

Philippine journalists' perceptions on press freedom

The impact of international media campaigns

Abstract: Legally, press freedom in the Philippines is protected by the 1987 Constitution. However, media laws in the country, especially those referring to freedom of the expression and the press, tend to be inconsistent and volatile. In fact, the country continues to be low ranking in the Reporters Without Borders Press Freedom Index. In response to attacks on press freedom, international media organisations have stepped up to defend and support the Philippine press. Drawing from data gathered through 20 semi-structured indepth interviews with Filipino journalists, this study sought to examine the effect of the government hostility against media on journalists' perception of press freedom and their attitude towards interventions from international media organisations and coalitions. More specifically, it looks at the impact (or lack thereof) of global media coalitions and foreign media organisations in the country. Findings show that local media are appreciative of the support given by international media organisations in promoting media freedom in the country. However, journalists also noted that when only one segment of the media is targeted, it can lead to divisiveness among local media practitioners.

Keywords: ABS-CBN, ACMC, freedom of expression, Global Media Freedom Coalition, grounded theory, Maria Ressa, media development, media freedom, media law, media predators, Nobel Peace Prize, Philippines, press freedom, *Rappler*, Reporters Without Borders, Rodrigo Duterte, trolls

RACHEL KHAN

University of the Philippines-Diliman, Quezon City

Introduction

IN 2021, the issue of media freedom took the world stage when the Nobel Peace Prize was presented to two journalists: one from the North and another from the South. As announced on their website, the coveted Norwegian Nobel Peace Prize was awarded in 2021 to Philippine journalist Maria Ressa and

Russian journalist Dmitry Muratov, for their ‘efforts to safeguard freedom of expression, which is a precondition for democracy and lasting peace’ (The Nobel Peace Prize, n.d.)

Maria Ressa is the beleaguered CEO and founder of *Rappler*, a Philippine online news portal, which is currently facing numerous legal battles aimed at shutting the media institution and jailing its head (Talambong, 2021). While, Ressa’s story was highlighted on the world stage, it is not unique in a country where press freedom has remained volatile throughout its short history as a democratic nation as evinced by the country’s dismal ranking in the Reporters Without Borders (RSF) Press Freedom Index (Reporters Sans Frontier, 2022).

The Philippines ranked 147th out of 180 (rank 1 being the freest) in 2022, a long drop from the rank of 90th when RSF first came out with its ranking system 21 years earlier (Reporters Without Borders, 2022; 2001). Moreover, outgoing Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte was profiled among the international media organisation’s gallery of predators, i.e. those who have declared themselves to be ‘at war’ with media (Reporters Sans Frontiers, 2021a). An infamy not previously given to a Philippine head of state since the ranking began in 2001.

Meanwhile, several international media organisations and coalitions have expressed support for Philippine media through statements, global campaigns and project funding (ICFJ 2020, IFJ 2021).

This study hopes to contribute to the field on journalistic role performance by examining how journalists are affected by their perceptions of media freedom. The study of journalistic role performance is a concept initiated by Mellado (2014) to aid the examination of the interplay between the structure, agency, culture and political economy of the media. The approach allows researchers to observe journalistic ideals vis-à-vis factors affecting news production. As Mellado et al. (2014, 2017) point out, the independence of journalists can affect their professional roles and performance. The scholars note, ‘Without autonomy, however, and with increasing forms of self-censorship, the roles that journalists may consider as important cannot be translated into an actual journalistic performance; hence, journalism eventually does not serve the purpose it deeply wants to fulfill in society’ (Mellado & Hellmueller, 2017, p. 2).

Balod and Hameleers (2019, p. 2) noted that the Philippine media operated in a ‘libertarian paradigm and liberal democracy’, wherein journalists tended to operate as societal watchdogs, who monitor the use or abuse of power on behalf of the citizens. On the other hand, Tandoc (2017) found that Philippine journalism was influenced by external forces such as their audiences, new technology, and institutions such as the government. Given the growing threats to media freedom, the study sought to examine the effect of the government hostility against media on journalists’ perception of media freedom, how this hinders the performance of their perceived roles and to what extent do interventions from international media development partners and media freedom coalitions help their performance.



CNN PHILIPPINES

Figure 1: President Rodrigo Duterte of the Philippines was included by the Paris-based media freedom watchdog Reporters Without Borders in its 2021 ‘press freedom predators’ list.

The state of media freedom in the Philippines

By law, the Philippines can be considered as having the freest press in Southeast Asia. Patterned after the First Amendment of the US Constitution, Article III, Section 4 of the 1987 Philippine Constitution states: ‘No law shall be passed abridging the freedom of speech, of expression, or of the press, or the right of the people peaceably to assemble and petition the government for redress of grievances.’ The Philippines also has a Shield Law, i.e. *Republic Act 53* that protects a journalist from revealing his sources and most recently, a free dom of information law for the Executive branch, through Executive Order 2 (EO2), which was issued by President Rodrigo Duterte in his first 100 days in office in 2016.

While the Philippine government operates its own television and radio station as well as a news agency, the majority of the media companies in Philippines are privately owned. Unlike other nations in Southeast Asia, there are no licensing, registration or membership requirements for media organisations and media practitioners in the Philippines. For broadcast networks, the power of the National Telecommunications Commission is limited to the allocation of frequencies to TV and radio stations, and do not extend to supervision over content. Although, to avail of these frequencies, broadcast companies need to be given a franchise by Congress, which by law is good for 25 years and would need to be renewed by another legislative action. On the other hand, print publications and online media companies need only to register as business enterprises.

While the Constitutional provision and freedom of information laws theoretically safeguard free speech and freedom of the press, recent action accompanied

by a blatantly hostile attitude of the current government towards the media has caused a significant erosion of press freedom. Libel, which has always been used as a threat to media in past regimes, has remained a criminal offence instead of a civil one under the 82-year-old Article 353 of the *Revised Penal Code* of the Philippines. Since the late 1980s, Philippine media organisations have been pushing for the decriminalisation of libel (Pinlac, 2012).

The United Nations Human Rights Committee had called the Philippine government's attention to what it deemed were excessive libel laws in 2011 and again in 2020 (Pinlac 2012; Butuyan, 2020). The international body noted that Philippine libel laws violated the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), of which the country is a signatory (Butuyan, 2020). Under the Duterte government, however, this law was further enhanced under *Republic Act 4363*, which amended the *Revised Penal Code* to include not only the author, but also the editor and publisher in the offence; while, *Republic Act 10175* or the *Cybercrime Prevention Act*, elevates this to include online libel (Robie & Abcede, 2015).

Meanwhile, the touted EO2 was made inoperable during the pandemic (Ilagan, 2020); while the Duterte Administration supported the passage of *Republic Act 11479* or the Anti-Terror Law, which includes a provision that criminalises incitement to commit terrorism 'by mean of speeches, proclamations, writings, emblems, banners or other representations tending to the same end', in vague terms. Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) senior Southeast Asia representative Shawn Crispin noted, 'The legislation as written is a direct threat to journalists and should be rejected.'

However, the latest (as of this writing) State of Media Freedom Report of the Manila-based Center for Media Freedom and Responsibility (CMFR) noted that from June 2016 to April 2021 (i.e. during the Duterte Administration) there had been a record 223 attacks on the media. The CMFR report enumerates the attacks as follows: 19 journalists killed and eight attempted killings; 37 cases of libel; 77 instances of intimidation, of which 20 cases were online harassment and 15 were threats via SMS; 13 cases of physical assault and five of verbal abuse; 12 occurrences of cyberattacks; 12 arrests; three incidences of destruction of equipment; three bomb threats; three strafing incidents; three corporate legal suits; three accusations of fake news and three other cybercrimes; and 12 cases of being barred from coverage (CMFR, 2021). Some of the more significant attacks are as follows:

Killings

The spate of media killings since 1986 has contributed greatly to the country's low world press freedom ranking. During the Duterte Administration (2016-2022), the CMFR reported 19 journalists killed in the line of duty. All were male, 13 worked in radio, five in print media and one online. Nine of them were from Mindanao, seven from Luzon and three from the Visayas. None of them

worked in Metro Manila (CMFR, 2021). These numbers are included in the death toll of 88 journalists killed in the Philippines between 1992-present, all of them done with impunity (CPJ, 2022).

Intimidation and harassment

According to the Freedom for Media Freedom for All (FMFA) coalition(2020), intimidation was carried out in a variety of ways including the use of social media trolls. Trolling was ‘weaponised’, said the FMFA, to attack both the political opposition and journalists, among others. The coalition also observed that ‘the most prominent of the Duterte propagandists were featured on podcasts by the Presidential Communications Operations Office (PCOO) and later received appointments in government’ (Freedom for Media Freedom for All, 2020).

Another popular form of harassment and intimidation by the current government is the so-called ‘red-tagging or red-baiting’ of journalists. Red-tagging has been defined as ‘the act of labelling, branding, naming and accusing individuals and/ or organisations of being left-leaning, subversives, communists or terrorists (used as) a strategy...by State agents, particularly law enforcement agencies and the military, against those perceived to be “threats” or “enemies of the State”’ (Pingel, 2014).

The International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) has recorded multiple incidences of red-tagging of Philippine journalists. In a January 2021 report, the IFJ noted that two prominent Philippine journalists, including the Singapore bureau chief of Agence France-Press was red-tagged in a Facebook post of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (IFJ, 2021). While the post has been taken down, IFJ noted that red-tagging ‘undermine[s] and endanger[s] media organisations and journalists perceived as being critical of the Philippines’ Duterte government’ (IFJ, 2021).

Several arrests of red-tagged female journalists were made in 2019 and 2020. These were Frenchie Mae Cumpio of Tacloban-based Eastern Vista; Paola Espiritu, the Ilocos correspondent of *Northern Dispatch*; and, Lady Ann Salem of *Manila Today*. Of the three women, Cumpio remains in jail.

President Duterte also forced two media organisations to remove their reporters, who had critical reports against him, from the Presidential Palace press corps (Elemia, 2020). He has also consistently verbally abused journalists and media institutions (CMFR, 2021). In several speeches in 2017, including his State of the Nation Address, Duterte called *The New York Times* ‘hypocrites’ and threatened to have the *Philippine Daily Inquirer* and *ABS-CBN* closed because of their negative coverage of his government’s ‘war on drugs’, which he claimed were false reports (*Interaksyon*, 2017; Daguno-Bersamina, 2017).

Related, a DDOS (cyber) attack on two alternative media websites were traced to the Philippine Military. Despite denials by Army officials, the Computer

Emergency Response Team of the Department of Information and Communication Technology (DICT) were the ones who confirmed that the Internet Protocol of the cyberattack was that of the military (CMFR, 2021).

The case of Rappler

Because of the critical stance of *Rappler* against the current administration, its CEO and founder, Nobel Peace Prize laureate Maria Ressa, has suffered several forms of harassment and false accusations from the government and Duterte cronies (Buan, 2019, Ratcliffe 2020). Among them are tax evasion; an attempted closure by the Security and Exchange Commission due to its financial structure; several libel suits and the news outlet's ouster from the Presidential Press Corps (Buan, 2019)

Ressa noted that the string of cases against her and *Rappler* began shortly after President Duterte denounced the media outlet during his State of the Nation Address in July 2017. He claimed that *Rappler* was 'fully owned by Americans', implying that they were violating the Constitutional prohibition against foreign ownership in media establishments (Ranada, 2017).

As of August 2021, Maria Ressa as CEO of *Rappler* had seven active cases filed in court against her and the company's other directors and staff. These included:

- An ongoing appeal process at the Court of Appeals for the June 2020 conviction of Ressa and former *Rappler* staff Reynaldo Santos, Jr. for cyberlibel.
- An ongoing case at the Court of Appeals against the Securities and Exchange Commission's revocation of *Rappler*'s licence to operate.
- Four consolidated tax evasion cases against Ressa and Rappler Holdings Corporation at the Court of Appeals also on the basis of SEC's closure charges.
- Another tax evasion case pending at the Pasig Regional Trial Court (Buan, 2019, Ratcliffe, 2020).

The case of ABS-CBN

At the height of the pandemic, in March 2020, Congress denied the franchise renewal of ABS-CBN, the country's broadcast network with the farthest reach. Various reports note that the Congressional committee in charge of franchises is composed of members who are allied to Philippine President Duterte (Gutierrez, 2020; BBC, 2020). The non-renewal of the franchise forced the network to go off the air when its 25-year franchise expired on 4 May 2020.

The franchise law for broadcast in the Philippines dates back to the Commonwealth era, i.e. when the Philippines was still considered a colony of the United States or what is also known as the American Insular government (AIG) era. *AIG Act No. 3846*, or the *Radio Control Act*, which became effective in 1931 and later amended during the Administration of President Diosdado Macapagal

in 1963, requires broadcasting networks to apply for a congressional franchise to operate television and radio stations for up to 25 years. ABS-CBN is one of the oldest networks in the country and was first given a franchise in October 1953. This was renewed in 1995 under the *Republic Act 7966*, which allowed them to operate until 4 May 2020. The closure of the ABS-CBN network resulted in the layoff of some 11,000 media workers (Rey, 2020).

It is not the first time that the network was shutdown. The studios of ABS-CBN were raided right after the declaration of martial law in 1972 and the network was forcibly closed.

International media campaigns

In July 2020, three prominent international media development partners—the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), the International Center for Journalists (ICFJ), and Reporters Without Borders (RSF)—banded together to launch a campaign in support of *Rappler* founder, journalist Maria Ressa, who at the time was facing libel charges for a story that appeared in their online news site. Dubbed the #HoldTheLine campaign, the three organisations formed a steering committee that called upon media institutions around the globe to express support for Ressa and the independent media under attack in the Philippines (ICFJ, 2020). The campaign garnered some 60 founding signatories from around the globe, including prominent organisations such as Article 19; DART Asia-Pacific; Amnesty International and the Association for International Broadcasting.

In the same month, the Global Media Freedom Coalition (GMFC), which is ‘a partnership of countries working together to advocate media freedom’, issued a statement of concern regarding growing restrictions on Philippine journalists, focusing on Ressa. Founded in 2019, the GMFC is a coalition of 52 nation-states that are committed to press freedom. The Philippines, despite its Constitutional protection for press freedom, is not a member.

The case of the *Rappler* founder had been one of the highlighted examples of attacks against the media during the GMFC campaign’s launch in July 2019, primarily because then-UK Special Envoy for Media Freedom Amal Clooney had taken on the role of Ressa’s legal counsel (Clooney, 2020).

Myers et al. (2022) noted that apart from acting as a coalition, member states of the coalition also run media freedom interventions in the Philippines. For example, the United Kingdom media freedom activities in the Philippines include not only public fora and small grants to selected media not-for-profit organisations but also includes diplomatic dialogue with government officials (Myers et al., 2022, p. 67). Similarly, Canada, has the longest running intervention for local media via their support for the Jaime V. Ongpin Journalism Awards run by the Center for Media Freedom and Responsibility through their McLuhan Fellowship Fund. They also give small grants for supporting media-related seminars

and workshops for journalists and/or journalism schools.

Meanwhile, the US Agency for International Development through the international media organisation Internews is currently supporting a five-year media development programme that includes several initiatives to bolster media freedom. Among their projects are a Fact-check Incubator, i.e. upgrading the fact-checking skills of journalists in selected media outlets and an academic study of popular Philippine social media platforms.

On the other hand, only the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) showed support for an August 2020 campaign to reopen ABS-CBN after its closure (IFJ, 2021).

Methodology

This study attempts to ground the study results on actual perceptions of Filipino journalists on media freedom and the role of foreign organisations. It is based on 20 semi-structured interviews conducted in mixed Filipino and English via video-conferencing or online audio-only calls, which were recorded and then transcribed. Respondents were targeted to include at least two respondents from widely circulating newspapers and online news media, popular broadcast networks and established community media. The initial target was 22 interviewees; but, one broadcast network disallowed the researcher from interviewing anyone from their newsroom. To provide anonymity, journalists interviewed were tagged via an assigned number and were referred as such in the study. The respondents' demographics are as follows:

- By position: eight editors/news directors and 12 reporters;
- By gender: 11 female and nine male
- By media outlet scope: 16 from national media outlets and four from the community press
- By medium: two online, nine broadcast, nine print

In seeking a research methodology that would provide an ontological and epistemological fit to the study and since it relies on an inductive approach, the researcher explored the use of the grounded theory framework of Corbin and Strauss (1990, 1998). Using the qualitative approach of Strauss and Corbin (1990), the researcher applied open coding, axial coding and selective coding in interpreting the data. Under this methodology, open coding is done by breaking up the textual data into parts, thus enabling the researcher to compare and contrast their answers in the in-depth interviews and allow a more open-minded interpretation of the data. This is followed by axial coding, wherein the researcher attempted to draw connections between codes and lastly, selective coding, wherein the researcher selected one central category that could connect the codes in the analysis. Finally, the researcher identified these overarching concepts into three major themes as seen in Table 1.

Journalists were asked to define media freedom in the Philippines and then rate it on a scale of 1-10 (10 being the freest). Then, they were grouped into three sets, those who rated it from 8-10 were labeled high, 5-7 were in the medium range and 1-4 in the low range. This was compared and contrasted to what they perceived were the barriers to a free press and to their perception of support coming from foreign media organisations and/or international bodies such as the Media Freedom Coalition.

Consistent with the Philippine constitutional provision on press freedom (Art. III of the Philippine Constitution 1987) and the liberal reputation of journalism in the Philippines (Myers et al., 2021; Balod et al., 2020; Meinardus, 2006) the perspective of the journalists interviewed—regardless of political leanings of their media outlet—was that media freedom is the ability to collect information and publish or broadcast that information without undue interference from authorities (Table 2). Journalist 9, a broadcast journalist, elaborated, ‘media freedom is when you can speak the truth without fear of retaliation’.

This perspective informed their general perception that the Philippines still enjoyed the protection of the Constitutional mandate on press freedom; while, at the same time, respondents agreed that the various attacks on the media have created a ‘climate of fear’ or ‘chilling effect’ among the journalists. The

Table 1: Perceptions of media freedom in the Philippines

| <i>Perceived level of media freedom</i> | <i>Perceived or experienced hindrances to media freedom</i> | <i>Perceived Impact of Foreign Media organisations</i> |
|---|---|---|
| High level (Score of 8-10) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • chilling effect/ self-censorship • limits in coverage from govt agencies • harassment by trolls | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • actual or felt support from international bodies/ media organisations |
| Medium level (Score of 5-7) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • chilling effect/ self-censorship • limits in coverage from govt agencies • harassment by trolls • limits from media owners | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • support not felt but has knowledge that support—either moral or financial—for local media had been given |
| Low level (Score of 1-4) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • chilling effect/ self-censorship • limits in coverage from govt agencies • personal experiences of harassment, especially red-tagging | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • support not felt and/or perceived lack of impact in support from international bodies/media organisations |

Note: The perception of media freedom and variables affecting this perception, such as support coming from foreign media organisations and/or international bodies.

Table 2: Philippine journalists' perceptions of media freedom

| <i>Perceived level of media freedom</i> | <i>How respondents rated media freedom</i> |
|---|--|
| High level (Score of 8-10) | 2 |
| Medium level (Score of 5-7) | 14 |
| Low level (Score of 1-4) | 4 |

researcher noted that the journalists' perception on media freedom in the country was largely based on the perceived level of fear or chilling effect. Based on the abovementioned table, the journalists interviewed can be grouped as such:

Chilling effect

Journalist 11 pointed out, 'We sometimes hear the President [Duterte] himself make pronouncements against media and, of course, we all know that what the President says will also affect the way others in government act.'

This was echoed by Journalist 7, who noted that one limitation of freedom is the discrimination of government offices on certain media entities, such as banning *Rappler* from its coverage of the Office of the President.

Similarly, Journalist 1 said, 'the antagonism from the political leadership is felt by the [media] owners, that is the businessmen, especially in capital intensive media. So, they are extremely careful not to antagonize the political leadership.'

Journalist 12, who works for a media company that is owned by a known pro-Administration businessman said, 'despite your idealism—in reality—it depends upon the vested interest of your company or the media entity that you belong to. So, if you want to stay in your job, then you will have to cater to the limits imposed by the bosses.'

The majority of the interviewees attributed the 'chilling effect' to its effect on their employers and indirectly to themselves as a threat to job security. Several respondents pointed out that their caution stems more from pressure from the media owners that do not want their media outlet shutdown as in the case of ABS-CBN.

One of the reporters noted that the chilling effect has led to self-censorship. 'Yes, they [the government] can say we're still allowed to write what we want to write, to publish what we want to say; but, actually it is not true. Actually, many colleagues say that the chilling effect is in the newsrooms, i.e. reporters would think twice about the story angle or if the administration might be angered and retaliate,' he said in Filipino, adding, 'even the editors would change the angle or maybe the editors simply will not use my story.'

Red-tagging and harassment

Journalist 8 had a first-hand experience of being red-tagged by a so-called government consultant, who claims to be a former Communist Party of the Philippines-National People Army officer. He said, ‘I’ve written many stories about people who were “red-tagged” who were eventually killed. So, it was disturbing for me and scary also that the stories that I write before about these people are happening to me directly.’

Journalist 12 agrees and points out that fear is greater among the community press. ‘If a colleague had been killed, there is fear that you could be next or you will be more cautious so that you will not be next,’ she said.

Three respondents said they had personally experienced being harassed by government and/or private entities such as trolls. Journalist 1 revealed that he has received a lot of hate messages on his social media pages. He said, ‘I hate to say this, but there has been a push back from the public as influenced by the political leadership. You can feel the pushback, especially on social media, for me is very real and not trolls. A lot of it is honest push back, although, in a large way driven by disinformation and manipulation.’

Journalist 7 comments, ‘I do not think I’ve seen it since the Marcos era, that the State is attacking the owners of newspapers, During the Erap [President Joseph Estrada] administration, government harassed media through advertising boycotts and libel suits. But this one really strikes at business, first *Rappler* and then ABS-CBN. They use legal means. Plus, the environment of killings and harassment, especially in the provinces. It is the overall context of the media environments that makes press freedom elusive right now.’

Limits to coverage

Respondents agreed that the pandemic had only served to worsen media freedom. In both a national media company and a community-based one, journalists and staff lost their jobs due to forced retrenchment as their company sought to cut loses due to a huge drop in advertising revenue. Journalist 5 admitted that they had to let go of 30 percent of their editorial workforce, leaving the rest of them with more work without any pay adjustments.

The issuance of Media IDs to only a select number of reporters during the lockdown also prevented journalists from going out of their homes to report the news. ‘We were limited to attending press conferences via Zoom,’ noted Journalist 9. This was concurred by other respondents. Journalist 10 added, ‘because of the pandemic there are restrictions which also hamper media freedom in the sense that some of the press conferences are moderated. So, you’re not free to ask questions and/or follow up questions. Sometimes, you’re just asked to submit questions and they have the option of choosing which questions to answer and you cannot ask the follow-up questions.’

Public support for a free press

With regard to public support for a free press, most respondents agreed that it was not the same level of support as in 1986, right after the ousting of dictator President Ferdinand Marcos following the peaceful EDSA Revolt. Journalist 7 points out, ‘this generation does not remember the Filipino press in 1986 that helped liberate the country. It is not so much as a lack of support but more of a lack of appreciation and even a lack of knowledge of the role of media.’

Journalist 1 added, ‘unfortunately, you also have a large segment of the public that echo that antagonism that their leaders have for mainstream media.’ Similarly, Journalist 11 laments, ‘it seems like being a journalist these days is a thankless job because we are always the bearer of bad messages.’ He added, ‘In my view, the public trust of media is not in an all-time high. I think this trust is partly diminished because of the systematic effort to undermine media freedom by the government.’

On a positive note, Journalist 2 recalled, ‘when we were feeling the brunt of Malacañang’s ire, we received messages telling us to go on. I think there are many people and sectors who believe they also have a stake in a free press especially in an increasingly authoritarian government. I believe there is support, even if those sectors or individuals may not necessarily be loud about it, for obvious reasons.’ Several respondents noted that public support is still there as seen in public rallies against the closure of ABS-CBN or the clamour to keep the press free when Maria Ressa was arrested (Westerman, 2019). Journalist 8 agreed that public support was still there, but many times it was given quietly through text or Facebook messages of support.

Global media interventions

In a general sense, all respondents welcomed the support for a free press given by the international community. Journalist 1 noted, ‘the hardest thing for any embattled sector is to feel that you are alone especially if you are up against the powers that be. If you feel support multilaterally, not just NGOs but also from foreign governments then that is even better.’

Journalist 7 said, ‘when you have the support of a global coalition, they will be your buffer. Some think that if you appeal for support from the outside, it will widen the breach with government further. But the breach is already there, so why not seek consolation and support outside?’

Journalist 10 said that the expression of support from the global community is ‘very helpful, because any form of support for a besieged press’. The journalist believes that this sends a message to the government that they people are watching. Also, he noted that ‘to see that many people are actually supporting us will actually encourage us to continue our fight to be able to continue exercising our profession’.

Journalists 6 and 12 opined that when statements are made by foreign media institutions, it boosts the morale of the local press and, at the same time, gives

the local press a reason to write a story on the importance of press freedom. However, they believe that this has little impact on changing the attitude of the government on the press.

Respondents from the community press are not that optimistic either. Journalist 5 said, ‘they [international media development partners] can express support, but they are far away, so what can that do? We are the ones in this environment, the threat is around us, how far can an expression of support go?’

More than the statements of support, other respondents said that financial support for a beleaguered media was what they deemed most needed from global coalitions and foreign media organisations. Journalist 5 and 9 opined that the best help that can be given is funding for training, so that local journalists can improve their crafts or funding for youth fora and symposia on media freedom issues to make the younger generation, who had not experienced martial law, realise its value.

On the other hand, Journalist 11 noted that ‘when you say something is foreign-funded, it immediately arouses suspicion. It can be used against you because they will say that those people or funders have an agenda that is why they are funding this or that’. Journalist 2 concurs, ‘It’s a two-edged sword. On the one hand, support of foreign institutions and coalitions in promoting media freedom is vital particularly in an environment of repression. On the other hand, it can sometimes be viewed by the government as interference, which is then spun [by government actors] to question the editorial independence of media organisations’.

Conclusion

Using grounded theory, this study sought to examine the effect of the government hostility against media on journalists’ perception of press freedom and their attitude towards interventions from international media organisations and coalitions. Results showed that the journalists’ perception about the level of press freedom in the country is largely influenced by perceived support for their work from their audiences and from the international community.

This has some bearing on the journalists’ role performance even as those who perceive greater support for their work remain daring in their reportage of government. While, those with a lack of support become more cautious and self-censor their work. In the case of the journalist who was a victim of ‘red-tagging’, he opted to lay low and remain at home.

Results of the study showed that most journalists (except for a few outliers) experience the same ‘chilling effect’ from the hostile attitude of government towards media. Respondents likewise observed the same level of public or audience support for a free press, i.e. the mix between those who were silently supportive and those who were vocally mistrustful of legacy media. However,

they varied in their rating of the level of media freedom based on the amount of global support they perceived media coalitions and foreign media institutions. For example, the respondent from *Rappler* actually rated the level of media freedom in the high bracket; while the community journalist who was red-tagged or harassed, rated it very low.

The results also show that the political leanings of the media establishment affected the way they perceived support from the global community. Respondents from pro-government media more readily dismissed the impact of global support for media freedom than those from more independent media.

Based on this study, one can ask: Is the level of media freedom merely a perception, then? The answer is no. As discussed in the early part of this article, attacks against the media are real and increasing in recent years, taking new forms as the social media becomes a new space for abuse and harassment. Whether death threats received from trolls can translate to a reality is debatable but the truth about journalists being killed in the line of duty is not something new in the Philippines. In fact, it is one of the statistics that has kept the country low ranking in the RSF Freedom Index.

Moreover, the majority of the interviewees expressed the fact that they had heard about the UK-led global media freedom coalition only in the light of the support they had given to *Rappler*. Meanwhile, 16 of the 20 interviewees said that the only support they had received or media freedom activity that they had participated in were those organised by the Philippine media organisations such as the Philippine Press Institute (PPI) or the National Union of Journalists of the Philippines (NUJP) in recent years. Although, they may not be aware that some of those activities had received support from global media development partners.

What the study does show is that foreign media institutions and global coalitions have been selective in their open support and therefore, not always perceived by a local press that does not have access to them.

As observed by one of the heads of a Philippine media organisation during a forum of press freedom, ‘the intervention of some foreign agency will highlight the divisions. We cannot do it in competition with one another. I think foreign support should come for the whole media industry, in terms of press freedom. If support is given only for one media outlet then this becomes divisive’ (De Jesus, 2020).

References

- BBC (2020, May 5). ABS-CBN: Philippines' biggest broadcaster forced off air. Retrieved May 31, 2022, from <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-52548703>
- Buan, L. (2019, February 25). Cases vs Maria Ressa, *Rappler* directors, staff since 2018. Retrieved June 17, 2021, from <https://www.rappler.com/nation/223968-list-cases-filed-against-maria-ressa-rappler-reporters/>
- Butuyan, J. R. (2020, June 22). PH libel law violates international law. *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, p. 1
- Clooney, A. (2020, June 12). A test for democracy in the Philippines. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved January 2, 2022, from <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/06/12/amal-clooney-test-democracy-philippines/>
- CMFR (n.d.). Marshall McLuhan fellowship archives – CMFR. Retrieved May 31, 2022, from <https://cmfr-phil.org/tag/marshall-mcluhan-fellowship/>
- CMFR. (2020, May 3). State of media freedom. Retrieved from CMFR: <https://cmfr-phil.org/press-freedom-protection/state-of-media-freedom-in-ph/>
- CMFR. (2021, May 3). State of media freedom. Retrieved from <https://pcij.org/article/6425/2021-state-of-press-freedom-in-the-philippines>
- CPJ (June 10, 2020). Anti-terrorism legislation threatens press freedom in the Philippines. Retrieved May 31, 2022, from <https://cpj.org/2020/06/anti-terrorism-legislation-threatens-press-freedom-in-the-philippines/>
- CPJ (2022). Journalists killed in the Philippines. Retrieved May 31, 2022, from https://cpj.org/data/killed/asia/Philippines/?status=Killed&motiveConfirmed%5B%5D=Confirmed&type%5B%5D=Journalist&cc_fips%5B%5D=RP&start_year=2016&end_year=2022&group_by=location
- Corbin, J., & Strauss, A. (1996). Analytic ordering for theoretical purposes. 2(2), 139-150.
- Daguno-Bersamina, K. (2017, July 24). Duterte uses SONA time to lash out against media. *Philippine Star*, p. 1.
- De Jesus, M. (2020, November 4). Statement during the Philippine Press Institute online forum on 'Safety of journalists in time of crisis'.
- Elemia, C. (2020, December 2). Why the PH needs to change old ways of covering Duterte when he lies. *Rappler*. Retrieved October 7, 2021 from <https://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/in-depth/reasons-philippine-media-need-change-old-ways-covering-duterte-when-he-lies>
- Estella, P. G. (2020). Journalism competence and the COVID-19 crisis in Southeast Asia: Toward journalism as a transformative and interdisciplinary enterprise. *Pacific Journalism Review: Te Koakoa*, 26(2), 15-34. <https://doi.org/10.24135/pjr.v26i2.1132>
- Freedom for Media Freedom for All. (2020). Press freedom further restricted amid COVID-19 pandemic. Manila: Freedom for Media Freedom for All.
- Gutierrez, J. (2020, December 15). Philippine Congress officially shuts down leading broadcaster. *New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/10/world/asia/philippines-congress-media-duterte-abs-cbn.html>
- ICFJ. (2020, July). #Holdtheline campaign launched in support of Maria Ressa and independent media in the Philippines. International Center for Journalists.
- IFJ. (2021). Philippines: Journalists falsely 'red-tagged' by military. International Federation of Journalists. Retrieved January 10, 2022, from <https://www.ifj.org/media-centre/news/detail/category/press-freedom/article/philippines-journalists-falsely-red-tagged-by-military.html>
- Ilagan, K. (2020, June 5). Quarantine curbs access to information. *Rappler*. Retrieved July 20, 2021, from at <http://manilastandardtoday.com/2014/03/04/ending-criminal-libel/>

- Interaksyon* (2017, April 28). Di ko masikmura: Duterte threatens to squeeze PDI and ABS-CBN. Retrieved July 20, 2021, from <https://interaksyon.philstar.com/breaking-news/2017/04/28/68713/oligarch-media-du30-hits-inquirer-abs-cbn-anew-to-recover-property-from-pdi-owners-block-lopez-firms-franchise-renewal/>
- Internews (n.d.). Region: Philippines. Retrieved May 31, 2022, from <https://internews.org/region/philippines/>
- Media Freedom Coalition (2022). About/history. Retrieved May 31, 2022, from <https://mediafreedomcoalition.org/about/history>
- Meinardus, R. (2006). Liberal times in the Philippines: Reflections on politics, society and the role of media. Germany: Friedrich Naumann Foundation.
- Mellado, C., & Lagos, C. (2014). Professional roles in news content: Analyzing journalistic performance in the Chilean national press. *International Journal of Communication*, 8: 2090–112.
- Mellado, C., & Hellmueller, L. (2017). Journalistic role performance: A new research agenda in a digital and global media environment. In C. Mellado, L. Hellmueller, & W. Donsbach (Eds.), *Journalistic role performance: Concepts, contexts, and methods*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Myers, M., Scott, M., Bunce, M., Yassin, L., Fernandez, M. C., & Khan, R. (2022). Re-set required? Evaluating the Media Freedom Coalition after its first two years. London, UK: Foreign Policy Centre.
- Pingel, J. (2014, April). Challenging red-baiting. *OBSERVER: A Journal on threatened human rights defenders in the Philippines*, 6(1), 4-6.
- Pinlac, M. (2012, February 17). Decriminalizing libel: UN declares PH libel law ‘excessive’. Retrieved from <https://cmfr-phil.org/press-freedom-protection/press-freedom/decriminalizing-libel-un-declares-ph-libel-law-excessive/>
- Ratcliffe, R. (2020, June 15). Maria Ressa: *Rappler* editor found guilty of cyber libel charges in Philippines. *The Guardian*. Retrieved November 15, 2020, from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jun/15/maria-ressa-rappler-editor-found-guilty-of-cyber-libel-charges-in-philippines>
- Reporters Without Borders (2001). 2001 World press freedom index. Retrieved May 31, 2022, from <https://rsf.org/en/index?year=2001>
- Reporters Without Borders (2021a). 2021 World press freedom index. <https://rsf.org/en/index?year=2021>
- Reporters Without Borders (2021b). Journalism, the vaccine against disinformation, blocked in more than 130 countries. Retrieved from <https://rsf.org/en/2021-world-press-freedom-index-journalism-vaccine-against-disinformation-blocked-more-130-countries>
- Reporters Without Borders (2022). 2022 World press freedom index. Retrieved May 31, 2022, from <https://rsf.org/en/index>
- Rey, A. (2020, May 5). ABS-CBN shutdown, a betrayal of 11,000 workers, labor groups say. *Rappler*. Retrieved October, 2021, from <https://www.rappler.com/nation/260007-abs-cbn-shutdown-betrayal-workers-labor-groups-statement/>
- Robie, D., & Abcede, D. (2015). PHILIPPINES: Cybercrime, criminal libel and the media: From ‘e-martial law’ to the Magna Carta in the Philippines. *Pacific Journalism Review: Te Koakoa*, 21(1), 211-229. <https://doi.org/10.24135/pjr.v21i1.158>
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory Procedures and techniques*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications.
- Strauss A. & Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory* (2nd edition). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

- Talambong, R. (2021, December 10). *Rappler's Maria Ressa makes history, receives Nobel peace prize in Oslo*. *Rappler*. Retrieved January 1, 2022, from <https://www.rappler.com/world/global-affairs/maria-ressa-makes-history-receives-nobel-peace-prize-oslo-norway/>
- The Nobel Peace Prize (n.d.). About the prize. Retrieved January 15, 2022, from <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/>
- Tandoc, E. (2017). Watching over the watchdogs. *Journalism Studies*, 18(1), 102-117. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2016.1218298>
- Westerman, A. (2019). Journalist's arrest in Philippines sparks demonstrations, fears of wider crackdown. NPR. Retrieved January 15, 2022, from <https://www.npr.org/2019/02/15/695062771/journalists-arrest-in-philippines-sparks-demonstrations-fears-of-wider-crackdown>

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank all the interviewees/respondents who kindly gave their time and insights for this research as well as the reviewers and editors for their insights and guidance. Also, the author expresses a special thanks to Professor Mel Bunce of the University of East Anglia and the AHRC Global Challenges Research Fund Urgency Grant for the support.

Dr Rachel Khan is professor of journalism at the College of Mass Communication, University of the Philippines, and current associate dean of the college. She is concurrently editor-in-chief of the academic journal of the Asian Congress for Media and Communication (ACMC). She holds an MS Journalism in new media from Columbia University, New York, under the Fulbright programme and a doctorate in public administration from UP. She is an award-winning journalist and has authored several articles and books, including textbooks in media literacy and the internet as a mass medium. An earlier version of this article was delivered at the Asian Congress for Media and Communication (ACMC) conference hosted virtually by Auckland University of Technology (AUT) 25-27 November 2021. khanterbury@gmail.com