

# Exploring the Lived Experiences of Filipino Journalists on Red-tagging and Its Imposition on Media Information Literacy in Educational Institutions

Maicah Jhaelle Logdat, Miko Rey Opinion, and Ric Daniel Floresca  
*Quezon City Science High School*

**Abstract:** Red-tagging has caused controversy in countries, including the Philippines. It refers to the labeling of individuals or organizations as enemies of the state without evidence. This practice has greatly affected journalists and news organizations who have a role in providing information in democratic societies. Those who aim to criticize and monitor the government are especially susceptible to being red-tagged. As a result this study aims to investigate the real life experiences of journalists who have faced red-tagging, examine its impact on media literacy and explore how the education sector can help mitigate its effects by educating the young people about red-tagging. The study uses a phenomenological approach using in-depth interviews including open-ended questions to extract important themes and sub-themes from each participant. A maximum sample size of 10 media interviewees was interviewed. Several forms of red-tagging were observed and themes of red-tagging affecting both personal and professional life was discussed. In summary, press freedom for journalists in the Philippines continues to be a tightrope full of systemic tension. With the absence of legal measures, red-tagging can alternatively be alleviated through the educational sector. Producing a critical public capable of discerning public information, can come a long way in diminishing the impact of red-tagging.

**Key Words:** Red-tagging, Journalists, Media Literacy, Educational Sector, Press Freedom, Critical Public

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Red-tagging, the act of categorizing individuals or organizations as state enemies without concrete evidence, has become a controversial issue in many countries, including the Philippines (Red-tagging punishable by 10 years in prison under proposed Drilon Law, 2021). Among those who are particularly affected are journalists and news outlets who are at the forefront of democratic societies, playing a crucial role in delivering information and holding the government accountable (Khan, 2022). The Philippines continues to occupy a relatively low position in the World Press Freedom Index compiled by Reporters Sans Frontiers

(RSF), presently standing at 132th out of 180 nations. Its ranking has seen limited improvement during President Duterte's tenure, with rankings of 138th in 2016, 127th in 2017, 133rd in 2018, and 134th in 2019 (Bautista, 2023).

However, the educational sector—whose goal is to inform and develop the youth and the public in general—may help in alleviating such issues. Institutions like these can help spread awareness and proper media literacy and other similar lessons that may reduce red-tagging. On another note, the education sector has also become victim to such practice. Back in June 2023, the Association of Concerned Teachers (ACT) spoke on

the red-tagging by the current administration being experienced by teachers (De La Puente, 2020). By identifying the role of the educational sector in the dissemination of information and specific disciplines with journalists, they may be able to help in improving the circumstances of red-tagging under the presidency of President Ferdinand “Bongbong” Marcos.

Numerous research studies have been conducted to explore the profound impact of this pressing issue. One notable example is "Kapwa: A phenomenological inquiry on the lived mediated communication practices of Anakbayan activists in the Philippines during the COVID-19 pandemic" which aims to investigate the lived-mediated practices of Anakbayan activists during the Duterte Administration (Pineda, 2022). The results show that the activists do not see cyberactivism as an alternative to offline activism but rather as part of a movement. Another study entitled "Philippine journalists' perceptions on press freedom: The impact of international media campaigns" delves into the actual viewpoints of journalists regarding media freedom within the country (Khan, 2022). Findings from this research reveal that journalists experience the “chilling effect” of the hostile attitude of the government.

While these studies have made significant strides in exploring the experiences of Filipinos amidst rampant red-tagging, it is important to acknowledge some certain aspects that need improvement. Although the aforementioned researches primarily focus on the perceptions of the interviewees regarding media freedom, they lack a comprehensive understanding of its long-term impact, particularly within the journalism sector. The participant criteria may also be too generalized. To gain more unique insights into the context of red-tagging, specific inclusions have to be made for other journalists, particularly those who have personally experienced harm and violence perpetrated by government authorities.

## **2. METHODOLOGY**

### ***2.1 Research Design***

This study will be using a phenomenological approach in investigating and analyzing the lived experiences of red-tagged journalists in the Philippines during the current President Marcos administration. This approach emphasizes the details and discerns a phenomenon as perceived by the participants in a specific context. Phenomenological studies commonly employ in-depth interviews with open-ended questions to characterize the participant's experiences. The

analysis of this approach aims to uncover recurring themes and draw broader conclusions into how a phenomenon is perceived or encountered. Hence, the phenomenological approach proves to be the most suitable design for this study, facilitating the conduct of in-depth interviews with open-ended questions to extract themes and sub-themes pertaining to red-tagging.

### ***2.2 Sampling Procedure***

Snowball sampling will be used to identify respondents. This method relies on a known individual within the group who, having developed trust, provides referrals to others in their network. This approach allows for the expansion of the sample through sequential referrals, facilitating access to isolated populations (Mweshi, G. K., & Sakyi, K., 2020). Certain contact persons from different print media stations will be interviewed and later on asked if they have other contacts who may share similar experiences or are in a similar situation. The availability of the referred contact will be taken into consideration during the identification of referred respondents.

### ***2.3 Respondents***

A maximum of 10 respondents, including both contact persons and referred respondents, from known print media stations will be interviewed in-depth regarding their experiences on being red-tagged and their views on the role of educators and the educational sector as a whole on improving the red-tagging situation of the country.

### ***2.1 Data Analysis***

The data gathered from the in-depth interviews will be transcribed and then analyzed using Braun & Clarke's (2013) thematic analysis. This method of analysis was chosen because this method allows the researcher a lot of flexibility in data interpretation and to approach large data sets more easily by sorting them into themes. The responses will be organized based on similarities in views and concurring patterns within the provided inputs of the journalists.

## **3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Status of Press Freedom**

Red tagging is a persistent problem for the press in the Philippines. In the last administration led by former President Rodrigo Duterte, press freedom was heavily endangered. During his term, the Philippines has consistently slipped in the World Press Freedom Index,

ranking 138th out of 180 countries in 2021 (Reporters Without Borders, 2021).

*He called out ABS-CBN, he called out Inquirer, he called out Rappler and I don't think you've seen that level of animosity coming from the president against media practitioners or even media institutions. (Andres)*

Two respondents answered that the freedom of the press improved under the current Marcos administration. Marcos' statements about respecting the rights of journalists and ensuring their safety indicate a positive step towards creating an atmosphere that is more conducive to journalism. However, this does not seem to be the case as the Philippines remains a dangerous place for a journalist to be in.

*The Marcos administration seems to be friendly with the media but that doesn't mean that we're as free as we used to be or that we have access to information as you would like. (Andres)*

#### Different forms and instances of red-tagging experienced by journalists

Journalists often receive death threats on social media platforms, however, tracking attackers is difficult because firstly, they are usually anonymous. Secondly, the government neglects to suspend these accounts unless platforms like Meta and Twitter collaborate with them. And lastly, the platforms mentioned are based overseas, making it hard for journalists to produce the names behind the accounts.

*I was cyberbullied. It was first posted on Facebook and then the comments of supporters of General Parlade. There were comments against me and then there were those who said that they would look for all my social media accounts to attack me. (Maria)*

Since Duterte's government, red-tagging has become a deadly weapon to silence critics. The National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict (NTF-ELCAC), the Anti-Terrorism Act, and the fact that libel is still a crime, have allowed law enforcers to arbitrarily arrest, detain, and kill dissidents. The current administration's act of restoring the Php 10-billion

budget for a government task force known for instigating forced mass surrenders and trumped-up charges can be seen as continuing the steps taken by the previous Duterte administration. Red tagging can be interpreted as the precursor to further harassment as it sends a signal to the public that journalists can be targeted as they are considered enemies of the state. The manipulation of online platforms offers these political figures control over their image projection, cultivating a reality that aligns seamlessly with their political ambitions, all without enduring the scrutinous gaze of journalistic inquiry, paving the way for the propagation of disinformation (Ragragio, 2020).

#### Influence of Red-tagging on Personal Life

Journalists often find themselves unjustly blamed for actions that led them to be red-tagged. Most commonly due to a theory known as issue framing, the public can easily be swayed into holding journalists or activists responsible for being targeted (Meriläinen and Vos, 2013). By amplifying dissenting voices, journalists find themselves labeled as enemies of the state, signaling to the public that targeting them is acceptable. This is associated with a study on self-censorship by Fadnes et al. (2020);

*If you're red-tagged, not just journalists, even the activists who are red-tagged, they are either jailed, arrested, or the others are killed. They just disappear, even my friends. (Maria)*

Psychological problems could start up as the threat of being labeled as an enemy of the state leads to a heightened sense of isolation and anxiety within journalists. This is similar to McCarthyism, in which baseless accusations are proclaimed to incite fear and suspicion in a certain individual or organization (Klobučar, 2023).

#### Influence of Red-tagging on Work

Journalists who are subjected to red-tagging often experience a more difficult work environment because of the risks it entails. According to one respondent, they had to switch jobs due to being red-tagged. They also stated that this is mild compared to the more severe implications of being red-tagged,

which is being targeted in rural areas. Red-tagged journalists who are based in rural areas are subject to harassment, with some even being arrested or killed.

*I had to change jobs last year when I was red-tagged. I was with another newsroom, but because of red-tagging, the work environment in the office became somewhat hostile. I was being blamed, asking "What did you do?" "How did this happen?" when in fact the real question should be, "Why is this kind of labeling allowed to happen?" (Jonas)*

#### Resolutions on Red-tagging Cases by Journalists

The act of red-tagging is mostly being done by government units. Regardless of different goals or purposes for the said tagging, the power of authorities is still absolute compared to that of journalists due to their positions. As a way to help journalists fight against red-tagging, organizations in the country offer different kinds of support. Organizations like the National Union of Journalists Philippines (NUJP) and the Justice and Court Reporters Association (JUCRA) for example may provide statements defending their members.

*For me, expressing their support (affiliated organizations, e.g. NUJP) to me. Things like that. When you have a network, it will put pressure on the official to stop doing the step further to harass you. (Andres)*

Networking, in this case, forces perpetrators to halt any operation against an individual. They work similarly to pressure groups that aim to influence the decisions or actions of both the government and the public (Grant, 2021). Movements like this affect not only the government but also the public. And as public opinion changes, specifically towards the protesters' views, so does the government's.

#### Censorship Practices

Journalists often practice self-censorship to lessen the possibility of being targeted by the government. Self-censorship occurs when a journalist or media source suppresses their speech or expression. They choose not to say something that could be significant for the public, either for its factual content or its contribution to a robust public debate on the subject

(Cox, 2022). Journalists' self-preservation tactics can manifest in a few different ways such as language alterations, deleted lines, or omissions.

*I just noticed that there's a tweak in the language, there could be some deleted paragraphs in your story or some quotes there might be some omissions because you know, the newsroom wants to be safe. They want to produce safe stories that do not offend the powers. (Andres)*

Some also simply do not allow their fear of being red-tagged to interfere with their reports, choosing to focus on the story they are writing along with the support of their company and trusted people. Red-tagged journalists resort to positive thinking and prioritize doing their work without fear of the consequences.

#### Journalistic Integrity Amidst Red-tagging

The pursuit of truth and accuracy, while remaining mindful of the potential societal impact, poses numerous ethical challenges for media organizations and journalists (Abbas & Khan, 2023). Therefore, upholding ethical standards as journalists becomes a continuous challenge, and safeguarding their integrity as information-source and provider may seem impossible at times.

*If you're a journalist, you adhere to certain ethical standards. So you just follow them. What are the ethical standards? Accuracy, fairness, objectivity in reporting. Avoid sensationalism. So you have to make sure that what you report is balanced (Maria)*

Following these criteria is essential to achieve a balanced representation of the data collected. Even so, journalists encounter challenges in delivering objective information to the public, such as information that may potentially stain the image of the government.

#### Role of Educational Institutions in Developing Critical Thinking

Critical thinking is arguably one of the most important skills that everyone should have and know how to apply in their daily lives. To be able to analyze,



interpret, and evaluate certain information is one of the most important things that one could do to help combat the said issue (Jones-Jang 2019).

*If we have a critical public, then I think red-tagging will stop because there's no incentive to red-tag anymore, because nobody will believe you without proof, so until we are able to reach that stage, we have to keep educating the people.* (Andres)

Fake news is a concurrent issue even outside the country. Because of false accusations and misleading statements, individuals whose goal is to spread the truth are labeled as enemies of the state. Similarly, some members of educational institutions—organizations that share a similar role in providing information—have also been the target of red-tagging. To solve this issue in the Philippines, these two sectors can work hand-in-hand to further promote and hone skills that may help in avoiding this problem.

*Rather than treating journalists as enemies and therefore red-tagging them in an attempt to diminish their credibility, why don't we just consider journalists as partners in nation-building?* (Jonas)

A state's government is a servant of its people. Just because they have the power, does not mean that they should have all the control. Questioning the authorities is an important aspect of society and the public is entitled to know and want what could serve them the best outcome in an issue. Although they have power over certain things, authorities should not think of decisions for their sole benefit. (Greene, 2018)

*Emphasizing pluralism or having a lot of differing points of view is part of being in a society. It's part of democracy, there can't be only one narrative and we also have to teach students that having a different opinion doesn't make you a bad person.* (Jonas)

Furthermore, on differing views and opinions, members of a society experience different things based on many different factors such as age, gender, and ethnicity. Opinions are bound to vary between people. Some people having a different view on a certain issue

should not warrant hostility from both the public and the government. It is part of democracy. And as a state whose goal is to preserve the freedom that democracy brings, concepts such as this should be further taught. (Schumaker, 2020)

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

The red-tagging practices of the government represent a pattern consistent with media capture theory where the government exerts its power to constrain independent media outlets, stifle critical and unfavorable information, and diminish dissenting voices. Journalists see red-tagging not only as a label but as a precursor to further harassment. This forces them to adjust in their professional lives driven by a need for protection. Nevertheless, journalists abide by their principles in their commitment to delivering the truth. They may change their language and narrative, but the essential duties of reporting facts and uncovering the truth remain steadfast.

Another notable aspect is the apparent inefficacy of legal action for journalists who are experiencing red-tagging. Seeking legal defense against such accusations is often pointless, emphasizing the lack of initiative measures coming from the government to address and fix these issues.

Journalists believe that, even in the absence of robust legislative measures, educational institutions can play an essential role in mitigating its impact. By teaching students skills, particularly media literacy and critical thinking, these institutions can cultivate a discerning public capable of disseminating information. They also emphasize the importance of pluralism or the harmonious existence of differing societal groups. Journalists accentuate that a real and functioning democracy thrives on the diversity of opinions and the ability to engage in constructive discussion. By doing so, there lies the hope for a future in which red-tagging loses its power in the face of a society that values critical thinking, media literacy, and the principles of a pluralistic democracy.

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