

The "Makiling Echo": the multiple functions of a staff magazine in the American tropical empire of the early twentieth century

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Abstract:

In an essay outlining the world of staff magazines in the early twentieth century United Kingdom, Alastair Black argues for their usefulness in shedding light on a whole range of historical topics including, among others, the “workplace; social class; leisure; gender; authorship; publishing” and, in his own case, information management. Ironically, he also notes that they are very much understudied.ⁱ In this article I take up Black’s call to study staff magazines, but in a context radically different; namely, the Philippines during the period of American colonization and focusing on just one example, the “Makiling Echo”, the staff magazine for the Bureau of Forestry between the years 1921 and 1937.

More specifically, my aim is to take up Black’s call for further study of what he suggests was an important medium of communication in the early 20th century by uncovering the forces or concerns that established the conditions of existence of one particular example of the genre, as well as the particular functions it was called on to perform. The nature of these functions in the case of the Echo may be traced to two sets of rather distinct concerns.

The first of these was to act as a medium of communication between staff members. The Bureau of Forestry employees worked in small scattered groups in rough terrain with very rudimentary transportation infrastructure. Furthermore, the early days of the Bureau’s history saw a management style that was overly centralized and authoritarian and which, by the 1920s, had created an atmosphere of mistrust and discouragement that a staff magazine may have helped to address. Given such conditions, the magazine was likely seen as creating an important link between forest stations and the central headquarters of the Bureau in Manila and Los Banos. Two mechanisms of social discipline can be identified here. Foucault’s notion of technologies of the self is the first of these. The magazine was filled with exhortations and instructions on how to “be” a forester. And secondly, the magazine,

containing as it did many basic articles on forestry principles as well as information management tools for foresters, operated as a reference library for men in field, imbuing them with a standardized knowledge of the discipline.

The second function of the "Makiling Echo" was to provide a publication outlet for the small scientific research community interested in forestry matters in the Philippines at the time. Given the small size of the community, part of this mission involved attempts at getting local forestry officers involving in scientific collection and observation work, as well as rewarding those who took part in such efforts. On the other hand, and increasingly predominant as the years went by, were articles produced by foresters permanently employed as research workers. For these employees of the Bureau professionalization of their work and concern for their image as scientists produced an emphasis to standardize the format of the articles submitted to the journal and pressure to move away from the concern for field communication. This pressure was successful enough in the end to result in the demise of the "Makiling Echo" and the creation of the purely scholarly "Philippine Journal of Forestry" in 1937. However, the continuing need for a mechanism of communication in the field quickly lead to the resurrection of the magazine in a new guise, "Forestry Leaves".

In presenting this history of the "Makiling Echo" I hope to contribute to the research on staff magazines, a rather under-studied genre, and to have done so in a context different from the usual work on information history which tends to focus on Europe and North America. In this case I have shown how in one particular case the importation of a genre of literature from the industrialized West could be made to fulfil similar functions at the most remote outposts of empire.

ⁱ Alistair Black. 'A valuable handbook of information': the staff magazine in the first half of the twentieth century as a means of information management, in *Information history in the modern world: histories of the information age*, ed. by T. Weller (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2011), pp. 130 – 154.