

Press freedom and censorship during Covid-19 pandemic: the case of Cebu City

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Abstract Censorship, in all its forms, has always been a means by which freedom is being checked and regulated. In hindsight, for the state and its people, censorship must always be exercised with caution to avoid suppression of the constitutionally guaranteed freedom of the press. Moreover, freedom of the press is crucial in times of crisis, as in the case of a global pandemic named COVID-19. The Philippines, regarded as the world's texting capital and one of the widest in social media use, feel the convenience of getting the news right at the fingertips, apart from avoiding physical contact in compliance with health protocols. The study zeroes in on Cebu City, regarded as one of the country's largest voting populations and a newsmaker in terms of its policies vis-a-vis the pandemic. It delves into the juxtaposition of press freedom and censorship in Cebu City against the backdrop of the pandemic. This study is anchored on Bunn's New Censorship Theory, Scammel's foundations on the Index of Censorship, and the ever-developing Libertarian Theory. Further, it employed the Colaizzi method to explore the experiences of Cebu-based media practitioners and media institutions. In this vein, press freedom and censorship are not mutually exclusive. The presence of one does not preclude the other; they can actually co-exist. The exercise of press freedom very well depends on the personal values of the media practitioners and institutions.

Keywords: cebu city; censorship; covid-19 pandemic; media; press freedom

INTRODUCTION

Needless to state, from its inception, the press has always been one of the key players in the development of society. However, despite its contributions, the press, mainly printed and digital media, continually experience blatant attacks and censorship of media personnel while dissenters to the government are often persecuted. One of the prevailing problems is the politicisation of the press (Annual Report on Press Freedom, 2017).

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The concept of 'press freedom' came into existence as early as the first amendment of the United States of America's (USA) Constitution. The provisions that guarantee its protection are already enshrined therein as early as the 18th century (History, 2018).

Freedom of the press, intimately intertwined with freedom of speech, specifically includes the right to "*seek, receive and impart information and ideas*" (Article 19, The Universal Declaration of Human Rights). Citizens obtaining information is a critical aspect of this right. Moreover, it provides further that "*states that deny media freedom also trample upon the rights of their citizens to receive information freely*" (Limpitlaw, 2016).

The Philippines, no less, provides for the protection and acknowledges the freedom of the press (1987 Phil Const., Art. III Sec. 4). Despite said constitutional safeguard, threats against media practitioners and media institutions are still prevalent in the country. In recent years, President Rodrigo R. Duterte has issued several statements categorically attacking the media, especially those critical of its administration (Gutierrez, 2020). For example, the denial of the renewal of the franchise of the Alto Broadcasting System and Chronicle Broadcasting Network (ABS-CBN) by the House of Representatives (Bernadas and Ilagan, 2020). The non-renewal of the franchise is seen as only one of the many attacks against institutions and organisations critical of Duterte's presidency (Gutierrez, 2020).

One of the Philippines' leading economies, Cebu City, is a bastion of democracy, freedom of expression, and the press. This distinction was challenged during the coronavirus pandemic. Several dissidents and citizens were taken into police custody who, to their defence, were simply exercising their rights. According to the "*Freedom for Media, Freedom for All Network Report*" dated 4 May 2020, the most prominent case reported was that of filmmaker Maria Victoria Beltran who posted a 'satire' about Sitio Zapatera in Cebu being the epicentre of COVID-19 in the "*whole of the universe.*" Cebu City Mayor Edgar Labella then screen-grabbed her post and threatened her arrest, which indeed happened a few hours later.

In this paper, the authors delved into the case of the lived experiences of selected media practitioners and media institutions in Cebu City in relation to the state of press freedom during the COVID-19 pandemic. It intends to shed light on the state of press freedom before and during the pandemic and the extent of censorship by the government during the Coronavirus outbreak. As it is, the global pandemic has tremendously impacted state and local policies, politics, and governance. What will be emphasised in this study is freedom and the exercise thereof.

Moreover, in the global community, several countries have experienced media suppression, and people's rights have been trampled and curtailed, especially their freedom of expression. Dunham (2017) claims that only 13% of the world's population "*enjoy a free press—a*

media environment where political news coverage is robust and uncensored, and the safety of journalists is guaranteed" (p.3). Furthermore, the coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19) worsened the general attacks against journalists and press freedom (Ndavula, 2020). The 2020 edition of the World Press Freedom Index indicates scores and ranks each country in terms of safety, security, and peace in exercising the freedom of the press. Norway topped the ranking with no cases of abuse, while the USA ranks at 45 with 23.85% of abuse cases. An overwhelming 45.64% of cases of abuse placed the Philippines at 138th (Reporters Without Borders, 2020).

Meanwhile, in the pre-pandemic Cebu City, people rely on internet-run and traditional communication mediums and newsgathering. News then covers all aspects, from government actions and other government-related news to entertainment, sports, and human interest. COVID-19 drastically changed this dynamic, forcing people to stay at home and changing the perspective from where news is viewed.

Nowadays, news coverage is mostly done remotely and virtually, making the home the centre of the media room. More and more press briefings have thus taken place online, but reporters have found it harder to demand answers because officials and their staff often screen questions (Bernadas and Ilagan, 2020). For instance, Camus (as cited by Bernadas and Ilagan, 2020) wrote that some questions from journalists were ignored while official reports from the government were consistently discussed. Media practitioners and institutions became dependent on government-fed data as their main source of information. In this light, freedom of the press should be upheld at all times. Being media enthusiasts, the researchers find interest in this novel study. They wish to bring back the voice of the news coverage to the media, who rightfully has the right to convey actual facts and information to the public. Various news items have covered selected Cebu City media practitioners' unpleasant experiences during the pandemic, but none have yet been academically written. It is imperative, therefore, that this study be conducted. After all, media institutions - and people - operate independently in a democracy, free from untoward and unnecessary government interference (Article 19 and CMFR, 2005). Media, as the fourth pillar of democracy, serves as a watchdog. Thus, the Filipino people must ensure that the system works.

METHODOLOGY

This study utilised the qualitative research method, specifically the phenomenological research approach. The said approach best fits this study because it would determine how the key informants and respondents of the study have experienced the violations of freedom of speech and the press, how socio-political institutions implement programs and the interlinkage of these variables as applicable during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Furthermore, for some sensitive and exclusive information experienced first-hand by each organisation, a personal interview or a focused group discussion (FGD) was conducted virtually with individuals or groups who have direct knowledge, empirical data, and/or observations pertaining to the violation of freedom of speech and the press.

The research was conducted in Cebu City. Cebu city has a population of 994,000 as of 2021, a 1.43% increase from 2020 (United Nations 2019). The research locale contained the key respondents to be interviewed, which makes the data easily obtained for the success of this study.

Table 1. The Population of the Study

Key Informant	Categorisation	Position	Sex	Number of Years in Practice/ Operation
Media Practitioner A	Member of the Press	Editor-in-Chief/ Consultant	Female	30 years
Media Practitioner B	Member of the Press	Reporter	Female	2 years
Media Practitioner C	Member of the Press	News Writer	Female	20 years
Media Institution A	News Department	<i>Not Applicable</i>	N/A	40 years
Media Institution B	Broadcast Department	<i>Not Applicable</i>	N/A	53 years
Media Institution C	Editorial Board	<i>Not Applicable</i>	N/A	103 years

Source: Data Processing by Author 2021

The respondents of the study (Table 1) were media practitioners and media institutions. The respondents were selected through purposive sampling. A minimum of three and a maximum of six from media outlets and institutions will participate in the Zoom interviews.

Three media practitioners will be selected to answer on the basis of their personal experience, and three will speak on behalf of their media company. Moreover, these respondents will be selected from an array of media practitioners and professionals whose expertise in the field of press freedom span two years prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. The key informants of the study were selected through purposive sampling with inclusion criteria of media practice and exposure in the field for at least two years before the COVID-19 pandemic and are still active members of the media. Virtual interviews of the key informants were done through Zoom meetings. Interview-guide employed during the virtual interviews was researcher-made and approved by content experts.

A researcher-made survey questionnaire was used in collecting data. The instrument would contain open-ended questions. The types of questions were experience, opinion, knowledge, and feeling. The questions could be answered either through a virtual interview or in writing, depending on the respondent's preference. The instrument encourages open responses toward the topic that would lead to fulfilling the research objectives.

The data needed for this study was obtained through interviews and document analysis with the instrument made by the researchers. The data could also be collected through the paper if the respondents want to answer the instrument themselves. Data collection was conducted from 1 March 2020 to 1 May 2021. The specific timeline was determined and set during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. The confidentiality of the respondents was secured, and the researchers would only give necessary information if permitted by the respondents through a consent form. The secondary source for this study was the established theories and related literature. The interview was documented through a virtual voice recorder with the respondent's consent. If a respondent wishes to answer discreetly, they would be provided with a questionnaire, paper, and pen to answer. Virtual interviews were conducted through Zoom.

The data were analysed using the Colaizzi method. After collecting data, the researchers checked over the responses of the key informants individually. First, the researcher read the data that would be transcribed to identify significant meaning. The data were re-read several times to gain a general sense of the whole content. Similar expressions and responses were organised and grouped with the selected significant statements to formulate meanings. Then, it was followed by extracting themes by sorting the formulated meanings into clustered themes and finally categorising and grouping them into emerging themes (Sapanta, 2021).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

There were three media practitioners who participated in this study, namely:

Media Practitioner A, female, has been a journalist for over 30 years. She started as a reporter in Manila and ended as an editor and director for content and digital media in "*Sunstar Cebu*," a leading newspaper in the region. After her retirement in March 2021, she started working as a consultant for *Sunstar*. During the pandemic, her nature of work drastically changed due to the COVID 19 protocol set by the government. With said restrictions, she now performs her work as a consultant through adjusted virtual dynamics with her colleagues and staff.

Media Practitioner B, female, has been in the media for two years. She started working in the media industry right after her college graduation. Before working for "*Rappler Cebu*," she had experience

working for "*The Freeman*," the longest-running newspaper in Cebu, for a year, and "*Female*," also for a year. During the pandemic, she was barred from covering news in a certain police station in Cebu City. Such an incident became a hot topic, circulating as a news item around the province.

Media Practitioner C, female, has been in the media for more than 20 years. She is currently working for "*The Freeman*." She requested anonymity during the interviews due to security reasons.

Meanwhile, three media institutions participated in this study through their appointed representatives. These include:

Media Company A, "*Sunstar Cebu*," is a newspaper company that has existed for almost 40 years. In 1996, it established its first website. It operates in 12 major cities in the Philippines.

Media Company B, "*ABS-CBN*," otherwise known as "*Alto Broadcasting System*" (ABS) and "*Chronicle Broadcasting Network*" (CBN), are broadcasting media that have been in existence since 1967 until its recent shutdown in 2020. This was the largest media company in the Philippines.

Media Company C, "*Freeman*," formerly known as "*Visayan Herald*," was established in 1919 and had been operating since. It is a leading newspaper published daily in English, and its circulation reaches the other major cities in the Visayas region of the Philippines.

The participation of the above-mentioned key informants was crucial in generating the data for this study. This portion of the study espouses their sharing of narratives and inputs of personal experiences during the pandemic.

Lived Experiences of Media Practitioners and Media Institutions

Table 2 presents the respondents' lived experiences as media practitioners during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Cebu City. The descriptions deduced from the informants' responses were analysed as either *Permissive* or *Restrictive*.

Permissive pertains to the condition of a well-exercised right to speech and information by media personnel and its institutions. Further, this means that, in media practice, legal safeguards are observed, and laws are rightfully adhered to. Nonetheless, in cases of violations, violators are justly penalised.

On the other hand, restrictive is defined as heightened government intervention and censorship of the media and their published content. In this case, there is no clear distinction between protected freedom and legally justified censorship. The government does what it thinks is due without regard to exercising a free press. The following table shows the classification of the lived experience of media practitioners during the COVID 19 pandemic.

Table 2: Classification of Lived Experiences of Media Practitioners and Media Institutions Representatives during the COVID-19 Pandemic

PERMISSIVE	RESTRICTIVE
"[Restrictions] did not affect the quality of [my] work as a journalist."	"Our movements are restricted." "Limited movement and a scary time." "Hard and challenging in terms of gathering of news and information." "Working from home is quite challenging."

Source: Data Processing by Author 2021

Media Institution C

Media Company C, the "Freeman," claimed that during the COVID-19 pandemic, no extra-legal manoeuvres were employed by the government to censor and monitor their newspaper circulation. Media Company C further stressed that,

"In writing the news, I don't think the pandemic has affected because pandemic or no pandemic the writing capability of the writers, or the editing skills of the writing capability of our reporters are the editing skills of the editor that's already in place, so no problem about that" (Media Company C, Virtual Interview, 31 July 2021).

This is clearly 'permissive.' As a media outfit, Freeman is stating that nothing much changed. They can still do what they, as a media institution, are best at, writing information and editing news. There is an emphasis on the institution's capacity as a media outfit, which remained intact even during the pandemic. This translates to the inner talents and capabilities of the members of the Freeman. Individual creativity and resourcefulness cannot be taken away from these talented members of the press, no matter what the circumstances are, because it is innate to them.

In relation to Bunn's (2015) New Censorship Theory, permissiveness, despite the natural health protocols, is perceived to be in equilibrium with the natural rate of censorship that benefits society. Moreover, this upholds the role of the press, according to the Libertarian Theory, the freedom of the press to publish what they intend to regardless of the conditions of the time.

Media Practitioners A, B, and C

Media Practitioners A, B, and C affirmed a restrictive and limited environment in Cebu City for media practice during the pandemic. As a result, the informants were compelled to work from their respective houses, making their jobs more challenging.

Media Practitioner B reiterated this stand, saying that:

"It was a scary time, and people looked to people in authority for guidance, and during that time, we saw, how do I say this in a politically correct manner, we saw evident power tripping. It did not personally happen to me, but the chilling effect was very

palpable. It happened to one of my colleagues” (Media Practitioner B, Virtual Interview, 26 July 2021).

This statement pertains to local and national government officials exercising their political power to influence what could be circulated in the news. Instead of being the guiding light in these trying times, some took advantage of their positions to yield socio-political and economic gains. Indeed, a traditional perspective on how government censorship is utilised.

On the other hand, Media Practitioner A emphasised the shift in audience from print to digital. Media Practitioner A further stated,

“Equally important is the change in our audience because our audience - readers of the newspaper, readers of our website, viewers of our video - so hmm they moved online” (Media Practitioner A, Virtual Interview, 31 July 2021).

This situation led to some concerns, particularly by media practitioners, as their audience became more involved in the news making rather than the ‘news-taking.’ Before the pandemic, print or digital media readers were merely takers of the information being provided. During the pandemic, said readers also underwent a paradigm shift of involvement in the ‘news making.’ The public has more comprehensive access to various forms of media and has become susceptible to fake news. They can even be the source of information for the media practitioners who have stayed at home due to certain restrictions.

Media Institutions A and B

Media Institution A expressed the effect of retrenching employees due to the losses in the pandemic, and they claimed that,

“With retrenchments, the smaller workforce were given more workloads or, for us, coverages beyond our beats” (Media Institution A, Virtual Interview, 27 July 2021).

Despite this, she asserted that,

“...there has not been much pressure on the quota of stories per day, as we do not have a quota.” (Media Institution A, Virtual Interview, 27 July 2021)

Media Institution B asserted that they have to adjust and adapt due to the health protocols imposed by local government units. They said,

“mas naka adapt na mi sa kana bitawng work from home na system but for our news sources, like from the government, {...} atoang very...immediate gyud og frontline during the pandemic, wala baya sila na prepared dayon sa system of kanang working from home, or being available sa phone or over the internet, so, adjustment kaayo gyud to na time” (We have adopted more in the work-from-home system, but for our news sources, like from the government {...} our immediate front liners during the pandemic,

they were not prepared for the work-from-home system or being available on the phone or over the internet, so that was really a period of adjustment) (Media Institution B, Virtual Interview, 29 July 2021).

Due to the heightened community restrictions, Media Institution B has menial access to the primary sources of information, most specifically from government agencies, as many of these (agencies) are still struggling to adapt to the work-from-home arrangement. There arises a dilemma on limited access to sources of these media institutions. The process of verification and validation of information cannot be fully observed as there is a limitation to movement. Somehow this threatens the commitment of media personnel to uphold their duty as 'watchdogs.' Transparency and accountability in governance are upheld side by side with freedom of information and the press.

State of Press Freedom before and during the Pandemic

Table 3 describes the State and Condition of Press Freedom before the COVID-19 Pandemic in Cebu City. The description is grouped into three (3) categories: upheld, neutral, and suppressed.

Table 3. The State and Condition of Press Freedom before the COVID-19 Pandemic

UPHELD	NEUTRAL	SUPPRESSED
<p><i>"For me, there should be an interaction [with the government] because kuan man gud, well, first I recognise that there must be that interaction, although the goal is to detach, or is to become a detached observer, as journalists diba? We are told that the media must be a detached observer, but we cannot totally detach ourselves from the government because we are the government's subjects."</i></p> <p><i>"[It is] part of the risk as a journalist. Got a few death threats way back for exposing an illegal activity and another one for an article on food poisoning. There are some politicians who are really intimidating and they love to shame some members of the press, including me."</i></p>	<p><i>"Cebu is healthy in terms of press freedom."</i></p> <p><i>"Media and news sources, mostly government agencies, have created a bond - a friendship."</i></p>	<p><i>"I was once asked a favour from a high-ranking regional official of a government office to not write about an issue involving him."</i></p> <p><i>"Well, threats and intimidation, we've had news sources who limited our access to information for one reason or another but, usually, it is - you know - to stop the release of damaging information or what they viewed to be damaging them or to their office. So, they deprived us of access and this happened several years ago..."</i></p> <p><i>"Well, before the pandemic, no, to be quite honest, a lot of the sources already had a grip on reporters here in Cebu because there's only a few of us lang, and it's very easy to pick out reporters."</i></p>

Source: Data Processing by Author 2021

The first category, upheld, meant that press freedom was practised and exercised by the media practitioners and media institutions in Cebu City during the pandemic. It suggests that there is no curtailment of these groups' rights to cover, write, and report on what is happening on the ground. Furthermore, press freedom is upheld when the constitutionally protected freedom of the press is religiously observed, followed, and respected. There are no government restrictions and conflicts.

The second category, neutral, meant that press freedom was neither fully restricted by the government nor fully exercised by the media practitioners and media institutions at the time of the pandemic. The third category, suppressed, means that there is heightened government-sanctioned censorship of media companies and practitioners. News items are also censored and controlled during the pandemic.

Table 4. The State and Condition of Press Freedom during the Pandemic

UPHELD	NEUTRAL	SUPPRESSED
<p><i>"Though the pandemic affected the nature of gathering news and our sales, it did not affect the quality of our work as journalists."</i></p> <p><i>"The media is more relaxed now, during the pandemic."</i></p>	<p><i>None Observed</i></p>	<p><i>"The pandemic has been a game changer."</i></p> <p><i>"It forced us to shift from working in the field to working at home. It caused companies to run, even with financial difficulties. The presence of fabricated news and trolls also increased."</i></p> <p><i>"Press freedom was attacked. Suppression of press freedom was the biggest factor why ABS-CBN was closed."</i></p> <p><i>"It is more restrictive now, more difficult and challenging."</i></p> <p><i>"Reporters became afraid of being singled out by their sources. We then began self-censoring, without knowing we are doing it, because of fear."</i></p>

Source: Data Processing by Author 2021

As can be gleaned in the two tables, Table 3 and Table 4, there is a recognisable difference in the state of press freedom as viewed by the media practitioners and media institutions before and during the pandemic. The state of *neutrality* in exercising press freedom was evident before the pandemic, while it was not observed during the pandemic. It was seen as some 'bond' among and between institutions of the media and even the government to reciprocate the recognition of each other's role in society's development. However, the landscape was

changed with the backdrop of the pandemic. Extremities were observed either upheld or suppressed.

Media Company C and Media Practitioner C
Before the COVID-19 Pandemic

Media Practitioner C and Media Institution C acknowledged the existence of censorship on a national scale, but the latter asserted that Cebu City upholds freedom of the press,

"Yeah, I think there is a bigger, kay ingon man ko ganina na in Cebu or in Central Visayas alone, is at least there is no censorship, but I think, from the reports that we hear, from the reports that we read and watch in the national TV, and national newspapers or national media outlets, for example, Rappler, I think on a nationwide scale there, there is that censorship. I think the level of censorship is more pronounced on a nationwide scale, although in Cebu or Central Visayas, that is not necessarily true." (Yeah, I think there is a bigger because I said earlier that in Cebu or in Central Visayas alone, is at least there is no censorship, but I think, from the reports that we hear, from the reports that we read and watch in the national TV, and national newspapers, or national media outlets, for example, Rappler, I think on a nationwide scale there, there is that censorship. I think the level of censorship is more pronounced on a nationwide scale, although in Cebu or in Central Visayas, that is not necessarily true) (Media Institution C, Virtual Interview, 31 July 2021).

It impacts the degree of censorship observed on a national level in contrast to the local level. The said response is advantageous to Cebu as a locality for censorship was not as felt on a national scale. It pushed the rights of media personnel and their institutions to a free press. Censorship was present but to a minimal extent, particularly in Cebu.

During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Media Institution C and Media Practitioner C conveyed that even during the pandemic, Press Freedom is still upheld, although the former cautioned that,

"... it's my perception [that] under this administration, I don't think we are, or the media are a little, I think the media are a little bit on their toes and so to speak" (Media Institution C, Virtual Interview, 31 July 2021).

It is perceived that, to a bit of extent, the media during the pandemic time are conscious because of the current administration. This situation reflects changes in media perception of the state and condition of press freedom before and during the pandemic, from minimal censorship to self-consciousness as a form of censorship. The self-conscious behaviour of a few media personalities may be attributed to unclear and confusing

restrictions by the government as a response to address the pandemic. There are quite a few instances whereby one pronouncement was contracted by the next in relation to the spread of the virus. These situations may still fall under censorship as there is a direct reaction from the media about their exercise of freedom of the press.

Further, another response by the informants reinforced the presence of press freedom,

"Nope...if you see the number of media industries still in operation as compared to those not. Even those who claim to be struggling under the Duterte administration are still out there continuing to attack the President" (Media Practitioner C, Virtual Interview, 31 July 2021).

It is believed that the occurrence of criticisms against the current administration, including the President, reflects the existence of press freedom.

Media Institution B Before the COVID-19 Pandemic

Media Institution B, ABS-CBN, observed that before the COVID-19 Pandemic,

"Kuan, naa say mga government agencies nga very friendly" (there are friendly government agencies) (Media Institution B, Virtual Interview, 29 July 2021).

Media Institution B further narrated,

"naa man gyoy gitawag og kanang murag naa namoy bond or naa namoy na create na friendship sa imong news sources. It helps us media practitioners in Cebu and maka-ana ko na healthy sad gyud nuon ang Cebu noh when it terms to press freedom kay, unlike siguro sa ubang lugar nga naa juy media killings ... diri sa Cebu - wala man say hinuon mga threats." (There is a so-called bond, or you created a friendship with your news sources. It helps us, media practitioners, in Cebu, and I can say Cebu is healthy in terms of press freedom, unlike other places where killings exist. Here in Cebu, there are no threats.) (Media Institution B, Virtual Interview, 29 July 2021).

It is also imperative that there is a harmonious relationship between media practitioners and their news sources as a bond is formed in the process. Libertarian theory also acknowledges the reader's response from the public or the feedback loop after receiving information from the media.

Media Practitioners A and B; Media Company A
Before the COVID-19 Pandemic

Media Practitioners A and B, alongside Media Company A, pointed out the existence of suppression in the pre-pandemic time.

Even before the pandemic and before entering the media, Media Practitioner B revealed,

"... I was already aware of the press situation on the national scale, but upon entering, it was reaffirmed, but it also introduced me to a different face of censorship, that if they didn't necessarily have to come with a gun being pointed at media practitioners or did not have to necessarily become in the form of death threats, sometimes it comes in the form of intimidation, through power tripping" (Media Practitioner B, Virtual Interview, 26 July 2021).

There is an acknowledgement that even before the COVID-19 pandemic, suppression in media is looming and does not necessarily equate to violence. Still, it could be present in threats, intimidation, and manipulation by various sources. This reinforces the New Censorship Theory, which contends that censorship in this virtual era is actually 'reinvented,' existing in a multi-faceted way, instead of the usual censorship involving suppressive power and violence.

Media Institutions A and B; Media Practitioners A and B
During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Media Institutions A and B, alongside Media Practitioners A and B, emphasised the suppression of press freedom during the COVID-19 pandemic.

On the one hand, Media Institution A highlights the influence of the country's chief executive in influencing public opinion on the media,

"The attitude of our president towards various media entities like ABS CBN and Rappler, in some way, for sure, has given confidence to the local government offices to not take other local media seriously" (Media Institution A, Virtual Interview, 27 July 2021).

On the other hand, according to Media Institution B,

"Censorship and threats and suppression of press freedom will always be there. Then again, sa ako giingon kaganiha, importante kaayo na siya sa factors for you, as a media practitioner, to become more reliable, to become more factual, to become more courageous sa pagkuha og information." (Censorship and threats and suppression of press freedom will always be there. Then again, as I have mentioned earlier, these are essential factors for you, as a media practitioner, to become more reliable, to become more factual, to become more courageous in obtaining information)" (Media Institution B, Virtual Interview, 29 July 2021).

It is also opined that censorship, threats, and suppression of press freedom are not isolated in the pandemic, and it is incumbent upon the media to take courage in obtaining truthful information to grow reliability in the profession.

Media Institution B further added,
"di ka mahadlok and to speak, not for yourself but for the masses."
(Never be afraid to speak, not for yourself, but for the masses)
(Media Institution B, Virtual Interview, 29 July 2021).

Media Practitioner A pointed out the permanence of threats to the members of the media and shared,

"...there are threats to media, whether from government or from individuals or private individuals, they will always be there. For as long as we do our work and we stand by [ano] the foundations of journalism, well, we will ... we survive this on a daily basis, diba?" (Media Practitioner A, Virtual Interview, 30 July 2021).

Furthermore, reaffirming the day-to-day obstacles in the practice of media, Media Practitioner A conveyed,

"So, we will continue to struggle and survive, and that's the beauty of journalism" (Media Practitioner A, Virtual Interview, 30 July 2021).

Media Practitioner B cited the plight of ABS-CBN as an example,

"I think it's very evident in the shutting down of the ABS – CBN franchise and the multiple attacks against my company, Rappler. Most would argue that it had nothing to do with a pandemic, but at that time, there was so much restriction of movements, people could not go to the streets easily and collectively decried the decision of Congress to not grant the franchise ABS – CBN, and we have Presidential Spokesperson Harry Roque, calling out and making comments again oh calling out media entities..." (Media Practitioner B, Virtual Interview, 26 July 2021).

Although legally justified, the closure of ABS-CBN entailed a curtailment of press freedom since it was sanctioned during COVID-19.

Government Media Censorship during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Table 5 categorises the extent of Government Media Censorship during the COVID-19 pandemic. Three categorisations of the extent of media censorship were deduced from the responses of the key informants, namely: minimum, neutral, and optimum.

The first category, minimum, means that Media censorship is defined as the barest or lowest attempt of the government to censor media. Media outlets are given free will on their news content, and the government loosens legal restrictions on them.

The second category, neutral, pertains to neither lowered nor heightened government censorship attempts. In this state, media companies can report without regulation or monitoring, but legal safeguards remain. None acknowledged neutrality to describe government media censorship during the COVID-19 pandemic among all media companies and practitioners.

The third category, optimum, means heightened and more restrictive government censorship attempts. In this state, media companies can report with ultimate caution, monitoring and censorship.

Table 5 shows the direct responses encoded from the personal interview transcripts.

Table 5. Categorisation of Government Media Censorship during the COVID-19 Pandemic

MINIMUM	NEUTRAL	OPTIMUM
<i>"Press freedom is very much alive in Cebu City."</i>	<i>None Observed</i>	<i>"It is very challenging because of our new set-up and lesser workforce."</i>
<i>"In general, I think we are much more relaxed during the pandemic... Maybe also because there is not much happening around even in politics."</i>		<i>"We were silenced during the pandemic." "Threats are always present." "We would wake up, and our anxiety would be through the roof until we reach the end of the article. We're afraid that a word or a minuscule error would not satisfy the appetite of our sources."</i>

Source: Data Processing by Author 2021

Media Institution C and Media Practitioner C

Justifying the need to censor information in pressing times, according to Media Institution C,

"...but there are times that I think censorship, and there are times that the media should exercise some restraint, okay, exercise some restraint for a censor, and that is the time when public safety demands it. When public safety is at stake" (Media Institution C, Virtual Interview, 31 July 2021).

Media Practitioner C reinforced Media Institution C's stand on the need to censor at certain times,

"Well, there are some sensitive topics in the government that may also affect the government's strategies like in war or raids... Thus, it must be respected. Also, like murders, rape cases... There are certain rules to follow" (Media Practitioner C, Virtual Interview, 31 July 2021).

To them, censorship should be an exception rather than a general rule justified when public safety requires it. This affirms Bunn's (2015) New Censorship Theory which opens alternatives for censorship to be taken as another mode for expanding discourse. Further, this is a reminder that press freedom is not absolute, and there are circumstances when it needs to recalibrate.

Media Practitioners A and B; Media Institutions A and B

As censorship can be imposed not just by the government but almost all capable entities and persons, Media Practitioner A stressed,

"Yes, because while there are media, and where there are news reports that may be unfavourable to certain people, you know, those who can always try to censor the media" (Media Practitioner A, Virtual Interview, 30 July 2021).

Media Institution A further added,

"But, you know, attempts by those who are displeased by what the media reported can always resort to actions that deprive journalists the ability to perform their work of reporting the truth" (Media Institution A, Virtual Interview, 27 July 2021).

Influential people whose careers or lives were disparaged by truthful reporting may threaten the lives and safety of media practitioners.

Media Practitioner B narrated a red-tagging experience while covering at a police station in Cebu City,

*"Some of them approached me and were like... Oh, your friends with XX [detainee], why are you so happy? And then, at that point, I was texting my editors if I should leave, and I was inching closer to the gate, and they were like, you are gonna go outside you are going to tell your comrades, your *kauban*, your *ka 'kosa'* is their term. He was gonna get released, and you're going to start a commotion"* (Media Practitioner B, Virtual Interview, 26 July 2021).

There is a hostile gap between government agency members and media practitioners dubbed anti-government. To give further clarity, Media Practitioner B recalled her affiliation with XX,

*"XX and I knew each other from organising a Lumad Bakwit School before. Whenever I would approach XX, they would jeer and at some point... there were several points of them red-tagging me, but I could only quote one verbatim, and that was what I reported '*magkita ra laman mo ni XX sa bukid'* or 'you and XX will see each other in the mountains soon'"* (Media Practitioner B, Virtual Interview, 26 July 2021).

The term "*seeing each other in the mountains*" is a familiar aphorism in the Philippines for turning into armed rebels of the revolutionary

movement. This reference is attributed to the Communist Party of the Philippines and the New People's Army (CPP-NPA).

On micro-level censorship, Media Institution A revealed,

"I was once asked a favour from a high-ranking regional official of a government office to not write about an issue involving him. I just told him that I am just doing my work, and it's nothing personal. He did not respond afterwards" (Media Institution A, Virtual Interview, 27 July 2021).

Media Institution A attested to have realised the emerging threats to press freedom,

"The presence of fabricated news has threatened press freedom. It was more evident this time of the pandemic {than before} with more trolls presence in social media" (Media Institution A, Virtual Interview, 27 July 2021).

A repeated historical attack against press freedom was the closure of ABS-CBN; according to Media Institution B,

"Yes. One example is the closure of our company, ABS - CBN. It is a very historic [kaayo nga] attack on press freedom" (Media Institution B, Virtual Interview, 29 July 2021).

Despite the clamour among civil societies and advocacy groups, the ABS-CBN company was shut down in 2020, causing the unemployment of thousands of employees. This is seen as a legally backed attack against press freedom.

CONCLUSION

It is a fact that press freedom is enshrined and protected by the Constitution. Thus, it cannot be taken away from media practitioners prior to or during the pandemic. However, the exercise of press freedom may be affected during the pandemic. News coverage dynamics have since evolved as media practitioners and institutions now rely on sources and recipients of available news due to the limitations of movement. Instead of gathering information in the field, they have become the mouthpiece of news sources. Unfortunately, most information now comes from the government, thus exercising control, which may be referred to as information restriction. Press freedom and censorship are not mutually exclusive. The presence of one does not preclude the other; they can actually co-exist. The restrictions on press freedom are evident of censorship, but it does not prevent its expressions in whatever form. During the pandemic, there were minimal restrictions on the expression of press freedom but heightened censorship. In the end, irrespective of the presence or absence of censorship, press freedom very well depends on the personal values of the media practitioners and institutions.

Because of the emergence of the COVID-19, the field of broadcast, journalism, and news-making tremendously halted. Effective

communication is salient in informing the public about government updates, especially since a global pandemic razes the nation. A communicative approach with lesser censorship and more emphasis on press freedom is needed. The study's findings show that censorship is present even in the exercise of press freedom, and strict health protocols impede the newsmakers themselves from gathering first-hand information.

The study has highlighted several researchable aspects that could be pursued further by those involved in promoting press freedom. The results from the research's key informants prove that although press freedom is enshrined in the Constitution, the government still exercises a degree of control. Thus, there is an urgent need to address this problem by suggesting a freer press and a high degree of accessibility to truthful information. This research, which zeroes in on the case of Cebu city, can serve as a starting point for more intensive analyses. Further research is needed to look at ways and means of dealing with freedom and censorship during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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