Chapter 1
Digital Threats and Attacks on the Philippine Alternative Press: Range, Responses, and Remedies

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ABSTRACT

In the Philippines, the assault on the press has gone digital. While Filipino journalists continue to face physical, verbal, and legal threats and attacks, cyber-attacks and online harassment/trolling were identified in 2018 as the second worst threat against them, after low wages and poor working conditions, according to the International Federation of Journalists and the Southeast Asia Journalist Unions. Websites of news outlets have also been hacked and taken down. These challenges make the press vulnerable to self-censorship and may even lead to fatal outcomes. This chapter seeks to fill the gap in the literature on the digital types of assault on the Philippine alternative press, focusing on the experience of alternative news media outlets—dependent media particularly critical of the government. It explores the range of such threats and attacks and the responses, legal frameworks, and remedies in place that are used to combat dangers of this nature.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter explores the digital threats and attacks against alternative media outlets in the Philippines, with a particular focus on the experiences of Bulatlat and Kodao Productions, which made headlines in 2018 and 2019 following the distributed denial of service (DDoS) attacks on their news websites.

While the Philippine press as a whole has continued to face physical, verbal, and legal threats and attacks, the digital forms of assault have increased. Cyber attacks and online harassment/trolling were
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ranked the second worst threat to Filipino journalists in 2018 according to the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), and the same was identified among the external and internal threats to journalists during the 2018 National Risk Assessment Workshop of the National Union of Journalists of the Philippines (NUJP).

Alternative media outlets that publish news online are among the most vulnerable to online harassment/trolling, hacking, and DDoS attacks. These challenges make them susceptible to self-censorship (International Federation of Journalists, 2018) and expose them to life-threatening situations. “Long term” research conducted by the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) shows that “physical attacks are often preceded by phone or electronic threats,” as over 70 percent of murder victims had reported receiving threats before their death (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2011, para. 21).

“Alternative press” and “alternative media” are used interchangeably in this chapter. Small and independent (Villadolid, 2005), alternative media outlets in the country typically do not generate income through advertising; they are not controlled by economic and political interests, and they strive to remain steadfast in upholding their rights and responsibilities as the truth-telling watchdog in a democracy. Their limited budget, usually from donations, results in limited reach. Thus, they take to social media to promote their media outlets and the stories they publish, maximizing their online networks.

Though the reach of alternative media is much lower than that of the dominant media giants, the threats and attacks they face are an indication of the significance of their reportage.

Based on findings from a review of documents and key informant interviews, and guided by the prevention, protection, prosecution, and partnership (4Ps) framework, the researchers discuss the responses of alternative media outlets Bulatlat and Kodao Productions to the digital threats and attacks they have received, as well as the existing legal frameworks and remedies used to address perils in the digital age of information warfare.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Alternative Media and Challenges in Digital Security

The alternative press is participatory and investigative; it seeks to cover “underreported groups and issues” (Lievrouw, 2011, p. 23). This form of media “privileges journalism practice that is closely wedded to notions of social responsibility. And it replaces the ideology of ‘objectivity’ with overt advocacy and oppositional practices” (Atton, 2003, p. 267). It typically uses first-person accounts by ordinary people and “collective and antihierarchical forms of organization which eschew demarcation and specialization – and which importantly suggest an inclusive, radical form of civic journalism.”

In the Philippines, alternative media agencies uphold a tradition of fighting for freedom and democracy. In contrast with the mainstream media, they are not owned or controlled by large private corporations (Maslog, Tuazon, Abunales, Soriano, & Ordenes, 2016). They are described as “fiercely independent” alternative news organizations (Southeast Asian Press Alliance, 2019, para. 7) that “play a crucial role in informing the people about issues and concerns of public interest that are usually overlooked by the mainstream media” (para. 5). They have become prone to digital attacks as they provide online platforms for people’s voices that state and non-state actors ignore or suppress (Southeast Asian Press Alliance, 2019).
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