Roces to outmatch compensation and benefits

<sup>55</sup> Oli Roble Samaniego, interview by authors, 9 July 2018.

<sup>56</sup> Samaniego, interview.

<sup>57</sup> Cynthia Roxas and Joaquin Arevalo Jr., *A History of Komiks of the Philippines and other Countries* (Quezon City: Islas Filipinas Publishing Co., Inc., 1985), 21.

<sup>58</sup> John A Lent, *Asian Comics* (Oxford: University Press of Mississippi, 2015), 57.

<sup>59</sup> *Philippines' Best 1000 Corporations* (Manila: Mahal Kong Pilipinas Foundation, 1987), 62, 339, 349.

<sup>60</sup> D. H. Soriano, *The Roces Family Publishers (With a History of the Philippine Press)* (Quezon City: Islas Filipinas Publishing Co., Inc., 1987), 50.

provided by other smaller publishing firms, which resulted in illustrators and artists flocking towards the Roces-established publishing companies. Based on the experience of Santiago, illustrators and writers' talent fees always came on time and sometimes earlier than the schedule.<sup>61</sup> In addition to that, regular workers received high wages and attractive benefit packages. The talented pool of employees has kept Roces-produced comics magazines competitive and marketable for the general public. Being the strongest force in the industry, Roces often outlived his competitors such as PSG Publications and in some cases offered to absorb closing companies like CRAF Publications and *Sosayati*.

The grand old man of Philippine *komiks* is highly respected in the industry. Although he operated a monopolistic enterprise, he was beloved by his employees. His death in 1993 cast a cloud of uncertainty for the industry, which had lost a patron. In the aftermath of his death, his businesses were split between his family members and private buyers.<sup>62</sup> According to some writers, illustrators and editors, the passing of Don Ramon Roces left a void in the industry which could not be filled by any of his surviving kin or by the new industry entrants. While GASI continued to be under the Roces family, their other gem Atlas was sold to the Ramos' National Bookstore in 1996.<sup>63</sup> According to Atlas' Bagalso, the change of command after the death of Don Ramon Roces really had a profound impact on the company. Even as the old employees were absorbed, there were noticeable differences in compensation and benefits. She described the shift to new management as going back to zero for the employees wherein everybody had to restart with lower wages and benefits. Reminiscent of the earlier Roces era, Bagalso praised the ability of the company to provide adequate compensation and benefits to its employees.

The functional equivalence of *komiks* and television was also influenced by factors other than the death of Don Ramon Roces. For instance, the increased demand of *komiks* had resulted in a sharp increase of comics magazines in the eighties.<sup>64</sup> The saturation meant that there was the challenge of filling weekly and bi-weekly issues with stories and illustrations. Writing about the state of the industry in the eighties, Del Mundo observed that the industry which was once fueled by creative passion had been transformed into a trade focused on merely surviving. As production was lagging behind consumer demand, the prolific writers and illustrators of the industry often operated in hectic schedules. The likes of Elena Patron, Nerissa Cabral, and Gilda Olvidado were said to each work around fourteen stories simultaneously during the peak of the comics magazine craze. The issues on having an overloaded industry snowballed to larger problems. To match the growing demand, the industry increased comics magazine publications, which meant companies had to hire more writers and illustrators to fill comic book pages. This came as an additional cost to the publications, as more workers meant larger expenditures for employee compensation. With the absorption of a larger workforce, companies resorted to lowering talent fees, which in turn led to the unhealthy practice of some people in the industry wholesaling contracts with the different publications, only to turn them over to young and inexperienced writers and editors for a lower pay as discussed by Santiago:

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<sup>61</sup> Roni Santiago, Zoom conversation with authors, 18 February 2021.

<sup>62</sup> Terry Bagalso, Zoom conversation with authors, 16 January 2021.

<sup>63</sup> Bagalso, Zoom conversation.

<sup>64</sup> Lent, *Asian Comics*, 58.

It was the influx (of content which affected) the quality of work. Because when the greats like Nestor (Redondo) left, there were other illustrators who had a lower quality of work than those of Nestor. So their works become commercialized, a sort of mass production. Because what they do, one person an illustrator for instance will continuously get comic scripts, then he will hire new illustrators so that his only job will be to layout then he will again ask someone to ink. So that was the case. It was really a case of outsourcing, comics quality suffered during those times. (Translated by the authors)<sup>65</sup>

As the system rewarded the writers and illustrators by the volume and not by the quality of their work, comics content creators had to conform to working on several stories at the same time just to get by. In some cases, the limited amount of time and the volume of work proved to be detrimental to the quality of the comics magazines. Describing the negative effects of a saturated industry, Santiago narrates:

Sometimes you'll see when you compare the works before and those made during that time [nineties], sometimes you'll see only faces [per comics frame], then it is just filled with dialogue. There is no detail, sometimes you'll only see a [drawing of a] house then there's a dialogue positioned near the windows, I mean the quality of the old works have disappeared, the quality of komiks really suffered.<sup>66</sup>

The dwindling sales of the nineties compounded the issue of employee compensation as comics publications struggle to work around their operational budgets. Former editor-in-chief Bagalso recounted that she was torn between obeying budgetary constraints imposed by the top management and providing higher pay to the talents:

As much as possible, I wanted to give them a higher rate. For example, because there is what you call Class A1, A2. It depends on the skill and talent of the writer and illustrator and if I see that their work is good and beautiful sometimes I increase their rates, I try to alter their pay because I am concerned. Now, when the top [management] sees it, in accounting, they'll usually call on me and say "why do we have a lot of expenses in komiks have you been increasing their rates?" That is my problem because I am concerned about our artists because they are underrated. I try to keep their pay high but I am constrained by the management because of the financial status of the company. That was my problem, I was concerned about management, I was concerned for the writers and illustrators. (Translated by the authors).<sup>67</sup>

Declining sales numbers of the nineties and the shifting preference of the general public towards television took a toll on the industry. In extreme cases, some publishing companies even had to resort to paying their employees through postdated checks which could be encashed weeks or months after. This had led to the practice of check rediscounting or informally giving up the ownership of the postdated check to a lender, to encash it on an earlier date with a twenty to thirty percent deduction. Illustrator Valiente had detested this practice during his time at GASI saying that it was a dark period in komiks history.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Roni Santiago, Zoom conversation with authors, 18 February 2021. All of Santiago's interviews are translated.

<sup>66</sup> Santiago, Zoom conversation.

<sup>67</sup> Terry Bagalso, Zoom conversation with authors, 16 January 2021.

<sup>68</sup> Randy Valiente, "I LOVE FILIPINO KOMIKS INDUSTRY," *Malikhaing Komiks* (Randy Valiente, April 29, 2007), <http://usapang-komiks.blogspot.com/2007/04/i-love-filipino-komiks-industry.html>.

Attractive employment opportunities abroad and in other industries have also been detrimental to the comics magazines industry. In an interview with Valiente, he identified mismanagement of talent through unfair wages as the crucial factor, which has forced the illustrators and writers to leave their careers in the local *komiks* scene, and venture to more lucrative work options. Opportunities to work for the internationally acclaimed DC and Marvel Comics and the up-and-coming animation industry in the US have lured talented artists out of the industry. In the process, the Philippine *komiks* scene had lost the likes of Lan Medina, Rey Macutay, and Crim Rivera to American companies.<sup>69</sup> On the other hand, *komiks* artists also migrated to other platforms such as television, movies, and newspapers. For instance, veteran writers Nerissa Cabral and Gilda Olvidado transferred to television and film<sup>70</sup> while the legendary Roni Santiago opted to stay with the newspaper.<sup>71</sup> With the migration of veteran talent abroad and in other industries, waves of fresh talent continued to be absorbed in the industry during the nineties according to Bagalso and Santiago.<sup>72</sup>

Issues on distribution also contributed to the demise of the comics magazines according to some people who worked in the industry. In a presentation delivered in the first Philippine Komiks Congress in 2007, former Atlas General Manager Deo Alvarez identified two crucial events, which he believed crippled the network of distribution of the industry during the nineties. According to Alvarez, unrest in Mindanao and the eruption of Mount Pinatubo negatively affected sales and gross profit of the industry in the nineties by at least 30%.<sup>73</sup> Bagalso reiterated the devastating effect of the Pinatubo blast to the decline of comic magazine circulation in the northern regions, most especially in the affected areas like Zambales and Pampanga. For Bagalso, the circulation of Atlas comics magazines in those areas never recovered. She also added that the American naval base pullout from Subic in 1992 contributed to the thinning of comics circulation in the area. Prior to the Americans leaving Subic, locals and American servicemen frequented the pen pal sections of the comics magazines.<sup>74</sup> Samaniego also shares in the observation that the *komiks* industry was experiencing issues when it comes to distribution in the nineties. He believes that the inefficient collection system and the inability of distribution agents to remit payment had severe effects on the financial health of the industry. The publishing houses had a difficult time in managing the payment of monthly fixed costs such as electricity, water, and salaries because of the non-remittance of collections.<sup>75</sup>

In the end, the commercialization of the TV paved the way for the displacement of the comics magazines as one of the nation's prime entertainment media. Throughout the nineties, the comics magazines industry's attempt to compete against the new medium achieved minimal success because the industry itself was facing several issues and challenges which it could not resolve. The

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<sup>69</sup> Randy Valiente, interview by authors, 28 July 2018.

<sup>70</sup> Valiente, interview.

<sup>71</sup> Roni Santiago, Zoom conversation with authors, 18 February 2021.

<sup>72</sup> Terry Bagalso, Zoom conversation with authors, 16 January 2021.

<sup>73</sup> Gerry Alanguilan, "Thoughts On the Komiks Congress #5," *Komikero Comics Journal*, March 2, 2007, <https://web.archive.org/web/20070803081116/http://gerry.alanguilan.com/archives/23>.

<sup>74</sup> Terry Bagalso, Zoom conversation with authors, 16 January 2021.

<sup>75</sup> Oli Roble Samaniego, interview by authors, 9 July 2018.

troubled state of the comics magazines in the 90s manifested itself in the declining readership base and circulation figures. By the new millennium, the downfall of the industry was already apparent as two of its pillars, GASI and Atlas, were struggling to survive. GASI slowly and eventually started to pull out comics magazine titles and instead focused on other printed materials.<sup>76</sup> On the other hand, Atlas which was the last surviving institution of the traditional comics magazines finally closed its doors in 2005.<sup>77</sup>

### The Emergence of Independent Komiks

In the period of struggle of the traditional comics magazines in the nineties, there was a consequent brewing movement in the comic book shops of Platinum Comics in Robinsons Galleria and Cats in Greenhills Virra Mall. Inspired by the breakthrough of Aster Comics which is considered as the first Filipino comic book published in the United States, comic book enthusiasts began to ponder on the possibility of self-publishing their creative masterpieces.<sup>78</sup> Jerry Alanguilan, Budjette Tan, Arnold Arre, Jay Anacleto and Carlo Vergara were some of the prominent figures in the nascent indie movement during the nineties. With the encouragement of the Filipino co-founder of the famed Image Comics in the US, Wilce Portacio, independent comic creators banded together in order to form the legendary *Alamat* Comics in 1994.<sup>79</sup> Even as their initial foray into self-publishing seemed to be a herculean task due to minimal resources, they had been successful in publishing several titles and capturing a niche market by the end of the decade. The movement has already transformed from their humble beginnings of mere photocopying or risographing their own works, to producing comic books in full color. It has attracted a growing number of fans each year in Komikon, a far cry from the reception they received from their early efforts to showcase their works in Robinsons Galleria, Bayanihan Center, and Club Dredd. The young troupe of comics content creators funded by just personal savings and borrowings were able to establish the backbone in which the present indie comics stands today. While traditional *komiks* had perished in the nineties, the saga of Philippine comics continues through the indie comics.

### Conclusion and Recommendation

Comics magazines had enjoyed dominance in the media industry with its gargantuan sales records which entertained generations of Filipinos during the post-war period. Thanks to its affordability, accessibility, and appeal, *komiks* reigned supreme as the Filipino's prime entertainment medium. However, during the Marcos regime, fear of censorship prompted the leading comic content creators to impose self-censorship to avoid being silenced by the increasing crackdowns against subversive media. Despite the limitations, the creative minds in the industry tiptoed around censorship laws allowing them to be successful while other mediums struggled under scrutiny.

Even so, its dominance was without challenge: as more Filipino households gained access to televisions in the 1990s, the industry was now met with a larger threat as the television became functionally equivalent to *komiks*. Based on the individuals behind the comics magazines industry, it was apparent that *komiks*

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<sup>76</sup> Dennis Villegas, "GASI: The Rise and Fall of a Komiks Giant", In *Komiks: Sa Pangingin Ng Mga Tagakomiks* (Quezon City: Central Book Supply, 2007), 17.

<sup>77</sup> Terry Bagalso, Zoom conversation with authors, 16 January 2021.

<sup>78</sup> Budjette Tan, Zoom conversation with authors, 1 February 2021.

<sup>79</sup> Tan, Zoom conversation.

was declining as a popular entertainment medium in the nineties. From their accounts, they all shared a common view that technological advancements on entertainment platforms such as the television had an adverse effect on the comics magazines. Even as televisions and *komiks* were already coexisting as early as the fifties, the displacement process of the comics magazines only materialized during the nineties, when television became an ordinary appliance to the Filipino household. While comics magazines enjoyed having the competitive advantages of appeal, affordability, and accessibility from the fifties to the eighties, television soon positioned itself as a more technologically advanced entertainment medium.

By the 1990s, television's functional equivalence to *komiks* paved the way for its displacement as the popular medium for entertainment. The added pressure from issues surrounding the Roces monopoly, employee compensation, comics quality, management, and distribution, only accelerated the displacement process of the ill-fated comics magazines by effectively crippling the industry's ability to compete against the new medium. By the new millennium, the traditional comics magazine industry was extinct. However, the narrative of Philippine comics did not end with the closure of the institutions behind the comics magazines. A new breed of content creators consequently emerged from the industry turmoil of the nineties to plant the seeds of independent comics. Lack of funding and resources did not stop the young artists to strive to revitalize the medium. In its foundational decade, the indie comics movement had already succeeded in publishing several comics books, as well as attracting a niche market for their works. They now continue the saga of Philippine comics up until today.

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