

Fear and Favor

Freedom of the Press in the Archipelago

Malaginoo

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On May 3, the world observes the World Press Freedom Day, a day set aside by the United Nations to commemorate the valiant duties and efforts of the press. On this day, we reflect the role of journalism in our lives, and remember the journalists who are persecuted and killed for reporting the truth for the world to know. We are called to stand for “Journalism Without Fear or Favor” something that has been lacking in our country, especially under our current government.

We have seen since the advent of the regime under President Rodrigo Duterte that now more than ever, the freedom of the press in our country is continually violated by the State. Journalists continue to be attacked online, intimidate, and illegally arrested for being critical of the government.¹ They are degraded through the words of a President and his sycophants.² They are forced to recant and censor themselves for criticizing the multiple wrongs of the State.³ They are simply banned from entering press briefings for asking questions too tough for a spokesperson to bear.⁴

All of this while media outlets that offer a view counter to the narrative of the regime are threatened and prosecuted by partisans of administration.⁵ What is worse is that the regime has already taken steps to completely legalize criminalizing dissent with the passage of the “Anti-Terrorism Bill” with provisions so vague that alternative news organizations and their journalists can be red-tagged and marked as terrorists to be put in jail indefinitely.⁶

Meanwhile, false information masquerading as news continues to be spread on the internet, largely through accounts and pages supporting the regime of the President.⁷ News items calling opposition figures “destabilizers,” “communists,” and “traitors” are shared and reposted, tricking people into believing falsehoods and influencing them to supporting whoever sponsored the disinformation campaign.⁸

However, this problem did not begin with the current administration. Not in 2009, not in 1972, not even in 1896. In fact, for as long as journalism has been around, news has never been without fear or favor.

The History of Press Freedom

Press freedom in the Philippines has always been under threat of censorship. Before the Philippines was even independent, the freedom of journalists, such as propagandists were stifled. Whether it be under the Spanish or the Americans, periodicals remained tightly controlled by

¹ Allysa Mae Clarin, *128 cases of press freedom violations recorded by media groups*, (Bulatlat, 2019). Reporters Without Borders also tracks these incidents, *Reporters Without Borders, Philippines*, (Reporters Sans Frontieres, N.D.). Retrieved from: rsf.org

² Paterno Esmaguel II, *Catcalling: Duterte broke the law in own city*, (Rappler, 2016). See also Arianne Merez, *Duterte calls journalist Ellen Tordesillas a ‘prostitute’; president’s ‘vulgarity’ hit*, (ABS-CBN, 2019). See also CNN Philippines Staff, *Panelo: Ressa wants special treatment being a journalist*, (CNN, 2019).

³ Samantha Bagayas, *UE campus journalist ‘forced’ to apologize after criticizing Duterte gov’t online*, (Rappler, 2020).

⁴ Rappler Editors, *Rappler reporter now banned from entire Malacañang complex*, (Rappler, 2018).

⁵ Darryl John Esguerra, *Media groups: State agents behind 69 cases of attacks vs journalists*, (Inquirer.net, 2019).

⁶ Ronalyn V. Olea, *Why the anti-terror bill is sanctioned state terrorism*, (Bulatlat, 2020).

⁷ Vera Files, *A trail of false claims made and fake news shared by Mocha Uson*, (Vera Files, 2018.) See also, Victor Barreiro Jr. & Gelo Gonzales, *Fake account network massively pro-Duterte – report*, (Rappler, 2019).

⁸ Pathricia Ann V. Roxas, *PNA hit for ‘red-tagging,’ posting ‘fake news’ vs Makabayan solons*, (Inquirer.net, 2019). See also Che de los Reyes, *Otsa Diretso, ABS-CBN News ‘most targeted’ by disinformation in 2019 elections – UP journal analysis*, (ABS-CBN Investigative & Research Group, 2019).

the government, only allowing works that are neutral or outright supportive of the ruling class of colonialists.⁹

After 1946, the press—though nominally independent—was under the influence of capitalists and politicians, such as the Lopezes of ABS-CBN. However, the next violent wave of violations against press freedom came under the rule of Ferdinand Marcos. Under that regime, all media outlets, newspaper, radio, television, were taken over and controlled by the government. All information was tightly controlled and censored, and those who refused to relent were “undermining the integrity of the government” and summarily arrested.¹⁰

Even after the fall of Marcos, the press was still under threat from both inside and outside government. Under the succeeding administration, over 40 journalists were killed from 1987 to 2001.¹¹

The most cases, however, happened under government of President Arroyo where over 80 media workers were killed. Worse, under Arroyo the attitude of the government towards the press chilled with battles in court against periodicals and illegal actions against journalists of the time.¹²

In 2009, the greatest attack on the press came with the Maguindanao Massacre where 58 people were slain—32 of which were journalists—by forces under the Ampatuan clan while part of Esmael Mangudadatu’s convoy. Only 30 of the 155 accused were convicted.¹³

Journalism was Never Free

The problem with journalism is not exclusive to the Philippines, though it is clearly exacerbated by the culture of impunity in this country. Rather, it affects all communities, all people, because the press continues to be driven by motives of profit and advantage.

For as long as the press is controlled by wealthy businessmen, the journalism it produces will always be influenced by their interests. Just as how entrepreneurs use their private property to earn from their businesses, the wealthy use media to earn the attention and trust of the people. As a result, they can choose the tone of their news, the opinions of their writers, and which items would help or hurt their reputation. This way, they can influence people to act for their benefit, whether political or economical.¹⁴

This is not meant as an attack on media workers, since they themselves work for these companies, and are subject to the whims of their bosses. They have to work in mentally strenuous conditions, sometimes with unfair pay, and even get laid off. Worse, the stories they follow can be risky, leading to the threats, assaults, and killings we are all too familiar with.

There also independent media agencies and publications, alternative news networks and campus journalists that do not work for profit but simply to tell the truth. They are made up of people

⁹ Ferdinan S. Gregorio, *In Defense of Freedom: Philippine Press Through the Ages*, (National Historical Commission of the Philippines, 2012).

¹⁰ Jodesz Gavilan, *From Marcos to Duterte: How media was attacked, threatened*, (Rappler, 2018).

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² GMA News, *Journalists fight back, file P12.5M suit vs Mike Arroyo*, (GMA News, 2006). See also GMA News, *SC hears ‘violations’ of PP1017, questions arrests, Tribune raid*, (GMA News, 2006).

¹³ Ronalyn V. Orea, *Court finds Andal Ampatuan et al. guilty*, (Bulatlat, 2019).

¹⁴ This is based on analysis of Antonio Gramsci on how the media and other cultural elements of society are used for domination and influence by the ruling class in the Prison Notebooks. See: Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*.

who report on events hidden or obscured by large outlets, and express opinions that would not usually be broadcasted out of “neutrality.”

In fact, with the advent of social media, anyone with an account on social media can report the news. Journalism, which used to be dominated by a few firms competing, yet in collusion in establishing a system that let them centralizing and monopolize information, has been liberated by platforms with a near unlimited reach. This, of course, is liable to abuse, as we have seen with the rise of fake news. However, were it not for citizen journalists, we would not see the current shift from radio and TV, to online news.

Without Fear or Favor Today

Of course, we cannot predict the future. We don’t know what sources they have for their news, or how they will report it to us. We can only act today towards shunning the conventional and adopting alternatives that work better for all of us. As libertarians, we organize and we act in order to build a society where there is free exchange, even of ideas, knowledge, and information.

Journalism in a libertarian society could be where media workers like reporters, journalists, and investigators would be deeply embedded in the community that they report to, so much so that the citizens themselves become a vital part of the process. Surely, there will be standards based on objectivity and quality, so that we will not repeat the mistakes we are currently making.

However, at every turn, from gathering information, processing and publishing news pieces, to spreading and disseminating it to local and international outfits, it is necessary that media outlets are transparent and accountable to the people they report to, by letting them contribute as well. Instead of large media outlets using and co-opting social media for their advantage, we can finally have a “social” media, a means for us to relay and communicate the truth from ourselves, to ourselves, by ourselves.

Journalism without fear or favor will remain impossible so long as there are people willing to use the press as a weapon against the truth and against us.

The written word has long been used as a tool of oppression, as a way to silence critics, hide the truth and influence others to do the same. However, in the same way, it has also been used to give voice to voiceless, to stand for those who cannot, and to bring the truth from the darkness.

Especially during these tumultuous times, news—especially on social media—has been used to inform people in a time when society cannot function face-to-face. It has been used to uncover the truth about the incompetence and lack of action from an incompassionate government.

In response, the police retaliated the way they always would: with terror, violence and fear. Journalists were among those arrested for “violating the Bayanihan Heal as One Act” that governs the quarantine in the country.¹⁵

If the government is willing to bring back Martial Law, then we should also be willing to fight it, by supporting media workers who are “no work, no pay,” journalists out on the street risking their health to do their jobs, and those people who simply report the truth.

Our circumstances may be different in the coming days, months, and years, but our goal should always be the same: *Journalism in a world without fear or favor.*

¹⁵ Reporters Without Borders, *Two Philippine journalists face two months in prison for coronavirus reporting*, (Reporters Sans Frontieres, 2020).

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