



**NO TAG**

**Press Freedom  
for Pluralism**



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# **NO TAG:**

**PRESS FREEDOM FOR PLURALISM**



**National Union of Journalists of the Philippines**

**2024**

## **NO TAG: Press Freedom for Pluralism**

National Union of Journalists of the Philippines | 2024

### **Writer-researchers:**

Lian Buan  
Alyssa Mae Clarin  
Janvic Mateo  
Leah Perez

### **Editors:**

Jonathan de Santos  
Ronaly V. Olea

### **Graphics and Layout:**

Max Santiago

### **Photos:**

Carlo Manalansan  
Alyssa Mae Clarin

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**F**rom Rodrigo Duterte (2016-2022) to Ferdinand Marcos Jr (2022-present), the Philippine government has denied or downplayed the existence of red-tagging, or the longtime practice of labeling dissenters as communists in order to silence them, threaten them, or undermine their work. Until a Supreme Court decision made public on May 8, 2024, there was no clear legal definition of red-tagging, which enabled the government for so long to deny the practice, and further, to deny the state policy by practice.

On the contrary, we found a state policy. The National Union of Journalists of the Philippines (NUJP), the biggest lateral organization of Filipino journalists, conducted a survey and focus group discussions (FGD) among journalists who have been red-tagged during the presidencies of Duterte and Marcos. The study finds that as high as **60% or more than half of the red-tagging incidents in the last eight years have been state-sponsored, and 19.8% of the red-tagging by State employed the intimidating method of dropping by, or sending a letter, where State agents cite different government policies as basis. The rest of the red-tagging incidents were perpetrated by influencers or unknown individuals or groups. The red-tagging incidents by unknown perpetrators sometimes used physical methods like posters, but used mostly social media platforms that were amplified by the network of pro-Duterte or pro-Marcos accounts.**

// To date there has been no legal remedy extended to the journalists specifically to red-tagging. //

Although the journalists' newsrooms or affiliated news organizations took some form of action in 70% of the incidents, these actions were mostly limited to releasing a statement, or publishing a story on the red-tagging. Many of these actions were far from any robust protocol to address the security concerns of the red-tagged journalist. There is also no institutional response to address the mental health impacts of red-tagging. Out of the recorded incidents, only 25% resulted in legal or quasi-legal actions such as filing a lawsuit, or filing a report, mostly with the independent Commission on Human Rights (CHR). **To date there has been no legal remedy extended to the journalists specifically to red-tagging.**

The consensus in the FGDs was overwhelming. **Red-tagging is an attack against a journalist for performing a duty, yet the burden is personal. We found that among professional journalists, no one stopped reporting on the stories that made them targets.** However, it's important to note that this insight is limited to those who participated in the FGDs, who have the capacity, support, and privilege to speak about their experiences. It is likely that many more incidents went unreported, and their insights will

unfortunately never become part of record. **So to say that our study found that red-tagged journalists were undeterred is only a snapshot of a battered, but persisting, profession.**

Persistence, and resistance, **need support.** The study makes the following recommendations:

1. Mainstream media organizations should continue, and further strengthen, their solidarity efforts with red-tagged journalists whether or not they belong to mainstream media, or alternative media
2. Media organizations and civil society should create a mechanism by which red-tagged journalists can have easy access to legal support
3. News organizations should adopt a more robust internal protocol to respond to a red-tagging attack on any of its staff, including but not limited to mental health response
4. The government should take these complaints seriously, investigate them, and hold accountable the perpetrators
5. President Ferdinand Marcos Jr should communicate a clear policy to **stop red-tagging**

# INTRODUCTION

**A**round the world, there is an alarming trend of journalists repression by branding them as enemies of state using a variety of laws and policies. The Philippines follows a regional trend in Southeast Asia where the pretext of lawfare against journalists is national security. In Malaysia, journalists are targeted for surveillance using its Sedition Act. In Thailand, the local news outlet Lanner was slapped with complaints of sedition by the military for livestreaming a protest.

In the Philippines, home to the longest-running communist insurgency in Asia, repression follows a more specific design, which is red-tagging. Red-tagging is a longtime practice in the Philippines of tagging or labeling dissenters as being armed communist rebels in order to silence them, threaten them, or undermine their work. While red-tagging has existed since before the dictatorship in the 70s, it has taken a more sinister shape under the populist Rodrigo Duterte. With the rise of social media, red-tagging can now be done through covert means to evade accountability, but can be amplified through coordinated behavior, and made more impactful by



Journalists and press freedom advocates call for the release of community journalist Frenchie Mae Cumpio  
(Photo from [www.nujp.org](http://www.nujp.org))

disinformation. In the face of continuing lawfare and killings, red-tagging has heightened vulnerabilities of journalists to surveillance and harassment.

While communism has ceased to be a crime in the Philippines since 1992, red-tagging remains to be a threat because “this practice has led to harassment, threats, attacks, and killings of human rights defenders, political activists, lawyers, trade unionists and other targeted groups perceived to be affiliated with the left,” said Amnesty International. In 2022, Acting United Nations (UN) High Commissioner for Human Rights Nada Al-Ashif sounded the alarm to the UN Human Rights Council that journalists are among the “targets of red-tagging” in the Philippines as “killings, arbitrary detention, and physical and legal intimidation reportedly continue.”

Three journalists who were red-tagged during the time of former president Rodrigo Duterte were eventually raided, arrested, charged and jailed over the premise of their being alleged communist rebels. Lady Ann Salem, the red-tagged editor of Manila Today, was jailed for three months in 2020 before winning her case. The judge who cleared her was also red-tagged. The red-tagged community journalist Frenchie Mae Cumpio has been in jail for four years now, with trial stalled in the lower court. Anne Krueger,



correspondent for Negros-based Paghimutad, was arrested and detained in October 2019 after her media outfit was labeled as communist. She was allowed to post bail but the charges have not been dismissed to this day. Radio broadcaster Percy Mabasa was very critical of red-tagging before he was assassinated in October 2022, the second journalist to be killed during the administration of President Ferdinand Marcos Jr.

That the Philippines is still among the most dangerous countries in the world for journalists, where only 30% of the cases of 117 killed journalists have been solved, exacerbates the anxieties of reporters vulnerable or already targeted for red-tagging.

Red-tagging has been identified as among the leading threats against Filipino journalists according to the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression and Opinion, Irene Khan. During Khan's mission to the Philippines in February 2024, her top recommendations to the current Ferdinand Marcos Jr government was to pass an executive order banning or discouraging red-tagging, and to abolish the red-tagging National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict, or NTF-ELCAC.

However, there is no law in the Philippines that defines or penalizes red-tagging. For a long time, the reference to define red-tagging was the 2007 Philippine situation report of United Nations Special Rapporteur Philip Alston, who said that red-tagging was the "characterization of most groups on the left of the political spectrum as front organizations for armed groups." And until recently, the only legal source to define red tagging is a 2015 dissenting opinion from Supreme Court Senior Associate Justice Marvic Leonen who defined red-tagging as "an act of labeling, branding, naming and accusing individuals or organizations being left-leaning, subversive, communists, terrorists: used as a strategy by state agents, particularly law enforcement." The dissenting opinion was in the case *Zarate vs Aquino III*, a 2015 petition for extraordinary protective writs that the progressive former lawmaker Carlos Isagani Zarate

and others lost against security officials.

Because there is no law against red-tagging, with the only definition coming from a dissenting opinion to a lost case until the May 8, 2024 Supreme Court decision, the State was empowered to make a sweeping claim that there was no red-tagging in the Philippines. If there was no definition, then there was no problem.

But President Ferdinand Marcos Jr himself acknowledged the existence of red-tagging when he passed Executive Order No. 23 on April 30, 2023, an EO that “reinforces and protects the freedom of association and right to organize of workers.” While the EO’s main purpose was to create an inter-agency committee to protect workers, the order said that among the premises of such action were “reported incidents of acts of violence, extra-judicial killings, harassment, suppression of trade union rights, and **red-tagging allegedly perpetrated by the State agents targeting, in particular, certain trade unions and workers’ organizations.**”

The NUJP conducted a comprehensive study through survey and FGDs, combining existing data from the union’s safety office that compiled red-tagging attacks throughout the years and new information obtained during the course of this research. A total of 25 red-tagged journalists from mainstream and alternative media, student publications, and press clubs participated in FGDs. Three experts - one each from the academe, legal profession, and psychiatry - were also interviewed.

The insights gained from the study **show a pattern of state-sponsored red-tagging that impacts the mental health of individual journalists, with little recourse to institutional help. Student journalists were the targets of the most intimidating State method of drop-by, whereas professional journalists were mainly red-tagged by unknown perpetrators on social media.**

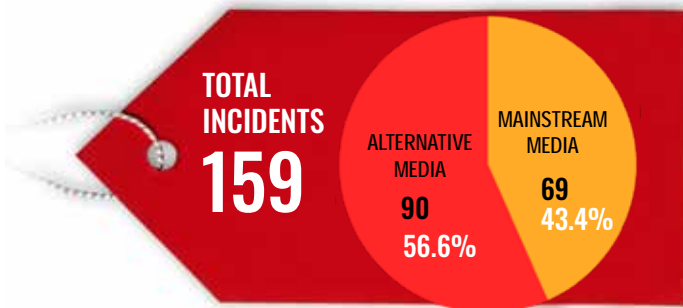
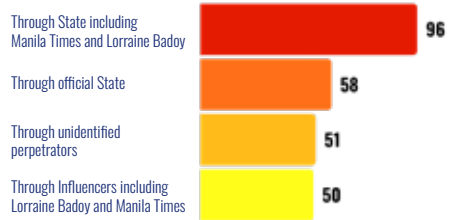
“It’s hard to believe that that’s not part of the overall strategy. It’s almost impossible to think that this is the work of individuals when the effect is so cumulative,” said journalist and GMA-7 documentarist Atom Araullo, who has filed a civil suit against his red-taggers former Palace official and NTF-ELCAC spokesperson Lorraine Badoy-Partosa, and self-proclaimed ex-rebel Jeffrey Celiz.

## STATE-SPONSORED

The study was able to collect information on **159** incidents of red-tagging against journalists from 2016. This is in no way a representation of the full picture, as we acknowledge that some incidents went unreported due to victims’ fear for their security and safety. Of the incidents recorded, **90 cases or 56.6%** involved journalists from alternative media, which is not significantly disproportionate to the **69 cases or 43.4%** that involved journalists

### Red-tagging incidents against journalists (2016-present)

There were 58 incidents of red-tagging through the State. There were 96 if you count the cases that involved the Manila Times during the period where its chief, Dante Ang, was special envoy to former president Rodrigo Duterte; and if you count the times that involved Lorraine Badoy after her government posts in the Duterte presidency.



source: NUJP

from the dominant or mainstream media. This shows that red-tagging does not only affect the alternative news outlets, which are typically assumed – especially by the State – to be left-leaning news organizations.

Of the 159 reported incidents, **58 were done through clear State methods** with identifiable sources of the attacks like the police, army, intelligence, and lists from the Department of Justice and Department of the Interior and Local Government. **That count will go up to 96** if you count the infamous April 2019 matrix published by the Manila Times, and the incidents perpetrated by Lorraine Badoy-Partosa after 2022.

The 2019 matrix is a fantastic and quickly debunked diagram of a supposed plot to oust former president Rodrigo Duterte, linking media organizations Rappler, Vera Files, and the Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism (PCIJ); public lawyers group National Union of Peoples’ Lawyers (NUPL) to the disgraced “Bikoy,” an ex-convict who accused the Duterte family of having drug links only to turn around later to say the political opposition made him do it. The study counts these incidents because the matrix was published by the Manila Times, a newspaper whose chairman emeritus is



Photo: NUJP

Dante Ang, who was Duterte’s special envoy for international public relations at the time, and the article was written by Ang himself. The source for their story, which accused the news organizations of colluding with leftist organizations to oust Duterte, was Malacañang itself. The study counts Badoy-Partosa’s red-tagging after 2022 because although she was no longer a Palace press official nor an NTF-ELCAC spokesperson during that period, she still wielded the influence and network of her former government offices.

It means the state-sponsored red-tagging incidents against journalists make up more than half or 60% (96 out of 159) of total incidents.

“Any government official who claims there’s no policy on red-tagging is a liar. Whether it’s under [former president Benigno] Aquino, under Duterte, or under Marcos. Red-tagging is a policy. And in the last [administration] it’s not just a policy, it’s a policy with deadly repercussions,” said veteran journalist Inday Espina Varona, whose last role before retirement was head of regions for Rappler.

## **CLEAR STATE METHODS**

There were 58 incidents that employed clear State methods, for example, when the Department of Justice (DOJ) under Duterte included Northern Dispatch’s Sherwin De Vera in a list of 648 people to be proscribed as terrorists under the old Human Security Act. That list included human rights lawyers, a UN special rapporteur, and many other activists. Manila Judge Marlo Magdoza-Malagar, who eventually dismissed the proscription petition, was red-tagged by Badoy-Partosa. In 2023, the Department of the Interior and Local Government (DILG) signed a resolution requiring organizations, including press clubs, to obtain permits before conducting any activity due to a Kalinga local ELCAC’s tagging of them as “communist sectoral fronts.” NUJP, Northern Dispatch (NorDis) and the College Editors Guild of the Philippines (CEGP) were included in the resolution.

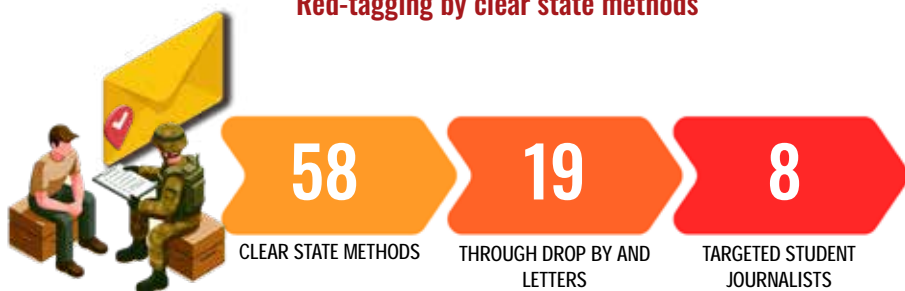
In July 2020, days after the feared anti-terror law took effect, the police confiscated copies of Pinoy Weekly magazines for being “subversive documents.” The most challenged law in recent Philippine history, the anti-terror law was widely seen as a crackdown on dissent, punishing incitement, recruitment, and providing “material support” to a vaguely-worded crime of terrorism. Journalists were among the challengers of the law.



A policeman confiscates copies of Pinoy Weekly. (Photo courtesy of Kadamay)

The most intimidating method of red-tagging is a drop-by, where the State official either leaves a verbal message or a letter, with a government letterhead and citing official policies. On December 3, 2023, a civil-military contingent of the Philippine army based in Sorsogon wrote a letter to barangay officials of Daraga, Albay, requesting an appointment with Bicol local journalist and AlterMidya staff Reynard Magtoto “to discuss matters related to the NUJP which falls under the purview of the 903rd Infantry (PATRIOT) Brigade, 9th Infantry Division, Philippine Army **as a target sectoral front organization.**” The letter cites Duterte’s Executive Order No. 70, which created the NTF-ELCAC.

### Red-tagging by clear state methods



On March 2, 2024, Leyte-based radio station Radyo Diwa received a call from a person who identified himself as being with the National Intelligence Coordinating Agency (NICA) inquiring about that day's guest on the radio, progressive Kabataan (Youth) Representative Raoul Manuel. Radyo Diwa's Jazmin Bonifacio said they have noticed surveillance on their station since then. "Two weeks ago, there was someone taking photos and videos on the upper floor. One of our reporters shouted at him and said 'Hey, what are you doing, why are you taking photos here?' He quickly hid his phone, walked to the corner, and in the corner we saw the PNP [Philippine National Police] Regional Office 8 vehicle," said Bonifacio.

Of the 58 red-tagging incidents where there were clear identifiable sources from the State, there were 19 that used the most intimidating method of drop-by. Of those 19 – almost half of the targets, or 8 of them – were student journalists. In January 2023, the parents of Kessha Carreon, associate editor of *The Outcrop*, the student publication of the University of the Philippines-Baguio, received a call from the Baguio City Hall saying that a military lieutenant had gone there to ask for Carreon. Carreon's father works at city hall, which afforded her a level of protection at the time. The military personnel carried a letter addressed to barangay officials, also citing EO 70, to request for an Information Education Campaign (IEC). City Hall officials asked for IEC documents but getting none, informed Carreon's father instead. Carreon's parents traced the letter to locate the signatory officials. In a meeting, as relayed to their family, the military personnel "said I was an activist in UP Baguio, that I was a potential recruit of the CPP-NPA [Communist Party of the Philippines-New Peoples' Army] and they also had photos and videos of me during rallies." It is a common experience for student journalists like Carreon.



Kesha Carreon red-tagged on Facebook page "PULAKero"

## THE DUTERTE-MARCOS NETWORKS

While many red-tagging incidents occurred after the journalist published a story about harassment or oppression of progressive groups or individuals, there were notable cases of journalists being red-tagged for stories that were generally critical of Duterte.

Veteran journalist Christian Esguerra, formerly an anchor of ABS-CBN and who now hosts his own YouTube show ‘Facts First,’ said the red-tagging against him came in sporadic moments “but got most serious in 2020 and 2021 when I have a story or a video or podcast that is very critical of Duterte in particular.” Esguerra said that when he does a story critical of Duterte, his red-taggers would rehash his old interview with the late Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) chairman Jose Maria Sison and twist it so he could be accused of communist links.

An identifiable trend of red-tagging also happened during the killing of ABS-CBN’s congressional franchise that resulted in the station going off air a second time since Martial Law, and led to thousands losing their jobs. The ABS-CBN shutdown was a sticky topic during the pandemic since it also affected the network’s entertainment shows that attract the most formidable fandoms in the Philippines. Media freedom advocates blamed the shutdown on Duterte’s allies at the House of Representatives. Anjo Bagaoisan, a journalist from ABS-CBN and deputy secretary general of NUJP, said many of the red-tagging incidents against ABS-CBN journalists happened during the shutdown. Lian Buan, a human rights reporter at Rappler, was red-tagged on Twitter by an unidentified user who quoted her tweet discussing ABS-CBN shutdown’s effect on loss of useful information especially during disasters.

Esguerra said the red-tagging posts against him were widely shared by pro-Duterte accounts. A senior member of the Foreign Correspondents Association of the Philippines (FOCAP) said their



members were red-tagged for stories critical of the former Duterte administration, and that those posts would be amplified by Duterte's former press official, dancer and vlogger Mocha Uson.

The Tinig ng Plaridel (TNP), the student publication of the University of the Philippines Diliman College of Mass Communication, was targeted by pro-Duterte and also now pro-Marcos blogger RJ Nieto, who goes by the username 'Thinking Pinoy.' TNP's coverage of the selection of the next UP chancellor in April 2023 became controversial because Meta (formerly Facebook) took down their video of students forcibly opening the doors of a university hall after the chancellor was selected. Nieto aggressively and relentlessly attacked TNP over the removal of the video, accusing them of obstruction of justice. Nieto's highlighting of TNP in his posts prompted a swarm of comments red-tagging the organization.

Buan's red-tagger was an unidentified Twitter user whose profile photo has the sticker of the UniTeam, or the 2022 campaign tandem of Marcos and Vice President Sara Duterte. That was the first red-tagging incident against Buan, which happened while she was covering a UniTeam campaign sortie in Quezon City in April 2022. The next red-tagging incident happened months after on TikTok, after she interviewed Marcos' justice secretary Jesus Crispin "Boying" Remulla and asked him about red-tagging. "I was a human rights reporter under the Duterte government, but it was while I was covering the Marcos campaign that I was red-tagged," said Buan.

## **A PERSONAL BURDEN ON MENTAL HEALTH**

Mental health impacts of the fear and anxiety caused by red-tagging were evident in the FGDs, **but affected the students the most.** The students said it "messed with their head" and led to serious cases of depression. Their parents told them to lie low, or to quit. Other staffers begged off from sensitive coverage, others took a leave of absence from the publication, and some resigned altogether. Himati, the official student publication of the University

of the Philippines Mindanao, experienced mass resignations.

The professional journalists battled with fear, anxiety, paranoia, **and guilt**. When Cong Corrales, editor-in-chief of the Cagayan de Oro-based Mindanao Gold Star Daily, wrote a feature story on a community pantry, the pantry leader was red-tagged after. “I was so guilty that he was just trying to help the community, and then I have to write that story, and he was red-tagged too,” Corrales said. A journalist expressed feeling guilt because the red-tagging incident, they believed, does not compare to the attacks against other people at a volatile time, which included arrests, detention, and murder.



Cagayan De Oro journalist Cong Corrales (third from left), files a case against internet company Meta. Accompanying him are MAD president Tony Lavina and NUJP chairperson Jonathan de Santos. Photo: NUJP

Almost everyone reconfigured their security plans, some opted not to go home for a long time, some changed their routes, and others took creative means to avoid surveillance like using fake names on delivery and ride-hailing apps. The fear was mostly for family members, especially those sharing the same home. Jonathan de Santos, who was red-tagged for his role as the chairperson of the NUJP, said “I pretend on social media that I am not bothered by it.” In reality, de Santos said, he attended fewer and fewer events for

the NUJP, consciously made the decision to be less visible, grew his hair long to change his appearance, and cut the times he went to his mother's house to spare her from possible surveillance. Bulatlat editor-in-chief Len Olea reduced her cycling times, especially at night; Buan stopped cycling altogether.

Rowena Paraan, who was red-tagged during the pandemic when she was the head of ABS-CBN's citizen journalism arm, said checkpoints during the lockdown scared her. "You're worried about every checkpoint, and **you suppress all rational thoughts**, and jump to negative scenarios like not being allowed to pass through when I'm carrying sacks of rice to distribute]," said Paraan. Janess Ann Ellao, managing editor of Bulatlat, experienced waiting for 5am to sleep due to the fear that her home was also going to be raided like what happened to Salem. "I practically have to wait until 4 am or 5 am just to say that 'okay tonight, it's not going to be our home,'" said Ellao. Bonifacio would sleep under her bed, scared that her house would be shot at repeatedly with a machine gun and if she slept on top of the bed, a bullet would definitely get her. The sight of motorcycles with two passengers, or the colloquially termed "riding-in-tandem", scared the red-tagged journalists and made them anxious of going out.

Buan said that when she was studying for her masters in London immediately after the 2022 campaign, a 30-minute commute became four hours because she feared the dark bus stops, or stops where she felt she was being watched. It resulted in multiple bus-hopping across the city, intentionally choosing well lit stops, and buses which were full of people, until it got her home. "That was a very sinking realization that I have not let go of the fear, which was a terrible mental health impact...compounded by the fact that I felt I did not have a right to feel that way because so many other people were going through worse," said Buan. "When late at night, there's rustling, I would peek at my door. That's just not a healthy way to live. It was a general pervading heavy weight on your shoulders," said Varona.

Araullo said red-tagging “really broke friendships apart.” He said: “In my case, when I see some of my former acquaintances or friends, and I see that they react to posts that red-tag me, or that discredit me as a journalist, either simple like or sometimes they will share it, then, you know, I would count that as an effect on my personal life.” It also caused a strain among colleagues whether within organizations or press clubs when the red-tagged journalist felt there was no ample support. In the family, the red-tagged journalists spent less time with their siblings, children, or parents to spare them from surveillance and possible attacks.

The FGDs reveal that there was no robust mechanism to respond to the mental health impacts of red-tagging. The Inquirer offered justice reporter Tetch Torres Tupas counseling after she was red-tagged by the former NTF-ELCAC spokesperson, retired lieutenant general Antonio Parlade Jr, for reporting on indigenous peoples’ affidavits disputing their anti-terror law charges. Other than that, the red-tagged journalists carried a personal burden, which is an exacerbation of the feeling of abandonment already caused by the



Dr. Reggie Pamugas in one of NUJP’s peer support sessions. Photo: NUJP

red-tagging. Red Masacupan, editor-in-chief of the red-tagged student publication Himati, said they were “disappointed” that their university did not provide mental health assistance. “A school nurse contacted me to check up on me, but they did not provide legal or psychiatric aid to help me through what happened. They just know that I worry when I see the police, that I worry when I hear a drone sound, that I worry when I hear a dog bark,” said Masacupan.

Reggie Pamugas, a physician and a psychiatrist with the group Health Action for Human Rights, and who has worked with journalists, said red-tagging has a “big mental impact” because it destroys the usual notion that your government will keep you safe. “You lose the concept that the State protects the people, including reporters. Then the people who you hoped would protect you then red-tags you. That’s a big mental impact. Where do you run? Let’s use the analogy of a child, who expects the parents to protect him or her. Why is my parent not feeding me, why is my parent hurting me? Who do I run to? It’s like that, so it has a big impact on mental health,” said Pamugas.

## **NEWSROOM ACTIONS**

In 159 incidents, there were only 6 cases or a mere 3.7% where the news organization took a concrete step to respond to the red-tagging of their journalist. The Inquirer offered Tupas leave, and the option to change her beat. Rappler drew up a security plan for Buan for the entire campaign coverage, and took charge of documenting social media attacks so she wouldn’t have to do it herself. In other cases, the press clubs or their contacts initiated a dialogue with the military.

In total, 112 cases or 70% took some action like releasing a statement or a story, reviewing protocols, or asking their journalist how they are. GMA-7 bosses “reached out” to Araullo and agreed that the best recourse was to let the issue subside. Bulatlat did an informal debriefing with its members, but had to make do with

limited resources as their main focus was legally challenging the blocking of their website by the National Telecommunications Commission (NTC). NTC premised Bulatlat's blocking on the anti-terror law's designation of people and members with no direct links to the news organization. FOCAP called for an emergency meeting, and started discussing putting up a safe house for their red-tagged members. The smaller community newsrooms implemented a buddy system - others were the watchers when the rest were reporting. ABS-CBN called for a meeting with their journalist Rowena Paraan after she was red-tagged during the pandemic, but Paraan said "it was intimidating" to right away meet with the network's security officials.

The full picture shows that there is no robust institutional protocol to address the red-tagging. "The reality is: you are on your own," said Esguerra. De Santos said "it did not help" that his former newsroom took it against him that his red-tagging was affecting the company too. Carreon said she started taking medicine for depression during the time that she had to figure out on her own how to face the incident, and file a report with the Commission on Human Rights without support from school. "In my perspective, we just got used to shutting it out and focusing on the work," said Bagaoisan.

"I hope newsrooms investigate red-tagging more clearly. But I hope the framework used for the investigation is how to protect the employee, how to protect the journalist, and not primarily how to protect the company," said Paraan.

The FGDs reveal a situation where newsrooms are either unwilling to extend support, unable due to the lack of resources, or simply have no established system to offer substantial aid. The news organizations that did not extend support were also the ones who advised their journalists to lie low. Danilo Arao, a professor of journalism, said "dominant media" should spend for "legal and any form of support - not just physical security, but also digital."

Mainstream media coverage of their red-tagging helped prompt school action, said Aila Esperida, editor of The Democrat, the

student publication of the University of Nueva Caceres in Naga City, Camarines Sur, and who received the same drop-by letters summoning them to meet with members of the Philippine Army. Coverage is also a big boost of morale, said the red-tagged journalists, alongside the statements of solidarity from many press clubs. However, according to Jane Cadalig, vice chair of the Kordilyera Media-Citizen Council (KMCC): “We have shown solidarity when ABS-CBN was being demonized but we can only do so much when you’re up against the government with all their resources.”

## **EFFECTS ON WORK**

The FGDs show that red-tagging affects the work of a journalist mostly among the student publications. There was less institutional support for student journalists who still had to adhere to school rules, and balance academic work. On top of that they had parents who were scared, and their fellow staffers were dropping out. There was also a period after the red-tagging attacks that campus publications chose to remove bylines, or used pseudonyms or initials for their stories, especially human rights stories, as part of their security protocol.

Among professional journalists, no one changed their beats or assignments, no one radically changed the way they approached their coverage, except that they were now more careful for their security and the security of their sources. It is likely that more incidents went unreported, and their insights will unfortunately never become part of record. To say that our study has found that red-tagged journalists were not stopped from reporting on stories that made them targets, is only a snapshot of a battered, but persisting, profession.

“Although I was given the option to write lighter stories at least temporarily, I chose to just carry on what I was doing, so it did not have any effect on me professionally,” said Tupas, who is a longtime

court reporter. Raymund Villanueva, a reporter for Koda, said he even increased the stories he filed. “We toughened up, it gave us the impetus to even increase stories of the same nature which is also our way to throw one punch against the enemies of press freedom. We were stiffened by what [the late former NUJP chairperson] Nonoy Espina said, ‘we are free because we insist on being free,’ said Villanueva.

There were two identifiable effects on the journalists professionally: 1.) Sources became hesitant and elusive 2.) Responding to the red-tagging, either by filing lawsuits or strengthening security protocols, took away time and resources from actual reporting. “It took us away from our work. For one to two weeks we were barely writing because we are composed of a very small team, and with what few people we had, we pulled them from reporting to help us analyze the cyber attacks,” said Ellao of Bulatlat. Bulatlat was a frequent victim of DDoS or distributed denial-of-service attacks, which maliciously disrupted traffic to the website to disable access.

The communities that the alternative media journalists frequently covered started clamping up understandably, and they started feeling the pinch of lessened access. Marc Lino Abila, editor-in-chief of Pinoy Weekly, said their sources, especially in the provinces, were also threatened directly. “The State attacks the sources too - the peasant leaders, and unionists were also being killed, arrested and jailed. So it was hard for us to access them also,” said Abila.

NUJP, also frequently red-tagged, was also badly hit, according to Bobby Lagsa, chairperson of the union’s local chapter in Cagayan de Oro, and a contributor to several national publications. “Many quit NUJP, many distanced themselves. Many also became curious. There was a big loss when NUJP was red-tagged, we lost a big space in journalism and in community media,” said Lagsa. Local chapters now have to grapple with journalists being apprehensive of membership due to fear of being red-tagged.





Press freedom advocates stage a protest in front of the National Telecommunications Commission. Photo: NUJP

## PUSHBACK

Journalists are not remiss with pushback actions over the years, whether it's filing counter lawsuits, or working with local governments to craft policy. Salem has fought her charges from the lower court to the appellate court, and won in September 2023 at the Court of Appeals when the Philippine government motioned for her lower court victory. The Court of Appeals affirmed that the search warrant against Salem - one of the many from the so-called "warrant factory" - was null and void, and therefore the firearms allegedly seized from her condominium unit were not admissible. The campaign against the warrant factories resulted in the Supreme Court removing the power of Metro Manila judges to issue search warrants outside of their jurisdictions. Salem is free and back working as a journalist, but her security remains fragile, lessening her physical visibility since her detention.

In Baguio City, north of Manila, journalists and civil society have made headway in pushing the city hall to pass a local human rights defenders ordinance, which would include clauses to define and punish red-tagging. Baguio City Mayor Benjamin Magalong, a retired police general, appears supportive of this move, including in his reelection slate red-tagged human rights defenders. Magalong has also declared Baguio as a “human rights inclusive city.” Magalong was red-tagged as a result. Also in Baguio City, the consolidated action of local human rights defenders have resulted in two resolutions from the Cordillera regional office of the CHR ascribing red-tagging as danger to one’s life and liberty. The local CHR resolutions define and punish red-tagging in a way that national offices - or courts - are still unable to do.

Bulatlat has scored an injunction against the NTC’s blocking of their website, although they are still on trial on the merits. The memorandum linking them to terrorism through a vaguely-worded layer of connection to the designated groups under the anti-terror law remains on record.

“It’s hard that we are the ones thinking of legal recourse to counter red-tagging and it seems as of now, we have limited options,” said Olea. “But I think it’s good to do collective pushback because I think they are feeling the pressure now,” she added.

The available legal remedies have not been encouraging to the red-tagged journalists. The loss of the Zarate case exposed some weaknesses in the extraordinary writs of Amparo (protection) and Habeas Data (data privacy), and since 2015 when the Supreme Court denied the progressive lawmakers the writs, others after them faced similar fates. Zara Alvarez, a Bacolod-based activist, had been consistently red-tagged for her human rights work with the group Karapatan and drove her to file for the same petition of amparo in 2019. The amparo and habeas data were a progressive innovation of the Supreme Court during the time of former president Gloria Macapagal Arroyo to respond to the urgent

problems of disappearances and extrajudicial killings. An amparo, if granted, would come in the form of a protection order which functions like a restraining order. A habeas data, if granted, would compel the government to remove damaging data against the petitioner. The Court of Appeals (CA) denied the petition without having to call Alvarez on the witness stand because of procedural issues. Alvarez and others appealed in the Supreme Court, but she was killed in 2020 before the Supreme Court could decide on her petition.



Environmental defenders Jhed Tamano and Jonila Castro. (Photo from Bulatlat.com)

The case of the young environmental defenders Jhed Tamano and Jonila Castro offered a window of opportunity because after many years, not only did activists win the protection order, they won it straight at the Supreme Court. Procedurally, the Supreme Court - where one files the petition - grants the writ, which is nothing more than just a paper to order the CA to hold expedited hearings to decide whether the privileges - or the actual protection order - would be given. In Tamano and Castro's cases, the Supreme Court gave a temporary protection order on their level, and granted the writ of habeas data saying that the security officials' statements to "expose" them "is already an open and express threat to petitioners' right to life, liberty, and security." Unfortunately, the Supreme Court decision on Castro and Tamano stopped short of discussing red-tagging, which could have given further boost to the legal remedies against the practice. The Office of the Solicitor General (OSG) is currently appealing the win of Castro and Tamano.

Another window of opportunity was when Badoy-Partosa was found guilty of indirect contempt, and fined P30,000 when she red-tagged Judge Marlo Magdoza-Malagar for dismissing the proscription case against the communist rebels. The Supreme Court launched motu proprio (on its own initiative) a contempt proceedings against Badoy-Partosa, but did not discuss red-tagging. The High Court instead framed the case on the limits of Badoy-Partosa’s freedom of speech. The Supreme Court found that the red-tagging speech against the judge (although the Supreme Court did not refer to it as “red-tagging”) constituted “vitriolic statements and outright threats” which “jeopardized the Judiciary.” Although the Supreme Court discussed Badoy-Partosa’s baseless accusation linking the judge to the communist rebels, the High Court stopped short of calling it red-tagging, and characterized it as “conduct that tends to bring the authority of the court and the administration of law into disrepute.”

Finally on May 8, 2024, the Supreme Court publicized a July 4, 2023 decision where they declared red-tagging as a “threat to a person’s right to life, liberty, or security.” This is the first time that a Supreme Court decision, and not a dissenting opinion, defines red-tagging. A unanimous decision, the Court issued the writ of amparo to former lawmaker and longtime activist Siegfred Deduro. Deduro was red-tagged repeatedly through posters, broadcast, in a forum, and experienced surveillance. He was red-tagged along with Alvarez, Iloilo-based activist Jory Porquia and National Union of Peoples’ Lawyers (NUPL) counsel Benjamin Ramos, all three of whom were shot and killed. Deduro’s petition for the writ of amparo, filed against his red-taggers from the 3rd



Infantry Division of the Philippine Army, was outrightly dismissed by the lower court in October 2020, which led to the appeal in the Supreme Court. The recent decision is a mere issuance of the writ, and directed the lower court to hold hearings to determine if the privileges of the writ are merited. Nevertheless, the ruling was significant because it defined Deduro's red-tagging "as a likely precursor to abduction or extrajudicial killing." Moreover, the Court referred to red-tagging in general as making the person "a target of vigilantes, paramilitary groups, or **even State agents.**" The Supreme Court further said: "inherent in the practice of red-baiting is the use of threats and intimidation to discourage 'subversive' activities."

**"It is easy to comprehend how a person may, in certain circumstances, develop or harbor fear that being red-tagged places his or her life or security in peril. This Court has demonstrated its understanding of this fear,"** said the Supreme Court in the Deduro decision.

It remains to be seen how this recent decision will impact the fight for accountability against red-tagging, or if it would even lessen the incidents, or stop it altogether. Before this decision, there was a losing streak for amparo for many activists, which was discouraging for the journalists. This discouragement was then combined with gaslighting because journalists did not think they deserved an "extreme" legal measure when their experiences were not as severe as the activists. "I thought: who am I to file for this?" said De Santos, who has since transferred Newsrooms and is easing back in to the visible union tasks since the red-tagging.

**The most profound pushback the journalists have done has been to stay on the job, continue reporting the same stories, despite the harmful effects of red-tagging.**

## THE STATE'S RESPONSE

NUJP also interviewed the Presidential Task Force on Media Security or PTFoMS, created under the Duterte government, and whose officials also held roles with the red-tagging NTF-ELCAC. The relationship between PTFoMS and Filipino journalists have always been fraught, and complicated to navigate because of mistrust. PTFoMS preferred to answer questions by email.

PTFoMS said “the Marcos administration unequivocally does not condone “red-tagging” or any form of harassment and discrimination” but in the same breath said **“the term “red-tagging” has no clear and universally accepted definition** and is not recognized under our local penal laws and international legal standards.”

PTFoMS said they are ready to assist “harassed” journalists, and that they “extend a hand to the NUJP, inviting them to renew their partnership and actively participate in the ongoing dialogue between the government and stakeholders.”

“Our approach is to conduct a thorough and impartial investigation into these allegations. This will involve scrutinizing the actions of the accused individuals within the government and law enforcement agencies to ascertain the validity of the claims made by the NUJP.”

“If the investigation, conducted with rigorous due diligence, confirms instances of harassment or red-tagging by government officials or uniformed personnel, PTFoMS is committed to taking firm action,” said PTFoMS.

The NUJP tried to interview the NTF-ELCAC and followed up three times but the task force said they had no available schedule.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The red-tagged journalists have an overwhelming recommendation to their colleagues: continue reporting, and stand in solidarity with those who are harassed. This is already ongoing. What is more needed is practical support: a free legal network that journalists can easily access whenever they are red-tagged. The legal support could range from as simple as legal advice, to notary services for reports they need to file, to as extensive as building a complaint to file it. Out of the 159 recorded incidents, there were only 41 cases that took legal or quasi-legal action; most were simply to file a report with the CHR.

The Movement Against Disinformation (MAD) is a recently established public interest lawyering group that focuses on red-tagging, framing the issue as dangerous disinformation for strategic litigation. They have provided legal assistance to red-tagged journalists, filed civil lawsuits on their behalf, and filed

Journalist Atom Araullo files a case against SMNI show hosts Jeffrey Celiz and Lorraine Badoy-Partosa. MAD president Atty. Tony La Viña serves as lead counsel. NUJP Photo



complaints with Meta to charge big tech some accountability for being the platform of such disinformation-driven attacks. MAD also petitioned the National Telecommunications Commission (NTC) to stop the air of SMNI, a broadcast channel owned by Duterte's friend Apollo Quiboloy, a fugitive doomsday preacher, and the red-tagging platform of Badoy-Partosa and Celiz. MAD framed the petition as SMNI's violation of its own franchise law (Section 4, RA 11422) which obliges the network "not to use its stations or facilities for the dissemination of deliberately false information or willful misrepresentation." All of these legal actions avoid the criminal case of libel, respecting the journalists' strong stance that libel must be decriminalized in the Philippines.

While strategic litigation helps, MAD president Tony La Viña said the CHR would be an instrumental first step to institutionally fight against red-tagging. "[They can come up with] protective systems, [establish] sanctuaries if necessary. Expose those that red-tag," said La Viña. The CHR has consistently stood firm against red-tagging, and recently held a symposium to gather information for a planned inquiry. The commission also recently launched a communication channel where journalists can quickly report attacks and other harassments, which include but are not limited to red-tagging.

"A law punishing red tagging might actually be good," said La Viña. Arao pushed for the passage of the Human Rights Defenders Bill, which protects human rights defenders from "any form of defamation, stigmatization, or other harassment, in connection with one's status, activities, or work as a human rights defender."

The NUJP echoes Khan's recommendation for the Marcos government to pass a law or a circular that would prohibit red-tagging, and punish those that will continue. The recent Supreme Court ruling should be a prompt for both an executive policy and legislation. PTFoMS pointed to Marcos' E.O. 23 for laborers, and said they are "aligned with the tenets" of the order.



The red-tagged journalists interviewed for this study all express apprehension in putting all their hope on the government to solve red-tagging. While some vouch for a level of engagement with local officials that they trust, the general feeling for journalists remains that it's a problem they have to solve on their own. It will be a combination of continued coverage, strengthened information campaign, and a more institutionalized and accessible legal and psychological support.

“It's very important that part of our response as a community of media is to ensure that red-tagging stops with our generation,” said Ellao.

*Disclosure: Among the participants of the FGDs were Buan, an author for this study; and Olea and De Santos, who are editors for this study.*

# **CASE STUDIES**

# PUSHING BACK AGAINST RED-TAGGERS

*Atom Araullo*

**Even one of the most recognizable faces in Philippine journalism was not spared from red-tagging.**

The first time it happened, in 2016, broadcast journalist Atom Araullo says he merely chuckled and brushed it off due to its “absurdity.”

It was a “cryptic post” insinuating that he is the son of a high-ranking member of the Communist Party of the Philippines and one he promptly forgot about.

“That post gained traction. I think thousands of shares, hundreds of thousands of likes,” he recalls. “Initially, because of its absurdity, I just brushed it aside. Had a little chuckle, in fact. Shared it with my mother.”

Araullo’s mother, Carol P. Araullo,

is the emeritus chairperson of Bagong Alyansang Makabayan, which State forces have repeatedly accused without basis of being a “front organization” of the communist party.

It later became more serious, the award-winning broadcast journalist says, when – like other lies perpetuated against critics of the Duterte administration, absurd as they were – took root and further gained traction.

“What I did observe is, sometimes, the attacks come in waves... especially when I produce a story that is a little critical, or if I make a comment about their principles or people that they support politically,” says Araullo.

There was a “kuyog” or mob mentality in the attacks. “Some appear to be real people, some seem like burner accounts,” he



Photo: NUJP

says. “That to me is not necessarily proof, but an indication that some of these attacks are orchestrated or at least are deliberate in terms of harassing and discrediting me.”

Even official social media accounts linked to the military and the police took part in the red-tagging spree.

It further escalated in 2019 when notorious red-taggers Lorraine Badoy-Partosa and Jeffrey Celiz targeted him in their SMNI program “Laban Kasama ang Bayan.” Their claim had the same narrative: He was in cahoots with communists because he is the son of an activist.

Soon enough, brushing it aside was no longer an option.

“On one hand, you don’t want to dignify the accusations. But on the other, what I’ve observed is that when it comes to misinformation

or disinformation, if you don’t do anything about it, it tends to spread. And it tends to take root and have a life of its own,” he says.

That’s when he decided to file a civil suit against Badoy-Partosa and Celiz.

“It was a bit tricky because I don’t want to use libel against red-taggers because I am one of those who push for decriminalization of libel. That’s when the possibility of filing a civil case came in,” Araullo says in Filipino.

The case, filed in September 2023, sought P2 million for “damages and injuries suffered due to defamatory statements maliciously disseminated” by the two SMNI hosts.

Araullo was assisted by the Movement Against Disinformation (MAD), a coalition

of organizations seeking to fight disinformation through litigation and public advocacy, in filing the case. MAD president Antonio La Viña, a constitutional law professor at the University of the Philippines, underscored the seriousness of red-tagging, especially for journalists and other human rights defenders.

“That’s very harmful because you can die, right?... Some people who have been red-tagged, including journalists, have been arrested, have been killed,” he says.

Red-tagging, La Viña adds, can intimidate journalists and prevent them from doing their jobs.

“If you intimidate journalists, it affects civic discourse, it affects the ability to criticize the government. We are poorer by it because then we cannot solve problems because we do not know the truth,” he says.

Aside from the security threat it poses, Araullo highlights the serious impact of red-tagging on the professional lives of journalists who are targeted.

It wasn’t as absurd as he initially thought it was.

“Credibility and trustworthiness are essentially all we have as members of the media... You know that they are trying to destroy your reputation,” he says.

In some instances, even people who are familiar with his body of work ended up “liking” or sharing false information about him. It also had an impact on his relationship with sources, especially State forces.

“That’s one way to limit your reportage, right? To prevent you from going to places where you need to go. To find out the truth,” he adds.

In an interview after filing the case, he points out a frightening reality: If someone like him – a journalist with national prominence and backing of a major news network – can be a victim of red-tagging, what more would its impact be to other journalists who have less protection and access to legal and other forms of support?

# RED-TAGGING AS PART OF THE SHUTDOWN NARRATIVE

ABS CBN

**Disinformation networks went into overdrive when the Duterte administration pushed for the shutdown of broadcast giant ABS-CBN in 2020.**

And along with the false claims used to justify the non-renewal of the network's franchise was a dangerous narrative that targeted government critics: red-tagging.

On May 12, 2020, just days after ABS-CBN stopped broadcasting on free television, Lt. Gen. Antonio Parlade Jr. of the National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict (NTF-ELCAC) alleged that the "reds [are freeriding] on the ABS-CBN issue."

He repeated the same, unsubstantiated claim that

communists are using "front organizations" to destabilize the government as they protested an assault on the media whose effects are still being felt years later.

"We don't need to red tag them," he claimed.

But that was what he did.

Parlade singled out veteran journalist Inday Espina-Varona, then a senior contributing editor and a writer for ABS-CBN, and accused her – without any evidence – of being part of a plan to oust then-President Rodrigo Duterte.

"The escalation of the attacks, hit the apex during Duterte's time," recalls Espina-Varona, former chair of the National Union of

# ABS-CBN BROADCASTING CENTRE



Photo: NUJP

Journalists of the Philippines (NUJP) who used to head ABS-CBN's Bayan Mo, I-Patrol Mo (BMPM) citizen journalism and engagement effort.

The government's motive, she says, was to silence critics and take the platform away from them, citing the experience of ABS-CBN, Rappler and the different alternative media outfits that experienced harassment during the Duterte administration.

Also red-tagged by Parlade were the NUJP, student organizations College Editors Guild of the Philippines and Union of Journalists of the Philippines-University of the Philippines (UJP), alternative media network Altermidya, and alternative media outfits Bulatlat, Kodao, Tudla, Kilab and Northern Dispatch.

A few days later, a Facebook post from a certain Aram dela Cruz also red-tagged another ABS-CBN journalist, Rowena Carranza-Paraan.

Paraan is a former NUJP chair and was then head of BMPM.

The post resurfaced a 2013 picture of women journalists during a safety training seminar in Cagayan de Oro City. It falsely claimed that the photo, which showed a simulation exercise for a first aid module, is proof that the ABS-CBN journalist has links with communists.

Paraan believes that the incident was linked to the ABS-CBN shutdown.

"I was never personally attacked when I was NUJP head. It was always NUJP, the organization. So many years after, when I do

not have much engagement with NUJP, why now?” she says in a mix of English and Filipino.

MindaNews, which originally published the photo, condemned the red-tagging incident, saying it endangers the lives of Paraan and the other women journalists who attended the training, which was conducted in coordination with the military.

While the original post came from a possible fake account, Paraan said the post containing the false claim was later shared by accounts linked to the police and the military.

“I initially laughed it off, but later on I felt scared,” she says, citing attacks against other individuals who were red-tagged. “I was living alone, so if something happens to me, no one will know about it.”

ABS-CBN journalist Anjo Bagaoisan, deputy secretary general of NUJP, notes that the red-tagging of Varona, Paraan and other media groups was clearly intended to discredit those opposing the network’s shutdown.

“The red-tagging was just one of those attacks that happened,” he says, recalling the slew of trolling incidents — among them the funeral wreaths that were delivered to ABS-CBN’s Northern Mindanao Office in Cagayan de Oro — that ABS-CBN and its journalists also experienced at the height of the shutdown.

Parlade, whose list included student organizations, drew a strong rebuke from the administration of the University of the Philippines College of Mass Communication (UP CMC).

“The active involvement of UJP and other CMC-based student organizations in the campaign to renew ABS-CBN’s franchise reflects what they learned within and beyond the four walls of the classroom,” it said in its statement.

“The College actually commends our students for their bravery as they face the bashing of mindless trolls, and now the Red-baiting of those who do not understand press freedom. For the information of NTF-ELCAC and Parlade, our students are guided by the College’s vision for a free and independent media, which is hardly communist.”



# KASIYANA: THE NORTHERN OPTIMISM AND FIGHT

## *Baguio journalists*

Baguio journalists have reported that despite the government's repeated denials of red-tagging as a state policy, evidence on the ground suggests otherwise.

Frank Cimatú and Jane Cadalig shared their experience in May 2023. During their regular program on SMNI, Jeffrey Celiz labeled journalists Harley Palangchao and Frank Cimatú, as well as freelance writer Luchie Maranan as part of the network of the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP). Palangchao and Cimatú are editors-in-chief of Baguio Midland Courier and Baguio Chronicle, respectively.

They were in Thailand along with other ASEAN journalists for a conference on disinformation. Celiz used a photo posted on Facebook that showed them eating dinner with Baguio non-

government organizations, whom they just decided to meet up with as kailians (townmates or hailing from the same city).

Jane Cadalig, vice chair of the Kordilyera Media-Citizen Council (KMCC), said that, because of that, they immediately released a statement to clear their colleagues' names. But this was only met with more red-tagging by Lorraine Badoy-Partosa, Celiz and their supporters.

Cadalig said that KMCC is just a young organization but because of the statement, they had to clear their image already.

Cimatú expressed that he was only worried about being in a foreign country. Meanwhile, Palangchao, who was being accused for the first time, appeared to be more nervous. "We were joking pero syempre mabigat kasi hindi nila



Photo by Angie de Silva

alam mangyayari sa airport, (We were joking but it was serious because they didn't know what may happen at the airport)" Cadalig said.

Cadalig added that red-tagging is especially heavier for journalists as it directly tarnishes their body of work. They did try to discuss the issue with officials but were only met with questions regarding their "love for the country." Because of this, they didn't pursue more dialogues and even had an inside joke about photo-taking. Until now, they have avoided having their pictures taken at seminars or trainings due to the incident.

What eased them, Cadalig said, was each other. She called it 'kasiyana' which means 'everything will be alright,' as long as they were there in solidarity. She also described community newsrooms as having very lean staff, "so kayo-kayo talaga. (you only have each other)"

Cimatu described the tag as a "badge of honor." He named journalists who were red-tagged and were sharp in their reporting. He also said that, for the public and the media community, the label is not a bad thing as it's already known that the perpetrators are clearly lying.

Apart from the case of Cimatu, Palangchao, and KMCC, one more media outfit is no stranger to red-tagging, this time in numerous accounts from the state itself. Labels came through summons, lists, police reports, direct conversations with the police, and online statements or photos shared by officials.

In 2018, Sherwin de Vera of Northern Dispatch (Nordis) was included in a list of alleged communist members submitted by the justice department. Since then, he has been targeted on multiple occasions, including being named in police reports as part of the communist network for simply covering protest actions. Aldwin Quitasol, a correspondent for a national daily, has also been falsely accused of being part of the communist network and received summonses in both 2021 and 2022 for an “anti-insurgency dialogue.”

Khim Abalos, a former reporter of Nordis, was red-tagged by the official Facebook page of the local city police, and in another instance, was forced by a police to delete his photos.

Most recently in 2023, Nordis was included in a list of alleged communists’ “Sectoral Front Organizations” in Kalinga province provided by the 50th Infantry Battalion of the Philippine Army.

The cases were reported to the



Photo from Katribu

Commission on Human Rights (CHR) and UN expert Irene Khan, while De Vera urged CHR to request Meta to provide the internet protocol addresses of Facebook accounts associating him with communists.

It is only in Baguio City where journalists and civil society have made headway in pushing city hall to pass a local human rights defenders ordinance. This is only the second local government legislation of its kind in the Philippines, after an ordinance in

Isabela City, Basilan. But unlike the Isabela ordinance, Baguio's ordinance has specific penal provisions and defines red-tagging, recognizing these as human rights violations.

Baguio City Mayor Benjamin Magalong, a retired police general, appears supportive of this move, also declaring Baguio as a "human rights inclusive city." Consolidated action by local human rights defenders resulted in two Cordillera CHR resolutions, declaring red-tagging as a threat to life and liberty. The challenge now is, how that kind of solidarity and concrete actions will trickle down to Manila and other regions of the country.

# UNBLOCKING THE TRUTH

## *Bulatlat and Pinoy Weekly*

**“Day 1 pa lang (Since Day 1), ang decision namin ay (the decision is) how to push back.” This was the clear statement of Ronalyn Olea, editor-in-chief of online media publication Bulatlat, as she shared how they went through various cases of red-tagging, with the worst being the blocking of their online website – their whole platform.**

In the final months of Rodrigo Duterte’s presidency, Hermogenes Esperon Jr., National Security Council (NSC) Advisor and Anti-Terrorism Council Vice Chairperson, sent a memorandum in June 2022 to the National

Telecommunication Commission (NTC) ordering Philippine Internet Service Providers (ISPs) to block access to websites “affiliated to and are supporting terrorists and terrorist organizations.” The NTC acted on the order and blocked 28 websites including that of Bulatlat and Pinoy Weekly, which are legitimate and alternative media organizations.

For more than two decades, Bulatlat has made it clear since 2001 that it is a place where one could get news and views left out of the news agenda of the mainstream media. It has been red-tagged throughout various administrations since former President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo. It has been included in a “trinity of war powerpoint



Journalists and advocates reiterate call for the junking of the Anti-Terror Act in a protest in July 2023. (Photo by Carlo Manalansan/Bulatlat)

presentations” released by the military, a frequent name in the controversial media network SMNI, and attacked by trolls and government officials in social media posts to senate hearings. Yet perhaps the worst was the blocking of its website.

A year after Bulatlat, Pinoy Weekly was established in 2002 as a weekly tabloid to reach a mass audience, using the language of the masses – Filipino. But it differed in providing content from mainstream tabs of the industry. Instead of the usual “sex, scandal, and crime,” Pinoy Weekly focused

on developments in public and national affairs. Like Bulatlat, it’s not new in red-tagging, with their copies frequently confiscated and dubbed as communist propaganda. Now, even their website was taken from them.

“Ang laking hassle (It was such a hassle)” and “literal na kumain ng oras (It ate time, literally).” Apart from still publishing stories and already having limited resources as alternative organizations, their focus was then diffused to finding lawyers, looking for assistance on digital security, and frequent consultations among members and partner organizations. While

Olea admitted it was a hassle, they described it as a hassle that was necessary. “It was a clear case of censorship. And if you do not push back, they might do it to others, not only to other media outfits but also to other voices critical of the government.”

But it didn’t come without personal effects on its members. Olea stopped biking when it was already dark and changed routines. Janess Ellao, the managing editor of Bulatlat, had a hard time sleeping, going as far as waiting until 4 or 5 am to breathe out “Okay, tonight is not the night.” Anxiety and paranoia are common feelings, Ellao adding that “you feel like a sitting duck just waiting to be arrested.” It was an added weight when the parents of their interns expressed serious concern, and one left completely.

For Marc Abila, editor-in-chief of Pinoy Weekly, it had effects but it was “business as usual.” As alternative organizations are not new to cases of attacks and threats, they were systematic in reviewing protocols, retaking physical and digital safety training, and simply debriefing

each other if needed. “Parang mas positive pa yung effect na dahil sine-censor tayo ng gobyerno, meron tayong ginagawang tama. Imbis na panghinaan ng loob, yung mga tao talagang tumibay pa yung loob, (The effect is more positive, because we are being censored, we did something right. Instead of being discouraged, the staff grew and persisted)” he said, adding that they meet up even until midnight just to talk about the next steps or stories.

“Noong nagEIC ako, dalawa lang kami, (When I became the EIC, we were only two)” Marc shared, but he, Ellao, and Olea said that interns poured in. “Ayoko siya i-romanticize, pero nakakapagtaka lang na (I don’t want to romanticize it but it’s interesting that) despite the red-tagging, we still get a lot of queries in internships,” Ellao shared. And even if they orient them about cases against Bulatlat, most interns stay as volunteers, while those who left still come back and help.

As Bulatlat went through the legal battle, they received “overwhelming” and “heartwarming” support from the media community. “It’s not

everyday you get to know that. It was an affirmation in the kind of journalism we do, we drew strength from that,” Olea said. “Nagbagsakan yung luha namin noong may ibang nag-message na 17 (pesos) lang yung laman ng g-cash niya pero ibibigay pa rin sa Bulatlat. Kasi kailangan. Kasi naniniwala sa work namin. Yung mga ganung support, kahit bugbog sarado ka na sa atake, nakakatuwa, (We cried when someone messaged that they only had 17 pesos in their e-wallet, but they will still give it to Bulatlat. Because it was needed. Because they believe in our work. That kind of support, despite us being bruised by the attacks, is heartwarming)” Ellao said.

Throughout various incidents, they filed cases. And while they’re not surprised by the lack of government action in most of the incidents, they said that it shows that they are “ready to demand accountability.” Indeed, efforts and pushback were not put to waste, as Bulatlat was unblocked in August 2022 after a two-month legal process to reverse the blocking. Meanwhile, Pinoy Weekly has put up an alternative site and continues its print operations.

“The more progressive take on journalism is that it’s a product of the reality of the times,” UP associate professor and Bulatlat editor Danilo Arao pointed out. He said that “real” journalists side with the marginalized sectors “because you want to serve as a voice to the voiceless. That’s it. It’s a simple concept,” – a concept that the state tried to block but the alternative press like Bulatlat and Pinoy Weekly continues.



# SCARE THEM WHILE THEY'RE YOUNG

*Campus journalists*

**For campus journalists, red-tagging does not only come in the form of notifications in social media, it also knocks on their own doors.**

In September 2023, Aila Esperida of The Democrat received a letter summoning her and her parents for a discussion with unidentified members of the Philippine Army. She said that military forces went as far to fetch her father when she didn't attend the said meeting due to classes. This continued for several months, with military officials visiting their house "twice a week" and following her even in school. She shared how officials threatened her to tell who the members of CEGP or NUJP are, "kasi kapag hindi, yung head mismo nila yung pupunta. Tapos, baka daw kung ano ang mangyari

kasi hindi mapakausapan. (if not, their head will be the one asking and something bad might happen as they already tried talking to her.)" She also said that she received several text messages, with people even providing her load to make sure she replied.

Kessha Carreon of UP Baguio Outcrop and her family also received a letter in January 2023, in her province in Isabela, asking her to meet with military officials. Despite meeting up with them and the officials telling them that they would stop bothering Kessha, another person who identified himself as part of the military contacted Kessha's friend asking for her personal details. She raised that what she experienced was part of the tactic "Dumanon makitungtong" (come and talk), a door-to-door



Aila Joy Esperida speaks during a program commemorating the anniversary of Martial Law in Naga City, Sept. 21 (Photo by Abby Bilan)

approach homologous to the Oplan Tokhang style of the war on drugs which resulted in several extrajudicial killings.

In August of the same year, ironically with a white ribbon seemingly to disguise the bloody tactic, Red Masacupan of UP Mindanao Himati said they also received a letter saying “Masacupan, komunista! Nakamasid kami sa iyo at sa mga kasama mo. (Masacupan, communist! We are watching you and your friends.)” Masacupan shared how four men suspected to be intelligence forces stayed just outside their building, despite her dormitory not really part of the main roads or ways.

Apart from them, other members of their publications also received similar letters in the same months, displaying the incidents as part of a pattern instead of an isolated one. Their cases were followed by waves of online attacks, personal and in articles published by the publications.

Similarly, journalists from Tinig ng Plaridel and UPLB Perspective shared how their organizations were red-tagged online – frequently hounded by trolls and a media personality who’s also a Duterte staunch supporter. Hundreds of comments not only red-tagged them but even threatened the organizations and personally called out the editors.

More than numbers in the growing case of red-tagging against campus publications, these knocks and persistent notifications have personal impacts on each student, especially on their mental health. Many thought of stopping writing or leaving their publications completely, but decided to push through. One journalist said that the red-tagging was one main factor why he resigned from his post.

These also caused rifts in the family—their parents asking them if they could “lie-low”, resign, or stop schooling completely. Some students also shared how they were diagnosed with depression. While one who is already clinically diagnosed, said he noticed how the incident amplified his depression when he caught himself flinching every time a notification popped out. Students described the psychological toll such as frequent zoning out, lack of focus, lack of enthusiasm, and even physical symptoms such as sharp chest pains.

Further, the problem with fear is that it spreads, translating to the operations of their student publications – members leaving,

stories being limited, and bylines cut out. The student journalists also raised the lack of action they received from their schools—their second homes, the supposed safe spaces that would support them.

Still, they persisted. And when asked how the attacks changed their perspective as journalists, the consensus was a clear “No.”

Directly summoning and knocking on the door of a journalist is already a cause for concern. However, it is even more alarming that the state can do this to student journalists. It appears that the simple phrase “knock, knock” is becoming more and more ominous, if not threatening. And the state is employing all means, especially to the young, to stop them from being critical journalists.

The problem for the state is this: they are not mere kids trying out journalism. They are not only young. They are the young with renewed optimism and mighty pens ready to pursue journalism amid attacks and threats against the press.

# THE MOST RED-TAGGED JOURNO IN CDO

*Cong Corrales*

## **“The most red-tagged journalist in Cagayan De Oro”**

This perhaps is the title no journalist ever dreamed of bragging about. For Cong Corrales, editor-in-chief of the CDO-based Mindanao Gold Star Daily, this phrase has affected even his wife, his children, his friends, his mental health, and his professional career.

Leonardo Corrales or “Cong,” 50, has been red-tagged numerous times on social media, and in anti-communist propaganda materials circulated in CDO since 2019. The first of the many cases was in February 2019 when leaflets containing a supposed list of communist members and recruiters of the New People’s Army included not only Cong’s name but also his family.

Soon, papers in different sizes – posters, bond papers, streamers, envelopes, packages, and even a box in the middle of a city mall – all had his name, photo, or his family branded as communists.

Activities on the ground were amplified online. Social media trolls posted their photos and called them a “family of communists” and “*halimaw* (monster)”, going as far back as using personal photos such as a picture of him and his wife in a Halloween costume.

“I cannot be with them. I cannot send them (his children) to school every day.” He shared how one of his children got bullied and was asked by a classmate about Cong. “But funny enough, my family is strong,” Cong shared, adding that his son defended him from his classmate. “They gave me

strength. *Sabi nila*, (They said) we will support you, *alam namin na wala kang ginagawang masama*. (We know you're not doing anything wrong.)”

“Fear, anger, fear, anger” – Cong said he experienced a cycle of emotions, which most red-tagged journalists felt. But in Cong’s case, there was another – guilt. There was a particular incident when he simply published a feature story about the initiative of a UP professor to set up a community pantry in the city to help the community amid the COVID-19 pandemic. However, this resulted in him and his source being red-tagged. The initiative did not push through, as well.

“I fell into a depression,” Cong admitted. He said he had a hard time getting up from bed in the morning, “Yung sense of purpose ng existence mo, nawawala (diminishes). Blurry. *Parang*, what is this all for?”

Cong’s colleague, Bobby Lagsa, NUJP-CDO chairman, shared how he realized Cong’s “real fear.” There was a time when he rode his motorcycle with his helmet, and in a joke, called Cong by his full name while he was smoking



Cong Corrales files a complaint against Meta over red-tagging. Photo: NUJP

outside a press conference. He said Cong froze for a moment and it dawned on him that his friend and colleague who usually throws strong and brave statements was actually scared.

He also said that there were moments when Cong “lost faith” with his colleagues. “*Minsan inaaway niya kami...* It led to drinking, depression, *lahat inaaway niya ‘pag lasing siya*. (At times he fought with us. He turned to drinking, fell into a depression, and would fight anyone when he’s drunk.)”

He also stopped writing. The viciousness of the attacks became unbearable that he was forced to fly from CDO to Metro Manila in August 2019 after receiving a printout that put a P1 million bounty on his head, even alleging him of murder and rape. He stayed in a friend's house for more than a month but soon needed to go back to his family and work.

After some advice from friends and NUJP members, he took up cooking and biking as a form of therapy. Little by little, he eased back to editing and writing stories.

*“Basta I will continue what I think is the role of journalism in society. Patayin nila ako kung patayin nila ako, (kill me if they want) I will still push through with what I do.”*

On May 5, 2023, he went to the National Privacy Commission to file an unprecedented complaint that would compel Meta to disclose information on the trolls that red-tagged him online. Cong said that he hopes that his move will “pave the way for others – not just journalists – Filipino citizens who have been maligned and slandered through social media platforms here in the Philippines.”

# A DEADLY POLICY ACROSS ADMINISTRATIONS

*Inday Espina-Varona*

## **In journalism, silencing is tantamount to killing.**

Journalist Inday Espina-Varona is not new to attempts to muzzle the press. Throughout her more than four decades of journalism practice, she has seen – and experienced – different forms of State-sponsored attacks against the media, including red-tagging.

In 2005, during the administration of Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, a PowerPoint presentation titled “Knowing the Enemy” circulated among the media. Believed to be the handiwork of the Intelligence Services of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (ISAFP), the presentation listed that National Union of Journalists of the Philippines

(NUJP) and the Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism as among the supposed legal fronts of the Communist Party of the Philippines.

Varona, at the time, was the chair of the NUJP.

A few years later, in 2009, the NUJP – along with one of its former officers – was included in an order of battle of the AFP’s 10th Infantry Division.

She was also accused of corroborating with the New People’s Army (NPA) while she was reporting about Lumad communities in Mindanao during the administration of Benigno Aquino III.



The pamphlet accuses the NUJP of speaking in behalf of and of being a propagandist of the Communist Party of the Philippines, the New People’s Army, and the National Democratic Front. (Photo from NUJP Facebook page)

“Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo’s time was terrible when I was chair of the National Union of Journalists of the Philippines then,” she recalls.

But it was during the time of Rodrigo Duterte that the attacks hit its apex, she says.

Varona, who was senior contributing editor and writer for ABS-CBN and later Head of Regions at Rappler, was red-tagged numerous times.

The incidents varied: from those included in the so-called “Oust

Duterte” matrix and posters distributed in Cagayan de Oro to being subject of various attacks online and in the SMNI program of Lorraine Badoy-Partosa and Jeffrey Celiz.

During the height of the ABS-CBN shutdown in 2020, Varona was singled out by Lt. Gen. Antonio Parlade Jr., then spokesperson of the National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict, as among the “reds” who are supposedly freeriding on the issue.



But there was one incident that particularly affected her.

“It was an anonymous post that said that I was using my journalism work to get sensitive information from the Defense Department, the PNP (Philippine National Police) and the AFP to pass on the NPA. That was very serious because it was very targeted,” she says.

“That was the time when the anti-terror law had just passed... And the repercussions were very, very serious. And the strangest thing is I’m not even a defense reporter. Nor do I cover the AFP or the PNP beats,” she adds.

It was like getting doused with cold water, she says. “The last time I felt that I had to continuously look behind my back was during the time of Gloria Arroyo.”

But the difference back then is that the journalists, particularly the NUJP, had a better relationship with the police.

“They were friendly to us. At that time, the PNP was not the mad dog that Duterte made it to be,”

says Varona, noting that while the original allegation came from an anonymous post, it was later “freely shared” by accounts linked to the police and the military. Social media didn’t help either.

“It played a big part. If there was social media during the time of Gloria, we would have big problems,” says Varona.

The internet, she notes, gave red-taggers a way to amplify the attacks while at the same time elude accountability. “[They can make it look like] it did not come from them directly... They use it for deniability tactics.”

Red-tagging took a turn for the worse during the Duterte regime, she says: “Now it’s communist-terrorist. They call you ‘salot’ (pest). You’re really a target for extermination.”

During the time of Duterte, Varona says 90 percent of activists who were killed were red-tagged before they were murdered.

And while there seems to be a “breathing space” for journalists during the current administration of Ferdinand Marcos Jr., Varona

says it remains a continuing policy of the government.

“Behind the smiles of this current president, killings continue to happen. And these are still people who were red-tagged before they were actually killed, or their organizations were red-tagged before they were actually killed,” she says.

“Rodrigo Duterte is on a different level precisely because he didn’t just allow it, he led the charge... Marcos is not leading the charge, but it (red-tagging) continues to escalate, especially in the provinces,” Varona adds in a mix of English and Filipino.

Any government official who claims there’s no policy on red-tagging is a liar. Whether it’s under Aquino, under Duterte, under Marcos, red-tagging is a policy. And it’s not just a policy – it’s a policy with deadly repercussions.”

# RED-TAGGED FOR DOING HER JOB

*Jazmin Bonifacio*

**Fear messes up the mind, but it also strengthens your resolve to keep fighting the good fight.**

When journalist Jazmin Bonifacio received her first death threat in 2005, the fear she felt came with a question: “Why me? I did not do anything wrong.”

It was a question that, like other journalists targeted for their work, she has repeatedly asked herself and her colleagues.

“For the military, for the police and the government officials here, it seems as if it was our fault... that we are discussing [relevant issues in our reports],” she says in Filipino.

Based in Eastern Visayas, Bonifacio – now chair of the National Union of Journalists of the Philippines in Leyte – had just returned from a

two-year reporting assignment in Samar when the threats came in.

First was a phone call accusing her of being a member of the New People’s Army, then came the death threats. At one point, she learned that her name was included in the military’s “order of battle.”

“Why? What was the basis?” was the question she repeatedly asked.

She did not get a direct answer, but she has an idea: her stories about the communities she covered.

The threats became so serious – at one point, a man pulled out a gun at her – that they had to keep her in a safe house for three months. It was when she decided what she really wanted to do: her job.

“For me, it’s difficult that I was just there listening to the radio, while my colleagues are being

harassed,” she says. “I said I need to go back to the station. And that’s what I did.”

But for Bonifacio, it’s not as simple as having enough courage to continue doing her job.

Fear is always there, she says, especially when the threats intensified over the years. It had a lot of impact on her life: she kept her distance from her family, and she became wary of colleagues, especially those who had close connections with State forces.

At night, paranoia sets in. “I sleep under the bed because I was thinking, ‘what if someone comes by and starts strafing [the radio station where I stay]?’” She’s also cautious when going out in the field, thinking about colleagues who may get harmed if someone attacks her.

One would think that she would eventually get used to it, but that was not the case.

After almost two decades, and several administrations later, the attacks – red-tagging, surveillance, death threats and harassment, among others – continue.

“Nothing changed,” Bonifacio points out, citing the case of fellow Leyte-based journalist Frenchie Mae Cumpio, who has been detained since 2020 over trumped-up charges of illegal possession of firearms and terror financing.

The NUJP – Leyte also monitored several cases of surveillance and harassment of journalists, including campus publications. The threats are also online, with anonymous accounts using social media platforms to perpetuate the same lies that have endured over the years.

It was enough to unnerve some of her colleagues, to a point there are those who ended up leaving the profession.

It is understandable, she says. But for Bonifacio, that was not an option.

“I am trying to be brave. I don’t want to show them that I am scared, because I just want them to know that we are not doing anything wrong.”

# HIT LIST

*John Ian Alenciaga*

**“For us, red-tagging kills. Nangyari na sa amin. Posters turned to surveillance, and in the end, may pinatay. Pinatay si Jory. (It happened to us. Posters turned to surveillance, and in the end, someone was killed. Jory was killed.)”**

This was the earnest and sobering statement by John Ian Alenciaga as he shares the scenario of activists in the Visayas region, not excluding journalists like him who also have something to say.

Alenciaga, 44, Altermidya-Panay coordinator, writer for Panay Today and co-host of news program Dampig Katarungan, was the subject of numerous red-tagging incidents in social media, via texts, and even in posters that may be synonymous with a hit list

– the same “hit poster” that ended someone getting killed.

He said that the tags against him became rampant in 2017 until 2018. It started on their Saturday radio program when he would frequently receive texts and messages calling him a communist. In December 2018 and, again, in March 2019, Alenciaga was red-tagged along with some 40 activists, progressive church leaders, lawyers, and human rights workers in posters plastered across Iloilo City. After these, he had been included in other tarpaulins hanging in footbridges, overpasses, and cities, among others.

But these posters didn't stay as mere posters – it translated to attacks and even a killing. In April 2020, Bayan Muna Iloilo coordinator Jory Porquia was shot nine times. Porquia's photo

appeared with human rights lawyers who survived attacks – Cris Heredia who survived a shooting attack in September 2019 and Angelo Karlo Guillen who was stabbed in the head in March 2021.

“The attacks were very systematic, it’s comprehensive. It targeted those who are critical of the government,” he said. He recalled that due to the killings and the Tumandok massacre, their commentaries, analyses, and opinions were mostly about the policies and programs of the government.

“Natakot talaga nung may pinatay na sa poster. Parang hit list o hit poster e (I was really scared when someone was killed in the poster. It was like a hit list or hit poster),” he said. It’s especially daunting when after the killing, another name was just plastered on it. This time, another community journalist as well – Crimson Labinghisa. Alenciaga said that it was expected and they even got to joke about it: “Oops, wala ka dito, ah! Uy dapat sama-sama tayo dito (You’re not here! We should all be here together),” but they really feared for their safety. He jumped from place to place,

staying for only a maximum of three months. He also lessened his visits with his family. He said they thought of filing a case but because these were posters and its perpetrators cannot be identified, they didn’t push through. He also said that they thought of renting a safe house or transferring stations but it would be too costly.

“It’s stirring and detailed, nakakainis (it’s irritating).” He said every time he goes out, he needs to think about where he will sleep, where he will go first, who he will be with, and many more details to check first.

Apart from the posters, Alenciaga was red-tagged on Facebook when he was accused of being a “spokesperson of the NPA,” and is also red-tagged on SMNI by NTF-ELCAC figure Jeffrey Celiz.

His statement was simple yet necessary: “Red-tagging really kills. Bakit hindi nangyayari sa iba? (Why isn’t it happening to others?) Kasi may (Because of) pushback.”

# COLLECTIVE ACTION: AN EFFECTIVE RESPONSE

*National Union of Journalists of the Philippines*

**With its mission to uphold press freedom and protect journalists from threats and harassment, it is not surprising for the National Union of Journalists of the Philippines (NUJP) to be subjected to similar – if not more intensified – attacks from State forces and other government actors.**

From the military’s “Knowing Your Enemy” presentation and orders of battle to a ludicrous matrix about a supposed plot to oust the president, allegations falsely claiming that NUJP has ties with communist groups have spanned across administrations.

“I think they are red-tagging the NUJP because of its advocacy for press freedom and for asserting independent journalism,” says Len Olea, NUJP secretary-general. “Those in power always intend to peddle their narrative to the public. Journalists who practice critical thinking, who refuse to toe their line, are considered enemies.”

The spate of attacks intensified during the Duterte administration, when more than a dozen incidents of red-tagging directed at the organization were documented. Among these were NUJP’s inclusion in the so-called “Oust Duterte” matrix and other “lists” by police or military units, as well as allegations from



Photo: NUJP

government or government-aligned actors, including former communications official Lorraine Badoy-Partosa and newspaper columnist Rigoberto Tiglao.

Social media platforms are also rife with such allegations, which did not stop when Duterte stepped down in 2022. Since Ferdinand Marcos Jr. assumed office, the NUJP has been red-tagged at least four times, including two instances on Badoy-Partosa's program on SMNI.

These documented cases are just a fraction of the pervasive and systematic effort of State forces to diminish the Union's efforts to ensure a safe environment for media workers in the Philippines. In fact, in many of the documented cases of red-tagging of individual journalists, their ties with the

NUJP are often mentioned, as if this is proof of their supposed involvement with communist groups.

For instance, at the height of the issue involving ABS-CBN's shutdown in May 2020, two former NUJP chairpersons who were then affiliated with the network were red-tagged.

An anonymous account, later shared by accounts linked to State forces, shared a 2013 image of women journalists taking part in a safety training seminar in Cagayan de Oro City. It specifically targeted Rowena Carranza-Paraaan, then head of ABS-CBN's Bayan Mo I-Patrol Mo, and falsely claimed that the photo – which shows a simulation exercise for a first aid module – is proof of her links with communist groups.



Inday Espina-Varona, then a senior contributing editor and a writer for ABS-CBN, was singled out by Lt. Gen. Antonio Parlade Jr., then spokesperson of the National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict, when he claimed that the “reds [are freeriding] on the ABS-CBN issue.”

A month earlier, Rappler’s Lian Buan, an NUJP director, was also red-tagged after she posted about the issue of ABS-CBN franchise. The post, which came from an anonymous account, falsely alleged that she is “one of the high-ranking officials of the CPP-NPA-NDF due that she’s part of one of the legal front groups that specialized on broadcasting (NUJP to be exact) (sic).”

It was the association with NUJP, Buan notes, that is often used against journalists who are red-tagged.

The same is true in the case of Jonathan de Santos, current NUJP chair, who said that most of the red-tagging incidents that he experienced is linked with his involvement in the Union.

It was a pattern that was hardly missed by anyone.

Yet, despite this, the NUJP even saw more journalists

taking an active role within the organization.

Since 2021, four new chapters have been established: North America, Cebu, Rappler and Inquirer.net. Two chapters, in Sorsogon and Leyte, were also revived.

The NUJP was also instrumental in the formation of the Filipino Freelance Journalists’ Guild, which aims to push for fair working conditions for media workers who are engaged in the so-called “gig economy” in the Philippines.

In its feasibility study on establishing the guild, the NUJP found that red-tagging is among the concerns of stringers and writers, especially those based in the provinces.

“Freelance stringers and writers, for their part, can be red-tagged simply for covering a protest, or writing a piece that is critical of the government,” read the study.

“One participant said that he was red-tagged during a Senate hearing, because he was covering people’s stories,” it added.

For many of the journalists interviewed for this study, collective action and support from colleagues were important

in responding to attacks, both in terms of coping with its impact and pushing back against perpetrators.

“Filipino journalists have realized even more the value of solidarity, especially in the midst of attacks and challenges. The systematic and deliberate attempts to discredit the profession have compelled us to push back together so that we can continue our task of bringing the truth to the public,” notes Olea.

NUJP and its chapters, along with other organizations, have been consistent in calling out attacks, as well as in monitoring the cases nationwide. This documentation was instrumental in establishing a pattern of State-supported red-tagging of Filipino journalists. Banding together, as Varona puts it, would make it more difficult for those behind the attacks to muzzle individual journalists or media organizations.

While it won't necessarily stop the attacks, she noted that it can help “alleviate the worst.”

“For those who are red-tagged, I think their main defense is their colleagues,” adds Paraan. “The

media organizations that support them, their friends, their peers – they can be your shield who helps you [deal with it].”

Olea notes how even the dominant media showed their support to alternative journalists and outfits when they were targeted during the Duterte administration.

“It gained us friends, expand network of supporters. It has a ripple effect on the community. That's why we always say: an attack on one is an attack on everyone.”

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Raymund Villanueva

Reynard Magtoto

Rowena Paraan

Tetch Torres-Tupas

## **NEWSROOMS/ORGANIZATIONS**

Bulatlat.com

Foreign Correspondents Association  
of the Philippines

Altermidya

Kodao

NUJP - CDO Chapter

NUJP - Leyte

Kordilyera Media-Citizen Council

Pinoy Weekly

## **STUDENT PUBLICATIONS**

College Editors Guild of the Philippines

UPLB Perspective

Outcrop, UP Baguio

The Democrat, University of Nueva Caceres

Tinig ng Plaridel, UPD CMC

Himati, UP Mindanao

Atty. Hue Jyro U. Go, PTFoMS

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Health Alliance for Human Rights

