The Television of Intervention: Mediating Patron-Client Ties in the Philippines
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ABSTRACT
In traditional anthropological work on the Philippines, the framework of patron-client ties has been extensively used to explain the exercise and contest of power between people in asymmetrical relationships: landowners and peasants (Kerkvliet, 1995), politicians and voters (Rafael, 1998), and the rich and the poor (Cannell, 1999). In this paper, inspired by Pertierra and Turner’s (2012) challenge to locate television within the frame of the national and the local, I explore whether and how enduring cultural normativities of patron/client can shed light on the peculiar relationship of television/audience in the Philippines. In particular, I draw attention to the unique feature of privately owned television networks as interventionist, whereby economic aid and assistance is offered to “the masses” not only in “wealth-sharing” game shows but also in the charitable projects and disaster relief operations run by media oligarchs and celebrities. While elite-owned, television confers symbolic recognition to the poor through their “overrepresentation” (Wood & Skeggs, 2009) across multiple genres, and offers material redistribution in the transactional interactions between generous tv personalities and loyal audiences in various “zones” of television experience. The paper reflects on the merits and limits of the (upper-class) critique of patron/client television as exploitative and perpetuating of a “culture of mendicancy” in developing, “third world” Philippines. It demonstrates why such media critique fails to restrain interventionist television in the face of tv owners and producers’ justifications that draw from both traditional cultural idioms and the neoliberal vocabulary of tv ratings, profits, and trust surveys.

KEYWORDS
television, television history, Asian television, mediation, patron-client ties, overrepresentation, exploitation, game show, charity appeal, Philippines
Similar to the other countries discussed in this volume, elite dominance over mass media has been a main characteristic of Filipino history. Foreign-educated Filipino intellectuals from wealthy families founded the early periodicals that demanded reform and/or independence from Spanish colonization in the late 19th century (Anderson, 1983). Today, “old rich” landowning families own and operate television networks, radio stations and newspapers not only as part of prestigious and profitable media conglomerates, but also in connection with their interests in industries as varied as oil and agriculture to insurance, shipping and mining.

Most of the popular history of Filipino television is written and published by media owners and practitioners themselves, in the form of anthologies that celebrate the anniversaries of the inauguration of television stations, such as GMA Network’s GMA Gold (2001) and ABS-CBN’s The Story of Our Lives (1999), or as biographies of their entrepreneurial and visionary founders, such as ABS-CBN’s Kapitan (“The Captain”) (2006). These texts chronicle not only the stories behind the most popular programs and actors of these privately owned companies, but also discuss the ethos of community- and nation-building held by media owners and producers, captured for instance in ABS-CBN’s brand tagline “In the Service of the Filipino”. These books also recount the many charitable and interventionist projects that the TV networks themselves (through their corporate personnel, but also journalists, news anchors and celebrities) have provided to poor or disaster-stricken communities around the country, such as distribution of food and clothes and the building of shelter and classrooms (see Figure 1).

![Figure 1. GMA Network Housing and Classroom Project, donated to typhoon victims in Iligan City in 2012](Image from: www.gmakapusofoundation.com)

Alongside this tradition of positive and celebratory historiography of media and the press—seen here as revolutionary, nationalist, honest, and service-oriented—is a more critical tradition. This approach, taken mostly by independent journalists and academics, highlights the history of television as an instrument of elite rule in its powers of framing and propaganda (e.g., Abaya, 1968; Maglipon, 1972; Rimban, 1999; Teodoro, 1998). They would
draw attention to the overlooked origins of Filipino television as originally a “propaganda machine” for the reelection campaign of the embattled President Elpidio Quirino in 1953 (del Mundo, 1989: 73). They would also highlight the continuing “semi-feudal” and “semi-colonial” structure of Filipino media, where media oligarchs observe careful alliances with other elite families and foreign power players (Almario, 1972: 19), forming what Alfred McCoy calls an “anarchy of families” that possess among them an intense concentration of political, economic and symbolic power in the context of a weak Philippine state (McCoy, 2009).

While this critical tradition provokes reflection about the negative social consequences of symbolic power being concentrated to a select few families, it is ultimately unable to account for the enduring popularity of television programs, journalists and celebrities in what is supposedly a grossly unjust society, not to mention the affective relationship that ordinary Filipinos have with particular TV networks. While elite-owned and supposedly serving only elite interests, Filipino television content today curiously “overrepresents” the poor across genres of news and reality television, soap opera and documentary. In stark contrast with other Asian television systems criticized to be “in denial” of poverty, such as India (Sainath, 2009) and Korea (Kim, 2007), Filipino television content is thematically about the suffering and patient endurance of the Filipino poor and working-class (Flores, 2001).

Crucially, the close focus on media ownership of Filipino TV historiography in both the positive and critical traditions are both unable to explain what I argue is its most defining feature as a social institution: Filipino television today is a television of intervention. Not only does Filipino television mediate in symbolic terms, such as in the circulation of representations of the Filipino poor; they mediate in material terms as well. Operating not only as intermediaries between donors from the private sector and the poor, or between the government and the masses, television networks themselves engage in interventionist projects directed at poor individuals and communities, such as charity and disaster-relief (Figure 1), but also in its “wealth-sharing” game shows and the operation of the TV station itself as a site of “media pilgrimage” (Couldry, 2003) for social services, such as free medical consultation, free legal advice, and money-lending. This paper aims to show then how the television of intervention works in the context of a weak state unable to serve its citizens, and occasionally during times of crises, “acts as the government” (DeQuiros, 2009).

This chapter retells a history of Filipino television then not solely from the perspective of elite ownership, but in the everyday context of ordinary people’s diverse and dynamic interactions with both television content (symbolic mediations) and interventionist media practice (material mediations). In media studies, this follows the “mediational approach” to the study of television as involving a concern of the interrelationships between “moments” of production, text, and reception (Couldry, 2008; Livingstone, 2009; Madianou, 2005; Ong, 2012). This perspective acknowledges that audiences—this case, low-income audiences assumed by many academics and cultural elites as “abused” and “exploited” by elite media producers (Cordova, 2011)—are fully capable of creatively interpreting and rejecting hegemonic discourses in media content. As such, I draw from archival research as well as my previous ethnographic work with Filipino television audiences in Manila, who not only

engaged in traditional “fan” practices toward particular TV shows or celebrities but also visited TV studios to avail of promised economic rewards and social services (Ong, 2011).

Consistent with mediation theory, this paper further traces the historical development of interventionist Filipino television through the anthropological framework of patron-client ties. This framework, I argue, helps explain how the wide gap between the elite class and the poor is bridged and resolved by the symbolic and material transactions enabled by interventionist television. While this approach has been used extensively in Philippine studies to explain the operation of mutually beneficial transactions in the context of grossly asymmetrical interpersonal relationships—between landowners and peasants (Kerkvliet, 1995), politicians and constituents (Rafael, 1990; Sidel, 1989; Yean, 2008), and those in power and “those who have nothing” (Cannell, 1999)—this has not been used in the study of Filipino media. My argument here for the Philippine studies literature is that the television of intervention draws from historical and cultural normativities of a good patron-client relationship and is used to resolve and justify the contradictory tensions that have faced mass media in the Philippines and elsewhere, such as the tension between profitable programming and quality programming, and the conflict between media freedom and media regulation.

In the next three sections, I discuss key historical eras for the development of television: 1) the early years, marked by a television whose ownership and content were elite-oriented, yet influenced by narrative themes of suffering already present in older media forms; 2) the martial law years, which momentarily suspend the control of television by elite families due to government seizure and control of mass media, though challenged by reactionary (and revolutionary) critique in alternative media; and 3) the post-martial law years, defined by a return to oligarchic control of mass media, an amplification of neoliberal values, and the emergence of television as a central social institution in the context of a “weak state” unable to serve the lower-class. In the final section “The Mediation of Patronage”, I argue that enduring logics of patron-client ties shape the operations of Filipino television in occasional tension—and frequent conflation—with highly neoliberal values.

**The Early Years of Elite Television**

Contrary to today’s television environment of elite ownership with mass-oriented content, the origins of Filipino television reveals a more exclusivist history of the medium. History books cite that the “father of Philippine television” is an American named James Lindenberg, who imported television from the United States to the Philippines, which was granted independence by the United States in 1946 (Rodrigo, 2006: 12). In 1952 Lindenberg's Bolinao Broadcasting Company was bought by Antonio Quirino, brother of then-President Elpidio Quirino, and was renamed as Alto Broadcasting System (ABS), responsible for the first telecast in 1953. The central reason for the buy-out was not economic but political: President Quirino was seeking reelection and hoped to harness the gloss and strength of the new medium for his campaign. But because TV catered only to the narrow audience demographic able to afford its high cost, Quirino’s strategy failed, especially in contrast with his rival Ramon Magsaysay’s populism. Magsaysay’s media strategy leveraged on the existing popularity of radio where his memorable jingle “Magsaysay Is My Guy” dominated the airwaves (del Mundo, 2003: 6). In 1957 ABS was
bought by the Chronicle Broadcasting Network (CBN), owned by the oligarchic Lopez family, who also owned public utilities firms and sugar plantations. This merger paved the way for the launch of ABS-CBN, the country’s largest network today (Rodrigo, 2006). It was only in the sixties that four other privately owned TV stations began broadcasting and challenged ABS-CBN’s market dominance.

In its early years, Filipino television content consisted of mostly American programming. From several decades of being a US colony (1898-1946), with English instituted during this period as the “medium of instruction” in basic education over the 70 languages and dialects in the country (Tovera, 1975: 41), the Philippines became an ideal market for American shows and advertising. Drawing evidence from the dominance of US-produced English-language content in the daily TV schedule, nationalist academics criticized America’s continued cultural imperialism as well as Filipinos’ “colonial mentality” and “white love” (Rafaell, 2000; Tolentino, 2011). Nevertheless, early TV culture was restricted to an elite class. Due to the high cost of television, the TV box as well as the receiver antennas perched above houses became status symbols. A 1955 UNESCO survey indicated that among the 12 million population, only one out of 2000 people owned a TV. The practice of TV viewing is described by historians as largely a community affair where windows and doors of wealthier TV-owning households were opened so that neighbors could gather and watch (del Mundo, 2003).

The most popular media forms of this period continued to be the radio drama, with its melodramatic narratives of suffering and tragedy that derived too from the spoken and sung religious text of the pasyon (Christ’s passion) (Ileto, 1979; Reyes, 1986). Cultural elites criticized radio as a medium that perpetuated ghetto or trash mentality (bakya, or jologs) by glorifying human suffering in its fictional genres (a critiqued levelled at television today, as I discuss in a later section). However, news and public affairs programs on radio that catered to the basic needs of the poor were more positively received. The early public affairs programs that were precursors to today’s interventionist media activities included radio shows that broadcast bulletins of missing children and farm animals and educated listeners about effective farming techniques (Lent, 1965).

As a response to radio’s popularity, television networks slowly incorporated mass-oriented programming into their schedules. Popular radio programs were adapted to television, such as the long-running radio serial Gulong ng Palad (“Wheel of Fortune”), known for its message of hope in the midst of oppression (Gimenez-Maceda, 1996: 39), and the talent show Tawag ng Tanghalan (“The Callback”), known to launch singing careers of ordinary people. It is crucial to note that Filipino television evolved and grew as a medium not only by modernizing and innovating, such as by being the second in Asia to broadcast in color (ABS-CBN, 1999), but also by adopting the grammars and narratives of the growing working-class and poor populations. As the percentage of people living in poverty increased after the 1960s, with the Philippine peso devalued by around 50 percent, the first crucial move by television to become a central institution in Filipino public life is to follow shifts in market conditions and make available symbolic and material resources that the majority of audiences would need and desire.
The Martial Law Years: Repression and Revolution

The martial law rule of President Ferdinand Marcos from 1972 to 1986 temporarily interrupted the trajectory of television as an elite-oligarchic medium attempting to reach larger audiences, because the Marcos government wrested privately owned media from their owners. Nevertheless, as this section will show, government-controlled television in this period continued to adopt more and more interventionist practices than in its early years, as it was used for explicit propaganda (that audiences would reject) and for more benign charitable projects that continued to draw inspiration from the successful programming of early community-oriented radio (that has proven popular among audiences to this day).

Marcos’ first instruction issued under martial law included the identification of mass media personnel critical of his totalitarian administration as “enemies of the state” and the turnover of TV companies to a “new breed of oligarchs” sympathetic to Marcos’ vision of “The New Society” (Maslog, 1999: 38). The suppression of freedoms of speech and organization also came in the form of physical abuse, arrest, exile or killing of journalists, publishers, and even TV owners—such as the exiled Eugenio Lopez III, owner of ABS-CBN (Nieva, 1983). During martial law, children’s educational programs, variety shows, and game shows became the new popular genres, alongside a steady stream of American-produced content, including the soaps Dallas and Falcon Crest. News and public affairs programs as well as newspapers followed government propaganda and projected only a positive image of “The New Society”, consistent with urban redevelopment programs that erected artificial walls and decoration to cover up the squalor of shanties and dump sites (Tadiar, 2004). As in the previous era, television programs continued to air in English. Even locally produced content such as news and public affairs shows aired in English in line with Marcos’ use of the medium as a technology for mass pedagogy (Rimban, 1999).

In response to intense government censorship and the “crony journalism” of the Marcos era, low-circulation “mosquito publications” revived the revolutionary and anti-authoritarian spirit of those earliest Filipino newspapers that were critical of Spanish rule. Anti-Marcos writers informed publics about the government’s distortion of information (CMFR, 2005; Maslog, 1990; Teodora & Kabatay, 1998), while in cinema, filmmakers adopted social realist aesthetics in tackling themes of urban poverty and corruption starkly absent from free-to-air television and radio (Campos, 2011). Film actress Nora Aunor became a celebrated icon among audiences for starring in an entire genre of movies that depict what the scholar Patrick Flores (2001) calls “sufferance”—that is, the patient endurance of suffering among the poor and marginalized.

It was during the 1980s that television slowly became a real “mass medium”, particularly in urban centers such as Metro Manila, where 80% of households came to own television. Nevertheless, provincial areas only reported TV ownership rates of between 14% and 50% (Philippine Information Agency, 1987), as English-language and highbrow “educational” content alienated most of the uneducated and poor population. To address this gap however, producers introduced more interventionist practices in genres such as the talk show in order to appeal to mass audiences’ needs and interests. For instance, the public affairs talk show Damayan (“Empathy for Each Other”), hosted by the head of the Philippine
Red Cross, Rosa Rosal, would become among the first TV programs with an institutional linkage to a charitable organization. The show not only broadcasted expert medical and legal advice to mass audiences, but it also engaged ordinary people in confessional interviews about their life struggles. In its later years, the show began seeking donations from television viewers at home to aid people they identified as in need of medical assistance, and also featured segments aimed at helping people reunite with lost family members, related both to urban resettlements and migrations as well as to extrajudicial killings and exiles during martial law (Lapeña, 2010; Donato, 2010).

Perhaps the most enduring legacy of martial law to Filipino mass media to this day is the continued skepticism toward any government regulation of media institutions. This extends far beyond traditional journalistic concerns over press freedom, censorship, and libel, but also toward the continued expansion of interventionist practices by elite-oligarchic television.

**The Mass Audience of Post-1986**

The present day landscape of a highly interventionist television system characterized by a) strong media/weak state and b) elite-owned television acting as patrons to low-income audiences (or “clients”) is configured in the immediate aftermath of Marcos’ totalitarian regime. In particular, four important moves enabled the establishment and acceptance of interventionism as a defining logic of Filipino television. First, mass media consolidated an heroic image for themselves when they played a crucial role in the overthrow of Marcos’ unpopular regime in February 1986. Media institutions became enabling platforms for the success of the “People Power Revolution” that marked three days of peaceful protest by 500,000 people in the streets of metropolitan Manila, ending in the exile of Marcos to the United States and the appointment of his rival Corazon Aquino as President. Such was Aquino’s debt to TV owners, personalities, and journalists that supported People Power and critiqued Marcos throughout the martial law period that among her first orders in office was the return of government-sequestered media companies to their original owners (McCoy, 2009). In a speech that also referenced the spread of democracy in Eastern Europe, Aquino says:

“It was in Asia, it was in the Philippines where it all began. It was here that the power of media, exposing the truth about bad government, showed itself able to galvanize a nation for its own liberation. It was in the Philippines that the ability of human flesh, charged with courage and fortified by faith, to prevail over steel and oppression was first demonstrated by a people and reported by the media” (Aquino, 1992: 155).

Media’s heroism, cultivated in their revolutionary practices during martial law and confirmed in their advocacy of People Power, was also rewarded by Aquino in the form of lax government regulation of media and the enshrining of press freedom in the 1987 Constitution, which is still used to this day (CMFR, 2007). Privately owned television companies now draw their “unbridled freedom” and independence from regulatory policies framed in the context of the enduring public association of media control with the dark era of propaganda and totalitarianism under Marcos. And while self-regulatory bodies were
established for mass media institutions, these inter-organizational bodies were of little consequence to operations, as television networks could freely evade sanction simply by withdrawing their membership to these groups (Ong, 2010).

The second crucial phase of television’s expansion of interventionist practice was the translation of this unregulated heroism into the formats for popular TV shows. For instance, post-martial television became awash with news and public affairs shows since “the people were hungry for information after 14 years of censorship” (Stuart Santiago, 2011). Unlike the Marcos era and the early years of TV, post-1986 news and public affairs programs were more inclusive toward mass audiences by shifting languages from English to Filipino, with the first Filipino-language talk show Public Forum launched in the late 1980s. Entertainment genres such as the soap opera broke free from directives to represent only positive images of “The New Society” and revived the themes of suffering and oppression from radio melodrama and older media forms such as the pasyon. Television drama enjoyed narrative license to depict “the same bitter and oppressive conditions of [people’s] lives” (Gimenez-Maceda, 1996: 39):

“The dramas... entertained by squeezing one’s tear glands dry and making a river of one’s nose ... empathizing with facile stories about poor-but-beautiful-[housemaid] drowning in a torrent of abusive words from wicked [rich master], or about maudlin moppets subjected to physical violence by [evil women], or of tubercular husbands coughing their life away in the arms of wives who eke out pitiful life from washing other people’s clothes” (Tiongson, 1976 quoted in Gimenez Maceda, 1996: 40).

Other factual entertainment genres such as game shows and talent shows incorporated generic elements of soap opera and talk shows to focus on individual contestants’ emotional backstories of separation, poverty, and personal tragedy. Ordinary people now embark on “media pilgrimages” to television studios not only to partake in the magical aura of the “media world” absent from the “ordinary world” (Couldry, 2003), but for the attractive wealth-sharing of cash prizes, groceries, livelihood packages, and houses offered by these mass-oriented game shows. The popularity of the landmark game show Wowowee, in fact, caused a stampede that killed 71 people and injured 800 others, as over 25,000 people gathered outside a stadium that could only hold 10,000 (Coronel 2006). In spite of public criticism for irresponsible event planning, TV station ABS-CBN evaded any criminal, civil, or inter-organizational sanction, in part through their formal establishment of a charitable foundation that promised to care for the families of the 71 victims.

Indeed, the third crucial manifestation of the television of intervention was the establishment of charitable organizations whose operations work in synergy with their television news department. For instance, ABS-CBN Foundation, operating since 1989, commits to making “a significant impact in the strategic areas of child care, environment, education, and disaster management” (ABS-CBNFoundation.com, 2013). Perhaps its most visible project is Bantay Bata (“Child Watch”), which offers a 24-hour hotline for ordinary people in need of “home visit, rescue, legal assistance, medical assistance, educational assistance, and supplemental feeding to children” (ABS-CBNFoundation.com, 2013). ABS-CBN Foundation’s activities are regularly featured on the network’s primetime news, as
their beneficiaries of economic aid and assistance would become “packaged” as “human interest” stories as the bittersweet final act of the evening news (compare with: Silverstone, 1988: 26).

Similarly, GMA Network has its own Kapuso Foundation, headed by their respected primetime news anchor Mel Tiangco. Its vision as an organization is “to uplift the quality of life of marginalized Filipino families... [through] direct provisions of resources and services in the areas of education, health and disaster relief, referrals and other social services” (GMA.com, 2013). Tiangco links the establishment of her media charity to an extension of the responsibility of television journalists as the most efficient “first responders” during a crisis:

“The reason why Kapuso Foundation is tied to the news is because, from our news desk, we learn days beforehand of the possibility of, say, a typhoon, and therefore we are able to prepare and help the victims. Why, who arrives on the site first anyway? It’s always us [the TV networks]. And it’s just irresponsible if we arrive and do nothing but just cover, when people are actually dying, or buried in [rubble]... But when Red Cross and the government and the other charities arrive, then we [Kapuso Foundation] would pull out. But Kapuso Foundation is always there as the first to respond” (Tiangco, quoted in Ong, 2011: 63).

Tiangco’s statement highlights media companies’ corporatized efficiency over that of under-resourced and bureaucratic government departments, perceived as inept particularly when it comes to crisis management. For instance, when a major typhoon hit Metro Manila in September 2009 and submerged 80% of the nation’s capital, journalists quickly reported on the lack of facilities of the National Disaster Coordinating Council (NDCC) which admittedly was said to only have 13 lifeboats available for rescue operations (Padilla, 2009). This led TV journalists and celebrities to use their own helicopters and speedboats to rescue stranded victims, provide them with food, and subsequently broadcast these stories of “heroic” rescues and benevolent donations by media people on television. In the words of writer Conrado de Quiros,

“In fact the monumental thing that happened was the complete absence of government. The only government there was were the media, notably [privately-owned television networks] ABS-CBN and GMA-7. You can forgive both for advertising their wares, or relief efforts, under the extenuating circumstances. They were the government. They were the central authority apprising the public of the situation. They were the central authority coming to the aid of victims. They were running the country” (De Quiros, 2009).

As mass-oriented TV stations¹, ABS-CBN and rival GMA (and, now with a recent third player, TV5) would become involved in what commentators describe as a “ratings war... for the hearts and minds [of ordinary Filipinos]” (Rimban, 1999) that would be played out in both head-to-head television programming and the expansion of interventionist projects intended to cultivate loyalty among masa viewers. Overtaking radio as the top medium with
a 98% ownership rate in the mid-2000s (McCann-Erickson, 2009), television owes its popularity to its strategic “overrepresentation” of the poor in both fictional and factual television genres, despite upper-/middle-class critique of television being a *jologs* and patronizing medium that “targets the least common denominator... feeding one kind of food, the easiest to digest, yes, baby food to adults with teeth” (De Jesus, 2011). Needless to say, many upper-/middle-class audiences have “switched off” from Filipino television and spend their leisure time with American entertainment (now available only on cable television) and social media, where class boundaries between elite and *masa* users are strictly maintained (Ong & Cabanes, 2011).

In the next section, I discuss the history of interventionist television in the Philippines through the analytical prism of patron-client ties. I argue that the emergence of television as a central institution in Filipino society that empowers it to even “act as the government” draws from its adoption—and reshaping—of enduring normativities of the patron-client relationship. While primarily a medium for one-to-many communication, television in the Philippines adopts practices of *direct intervention* and *personalization* in order to approximate the dyadic personalism and mutual aid of the patron/client relationship in the television/audience relationship. The consequence of this personal relationship is the ability to command *reciprocal exchange*, and in this context, this is evident in the implicit (and occasionally explicit) obligation to act as a loyal television viewer to the TV station.

The contemporary context in which interventionist television is situated, of course, is that of high neoliberalism in Filipino public life, where private companies fill in the gap left by a weak state unable to serve its citizens (De Quiros, 2009; Tolentino, 2011). I argue that just as interventionist television is informed by long-standing historical and cultural normativities of patronage, in its most current iteration it is also simultaneously 1) fueled by neoliberal imperatives for profit and 2) justifying the market- and *masa*-orientedness of what is increasingly criticized by cultural elites as “dumbed down” *jologs* Filipino television. Drawing from my previous ethnographic work with television audiences in Manila, I finally argue that interventionist television should not be regarded through simple binaries of “authentic assistance” or “exploitation” but, rather, should be understood in relation to continuing struggles for social recognition and redistribution in a widely unequal society.

**The Mediation of Patronage**

The anthropologist Benedict Kerkvliet defines patron-client relationships as:

“built by face-to-face exchanges between two non-relatives, one of whom (the patron) clearly has a superior capacity to grant goods and services to protect and/or benefit the client, often in an immediate, tangible way. The client reciprocates by giving services, assistance, and general support that are frequently less tangible than, and nearly always different from, what he or she receives. This special relationship typically begins as a limited, particular interaction but evolves, through actions of both individuals, into a flexible, multi-stranded association or even friendship that is dependable for each individual” (Kerkvliet, 1995: 212).

While this framework has been also been used in the study of *caciquismo* in Latin America
and warlordism in China (Sidel, 1988), in the Philippines it is particularly animated with local cultural normativities of utang na loob (debt of gratitude, or more literally, debt of the inside) and hiya (shame). As scholars in various fields have pointed out, interpersonal relationships are strictly yet internally regulated by norms of reciprocity or debt repayment, such that individuals (especially low-status clients) feel morally obliged to repay favors in order to avoid being stigmatized as walang utang na loob (without debt of gratitude) or walang hiya (without shame)—“the worst possible thing a Filipino should be seen as exhibiting” (Miller & Madianou, 2012: 24). Being extended assistance from a patron incurs a debt that is interiorized in the client (hence: utang na loob), as the patron is viewed to have gone beyond the norms of kinship or friendship in extending help (Rafael, 1990). Relationships between landlords and tenants, lenders and borrowers, landholders and agricultural works, employers and employees, and politicians and constituents have been examined through this prism in historical and contemporary contexts (Hollnsteiner, 1973; Sidel, 1999; Yean, 2008).

The common argument in the literature is that the Philippines’ “underdeveloped” politics is caused by the proliferation of oligarchic elite families with total control over the state and that patron-client relationships have continued to thrive due to inefficient bureaucracy, a weak economy, and the cultural values of utang na loob and hiya (for a comprehensive review, see: Yean, 2008: 415). Although the framework has also been criticized for its “Orientalizing of so-called Filipino values as the negative other of Western, or more specifically American, values” (ibid.: 416) as well as its long-standing concern with traditional politics rather than an “everyday politics” of resistance that account for clients’ need not only for material goods but also for symbolic recognition (Cannell, 1999; Kerkvliet, 1995), such is its resonance that its critics demand its contemporary updating rather than complete revision (Yean, 2008).

While I do not wish to endorse a wholesale adoption of this framework in this historical analysis of Filipino television operations, I argue that it lays open the “hidden transcript” of interventionism as the unique and defining logic of Filipino mass media. Though Filipino media scholarship has previously gestured to patron-client ties in more micro analyses of relationships between fan audiences and charismatic celebrities or game show hosts (Cornelio in Valisno & Marcelo, 2011), these analyses fail to link these practices to the organized and vertical infrastructure of interventionism that television networks have historically cultivated and updated.

Indeed, the history of Filipino television points towards a cooptation of popular interventionist practices from both community radio and newspapers into a more organized system of intervention coordinated on a national scale, yet deployed in local contexts. As we saw in the “Early Years” section, Filipino television slowly broadened its reach and popularity by borrowing from mass-oriented radio programming that directly addressed local community needs (such as locating missing farm animals and children, and so on). While early television content was caught in tension between elite-oriented programming imported from the United States and radio-adapted soaps and talent shows that played on cultural and religious tropes of suffering and pity, over time television oligarchs would rely more on mass-oriented programming and the expansion of direct
services to broaden their market and cultivate loyalty among their client-audiences. As discussed earlier in both the “Martial Law” and “Post-1986” sections above, we also saw how media intervention of the most popular and effective kinds were ones that operated outside of government control or regulation, where propagandistic television during martial law was rejected, yet extra-governmental charity and assistance was popularly received.

As an agent outside of formal government yet nevertheless a staunch representative of the nation, Filipino television references and consolidates the historical image of the nationalistic, revolutionary heroes behind the earliest Filipino media critical of Spanish colonization. The revolution against Marcos’ martial law in 1986 provides a more contemporary reference for this imaging and is mundanely cultivated through the circulation of nationalistic branding in television networks’ taglines, as we discussed in the Introduction (e.g., ABS-CBN’s “In the Service of the Filipino”), and today’s news and public affairs programs (e.g., ABS-CBN’s primetime newscast Bandila, or “flag”, prominently displays in its opening titles the Philippines flag juxtaposed with images of journalists alongside face-painted youth activists that work to reference historical and contemporary nationalist movements).

The systematized intervention of Filipino television in public life now requires deeper analysis of its contemporary operations. As the patron-client framework dictates the requirement of face-to-face exchanges, it seems to run contrary to the assumed operations of television as a one-to-many communications medium premised on “dissemination” rather than “dialogue” as primary mode of address (Peters, 1999). In the Filipino context however, television’s embeddedness in public life significantly operates on the level of face-to-face exchange and dialogue in its diverse practices of intervention. We see this in “media pilgrimages” (Couldry, 2003) where ordinary people come to the television networks for gestural forms of social redistribution practiced across various entertainment genres, news and public affairs shows, and projects of media charities. We also observe this in “reverse pilgrimages” (Couldry, 2003) where media personnel themselves leave the television center to visit disaster zones and administer emergency relief operations, as we saw in earlier sections. These “media pilgrimages” and “reverse pilgrimages”, though individually operating with differences according to specific exigencies of media genre and social context, are nevertheless shaped by television’s systematized patronage, where obligations of mutual exchange are subtly enforced, and the television network is personalized as a benevolent patron in its embodiment as a celebrity or media employee directly interacting with a client-audience/fan, and thereby materializing a kinship network rather than the strictly dyadic relationship of traditional patron-client ties. Occasionally, this interaction is also captured by television cameras and through the process of representation, one can argue that the client-recipient on television becomes a proxy for viewers at home who claim to “see themselves” in the mediated stories shared by people who belong to the same kin network by virtue of loyal viewership (Ong, 2011).

On the first point of obligations of mutual exchange, it is important to emphasize that television’s hospitality toward low-income people within the specially demarcated “media world” is not unconditional. While they extend invitations for people to travel to and visit
their offices as actual venues not only for entertainment but also for legal advice or medical assistance, referrals to NGOs and other government offices, and even moneylending, depending on the specific mediator of the interventionist practice. Whether it is the particular genre of the game show, the talk show, or media charity, the recipient is required to observe conditions of exchange. For instance, broadcast-worthy “entertaining” public testimonies of personal tragedy are required of media pilgrims seeking assistance through game shows or talk shows, just as material and visible evidence of urgent need is required to avail of medical assistance through media charities. It is unsurprising then that a regular sight of television network exteriors are queues of people, often women carrying sick children to display tangible evidence of “authentic” need, to justify their particular deservedness of television’s economy of symbolic recognition and economic assistance over the many other poor people seeking similar help.

Related to this first point of debt obligation is the second issue of a personal and extended kin relationship that is cultivated in “media pilgrimages” and “reverse pilgrimages”. This second issue refers to the concurrent move by media institutions to deploy contemporary practices of branding that reference and reshape the normativities of patron-client relationships. In the branding of the top three privately owned TV networks as ABS-CBN Kapamilya (Of One Family), GMA Kapuso (Of One Heart), and TV5 Kapatid (Sibling), kinship bonds are extended to diverse audiences on a daily basis through the various genres and services that they offer, and become more strongly consolidated into debt obligations in the context of direct intervention. Perhaps the most striking evidence of the successful personalization of interventionist practices through contemporary branding (such as in these branding taglines used in post-1986 context) are quantitative and qualitative industry surveys that suggest that the majority of television viewers tend to be viewers of entire channels, rather than selective viewers of individual programs across multiple channels (GMA Cebu Survey, 2004). In my own ethnographic research with television audiences in Metro Manila, I also found that it is common practice for ordinary people to self-identify as Kapamilya or Kapuso, and that slum neighborhoods as a community converge in their attention and loyalty to a particular TV station, such that one neighborhood “adopts” the moniker of Kapamilya or Kapuso (Ong, 2011).

In the context of intervention then, the use of pseudo-family idioms can be seen as inordinately extending the conditions of exchange beyond the immediate transaction of personal story-for-material assistance toward a more lasting relationship of viewership and fandom, where loyalty to the television network broadens out from a personal affinity towards a specific celebrity, show, service, or genre, onto the wider network of other celebrities, shows, services, and genres on offer in the present and still to come in the future. Of course, these pseudo-family idioms work simultaneously as contemporary corporate strategies of branding that leverage on affinity-building that is hoped to translate into high TV ratings, but in a more critical light are ways to “mystify the inequality [of patronage] to the point that makes it seem not only historically inevitable but also morally desirable” (Rafael, 1988: 296).

As sources of seemingly inexhaustible patronage across its multiple platforms that achieve nationwide reach and trust beyond that of government and individual politicians, television
institutions nevertheless contend with contrasting discourses of being, on one hand, one of the most trusted social institutions in the Philippines (Garcia, 2013) and, on the other, profit-seeking corporations that glorify and exploit the masa's poverty and further “condition them to be poor” (Koh, 2006). Both optimistic and pessimistic discourses should be seen working not in complete opposition but rather in a relationship of reinforcement and justification. My argument here is that while elite media owners are widely criticized by other cultural elites for eschewing quality content for lowest-common denominator programs that further infantilize masa audiences, the justification of this marketing strategy is the visualization and circulation of evidence of symbolic recognition and material redistribution for “those who have nothing” (Cannell, 1999). By claiming to not only represent the masa through fictional narratives of soap but also helping the masa through direct intervention, television networks construct a shibboleth against the critique of exploitation and demands for media regulation and control—be it on economic issues of limiting advertising minutes on television, or security issues of live broadcasting a hostage crisis and negotiating with hostage takers (Ong, 2010). Furthermore, these elite-owned media institutions find potential allies among other (aspiring) political elites who need a communications platform that might endear them to those seen as the constitutive vote during elections, and local and transnational corporations that leverage on the “sachet economy” business model to reach mass consumers.

In another light, the established cultural normativities of patron-client ties (which include personalization, mutual aid, reciprocity) soften the edges of what are highly neoliberal and impersonal imperatives that dictate the explicitly profit-oriented direction of Filipino television, as we recall the statement above of ABS-CBN’s Lopez to focus on economic concerns over political concerns after martial law. Patron-client ties additionally provide a readily available vocabulary for Filipino audiences to make sense of the often-amorphous and ambiguous processes of crossing the boundary to the “media world” as part of the ordinary cosmology of “testing fate” and “taking a leap of faith” (pagbabakasakali), which are the common idioms also used by clients when interacting with patrons in everyday life (Cannell, 1999; Ong, 2011). The client-audience recuperates agency in what is seen by many academics and cultural critics as purely exploitative or self-exploitative practices by asserting that these experiences of displaying the self and “performing suffering” in media spaces are dignified forms of physical labor (in contrast with passive activities of staying at home) and creative emotional labor (in the skillful manipulation of generic codes and social expectations in the practice of demanding pity and recognition from people in power).

Conclusions: The Neoliberal Patronage of Filipino Television
As discussed in this chapter, one of the “hidden transcripts” in Filipino history is the media’s story of intervention in public life: revolutions, social movements, political critique, and charitable services have been enabled, if not orchestrated, by media personnel at different period’s of the nation’s history. Today’s television exists in continuity with older media of revolutionary and “mosquito” newspapers and development-oriented community radio in sustaining a national (even global, if we count Filipino transnational tv!) communicative infrastructure that forges patron-client relationships between TV networks and their audiences. Television's unique form of symbolic power in the Filipino setting relies as much in its traditional capacities for one-to-many broadcasting and the staging of
grand media events, but also in the ways in which it has reanimated local Filipino cosmologies centered around gift-giving, mutual aid, and reciprocity through its various TV programs, personas, and projects. Television’s centrality in Filipino public life depends much upon its modern expansion of intervention through the mundane circulation of images and narratives of benevolent intervention in the context of a weak state, its contemporary use of personalization through branding strategies, and its strategic mediation of pseudo-family idioms that situate interpersonal exchanges in the “media world” within an extended family (and TV!) network with obligations of extended and eternal loyalty.

The deployment of the notion of patron-client ties, however, does not fully capture the full extent of the television/audience relationship. As with other commodified forms of patronage, while it allows television networks to attract anonymous masses through its circulation of “false promises of salvation” (Fonbuena, 2006), it also allows client-audiences to “switch [to other] patrons” in the marketplace (Rafael, 1988: 298). As such, client-audiences who are recipients of particular forms of symbolic recognition or material assistance may not always be expected to pay back the “favor” if s/he would wish to confer loyalty to another TV channel. But perhaps more significantly, audiences do not always seek to be clients and therefore do not actively seek offers for economic aid, but for more conventional needs to have a libangan (enjoyable activity; something with which to pass the time) in the context of hardship or poverty. In this light, the hospitality (albeit limited, generic, and conditional) granted to other poor people in spaces of television already address an ordinary yet profound need for social recognition among the economically marginalized, in whom oligarchic elites depend for economic, political, and moral legitimation.

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The broader socio-economic context behind these shifts in the media landscape is the expansion of the “lower-class” or the bottom-of-the-pyramid category in the Philippine population. Market researchers and academics use lettered class categories of A (very rich), B (moderately rich), C (middle-class), D (moderately poor), and E (very poor), where upper- and middle-classes are estimated to be between 7% and 11% of the population, class D between 58% and 73%, and class E between 18% and 32% (Schaffer, 2002). This created a political situation where “the mass (masa) vote” decides electoral outcomes, leading politicians to cultivate the poor vote. In economic terms, the Philippines is characterized as a “sachet economy” driven by lower-class consumption of small-sized lower-cost “sachets” of products such as shampoo and soap, as well as low-denomination prepaid phone cards used for texting and calling (Tolentino, 2011). Television companies have adopted this business model of top advertisers Procter & Gamble, Unilever, and Smart Telecommunications after martial law. In the words of ABS-CBN owner Eugenio Lopez III, “Under martial law, all of these stations were dominated by political concerns, not by economic or business concerns... [Now] we’ve also paid attention to local programming. We made a strategic decision... that we were going to be a mass-oriented TV station” (in Romualdez, 1999: 55).