

Media Framing's Influence on Digital Public Behavior Towards Young Women and Queer HRDs

Justine Marie Fuentes, University of the Philippines, jcfuentes@up.edu.ph
Francesca Mauricio, University of the Philippines, francescadmauricio@gmail.com
Jan Brithney L. Navales, University of the Philippines, janbrithneynavales@gmail.com

Abstract

The research examines how media portrays women and LGBTQIA+ young human rights defenders (HRDs), focusing on the impact of such portrayal on their digital rights. It meticulously evaluates the framing techniques employed by mainstream, alternative, and state-owned media, assessing their influence on public perception, state responses, and the prevalence of online harassment of HRDs. Four significant cases of young women and queer HRDs from the Philippines are scrutinized to understand the harassment that stems from their media portrayal.

The study unveils the influence of media coverage in sculpting public attitudes toward HRDs, especially in the digital realm. It reveals the varied and often subtle nuances in media framing that critically shape reader responses and mold public opinion. A fundamental aspect of this research is its strong advocacy for responsible and ethical journalism, underscoring its vital role in safeguarding the rights and security of HRDs. It also highlights the gaps in current legislation, advocating for more robust media laws to shield HRDs from state-supported online harassment.

In summation, this study enriches the dialogue on media's influence on human rights advocacy, calling for a shift toward gender-sensitive and ethical journalistic practices. It highlights the urgent need for legislative reforms to protect the digital rights and overall well-being of women and LGBTQIA+ HRDs, aligning with the SDGs for gender equality and just institutions. This research not only sheds light on the imperative for enhanced legal protections but also champions responsible media conduct, aiming to bolster the digital safety and rights of Filipino HRDs.

Keyword/s: human rights defenders, media framing, public perception, queer, women

Introduction

Human rights defenders (HRDs) in the Philippines face significant challenges, exacerbated by a political climate that often views dissent as a threat to national security. Under President Rodrigo Duterte and continuing under President Ferdinand Marcos Jr., the government has implemented measures that critics argue stifle dissent and violate basic human rights. The Anti-Terrorism Act of 2020 (Republic Act No. 11479) is particularly controversial due to its broad definitions and provisions that allow for arbitrary and discriminatory enforcement against HRDs and HRDs (Human Rights Watch, 2020; Amnesty International, 2020). These measures have led to a "repressed" civic space in

the Philippines, where HRDs are regularly subjected to harassment, legal challenges, and even extrajudicial killings (CIVICUS, 2022).

The National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict (NTF-ELCAC), established by Executive Order No. 70 in 2018, has been instrumental in red-tagging, or labeling individuals and groups as communist insurgents without substantial evidence (Gonzales, 2021). This has resulted in heightened risks for HRDs, especially those involved in advocacy for marginalized communities, indigenous peoples, and environmental issues. The government's rhetoric and actions create an environment where human rights violations are not only tolerated but often justified as necessary for national security (Sobel, 2020).

The media plays a crucial role in shaping public perception of HRDs in the Philippines. Different media outlets—mainstream, alternative, and state-owned—employ varied framing techniques that significantly influence how HRDs are viewed by the public (Happer & Philo, 2013; Xu, 2022). Mainstream media often strives for balanced reporting but can inadvertently amplify state-driven narratives through its reactive stance and the need to present "both sides" of a story (Gozum, 2023; Bautista, 2023). This balanced approach, while seemingly objective, can lead to the propagation of unverified claims and the legitimization of state propaganda.

State-owned media, on the other hand, primarily promotes government perspectives, often portraying HRDs as threats to peace and security (Nepomuceno, 2023a). This framing aligns with the government's agenda and contributes to the public's negative perception of HRDs. Terms like "communists" and "rebels" are frequently used, reinforcing stigmatization and justifying aggressive actions against HRDs (GMA News, 2023b).

Alternative media outlets, such as Bulatlat and Kodao Productions, provide grassroots perspectives that highlight the struggles and legitimate grievances of HRDs. These platforms offer a counter-narrative to mainstream and state-owned media, focusing on human rights abuses and the systemic issues faced by marginalized communities (International Federation of Journalists, 2019). However, their reach is limited compared to mainstream media, which impacts their ability to significantly alter public perception.

The digital space in the Philippines has become a battleground for HRDs, who face significant online harassment. Women and LGBTQIA+ HRDs are particularly vulnerable, facing gender-specific harassment that includes sexual violence and threats (United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, 2018). This harassment often leads to self-censorship, reducing the visibility and effectiveness of these HRDs in digital spaces (Simonovic, 2018). The spread of disinformation by state actors and right-leaning individuals exacerbates this issue, further marginalizing HRDs and hindering their advocacy efforts (Forum-Asia, 2020).

Methodology

Case Selection and Data Collection

The case selection process involved identifying four high-profile cases of young women and LGBTQIA+ HRDs in the Philippines, specifically targeting different regions to ensure a comprehensive analysis. The chosen cases include Chad Booc, Jhed Tamano and Jonila Castro, Kenneth Rementilla, John Peter Angelo Garcia, Jasmin Rubia, Hailey Pecayo, JPEG Garcia, and Kei Galon. These cases were selected due to their prominence and the diverse challenges they present, such as online harassment, false charges, illegal detention, and extrajudicial killings.

Data collection was conducted by sourcing content from various media outlets, including mainstream, alternative, and state-owned platforms. The collected data encompassed news articles, public social media posts, and official statements. This diverse range of sources allowed for a broad perspective on how different media entities frame these HRDs and their activities. By compiling a wide array of media content.

Content Analysis

The core of the methodology is a qualitative content analysis, which aims to discuss the media portrayals of the selected young women and queer HRDs. This process began with a detailed reading of the collected media content to identify key themes. Common themes and narratives were discerned and categorized to facilitate a systematic analysis. The initial step was crucial in understanding the recurring motifs that could influence public perception.

Limitations

This study acknowledges certain limitations, including the potential for bias in media reports and social media content, which may not fully capture the experiences of all HRDs. Additionally, the reliance on qualitative data means that the findings may not be generalizable to all HRDs in the Philippines. Despite these limitations, the study aims to provide valuable insights and contribute to the broader discourse on the protection and empowerment of HRDs.

Results and Discussion

Case Analysis

Chad Booc, a volunteer teacher and LGBTQIA+ activist, faced significant challenges due to his activism for the Lumad community. He was often depicted by state media as a terrorist and member of the New People's Army (NPA). The framing of his activism as terrorism by state-owned outlets reinforced public perceptions that justified violence against him. This narrative was evident in the state's portrayal of his death as a result of a military encounter, a claim met with skepticism and contested by various human rights

groups (Ecarma, 2021; Cantal-Albasin, 2022; Reyes & Mangosing, 2022).

Environmental activists Jhed Tamano and Jonila Castro were abducted and later framed as voluntary surrenderees by the military. This narrative, heavily pushed by state media, was immediately refuted by the activists upon their release, highlighting the state's attempt to control the public perception of their activism. Their case underscores the risks faced by environmental HRDs and the media's role in perpetuating state narratives (Al Jazeera, 2023).

Kenneth Rementilla, John Peter Angelo Garcia, Jasmin Rubia, and Hailey Pecayo from Southern Luzon were embroiled in legal battles under the controversial Anti-Terrorism Law. They were accused of being involved in terrorist activities, a charge commonly used to silence dissent. Mainstream media coverage of their legal battles varied, with alternative media highlighting the injustices they faced while state media reinforced the narrative of their alleged criminal activities. The charges against most were eventually dismissed, reflecting the contentious application of the Anti-Terrorism Law (Bollo, 2023; Casilao, 2023; Subingsubing, 2023).

Kei Galon, a youth activist, was detained during a community demolition and accused of recruiting for the NPA. State media often depicted her as a threat to national security, aligning with the government's broader strategy of red-tagging activists. This narrative aimed to discredit her advocacy for urban poor communities and justify her detention (SunStar, 2023; The Freeman, 2023).

Coverage by Mainstream, State-Owned, and Alternative Media

The coverage of news events by mainstream, state-owned, and alternative media outlets reveals distinct approaches to journalism, which significantly influence public perception of human rights defenders (HRDs). Mainstream media sources like Rappler and the Philippine Daily Inquirer typically strive for balanced reporting by presenting narratives from all involved parties. For instance, Rappler's article "2 missing HRDs now 'safe and sound' with authorities – NSC official" and the Inquirer's piece "CHR notes 'complexity' of Castro-Tamano 'abduction' case" juxtapose the accounts from authorities and activist organizations. This method aims to maintain neutrality but can lead to multiple interpretations of the same event, as the readers are presented with conflicting perspectives (Bautista, 2023; Gozum, 2023).

On the other hand, state-owned media often aligns its reporting with government perspectives, as seen in the coverage of the cases of Jhed Tamano and Jonila Castro. The Philippine News Agency (PNA) published several articles framing the story from the viewpoint of the National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict (NTF-ELCAC) and the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP). These articles tend to emphasize the official stance, casting a specific light on the events and individuals involved, which often reinforces the state's narrative and delegitimizes the HRDs' accounts (Palicte, 2022;

Nepomuceno, 2023a; Nepomuceno & Balbin, 2023; Nepomuceno, 2023b; Nepomuceno, 2023c). This approach underscores the role of state media as a tool for disseminating government propaganda and managing public perception.

Alternative media, such as *Bulatlat* and *Anakbayan's* social media, often adopt a grassroots methodology in their reporting. They provide direct access to local communities and organizations closely linked with the HRDs. This style of journalism offers an on-the-ground perspective, giving voice to those directly affected by the issues. For example, *Bulatlat's* article "5 killed in Davao de Oro are civilians, not NPA, the group says" and *Anakbayan's* press release regarding the *Bankal 7* highlight the lived experiences of the HRDs and the communities they serve, presenting a stark contrast to the narratives promoted by state-owned media (Umil, 2022; *Anakbayan SMR*, 2023).

Public Perception

Public perception of HRDs in the Philippines is heavily influenced by how they are portrayed in the media. Mainstream and alternative media generally employ neutral to positive descriptors for HRDs, using terms like "activists," "organizers," and "environmental workers." In contrast, state-owned media often uses negatively connotated terms such as "communists" and "rebels." These labels, typically originating from statements by authorities like the AFP and NTF-ELCAC, are designed to frame the HRDs as threats to national security. This framing not only stigmatizes the HRDs but also justifies aggressive actions against them, which can lead to public support for such measures (Palicte, 2022; Umil, 2022; Bautista, 2023; Gozum, 2023; Nepomuceno, 2023a; Nepomuceno & Balbin, 2023; Nepomuceno, 2023b; Nepomuceno, 2023c).

The extent of media coverage also plays a crucial role in shaping public engagement. Mainstream media's wider platform can significantly influence the momentum of an issue, as seen in the national attention garnered by the coverage of Chad Booc's death and the abduction of Jhed Tamano and Jonila Castro. International coverage by organizations like Al Jazeera further amplifies these issues, showcasing their global relevance and impact. This international attention can shift public perception and garner broader support for the HRDs, highlighting the importance of ethical and comprehensive journalism in shaping public discourse (Al Jazeera, 2023).

Gender-Based Analysis

The gender basis of media portrayal significantly affects public perception of young women and LGBTQIA+ HRDs. Women HRDs are often subjected to gender-biased language that undermines their legitimacy and portrays them as overly emotional or irrational. For instance, Jhed Tamano and Jonila Castro, both young women environmental HRDs, were framed by state media as misguided and manipulated, reducing their credibility and dismissing their legitimate concerns. Men in authority such as DND Secretary Gilbert Teodoro and NSC spokesman Jonathan Malaya had been

aired and redtagged the two young women HRDs in public media. This gendered framing not only diminishes their agency but also exposes them to greater risks of harassment and violence (Al Jazeera, 2023; GMA News, 2023a).

LGBTQIA+ HRDs, such as Chad Booc, also face unique challenges due to their gender identity and sexual orientation. Since information is easily accessed online, the public often ridiculed Booc and directed misogynistic and homophobic slurs towards him. Booc was proudly queer and never ashamed of his identity, which made him a target for online harassment (Hukbo.com, 2020; National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict, 2021). Public perception, influenced by state narratives, portrayed him not only as a security threat but also as a social deviant. This dual stigmatization, reflected in comments on his social media accounts, compounded the risks faced by LGBTQIA+ HRDs, as they navigated both homophobic and politically motivated attacks (Umali, 2022). The use of derogatory terms and the focus on their identity in media narratives exacerbated their marginalization and vulnerability.

Digital Media and Online Harassment

The role of digital media in the lives of HRDs, particularly young women and LGBTQIA+ HRDs, is dual-faceted. While it serves as a powerful tool for advocacy and dissent, it is also weaponized for harassment and disinformation. The heightened visibility of HRDs through mainstream media coverage, while beneficial in elevating local issues, also presents significant risks. Personal information can be inadvertently or intentionally disclosed, making HRDs vulnerable to both online and offline harassment (Forum-Asia, 2020).

State media's negative framing often contributes to the escalation of online harassment. The persistent red-tagging of HRDs like Chad Booc by state-affiliated social media accounts significantly increased the volume and intensity of hostile online reactions. Terms like “kill,” “bitayin” (hang), “ikulong” (imprison), and “salot” (pest) were frequently used against him, reflecting the substantial impact of state-influenced media narratives on public opinion. This barrage of negative framing not only endangers the HRDs but also undermines their advocacy efforts, highlighting the urgent need for protective measures and ethical journalism (Hukbo.com, 2020; National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict, 2021; Caparas, 2023; Rappler, 2023).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the study highlights the severe consequences of poor media reportage on young women and queer human rights defenders in the Philippines. Negative framing often incites violence that is distinctly homophobic and misogynistic. To address this, we advocate for more ethical journalistic practices that consider the impact of reportage on these vulnerable groups. Additionally, digital media, while a powerful tool for advocacy, has been weaponized to harass HRDs, necessitating stronger community guidelines from

social media platforms. Furthermore, the protection of young HRDs requires robust, experience-informed legislation. Encouragingly, there are legislative efforts in the Philippines aimed at recognizing and safeguarding the rights of HRDs, underscoring the State's obligation to protect them. These legislative initiatives are crucial steps towards ensuring that human rights defenders can carry out their essential work without fear of harassment or violence.

References

Al Jazeera. (2023, September 21). Two activists freed in the Philippines after being abducted by the military. Retrieved from <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/9/21/two-activists-freed-in-philippines-after-being-abducted-by-the-military>.

Amnesty International. (2020). Philippines: Anti-Terrorism Act of 2020 will lead to more human rights violations. Retrieved from <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/asa35/2476/2020/en/>

Anakbayan SMR. (2023, November 29). RELEASE BANKAL 7! STOP THE ATTACKS!. Twitter. Retrieved from https://x.com/anakbayanph_smr/status/1729817565587710138.

Bautista, J. (2023). CHR notes 'complexity' of Castro-Tamano 'abduction' case. Philippine Daily Inquirer. Retrieved from <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1836234/chr-notes-complexityof-castro-tamano-case>

Bolledo, J. (2023, November 23). 3 activists are latest to win cases of feared anti-terror law. Rappler. Retrieved from <https://www.rappler.com/philippines/activists-latest-win-case-feared-anti-terror-law-november-2023/>.

Cantal-Albasin, G. (2022, March 11). Dismembered limbs, peeled off skin raise questions on Davao de Oro 'encounter'. Rappler. Retrieved from <https://www.rappler.com/philippines/dismembered-limbs-peeled-off-skin-raise-questions-davao-de-oro-encounter-march-2022/>.

Caparas, J. (2023, September 19). Press conference of Jhed and Jonila. ABS-CBN News' Facebook Page. Retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/abscbnNEWS/posts/715171707324755>.

Casilao, J. (2023, November 23). Antipolo prosecutors junks terrorism complaint vs 2 students. GMA News. Retrieved from <https://www.gmanetwork.com/news/topstories/regions/889361/antipolo-prosecutors-junks-terrorism-complaint-vs-2-students/story/>.

CIVICUS. (2022). Philippines: Activists face judicial harassment, abductions and being

designated as terrorists. Retrieved from

<https://monitor.civicus.org/explore/philippines-activists-face-judicial-harassment-abductions-and-being-designated-as-terrorists/>

Ecarma, L. (2021, February 16). Who is Chad Booc, the activist arrested in Cebu with the Lumad?. Rappler. Retrieved from <https://www.rappler.com/philippines/things-to-know-chad-booc-activist-arrested-cebu-with-lumad/>.

Forum-Asia. (2020). FoE Under Threat: Chapter on Women in the Digital Age. Retrieved from https://www.forum-asia.org/uploads/wp/2020/03/FoE-Under-Threat_Chapter-on-Women-in-the-Digital-Age.pdf

GMA News. (2023a, September 21). [Video] DND, pinag-aaralang kasuhan ng perjury ang 2 nawalang environmental activist. Facebook. Retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=10029513377121118>.

GMA News. (2023b, December 1). Raps filed vs 7 persons in demolition in Bankal, Lapu-Lapu City. Retrieved from <https://www.gmanetwork.com/regional/tv/news/99679/raps-filed-vs-7-persons-in-demolition-in-bankal-lapulapu-city/story/>

Gonzales, C. (2021). Esperon happy with closure of NPA-infiltrated Lumad schools. Manila Bulletin. Retrieved from <https://mb.com.ph/2021/03/06/esperon-happy-with-closure-of-npa-infiltrated-lumad-schools/>

Gozum, I. (2023, September 15). 2 missing activists now 'safe and sound' with authorities – NSC official. Rappler. Retrieved from <https://www.rappler.com/philippines/missing-activists-safe-sound-national-security-council-briefing-september-2023/>.

Happer, C. & Philo, G. (2013, December 16). The Role of the Media in the Construction of Public Belief and Social Change. Journal of Social and Political Psychology, 2013, Vol. 1(1), 321–336, <https://doi.org/10.5964/jspp.v1i1.96>.

Human Rights Watch. (2020). Philippines: New Anti-Terrorism Act Endangers Rights. Retrieved from <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/06/05/philippines-new-anti-terrorism-act-endangers-rights>.

Hukbo.com. (2020, November 16). RED-TAGGING? WHAT FOR?. Facebook. Retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/Hukbodotcom/posts/red-tagging-what-formr-chad-booc-a-member-of-the-so-called-front-organizations-o/1301905750145755/>.

International Federation of Journalists. (2019, February 19). Several news websites targeted in cyber-attacks in the Philippines. Retrieved from

<https://www.ifj.org/media-centre/news/detail/category/asia-pacific/article/several-news-websites-targeted-in-cyber-attacks-in-the-philippines>.

National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict. (2021, February 20).

READ: Chad Booc?. Facebook. Retrieved from

<https://www.facebook.com/ntfelcac/posts/443256480446075>.

Nepomuceno, P. (2023a, March 13). Human rights defenders' bill threat to PH

democracy: NTF-ELCAC. Philippine News Agency. Retrieved from

<https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1197215>.

Nepomuceno, P. & Balbin, M. (2023, September 19). NTF-ELCAC 'appalled'

by kidnap claims of 2 environmentalists. Philippine News Agency. Retrieved from

<https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1210195>.

Nepomuceno, P. (2023b, September 20). AFP: Reversal of 2 environmentalists

in Bulacan presser 'brazen'. Philippine News Agency. Retrieved from

<https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1210209>.

Nepomuceno, P. (2023c, September 21). PH Army eyes raps vs. 2

environmentalists over claims. Philippine News Agency. Retrieved from

<https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1210313>.

Palicte, C. (2022, February 25). 5 rebels killed in Davao de Oro clash. Philippine News

Agency. Retrieved from <https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1168568>.

Rappler. (2023, September 19). Environmental activists emotional at reunion with

colleagues. Facebook. Retrieved from

<https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=226163893451448>.

Reyes, D. & Mangosing, F. (2022, March 12). 'Intent to kill': The Booc autopsy.

Inquirer.net. Retrieved from [https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1567042/intent-to-kill-](https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1567042/intent-to-kill-the-booc-autopsy)

[the-booc-autopsy](https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1567042/intent-to-kill-the-booc-autopsy).

Simonovic, D. (2018). The Impact of Online Violence on Women Human Rights

Defenders and Women's Organizations. United Nations Human Rights Office of

the High Commissioner. Retrieved from

[https://www.ohchr.org/en/statements/2018/06/impact-online-violence-women-](https://www.ohchr.org/en/statements/2018/06/impact-online-violence-women-human-rights-defenders-and-womens-organisations)

[human-rights-defenders-and-womens-organisations](https://www.ohchr.org/en/statements/2018/06/impact-online-violence-women-human-rights-defenders-and-womens-organisations).

Sobel, Aaron. (2020, June 30). Philippines' Antiterror Bill Will Stifle Dissent.

Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Retrieved from

[https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/06/30/philippines-antiterror-bill-will-stifle-](https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/06/30/philippines-antiterror-bill-will-stifle-dissent-pub-82215)

[dissent-pub-82215](https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/06/30/philippines-antiterror-bill-will-stifle-dissent-pub-82215)

Subingsubing, K. (2023, September 5). UP student leader accused of being a

terrorist. Inquirer.net. Retrieved from <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1826597/up-student-leader-accused-of-being-a-communist#ixzz8iLDKGkaM>.

Sunstar News. (2022, November 21). Anakbayan-Cebu denies urging youth to join NPA. Retrieved from https://www.sunstar.com.ph/cebu/local-news/anakbayan-cebu-denies-urging-youth-to-join-npa#google_vignette.

The Freeman. (2023, December 4). TOP STORY: Panaghugpong Kadamay Cebu has welcomed the court's decision to release #Bankal 7 after three days of detention. Facebook. Retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/thefreemannews/posts/686099633659567>.

Umali, L. (2022, April 20). [FIRST PERSON] Chad Booc was my friend. The AFP killed him. Rappler. Retrieved from <https://www.rappler.com/voices/ispeak/first-person-chad-booc-friend-afp-killed-him/>.

Umil, A. (2022, February 27). 5 killed in Davao de Oro are civilians, not NPA, group says. Bulatlat. Retrieved from <https://www.bulatlat.com/2022/02/27/5-killed-in-davao-de-oro-are-civilians-not-npa-group-says/>.

United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner. (2018). INFO: WHRD. Retrieved from https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/Women/WRGS/SexualHealth/INFO_WHRD_WEB.pdf.

Xu, M. (2022, July 28). How Mainstream and Alternative Media Shape Online Mobilization: A Comparative Study of News Coverages in Post-Colonial Macau. Journal. Media 2022, 3, 453-470. <https://doi.org/10.3390/journalmedia3030032>.