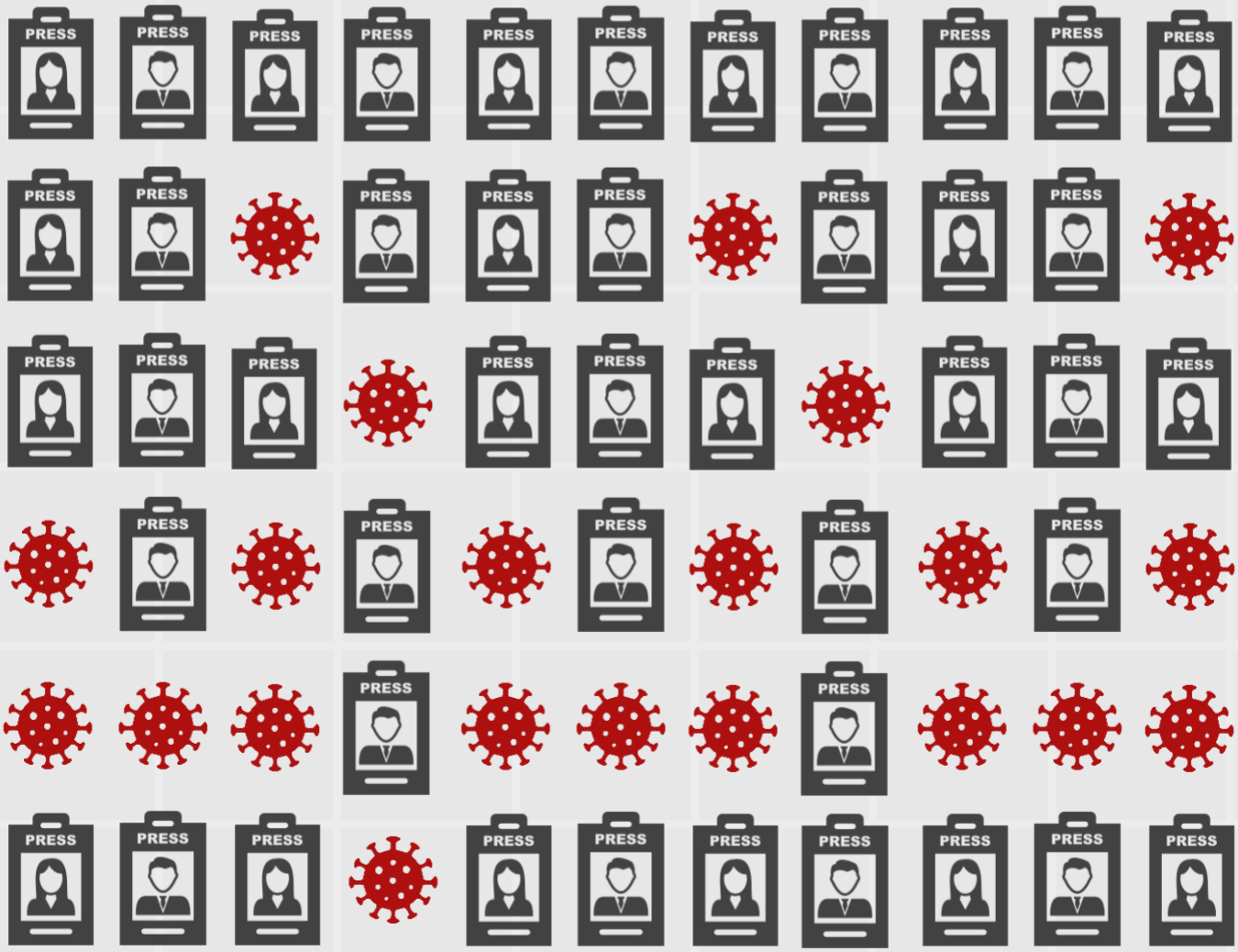
CMFR
CENTER FOR MEDIA FREEDOM & RESPONSIBILITY

International Fund
for Public Interest Media

RESILIENCE AND INNOVATION

Authoritarianism and Pandemic Effects on Public Interest Media in the Philippines



RESILIENCE AND INNOVATION:

AUTHORITARIANISM AND PANDEMIC EFFECTS ON PUBLIC INTEREST MEDIA IN THE PHILIPPINES

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This report was supported by

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The Duterte administration and the Covid-19 pandemic changed the landscape of the news media in the Philippines, affecting the way journalists work. The Center for Media Freedom & Responsibility (CMFR) saw the need to examine the impact of the period; not just on media organizations but on the journalists themselves.

This report documents the dramatic shifts in the government's treatment of media during the period and its resulting changes towards the overall media landscape. More than just the numbers behind job losses and shuttering of media institutions, the report looks at how the dual impact of the pandemic and the country's governance had permanently transformed the Philippines media as we know it.

Through surveys and focus group discussions, CMFR documented these shifts and the corresponding responses that the media adopted as it strived to evolve and find its footing in this era of information. CMFR hopes that others will follow up on this effort to provide more data that will confirm these initial findings.

This report was made with the support of the International Fund for Public Interest Media. CMFR would like to thank Irene Jay Liu, Trinna Leong, and Ivygail Ong for shepherding this project; Ross Settles for refining and further editing the report; and to the CMFR staff, especially, Penzer Baterna, Leah Perez, Rafaela Abucejo, and Jeraldine Pascual who worked together as a team, with grace under pressure.

CMFR would like to thank all those who participated in this study: the journalists who took time to answer the surveys, to take more questions, sharing what they went through so we could better understand their experience as individuals and as a community.

This is CMFR's last project before its closure after 37 years of media development work. We hope it will be useful to more readers.



INTRODUCTION

The Context: 2016 to 2023 - The Duterte Years and COVID-19 Pandemic

The Philippine media has long served as a watchdog in a complex democracy shaped by the country's archipelagic geography and highly pluralistic media ecosystem. Spread across 18 regions with over 7,600 islands, the country hosts 959 media outlets, including a mix of national media conglomerates, regional news organizations, community press, and a growing number of digital media outlets according to 2025 research conducted by the Center for Media Freedom & Responsibility (CMFR). These media serve diverse audiences in terms of geography, culture, and languages. For much of its history, the Philippine press has been free. Journalism has played a role in informing the public and holding power to account, often operating amid political pressure, economic challenges, and persistent threats to journalists' safety. Reporters Without Borders has classified the country as "one of the most dangerous countries in the world for journalists."[1]

The Philippine media ecosystem, already fragile from the impact of new technology and resulting changes in audience behavior, was severely tested when the COVID-19 pandemic coincided with the final three years of the authoritarian six-year presidency of

1 Reporters Without Borders Philippines https://rsf.org/en/country/philippines

Rodrigo Duterte. Over the three years of the pandemic, strict lockdowns, school closures, and movement restrictions, implemented with minimal public consultation, constrained news coverage, and consolidated state control over information.

Even before taking office in June 2016, Duterte signaled hostility toward the press, framing journalists' killings as targeting "corrupt" individuals[2] and dismissing the Philippine's long history of violence against journalists. His administration was marked by public attacks, redtagging[3], and politically charged legal actions. The non-renewal of ABS-CBN's broadcast franchise, which shuttered 143 stations nationwide, highlighted the vulnerability of major media institutions, leaving thousands unemployed and cutting off communities that relied on the network's free TV channels for news and information. Simultaneously, the Duterte administration weaponised local Philippine tax and libel laws to attack other independent media voices, most notably Rappler. Redtagging as a tool of media control also received new legislative support with the widely criticized passage of The Anti-Terrorism Act of 2020 (RA 11479). Despite these actions, displaced journalists and media operators showed resilience, creating new community-based online platforms that continued to uphold accuracy and independence amid ongoing uncertainty.

The Philippines recorded the first fatality outside of China from COVID-19 in February 2020, marking the beginning of a three-year public health crisis[4]. The pandemic compounded these political pressures by disrupting newsroom operations, collapsing advertising revenue, and forcing many outlets, especially in the regions, to downsize, suspend print editions, or close. While a rapid shift to digital platforms allowed some organizations to survive, it also caused job losses and reduced the depth and reach of reporting, particularly outside major urban centers. Although the Duterte administration ended in June 2022 and the COVID-19 public health emergency was lifted in July 2023, the effects of these twin crises persist, altering newsroom practices, reshaping media consumption patterns, and raising enduring questions about the quality, sustainability, and role of journalism in the Philippines.

Research Methodology

This study examined how these dual crises affected Philippine journalism, newsroom structures, reporting practices, and the broader democratic function of media; explored

2 "Philippine president-elect says 'corrupt' journalists will be killed", The Guardian, 31 May 2016. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/may/31/philippine-president-elect-says-corrupt-journalists-will-be-killed

3 Redtagging: Labeling individuals or organizations as communist sympathizers or terrorists without substantial evidence.

4 "Philippines races to trace those linked to first coronavirus death outside China", The Guardian, 2 February 2020. https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/feb/02/philippines-races-to-trace-those-linked-to-first-coronavirus-death-outside-china

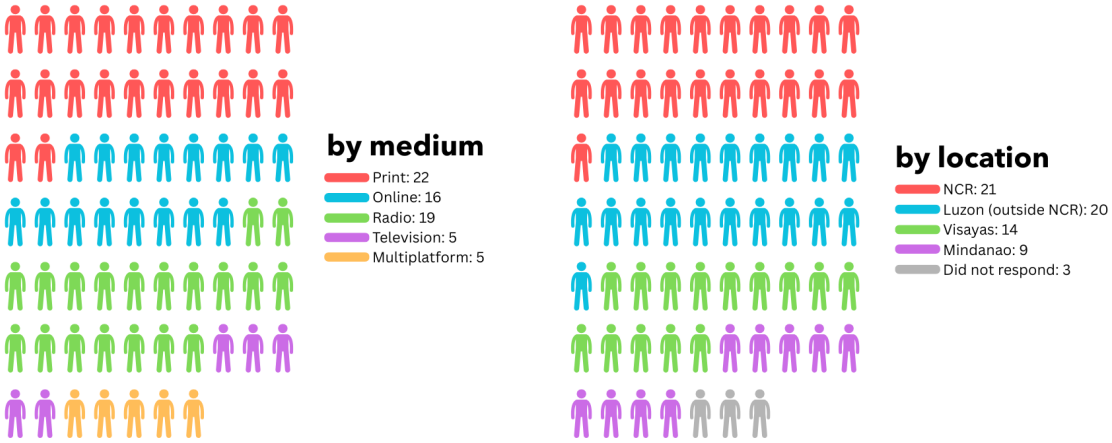
changes in newsroom operations to address shifts in news consumption, content strategies, formats, and platform choices, as well as the long-term implications for journalistic quality, sustainability, and public access to credible news.

CMFR conducted the research in two stages. First, individuals who had worked in the news media in the seven years from 1 July 2016 to 31 July 2023 were surveyed about their experiences of the impact of both political pressures from the Duterte administration and the COVID-19 pandemic. To capture a full picture of the impact on journalists and independent media, two surveys were fielded, one targeting journalists and the second targeting newsroom and news media management. The surveys were fielded in the third quarter of 2025. In total, CMFR surveyed 57 journalists and 67 media managers and executives from existing media organizations. Over fifty media organizations from across the country were represented.

In the second stage, CMFR conducted six focus group discussions, both online and in-person, with journalists and media managers nationwide. In total, the focus groups brought together 19 journalists and 22 media managers representing nearly three dozen media organisations.



67 respondents composed of media owners, managers, and administrative staff between **July 1, 2016** and **July 30, 2023** participated in the study.



Note: Three respondents selectively completed the survey, resulting in a total sample of 67, but total responses to some questions vary by one to three respondents.

The Duterte administration and the COVID-19 pandemic exposed and amplified long-standing vulnerabilities in Philippine media, reshaping how journalists work, report, and survive. Pressures ranged from political intimidation and economic instability to ethical dilemmas and psychological strain, challenging newsroom independence while also sparking innovation and collective resilience:

- Duterte-era intimidation and political pressure triggered widespread fear, self-censorship, and threats to press freedom.

- COVID-19 worsened economic weaknesses, causing layoffs, closures, and increased susceptibility to political and commercial influence.

- Editorial independence eroded, but journalists adapted through hyperlocal reporting, digital innovation, and collaboration.

- Crises caused severe psychological strain and job insecurity, prompting reliance on peer solidarity and informal support networks.

- Concerns for journalists' personal safety have continued or even worsened since 2023.

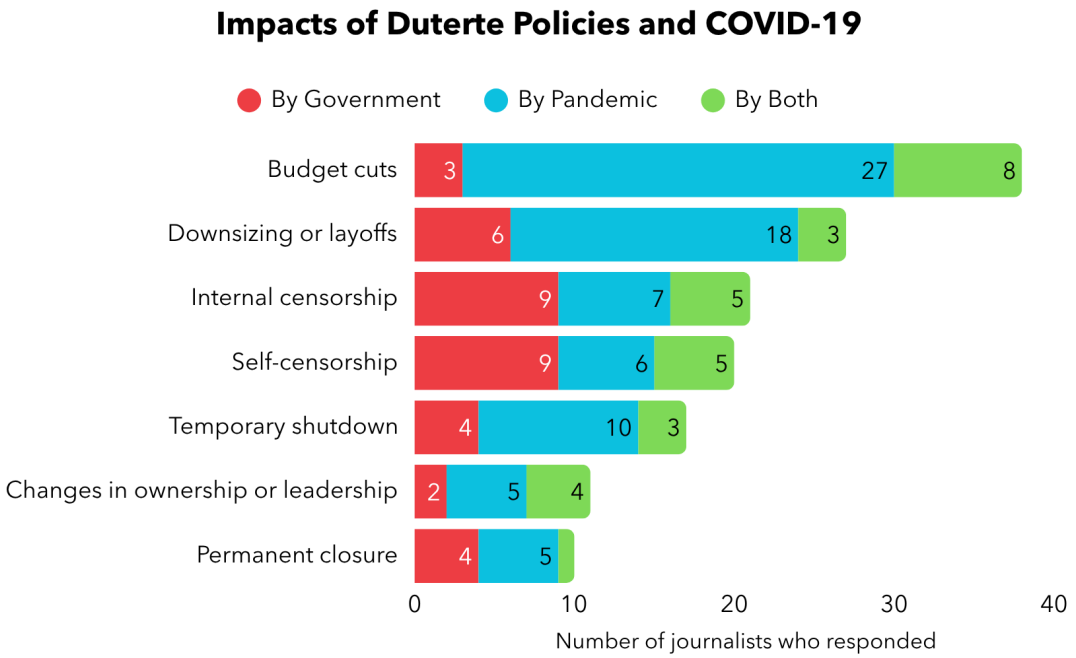
- Institutional and self-censorship as a reaction to government pressure and the collapsing economics caused by the pandemic continues today.



POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC PRESSURES ON PHILIPPINE MEDIA

Political and economic pressures on journalists are not a new phenomenon in the Philippines. In the five years before Duterte came to power (2011 - 2016) over one third of surveyed journalists (38%) reported that they experienced political pressure, and more than one quarter (26%) said they experienced commercial pressure. Journalists identified the sources of pressure as both internal from their news organisations and external from the government and advertisers.

These issues intensified under Duterte and later, during the COVID-19 pandemic. Journalists noted both significant economic effects on media operations and a significant increase in editorial censorship and journalist self-censorship.



Duterte openly challenged critical media. The use of police power alongside political pressure became more systemic throughout his term. This also emboldened local governments to adopt his style of leadership, including being adversarial with the press. During this period, political pressure was pervasive. Only 14% of surveyed journalists noted no political pressure, while over one-third (36%) experienced severe or significant pressure and almost half (49%) noted at least some moderate or slight political pressure. Media managers and executives experienced a similar level of political pressure. Among the managers, 66% reported some political pressure of which over 40% noted the pressure as severe or significant.

Journalists and news managers reported they experienced **political pressure during the Duterte administration.**



Culture of Fear and Structural Vulnerability

The Duterte administration entrenched a culture of fear within Philippine journalism, with effects that persisted beyond his term. Approximately one in three journalists (33%) noted that the government pressure continued post-2023.

Survey data show a pronounced personal impact on journalists, with emotional and mental distress, physical attacks and general fears for personal safety almost universally cited by journalists. Issues of self-censorship or other professional practices were less prevalent though still significant. Post-2023, concern over personal safety persisted with two-thirds of journalists (67%) saying such fears remain or worsened. Over four in ten (42%) noted that significant or greater levels of self-censorship continued post-2023.

While threats to journalists were not new, focus group respondents emphasized that hostility intensified during the Duterte administration and continued even after his presidency. Attacks became more organized and normalized, amplified by social media disinformation and state rhetoric that framed critical reporting as subversive. Journalists covering human rights, insurgency, and the "war on drugs" were especially vulnerable, facing online harassment, intimidation, surveillance, or loss of employment.

This climate was reinforced by documented violence. From July 2016 to April 2021, CMFR recorded 19 journalist killings, 10 attempted killings alongside 51 cases of intimidation, 23 cyberattacks, and 23 incidents of online harassment[5]. These figures are widely regarded as low estimates.

A key mechanism of repression was redtagging, the public labeling of journalists as affiliated with the Communist Party of the Philippines-New Peoples' Army-National Democratic Front (CPP-NPA-NDF). After peace talks collapsed, a 2017 memorandum declaring the CPP-NPA a terrorist organization enabled government agencies and allied actors to brand journalists and media outlets as security threats, exposing them to online attacks, surveillance, and social stigma. The impact on reporting was tangible. Sherwin de Vera of Northern Dispatch noted that redtagging forced their newsroom to lose correspondents and constrained how journalists could enter and report from communities. For others, the danger extended beyond the journalist to their sources.

5 "2021 State of Press Freedom in the Philippines", 5 May 2021, Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism.

In alternative media, fear was intensified by high-profile arrests. In 2020, Lady Ann Salem, a journalist and union organizer, was arrested late at night and held until 2021[6]. Frenchie Mae Cumpio, a Tacloban-based community journalist was detained in 2020 and held for six years until being found guilty on terrorism charges in early 2026[7]. High profile cases like these had a palpable effect on working journalists. Len Olea, editor of Bulatlat, shared that a staff member delayed sleep until early morning hours, anxious that they might experience late-night arrests like those of Salem and Cumpio.

Institutional attacks further deepened insecurity. The 2020 non-renewal of ABS-CBN's broadcast franchise was widely described as the most traumatic moment for the industry, demonstrating how political pressure could translate into mass job loss and professional insecurity. Former ABS-CBN manager Rowena Paraan recalled how daily presidential attacks placed management under constant strain, with uncertainty permeating newsroom decision-making. Journalist Jeff Canoy likened the experience to "complex PTSD," noting that even hearing Duterte or his allies speak continued to trigger fear long after the shutdown.

Digital repression accompanied these pressures. Several independent and alternative outlets including Bulatlat, Kodao Productions, and Pinoy Weekly reported repeated Distributed Denial of Service (DDoS) attacks that disrupted operations. In 2022, the National Telecommunications Commission, acting on a directive from the National Security Council, ordered internet service providers to block the websites of Bulatlat, Pinoy Weekly, and other progressive organizations over alleged CPP-NPA links. These outlets denied the accusations and condemned the move as censorship enabled by redtagging.

The case of Bulatlat illustrates the resilience and determination of newsrooms in the face of politicized technology attacks. After its website was blocked in 2022, editor-in-chief Olea said the newsroom chose to "push back" from the outset because "you can't let fear decide the story," stressing that "every attack on one journalist is an attack on all of us." The legal battle was costly in time and resources, but on 18 November 2025, a local court voided the blocking order, declaring the original memorandum unconstitutional.

6 "Filipina journalist arrested for firearms planted by police", Reporters without Borders, 5 March 2021
https://rsf.org/en/filipina-journalist-arrested-firearms-planted-police
7 "Who is Frenchie Mae Cumpio, the iconic Filipino journalist held behind bars for six years?", Reporters without Borders, 2 May 2026
https://rsf.org/en/who-frenchie-mae-cumpio-iconic-filipino-journalist-held-behind-bars-six-years

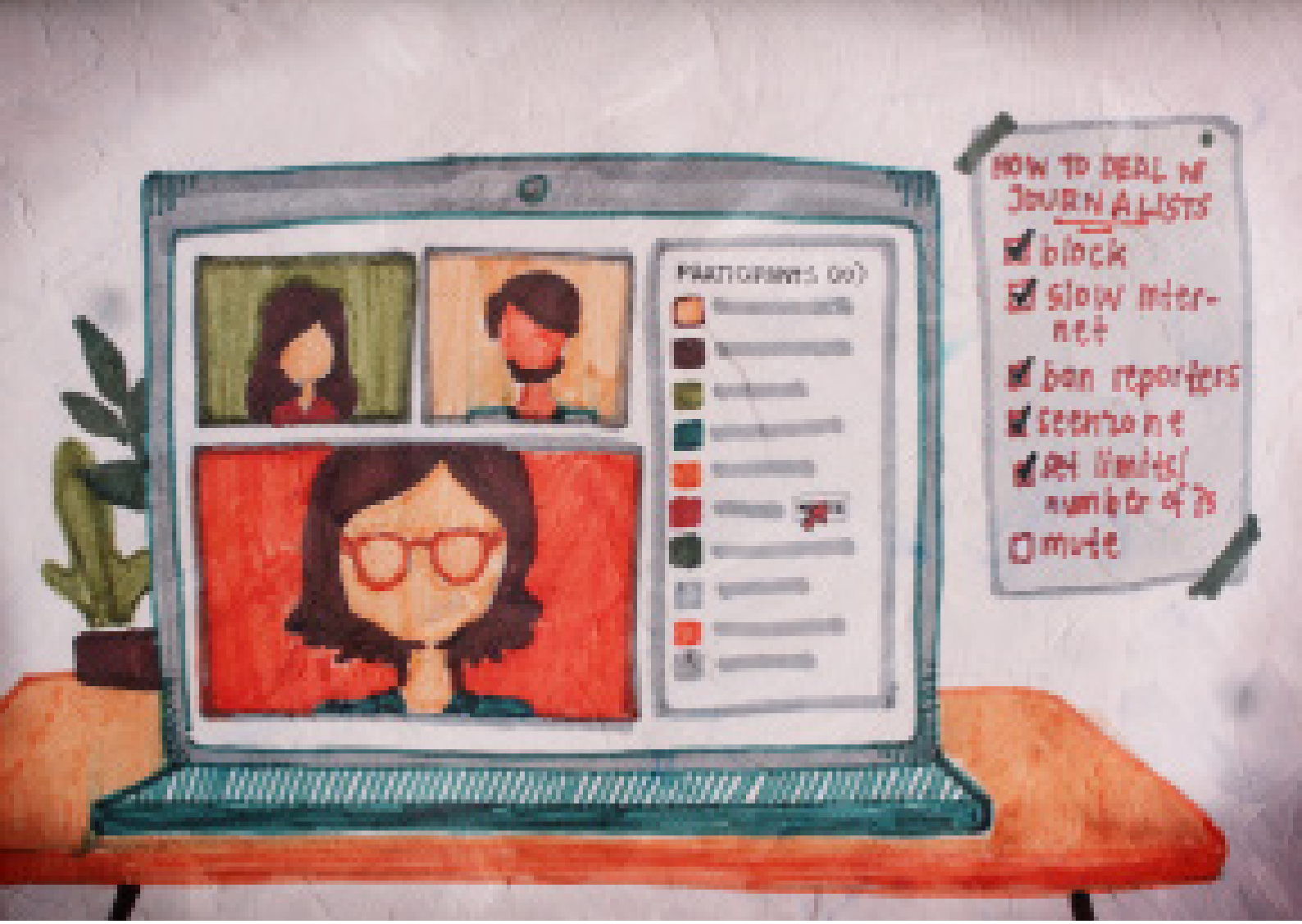
COVID-19 and the Economic Uncertainty of Newsrooms

The COVID-19 pandemic compounded political pressure with acute economic vulnerability. Lockdowns disrupted newsroom operations, while advertising-dependent outlets experienced revenue collapse. Nearly half of journalist respondents (47%) reported budget cuts, 31 percent experienced downsizing or layoffs, and 17 percent said their newsrooms temporarily shut down. Among news managers, 81 percent (54 of 67) reported financial losses.

From 2016 onward, managers reported newsroom closures (57%), downsizing of physical offices (31%), layoffs (31%), and budget reductions (18%). Reduced advertising revenue, pandemic disruptions, and declining subscriptions were cited as the primary challenges, with some also pointing to government regulatory actions. Financial difficulties heightened susceptibility to political and commercial pressure, as newsroom survival increasingly depended on access to sponsors, advertisers, or cooperative sources of government advertising.

Several long-standing regional publications closed. The Visayan Daily Star ceased operations after 38 years, but later decided to come back as a fully-digital news outlet. SunStar Baguio reduced its print schedule during the pandemic before transitioning fully online, while the Baguio Midland Courier closed after 77 years in 2024, partly due to resistance to digital migration. Other outlets survived only by drastically cutting operations: a Tacloban newspaper shifted from daily publication to twice weekly, and The Ilocos Times reduced its pages from 12 to 14 to just four to six after losing crucial revenue streams such as legal and judicial notices during pandemic court closures.

Even large organizations were not spared. The Philippine Daily Inquirer accelerated virtualization and consolidated regional bureaus; while ABS-CBN's remaining cable and digital operations implemented salary freezes and resource cuts that pushed many journalists to leave for more financially stable work. As Jeff Canoy observed, economic uncertainty compounded political fear, reshaping career paths and newsroom capacities long after the immediate crises had passed.



EDITORIAL INDEPENDENCE AND CENSORSHIP

Political and economic pressures created a chilling effect that extended beyond individual journalists to entire newsrooms. Journalists reported internal censorship and self-censorship (16% each), while managers cited pressure to cover or avoid certain topics (40%), staff self-censorship (30%), legal threats (22%), and changes in editorial policy (19%). Even without formal censorship orders, many journalists felt compelled to align with government narratives to avoid reprisals, weakening the press's watchdog role.

These pressures were particularly acute in the provinces. In Bicol, Davao, and parts of Mindanao, journalists described direct interference by local officials: selective access to events, surveillance, and intimidation by police or military personnel. With limited resources and already tenuous newsroom conditions, community media were especially vulnerable. As morale declined, media owners and managers, fearing political retaliation or revenue loss, sometimes imposed internal editorial limits. As former SunStar Cebu editor Nini Cabaero explained, management would tell editors that accommodating certain advertisements was "necessary to cover your next paycheck," blurring the line between survival and censorship.

Political Interventions and Narrative Control

The Duterte administration effectively controlled the information environment through intimidation, the use of regulatory mechanisms, and selective access, practices that also trickled down to local governments.

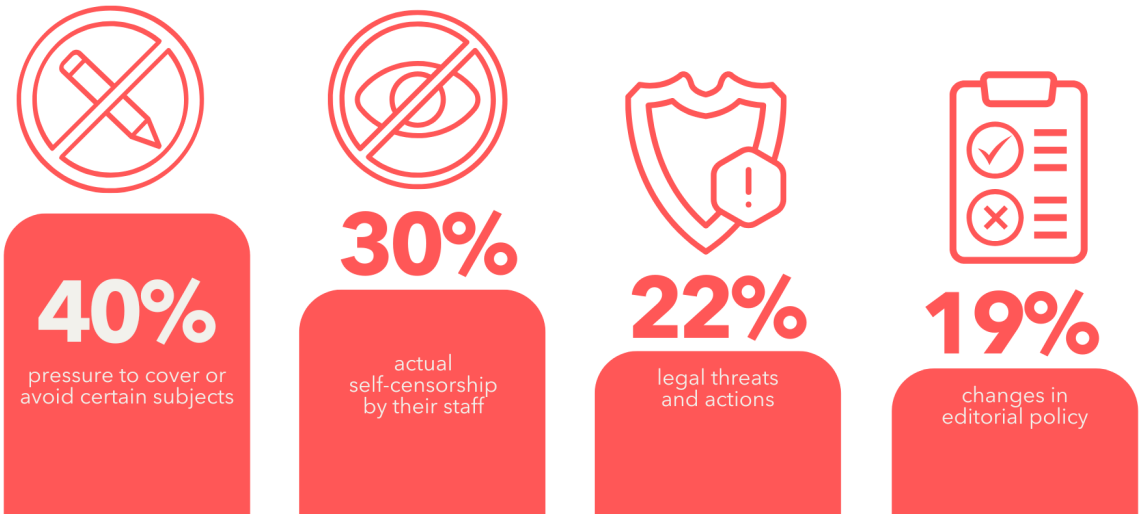
Rappler's Miriam Grace Go noted that Duterte "set the tone" for how officials treated journalists, emboldening them to be openly rude or dismissive. The 2018 barring of Rappler reporter Pia Ranada from Malacañang (the presidential office) became a powerful signal[8]. Cebu correspondent John Sitchon recalled how this incident "reverberated locally," normalizing officials publicly calling out reporters on livestreams and prompting local government administrations to issue memorandums restricting staff from speaking to journalists without approval from the governor or mayor, forcing reporters to wait for tightly controlled press conferences.

Survey data reflect how these pressures translated into newsroom behavior. Nearly one-third of journalists softened headlines or story angles (32%) or withheld critical stories (28%), while 25% said fear of retaliation influenced their reporting. Although 47% said their editorial freedom was not directly affected, 28% reported a slight decline and 12% a significant reduction in editorial freedom, indicating how political and commercial pressures subtly reshaped editorial decisions even in the absence of formal censorship.

The COVID-19 pandemic intensified these constraints. Journalists described restricted access to sources and an increased reliance on official statements, as government briefings were tightly managed and critical questions often ignored. Those who challenged official narratives risked exclusion from press events or faced online harassment. Officials

[8] "Palace slams door on Rappler reporter", Inquirer.net (The Philippine Daily Inquirer), 21 February 2018 https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/970236/palace-slams-door-on-rappler-reporter

News managers believed that these pressures led to:



increasingly relied on digital platforms to deliver one-way information; a Visayas-based journalist observed that authorities were "very swift giving PRs (press releases)," but unresponsive when asked for data or follow-up.

During the pandemic, authorities also shifted to vlogs and pre-recorded video statements, eliminating opportunities for follow-up questions—a practice that continues today. Rappler reporters reported being removed or excluded altogether from Viber group chats where official advisories were shared. In one incident, Rappler's Go recalled that one of the media's education reporters was identified as a Rappler staff member and told to cover the Department of Education's annual sporting event for students (Palarong Pambansa) from outside the venue through a loudspeaker. These indirect but systematic constraints fostered a culture of compliance and silence, allowing the state to shape public perception without overtly dismantling press institutions.

Internal Censorship Within Newsrooms

Beyond overt political pressure, internal newsroom dynamics further eroded editorial independence. Editors and managers, often acting under instructions from owners or motivated by fears of losing advertisers, government access, or business contracts, filtered stories by limiting which topics were pursued and how they were framed. Respondents recalled multiple instances in which critical reports were heavily revised or abandoned altogether due to perceived political or financial risks.

This internal censorship was rarely explicit. Instead, it took the form of self-regulation framed as "editorial prudence" or "maintaining neutrality." Iloilo-based journalist Tara Yap recounted being pressured by an editor to publish a press release promoting a local mayor. She refused, telling him she could not put her name on the piece—an act that underscored how ethical resistance often rested with individual journalists rather than institutional safeguards.

Commercial pressure intensified these dynamics. Twenty-one percent of journalists said their organizations prioritized corporate press releases over independent reporting, while 18 percent reported direct advertiser influence on editorial content. Another 18 percent admitted to toning down or withholding stories critical of sponsors or business partners. These patterns suggest that financial survival increasingly took precedence over journalistic principles, further narrowing the space for investigative reporting.

In smaller regional outlets, where economic dependence and political proximity are more pronounced, internal censorship was especially acute. Reporters described how coverage decisions were shaped by relationships with local officials or advertisers who also served as primary revenue sources, reinforcing selective reporting and avoidance of controversial issues. Over time, self-censorship became normalized as a practical newsroom strategy rather than an ethical compromise.

Bautista observed that publishing articles "not favorable" to local politics often carried immediate consequences, such as exclusion from press conferences and official events. Efren Ramos of The Ilocos Times experienced this directly when a mayor called him to complain about a critical column and warned that the paper would no longer publish government ordinances, an important source of income for the outlet.

Another journalist noted that local governments and businesses were "heavy advertisers" with prime slots in newspapers and radio. This financial leverage encouraged favorable coverage and, at times, paid public relations content that appeared without bylines. When these "heavy advertisers" became subjects of news, focus group respondents acknowledged covering them positively to "balance it out" or even choosing not to report on them at all. This practice became more common due to economic uncertainty. Reporters sometimes selectively chose which stories to cover, intentionally avoiding controversial issues.

Others acknowledged similar compromises. ABS-CBN's Jeff Canoy described how he "hated" having to remind himself to pause before writing, constantly weighing the impact

of his work against the backdrop of ABS-CBN's loss of its over-the-air license. Ryan Rosauro of the Philippine Daily Inquirer recounted how newsroom strategy at times involved assigning certain reporters to remain deliberately "chummy" or non-critical toward members of the Duterte family, simply to preserve access to official information.

The cumulative effect of these pressures was a deep internalization of censorship. Fear of retaliation compelled journalists to exercise extreme caution in their reporting. Kurt Dela Peña of Inquirer.net recalled that after his article on a national fund that provides monetary and programmatic support to communities deemed as free from communist influence, the report drew condemnation from the implementing government agency, the Department of the Interior and Local Government. Thereafter concerns about redtagging made him hesitant to pursue follow-up stories.

Taken together, these accounts illustrate how censorship during this period was not imposed solely from the outside but embedded within newsroom routines themselves, reshaping journalistic practice through fear, economic dependency, and the normalization of restraint.

Shifting Ethical Standards During Crisis Coverage

Journalists reported frequent ethical dilemmas, particularly during the pandemic, when restricted mobility and limited access to sources forced heavy reliance on official data and virtual interviews. Safety concerns and logistical constraints often took precedence over comprehensive reporting. Many respondents acknowledged that coverage was deliberately "softened" to avoid being labeled "anti-government" or "unpatriotic," blurring the line between independent journalism and public information dissemination.

The public health crisis further complicated ethical decision-making. While journalists felt a responsibility to counter misinformation and promote public safety, this role often came into tension with the need to scrutinize government responses. The rapid shift to digital platforms exacerbated the race to be first online often undermining earlier verification processes. The pandemic kept journalists away from sources, forcing an often unattributed reliance on user generated social media content and simple citations like "CCTO" (credited to the owner). Respondents described making conscious editorial adjustments during the pandemic, choices that, while understandable in a crisis, raised broader concerns about how emergencies can redefine the boundaries of journalistic independence and practice.

Innovating to Balance Safety and Journalistic Integrity

Across overlapping political, economic, and health crises, journalists navigated through a constant trade-off between personal safety and professional ethics. To continue reporting during lockdowns, local journalists increasingly relied on partnerships, collaborative investigations, and cross-platform initiatives. Despite operating in a hostile and unstable environment, respondents emphasized a continued commitment to ethical practice and independent reporting.

The closure of ABS-CBN's over-the-air broadcast operations and subsequent layoffs created both disruption and innovation. New digital outlets such as Digicast Negros and Bicoldot.ph emerged in the aftermath. Industry leaders Ricky Bautista and Efren Ramos noted that the Philippine Press Institute's News Commons provided a collaborative digital platform that allowed community newspapers to share content, upgrade their online presence, and attract corporate advertising—offering a critical financial lifeline and helping outlets "makabangon muli" ("rise again").

Newsrooms also adapted creatively to resource constraints. Newsline in Davao, led by Editha Caduaya, adopted a community-sourcing model that paid citizens modest fees for real-time video footage, expanding coverage while minimizing costs. Aireen Jaymalin of BicolDot.ph relied on volunteerism and partnerships with local universities, engaging journalism students as "digital natives" while training staff to use platforms such as TikTok.

Despite ongoing political and economic uncertainty, journalists emphasized the enduring importance of community-based reporting. Kimberlie Quitasol of the Northern Dispatch stressed that community journalism must survive as a critical counterforce to misinformation. Francis Allan Angelo of the Daily Guardian similarly argued for hyperlocal reporting, noting that national media often "gloss over" regional issues. For Rappler's Go, these challenges point toward a shared path forward: "the future of news is collaboration," with fellow outlets seen not as competitors, but as partners.



JOURNALISTS' WELL-BEING AND PROFESSIONAL CHALLENGES

Psychological Impact of Political and Pandemic Crises

Journalists highlighted constant (21%) and frequent (21%) emotional or mental distress, reflecting the psychological toll operating under simultaneous threats to safety, stability, and editorial independence. The combined pressures of political repression during Duterte's presidency and the COVID-19 pandemic created a "perfect storm" of fear, uncertainty, and exhaustion. Reporters described the period as one of "constant vigilance," marked by the dual anxieties of potential government reprisal and exposure to a deadly virus.

Journalists infected with COVID-19 recounted feelings of stigma and exclusion, noting that news organizations lacked adequate systems for emotional or material support. Many suffered quietly, coping with trauma through informal channels such as peer discussions and mutual encouragement among colleagues.

The psychological toll was not confined to individual experiences but extended to newsroom culture. The constant exposure to distressing stories ranging from pandemic deaths to political violence created a sense of collective fatigue and emotional numbing. Some respondents reported recurring symptoms of burnout, anxiety, and depression, while others described developing "empathy fatigue" as a coping mechanism. The absence of structured psychological support within most newsrooms only deepened the strain, leaving journalists to navigate trauma largely on their own.

Job Insecurity, Burnout, and Loss of Morale

The crises also magnified long-standing structural weaknesses in the media industry, particularly in terms of job security and economic stability. Newsroom downsizing, budget cuts, and temporary shutdowns forced many journalists to accept reduced pay, unpaid leaves, or even permanent layoffs. Freelancers and correspondents, especially in provincial areas, were disproportionately affected, as they lacked access to benefits and institutional safety nets.

The uncertainty surrounding employment and income, coupled with the emotional demands of covering national emergencies, led to widespread burnout and declining morale. Journalists spoke of "professional fatigue," a condition marked by exhaustion not just from workload but from the perceived futility of their efforts amid political hostility and public disinformation. The closure of major broadcast network ABS-CBN and the contraction of local news outlets amplified feelings of loss not only of livelihood but of purpose and mission.

For many, these experiences prompted a reevaluation of journalism as a career path. Some left the profession entirely, transitioning to public relations, government communications, or advocacy work, where stability and safety seemed more attainable. Those who stayed often described working in "survival mode," balancing their passion for truth-telling with the pragmatic need to endure in an increasingly precarious media landscape.

Lack of Institutional Mental Health Support

Most media organizations, especially smaller newsrooms and community outlets, offered no formal mental health programs. Reporters worked without access to counseling, trauma recovery, or wellness programs, reflecting both the financial fragility of newsrooms and the persistent stigma surrounding mental health in professional settings.

The psychological toll of sustained crisis coverage was profound. Jowel Canuday of MindaNews observed that trauma pushed some journalists to "suddenly disappear," leaving the journalism field and resulting in the loss of critical voices. Carmela Estrope of Newscore recounted suffering a nervous breakdown after months of reporting on the deaths of community figures, explaining how the grief "really accumulated." Jeff Canoy described the early pandemic period as one of "unprocessed grief," recalling the shock of speaking to an editor one week only to find them gone the next, and the collective inability to "grieve together." Malen Catajan similarly confirmed that her newsroom provided no psychosocial or medical support, even when colleagues fell ill.

For some, the emotional burden was compounded by personal attacks. Editha Caduaya of Newsline described facing intense harassment directed not only at her but also at her family. Operating in Davao, what she called "Duterte country", Caduaya had long been perceived as a "friend" of the former president. When her outlet published critical reporting, including a viral story involving Duterte's Spokesperson Martin Andanar, supporters felt she had shifted allegiance and labeled her an "enemy," declaring "hindi na Tatay Digong" ("no longer a father figure"). These attacks, she emphasized, were highly personal and distinct from broader patterns of redtagging.

Caduaya also highlighted the absence of institutional care within newsrooms. When two female correspondents contracted COVID-19, their organizations offered no assistance and instead subjected them to harassment, dismissively calling them "flirts" for still going out to cover an event despite the pandemic. Fellow journalists had to intervene, providing food, financial help, and emotional support to prevent one of them from falling into despair.

Coping Mechanisms and Solidarity Among Media Practitioners

In the absence of formal safeguards, journalists turned to collective resilience. Informal networks, online communities, and local press clubs provided emotional reassurance,

safety strategies, and collaborative responses to threats. Regional initiatives such as the Cordillera Media-Citizen Council institutionalized mutual protection, offering ethical guidance and psychosocial support. Beyond formal structures, many journalists found strength in acts of empathy and solidarity. Actions such as covering for sick colleagues, checking in after attacks, or supporting one another during harassment reinforced the communal ethos of the Filipino press.

Overall coping strategies remained informal and unorganized. Journalists relied heavily on peer support, checking in on colleagues, sharing workloads, and offering moral support during traumatic coverage. While this solidarity was crucial for survival, it could not substitute for systematic mental healthcare. Over time, the consequences of this gap became evident: many journalists reported heightened caution, emotional distancing from their work, and reluctance to engage in advocacy. Stress and exhaustion became normal, producing a workforce that remained deeply committed but increasingly weary.

Political hostility and the pandemic exposed deep vulnerabilities in the Philippine media but also demonstrated its enduring capacity for collective resilience. The psychological scars highlight the urgent need for institutional mental health programs, fair labor practices, and sustained peer support. Amid these challenges, journalists' solidarity stands as a testament to their commitment to truth, to each other, and to the public they serve.



COVID-19 DISRUPTIONS, DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION AND CHANGING AUDIENCE BEHAVIORS

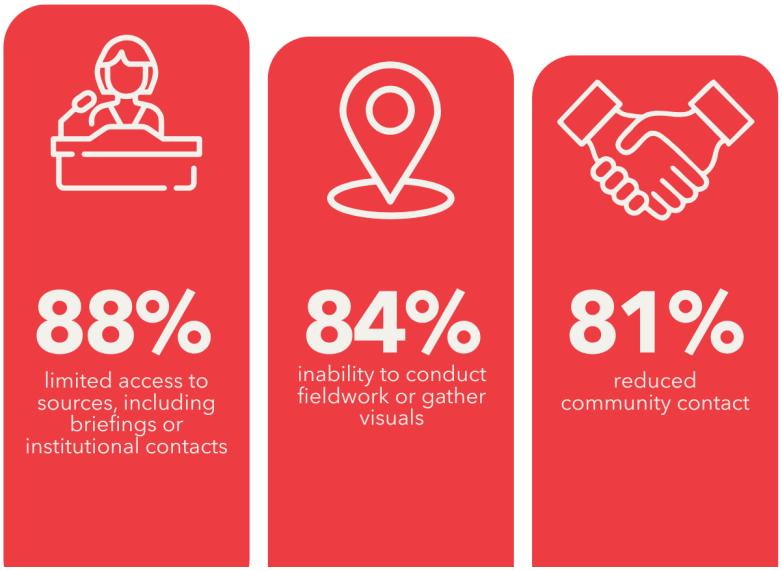
The COVID-19 pandemic marked a structural turning point for Philippine media, accelerating long-standing shifts in newsroom operations, digital production, audience behavior, and public trust. Lockdowns and mobility restrictions forced a rapid transition from field-based reporting to remote or hybrid work, sharply limiting direct contact with communities and sources.

40%

of journalist respondents reported severe newsroom disruption, while **another 38%** described the impact as significant



The vast majority of journalists cited **major challenges** to their **reporting routines**



These disruptions weakened the depth and immediacy of reporting, particularly in regional areas with unreliable internet infrastructure. Journalists emphasized the loss of on-the-ground observation as one of the most damaging consequences of the pandemic. Unable to visit communities, attend events, or conduct in-person interviews, reporters increasingly relied on press releases, online briefings, and secondary sources. Those covering local governance, disaster response, and human rights struggled to verify critical information, undermining the journalistic principles of proximity and accuracy.

Remote work also exposed and deepened structural inequalities within the media sector. Journalists in provincial areas and smaller newsrooms faced greater technological limitations and weaker institutional support than those in metropolitan organizations. Uneven access to digital tools, stable internet, and training widened existing gaps in news quality, coverage reach, and professional development between urban and rural journalists.

Ethical Challenges in Digital-First Reporting

The shift to digital-first journalism because of COVID-19 introduced new ethical pressures. Limited physical access to sources complicated verification, while accelerated news cycles increased pressure to publish quickly. Some journalists admitted relying on user-

generated content or social media posts to meet deadlines, highlighting the tension between accuracy and competitiveness. While social media became indispensable for sourcing information and engaging audiences, it also amplified exposure to misinformation and disinformation. As one respondent observed, the race to publish first increasingly came "at the expense of the depth and accuracy we used to insist on."

These pressures carried psychological and moral costs. Rappler's Go described how her newsroom adjusted its handling of late-night government briefings, opting not to livestream in full or post real-time tweets without verification. Instead, they prioritized accuracy and staff well-being, finding ways to publish verified stories "with a fresh angle by tomorrow." Jairo Bolledo of Rappler reflected that the multiple layers of accuracy checks during the pandemic altered reporting priorities, sometimes reducing empathy as journalists avoided "commodifying" individual cases. Tonette Orejas of the Philippine Daily Inquirer noted that when official data could not be independently verified, reporters explicitly disclosed in their stories that figures "cannot be immediately confirmed."

Across newsrooms, journalists were forced to constantly renegotiate the balance between professional accountability, personal safety, and emotional endurance—particularly when covering contentious issues such as vaccine rollout failures or weaknesses in government response.

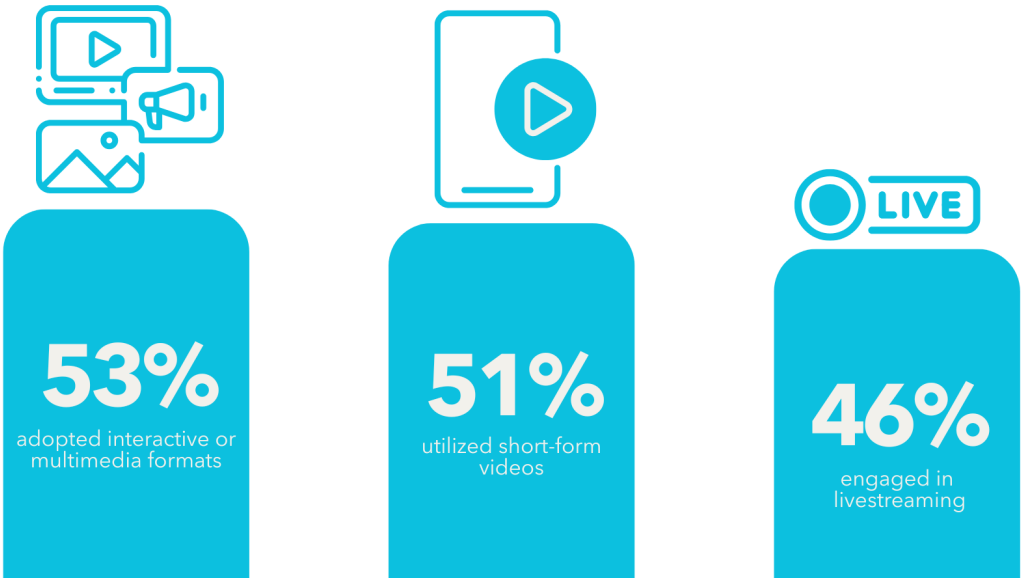
Digital Transformation and the Newsroom Divide

Despite these challenges, the pandemic accelerated the digital transformation of Philippine media. As advertising revenues declined and print circulation collapsed, many outlets pivoted to online platforms. Several print-focused organizations integrated or fully transitioned to digital operations, while radio stations expanded their reach through livestreams and podcasts. Journalists readily experimented with live streaming, multimedia storytelling, and virtual interviews to sustain public engagement amid mobility restrictions.

Newsroom practices altered completely with over fifty percent responding that published stories were digital, with many adopting interactive, visual formats. Based on this digital transition, 82 percent observed higher audience engagement. But new digital operations introduced new strains: two-thirds cited technical and infrastructure issues, more than

half reported increased workloads (58%), difficulty maintaining content quality (58%), and inadequate technical training or support (54%), and 56 percent struggled to monetize digital formats.

Newsroom adaptation to digital platforms and the digital divide



Persistent economic challenges of digital journalism in the Philippines



The transition also revealed a pronounced generational divide. Younger journalists adapted more quickly, leveraging analytics, video editing tools, and platform-specific storytelling, while older journalists faced steeper learning curves and difficulty managing

digital workflows. Although these differences sometimes generated friction, the crisis also fostered collaboration, with intergenerational mentoring and collective problem-solving becoming essential for newsroom survival.

Changing Audience Behavior and Metrics-Driven Journalism

In the post-pandemic period, digital transformation coincided with significant changes in audience behavior. Journalists overwhelmingly observed a preference for shorter, visually driven content: 89 percent noted demand for concise formats, 89 percent for visuals and multimedia, and 82 percent for real-time updates. Interactive formats gained traction, with 77 percent reporting increased audience interest.

These shifts compelled newsrooms to rethink storytelling strategies. More than a third of respondents (37%) said their organizations made significant changes to content strategy, while 33 percent reported moderate adjustments. Editorial teams increasingly prioritized multimedia storytelling (82%) and trending or viral topics (53%). Demand also grew for localized reporting (63%) and "feel-good" human-interest stories (61%), reflecting a desire for relatability and emotional relief amid prolonged crises.

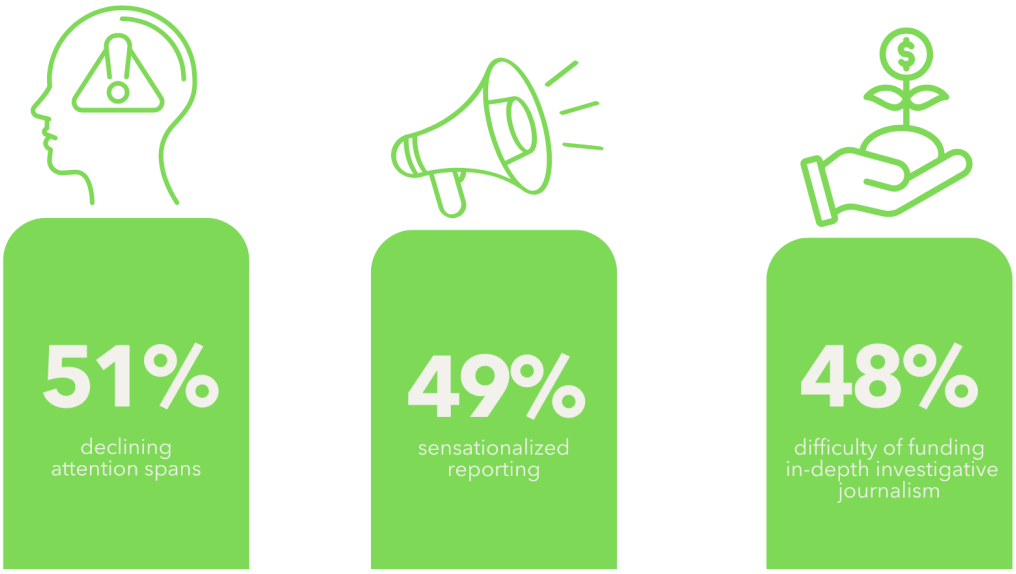
While these adaptations diversified newsroom output, they reinforced a cultural shift toward brevity, visual appeal, and emotional resonance. Short-form videos, infographics, and interactive formats became standard, particularly on algorithm-driven platforms. Rappler regional correspondent John Sitchon expressed concern over this transformation, worrying there was a risk that verified factual journalistic content may be lost in the flood of algorithmically served social media content. At the same time, most respondents (70%) believed their organization's news quality had seen some improvement compared to the period before July 2016, suggesting that adaptation also spurred innovation.

Audience analytics increasingly shaped editorial decision-making. Over one in three news managers (36%) reported frequently or always using metrics to guide editorial choices, while another 31 percent used them sometimes. Social media analytics (39%) and website metrics (34%) were the most common tools. Sixty percent of respondents felt pressure to produce click-worthy content, and 54 percent said algorithms increasingly influenced story prioritization. As Mindanao editor Cong Corrales observed, "we used to decide what was important; now we also have to decide what will perform well."

Public Trust, Misinformation, and Accountability

The convergence of digital transformation, metrics-driven journalism, and platform dependence complicated public trust. While audiences turned to credible media during the height of the pandemic, this trust eroded as misinformation resurged, polarized discourse intensified, and clickbait practices returned. Respondents identified declining attention spans (51%), sensationalized reporting (49%), and the difficulty of sustaining investigative journalism (48%) as key threats to credibility.

Journalist respondents identified several **key challenges undermining public trust**



Digital participation transformed audiences into both collaborators and critics, creating opportunities for more responsive journalism but also intensifying scrutiny and harassment, particularly for reporters covering sensitive political issues. Former SunStar editor Nini Cabaero similarly noted that audiences had shifted from passive consumers to active "partners or critics," using digital platforms to tell newsrooms what mattered to them.

In the post-crisis period, rebuilding trust emerged as a central concern. News organizations emphasized accountability and transparency through fact-checking collaborations, media literacy initiatives, explainer formats, and community engagement programs. Respondents noted that despite demand for lighter content, audiences remained highly engaged with substantive reporting on issues such as waste management, water supply, defective

infrastructure, and local governance. As Joseph Marzan of Iloilo-based The Daily Guardian put it, “for community media, trust is our currency.”

Overall, the pandemic functioned as both disruptor and catalyst. It exposed longstanding political, economic, and technological vulnerabilities while accelerating digital transformation. The resulting hybrid model anchored in online platforms, analytics, and multimedia storytelling has reshaped how news is produced and consumed. Yet the central challenge remains unchanged: sustaining editorial independence and public trust in an attention-driven information ecosystem without abandoning journalism’s core values of accuracy, fairness, and accountability.



INNOVATION, COLLABORATION, AND THE FUTURE OF JOURNALISM

Digital Innovation Beyond Crisis Response

Following years of political pressure and pandemic disruption, Filipino journalists increasingly shifted from crisis-driven adaptation toward more deliberate innovation. Rather than merely maintaining visibility or engagement, many newsrooms, particularly community-based and local outlets, used digital tools to reassert journalism's public service role under constrained conditions. Social media, mobile platforms, and multimedia storytelling became mechanisms not only for survival but for experimentation amid shrinking resources.

Journalists described innovation less as the adoption of new digital formats already normalized during the pandemic and more as a rethinking of journalistic practice, making greater use of the two-way communications functionality of new digital platforms. Digital spaces were increasingly treated as venues for dialogue, transparency, and participatory

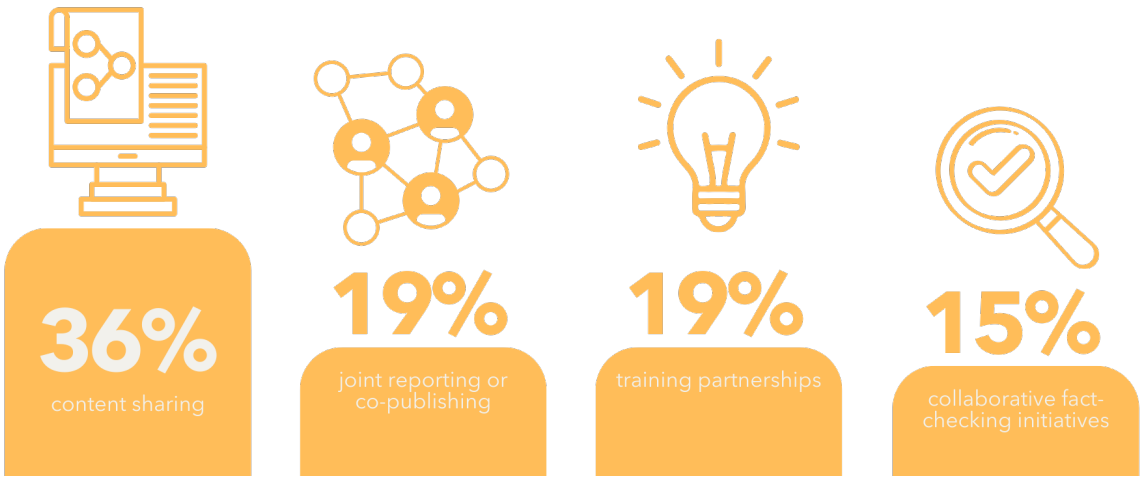
storytelling rather than one-way distribution channels. This shift reflected a broader reassessment of how journalism could remain relevant and accountable in fragmented, algorithm-driven environments.

Younger journalists and student publications played a central role in this transition. Their fluency with digital tools and platform logics positioned them as catalysts for newsroom innovation. Veteran journalists frequently credited younger colleagues for leading digital initiatives, mentoring peers, and fostering collaborative cultures. This generational exchange underscored that innovation was as much about mindset as technology, anchored in the belief that journalism must continuously evolve to remain credible, accessible, and impactful.

Collaboration as a Strategy for Resilience

As traditional newsroom structures weakened, collaboration emerged as a key strategy for sustainability and reinvention. Nearly half of manager respondents (48%) reported that their organizations participated in collaborative initiatives, including content sharing (36%), joint reporting or co-publishing (19%), training partnerships (19%), and collaborative fact-checking efforts (15%). These arrangements extended limited resources while fostering professional solidarity in an increasingly uncertain media environment.

Nearly half of **manager respondents (48%)** reported that their organizations participated in **different forms of collaboration**



Collaborative frameworks such as Media Citizens Councils were cited as particularly significant innovations in accountability and trust-building. These councils brought together journalists, educators, and civil society actors to promote ethical standards,

verify information, and mediate public complaints. Their participatory design marked a departure from traditionally insular newsroom practices, reinforcing the idea that journalistic credibility is co-produced with audiences rather than unilaterally asserted.

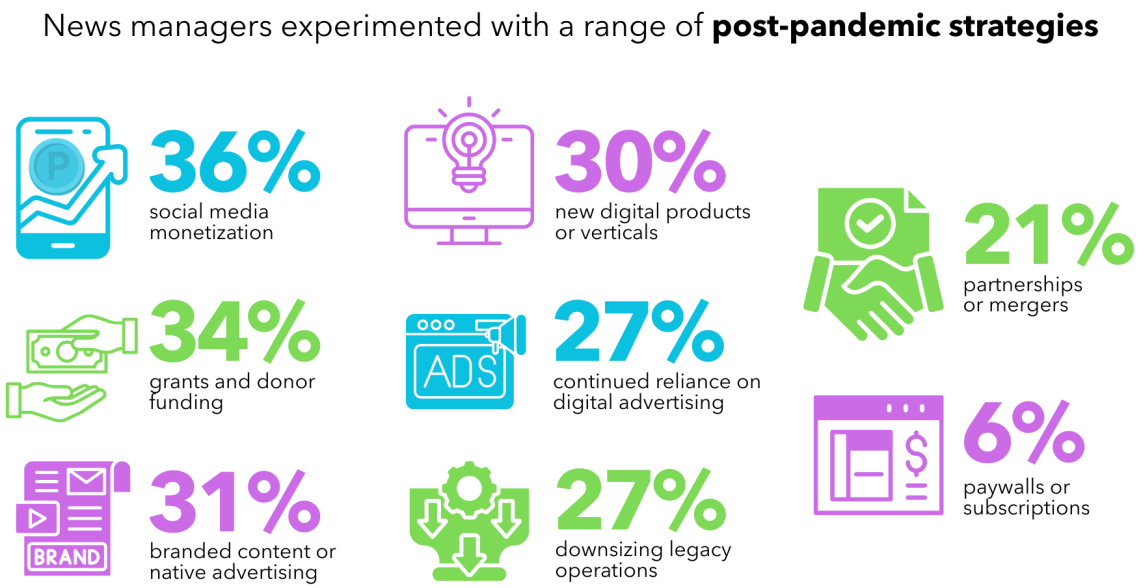
Beyond formal structures, journalists also engaged in informal alliances, cross-platform investigations, and networked reporting projects especially on underreported issues such as local governance, corruption, and public health. Partnerships with universities, independent content creators, and civic organizations helped sustain reporting during periods of financial and logistical strain. While these collaborations blurred the boundaries between professional and citizen journalism, respondents framed them as expressions of collective responsibility rather than a dilution of standards.

Collaboration, however, was not without friction. Managers identified resource constraints (37%), editorial differences (34%), and competition or lack of trust (25%) as persistent barriers. Even so, the growing willingness to cooperate signaled a cultural shift away from competitive isolation toward shared capacity-building in pursuit of accountability and public interest journalism.

Searching for Sustainable Funding Models

The compounded crises of political pressure and pandemic-induced economic decline exposed the fragility of Philippine media's financial foundations. Reliance on advertising and corporate sponsorships, already vulnerable to political interference, proved increasingly unsustainable, prompting news organizations to explore alternative revenue models.

News managers reported experimenting with a range of post-pandemic strategies from highly digital solutions like social media monetization and native advertising to more management focused tactics like partnerships or downsizing.



When asked to identify monetization approaches best suited to their newsrooms, respondents highlighted social media or platform monetization (61%), branded content/ native advertising (51%), digital advertising (51%), corporate sponsorships or brand partnerships (49%), and events, training, or workshops (45%).

While these efforts represented tentative steps toward diversification, journalists consistently warned against compromising editorial independence. Respondents expressed concern that donor-driven projects or commercially oriented sponsored content could subtly shape coverage priorities. Many emphasized the need for systemic solutions, such as public interest funding, stronger press freedom protections, and media literacy initiatives, to ensure sustainability without sacrificing integrity.

Reclaiming Independence and Envisioning the Future

The cumulative pressures of the Duterte administration and the pandemic prompted deep professional reflection. While professional practice came under increased but silent pressure to "balance out" critical reporting, media professionals maintained journalistic resolve. Adversity appeared to strengthen commitment to public service reporting. One-

third of news management respondents (33%) said their dedication to journalism was "significantly strengthened," while another 28 percent said it was "slightly strengthened," citing renewed clarity about journalism's democratic purpose.

Looking ahead, journalists expressed cautious optimism. While political pressure, economic uncertainty, and technological disruption remain unresolved, respondents emphasized that these challenges are not insurmountable. Instead, they identified three interdependent pillars for the future of Philippine journalism: collaborative frameworks that expand collective capacity, sustainable funding models that protect editorial independence, and a renewed ethical commitment to public service journalism.

Respondents argued that journalism's future does not hinge solely on technological advancement but on preserving its democratic mission—to inform the public, scrutinize power, and serve the common good. Through continued innovation, cooperation, and principled reporting, Philippine journalists seek not only to survive but to reclaim independence and rebuild the public trust upon which the profession depends.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The political pressures of the Duterte administration, along with the economic shock of the COVID-19 pandemic, exposed deep structural vulnerabilities within Philippine media. Years of redtagging, harassment, commercial dependence, and unstable newsroom economies weakened editorial independence and normalized self-censorship. At the same time, technological shifts, disinformation networks, and shrinking public trust further strained the capacity of journalists to perform their watchdog role. These challenges are not isolated to any single sector. They are systemic, interconnected, and enduring. Strengthening press freedom and rebuilding a resilient media ecosystem therefore requires coordinated action across news organizations, government institutions, journalism schools, civil society, technology platforms, and international partners.

CMFR's following recommendations outline a multi-sectoral roadmap for restoring integrity, safety, sustainability, and public trust in Philippine journalism.

1. For Media Organizations and Newsrooms

REBUILD EDITORIAL INTEGRITY

- Establish internal Editorial Independence Charters separating business and editorial decision-making.

- Develop clear editorial and conflict-of-interest policies, especially for community and smaller newsrooms, with explicit procedures for enforcement and accountability. Stronger frameworks are essential to guide younger or less-experienced journalists in upholding ethical standards.

- Strengthen cross-outlet fact-checking and peer review networks to counter disinformation and political pressure, enabling news organizations to jointly verify sensitive claims, share sources and methodologies, and provide collective editorial backing for high-risk or politically targeted reporting.

- Encourage transparent corrections policies to rebuild trust.

SUSTAINABLE FUNDING MODELS

• Diversify revenue sources beyond advertising: membership models, reader contributions, and local sponsorships.

• Form cooperatives or alliances, like News Commons, but for administrative and shared resources, pooled ad sales, and collaborative grants.

• Support small and regional outlets through micro-grants and crowd-funding initiatives.

WORKPLACE WELL-BEING AND SAFETY

• Institutionalize mental health support, peer counseling, and post-crisis debriefing for journalists.

• Adopt newsroom protocols for digital and physical safety, particularly against redtagging and online harassment.

• Provide legal aid and protection partnerships with NGOs for journalists facing political persecution.

DIGITAL SKILLS AND ETHICS TRAINING

• Regular training on data verification, social media ethics, and use of AI tools in reporting.

• Establish mentorship programs pairing senior and young journalists to bridge generational skill gaps.

• Reintroduce ethical newsroom codes adapted for the digital age (addressing virality, algorithms, AI-generated content).

2. For Government and Policy Institutions

LEGAL AND POLICY REFORM

- Review and amend laws that undermine press freedom and freedom of expression, including those that enable harassment and redtagging, such as criminal libel and cyberlibel provisions, the congressional franchise requirement for broadcasters, and the Anti-Terrorism Act's vague clauses.

- Strengthen the Freedom of Information (FOI) system and extend it to local governments.

- Institutionalize protection programs for journalists under threat (modeled after UNESCO's Journalist Safety Mechanisms).

TRANSPARENT COMMUNICATION CHANNELS

- Encourage open and regular government-media dialogues to rebuild trust and ensure equitable access to information.

- Require public officials to respond to press queries through transparent, documented processes.

SUPPORT FOR MEDIA DEVELOPMENT

- Create a National Journalism Fund to support independent public interest reporting.

- Provide tax incentives for independent, community-based, and regional journalism projects.

- Collaborate with academic and civic institutions to fund public interest journalism and fact-checking initiatives.

3. For Journalism Schools and Training Institutions

CURRICULUM REFORM

- Integrate modules on trauma reporting, digital security, misinformation, and newsroom economics.

- Prioritize practical training in data journalism, multimedia storytelling, and audience analytics.

- Embed solutions journalism and media literacy education to reframe journalism as a public service.

INDUSTRY-ACADEMIA COLLABORATION

- Partner with news outlets for student internships focused on community reporting and digital transformation.

- Encourage academic research on post-Duterte media impacts, disinformation networks, and media trust rebuilding.

STUDENT PRESS SUPPORT

- Protect campus journalists from censorship and political interference through university-level press freedom codes.

- Provide access to mental health resources and safety training for student reporters.

4. For Civil Society, NGOs, and Media Watchdogs

COMMUNITY MEDIA COUNCILS

• Expand and institutionalize Media Citizens Councils nationwide to handle ethics complaints, mediate disputes, and promote transparency.

• Empower local communities to participate in defining ethical standards and feedback mechanisms.

PRESS FREEDOM ADVOCACY

• Continue documenting press freedom violations and advocating for journalist protection laws.

• Develop public campaigns highlighting the importance of independent media in democracy.

PUBLIC MEDIA LITERACY PROGRAMS

• Partner with schools, churches, and civic groups to teach citizens how to critically consume information.

• Promote awareness of fact-checking organizations and responsible social media use.

5. For Technology and Digital Platforms

PLATFORM ACCOUNTABILITY

- Enforce transparent algorithms and fair visibility for credible news sources.

- More collaboration with fact-checkers, social media influencers and news outlets to flag false content promptly.

- Provide ad revenue-sharing models for verified journalism partners.

CAPACITY BUILDING

- Offer media organizations technical support for secure content hosting, audience analytics, and AI-assisted fact-checking.

- Train journalists in platform tools for combating disinformation and online harassment.

6. For the International Community and Donor Agencies

LONG-TERM FUNDING

The political challenges posed by the Duterte presidency and the impact of the pandemic dramatized the urgent need for focused long-term funding for extended and continuing training of journalists, providing continuous monitoring of the progress as a way of validating the effectiveness of training and its focus.

FUNDING AND PARTNERSHIPS

- Invest in local capacity-building programs aimed at long-term newsroom innovation and institutional sustainability.

- Support cross-border collaborations on regional disinformation, safety networks, and research.

- Prioritize multi-year operating grants that sustain independent local and regional media over short-term tactical projects, like native advertising development.

ADVOCACY AND DIPLOMACY

- Include press freedom metrics in human rights and governance dialogues with the Philippine government.

- Provide international platforms for Filipino journalists facing threats or exile.

7. Cross-Sectoral (All Stakeholders)

- Create a permanent, multi-stakeholder mechanism that brings together government, academe, civil society, and news organizations to coordinate the recovery, protection, and strengthening of the media sector. This framework should enable continuous dialogue, monitoring, and reform to restore press freedom, journalist safety, and institutional resilience beyond political cycles.

- Build on existing initiatives to establish an independent Philippine Media Sustainability Fund to support newsroom innovation, journalist safety, and ethics training.

- Institutionalize an annual Media Freedom Forum that brings together existing forums under a unified platform to assess progress, share best practices, and coordinate responses to threats.

- Promote collective resilience through shared resources, mentorship, and solidarity across Philippine regions, generations, and international networks.