Covering Mindanao: The Safety of Local vs. Non-local Journalists in the Field

Marte Høiby

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Covering Mindanao: The Safety of Local vs. Non-local Journalists in the Field

Marte Høiby

Department of Journalism and Media Studies, Oslo Metropolitan University, Oslo, Norway

ABSTRACT

In this study, I examine the perilous conditions facing Filipino journalists covering the Mindanao region, focusing on differences in threats and dangers faced by those who are local to the region and those parachuting in from Manila. Using a qualitative approach, I have conducted one group interview with two local and two non-local journalists, and five in-depth one-to-one interviews with journalists and expert sources, in 2017. The study additionally draws on interviews with fourteen Filipino journalists and editors from 2014. The journalists perceive that safety differ depending on whether they are local to the conflict they cover or not. Safety issues are significant for the ways in which they operate in the field and decisions they make. Extra-judicial killings and impunity for perpetrators committing crimes against journalists perpetuate dangerous conditions particularly for local journalists, while kidnapping for ransom is among the greatest threats perceived by non-local journalists. In situations which non-local journalists can retreat, their local counterparts stay behind and face reprisals. Ethics is imperative to safety particularly for local journalists. Safety training should be tailored to and differentiate between security challenges. Collaboration between local and non-local journalists may improve their safety altogether, but media organisations must adequately compensate both.

Introduction

Despite the fact that the Philippines is not officially at war, it continuously features among the world's deadliest places for journalists. With a history of dictatorship and colonial rule, the Philippines is also the site of Asia's longest-running communist insurgency while other organisations and splinter groups claim autonomy in the south of the country. At the same time, the Philippine media is persistent in uncovering issues of conflict affecting society. In 1986, the Philippine press contributed to peacefully overthrowing the 21-year dictatorship of President Ferdinand Marcos and leading the people's revolution for a democratically elected new leader. Nowadays, working in one of the most progressively growing economies in East Asia (worldbank.org 2017) which is considered a transitional democracy with a relatively free press, the Philippine media still struggles for safety at work. Referring

to this peculiar context, some claim that, "the Philippine press is best described as a contradiction" (Tandoc and Skoric 2004; Tandoc 2016, 1).

Research within journalism holds that local and foreign journalists possess inherently different traits in newsgathering (Hamilton and Jenner 2004; Palmer and Fontan 2007; Murrell 2014; Soomin 2016). Further, a larger study on threats and dangers facing journalists in conflict zones carried out in 2014, indicates that the situation for local journalists working for smaller media outlets differed significantly from the picture presented by foreign correspondents or national journalists covering the same conflict for large companies based in metropolitan cities. Not only did the journalists show great disparities in access to equipment and training for protection, it was evident that the threats they received were of a significantly different character, severity and endurance (Høiby and Ottosen 2015, 2016, 2017). Taking this as departure point, this study aims to highlight some of the divergences in threats and dangers facing local and non-local journalists covering Mindanao.

I start by discussing what some describe as the contradictory environment of press freedom and antipress violence, providing a backdrop for further investigation into the risks and threats facing Filipino journalists. Then, I present a body of empirical data about threats, dangers and levels of safety perceived by Filipino journalists, before pointing out some disparities in the threats perceived by local and non-local journalists operating in the same field, namely the Mindanao region. In this context, the non-local journalists are Filipino journalists who are not local to Mindanao, and who regularly travel to Mindanao to cover conflict for media companies in Manila. Finally, I seek to advance knowledge and understanding about how local and non-local journalists may connect—by competitive or collaborative means. The objective of this research, therefore, is to explore the extent to which perceptions of threats and dangers differ between local and non-local journalists covering the same conflicts in the same area. And to demonstrate the potential of collaboration in spite of an increasingly perilous situation for those working (and living) in the field.

Knowledge about journalists' working conditions in the field can contribute to safer and freer journalism, and even save lives. The quest for knowledge and understanding of antipress violence, journalist assassinations and press freedom is thus an urgently emergent component of journalism education (Krøvel 2017). Less experienced reporters can learn and prepare before entering the dangerous field of work. Knowing and understanding how safety differs according to journalists' personal and professional attributes is one of the key factors in improving their security in the field. Thus, with the safety of journalists firmly in mind, the article aims to answer the following research questions:

RQ1) How do Filipino journalists covering Mindanao perceive threats and risks related to their work, and how does the situation for local journalists compare with that of those parachuted in from Manila?

RQ2) What are the relationships and work arrangements between local Mindanao journalists and national journalists from Manila, and how does anti-press violence, killings and threats affect these relationships and work arrangements?

I will in this article explore the relationship between journalists from the metropolitan and provincial areas of the Philippines. I argue that, taking into account differences in political contexts, economic imperatives and organisational structures, questions of physical

insecurity in the field are an ever more dominant influence on journalists' work in conflict zones.

Terminology and Concepts

It is a challenge to label the actors involved in gathering information for a news outlet without neglecting significant attributes of their role. What exactly the "fixer" label implies, and whether it is adequate or correct for describing the role of someone whose performance is crucial to the process of journalistic production, has not been widely considered (e.g., Murrell 2014). Many "fixers" change between or even perform simultaneously two or more roles—such as being journalists for their own media, and translators, chauffeurs or facilitators for other journalists. In this article, all interviewees are journalism professionals and/or journalists by occupation. Some are parachute journalists living in Manila, while others are local to Mindanao. I use the term "non-local" or "Manila journalists" (to be more specific) to refer to interviewees in the former group, while "local" or "Mindanao" journalists identifies those in the latter. The term "fixer" only applies in the case of locally employed workers who are not journalists (i.e., none of the interviewees) in contexts where this is appropriate for the role they perform.

War and conflict reporters are defined as those reporting on armed or violent social conflict, and may additionally include beats such as politics, corruption and crime. Guidelines for other research sampling, namely journalists covering "both armed conflict and organised crime; any type of reporting in which the journalist is putting her or his life at risk for the job based on potential threat from actors involved in the conflict" is maintained (Høiby and Ottosen 2015).

Antipress violence is not a commonly used term, and to this date cannot to be found (as antipress, nor anti-press) in Dictionary.com, Oxford dictionaries (en.oxforddictionaries.com), or Cambridge dictionary (dictionary.cambridge.org). In the Merriam Webster dictionary it is spelled "anti-press" and defined as "opposed to or hostile toward the press" (Merriam-webster.com 2018a).

Press freedom, or "freedom of the press" can be defined as "the right of newspapers, magazines, etc., to report news without being controlled by the government" (Merriam-webster.com 2018b). Alternatively, in a legal framework, as "the right to publish and disseminate information, thoughts, and opinions without restraint or censorship as guaranteed under the […] Constitution". While the word "restraint" opens for the possibility of murder or violence to perform as impediments to such freedom, it imposes that the freedom is defined in a constitution. In general, definitions of press freedom are explicitly focused on absence of government censorship, and considered from a legislative perspective. To expand the term, it is often merged with the freedom of speech or of expression.

Methodology

In total nine persons were interviewed in personal meetings in May 2017; four of them in a group discussion, and the remaining in one-to-one semi-structured interviews. The majority of interviewees work as journalists and some are what I refer to as expert sources, but all expert sources come from work in journalism and some of them with high merits.

The group discussion included two Mindanao journalists and two Manila reporters covering Mindanao on parachute assignments. Another two journalists, one working and living in Mindanao and one from Manila working in Mindanao, were quizzed in separate one-to-one interviews. Questions focused on risks of working in small, local communities in the provinces; the risks of reporting in Mindanao for Manila reporters and how risks affect their—both local and national journalists'—choice of access, use of local resources such as drivers and guides, fixers or other journalists etc. The reporters were also asked if and how national journalists benefit from local resources in their newsgathering processes, and vice versa; how Mindanao journalists and Manila reporters benefit from cooperation when covering Mindanao; issues of competition; and their motivation. Finally, the interviews were transcribed and a thematic content analysis carried out.

The expert sources were from the National Union of Journalists in the Philippines (NUJP), the Philippine Centre for Investigative Journalism (PCIJ), and the Editor-in-Chief of social news network *Rappler* (former Head of *CNN Jakarta*) Maria Ressa, who is also the author of several books on insurgency and journalism in South-East Asia. Previous work from these sources, such as PCIJ reports and NUJP reports and trainings, and investigations by Maria Ressa, also inform the study (Ressa 2003).

This paper also takes advantage of relevant interviews in previous research. In 2014, 15 in-depth interviews (with 4 editors and 10 journalists) were conducted with Filipino conflict reporters, in a research project that set out to map journalists and editors' experiences with threats and their responses to a potentially degraded security situation for journalists at work in conflict zones (Høiby and Ottosen 2015).

Literature Review: Theorising Antipress Violence and Journalist Killings

In 2015, UNESCO launched a research agenda addressing journalist safety and the issue of impunity, encouraging the global academy to pay attention: "By creation of the agenda, UNESCO aims to encourage new academic research in this important area that until present has been covered only by a scarce amount of scientifically oriented studies" (UNESCO 2015). Since then, a number of books and articles have added empirical insights suggesting the twenty-first century conflict reporters face increased hostility, political targeting and threats of kidnapping (e.g., Nohrstedt and Ottosen 2014; Høiby and Ottosen 2015, 2016, 2017; Armoudian 2017; Carlsson 2016; Høiby 2016; Carlsson and Pöyhtäri 2017; Cottle, Sambrook, and Mosdell 2017; Palmer 2018b). Recognising historical and geopolitical contexts, the emerging scholarship discusses impacts of economic pressure, international politics and new media platforms, along with other technological advancement such as instruments for tracking and surveillance. Impunity for crimes against journalists is recognised as an intrinsic mechanism at the core of its persistence, used systematically to impose journalistic self-censorship by states and state-sponsored actors. (Harrison and Pukallus 2018).

Few, if any, attempts have so far been made to establish a comprehensive scientific theory about this multidimensional phenomenon of local and global scope. In this article I will not aim to deliver a developed theoretical framework, but rather point to elements in contemporary society that show discernible patterns in the field of violence against journalists.

The attacks and killings registered by international bodies and interest organisations show that the countries regularly featuring at the top of statistics for detained journalists (e.g., China, Turkey, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Vietnam, Egypt and, Iran) do not significantly overlap with countries where most journalists are killed (e.g., Mexico, Iraq, Syria, the Philippines, Pakistan, Afghanistan, India, Brazil, Honduras, Guatemala, Colombia, Yemen, Libya, South Sudan, Somalia, Palestine and Bangladesh) (CPJ 2012; UNESCO 2018). The countries that have highest prevalence of journalist assassinations are for the most part classified as young, transitional or insecure democracies. Few countries persistently figure very high in the two statistics at the same time, and few of the countries with high numbers of killings are among the lowest-ranking on the RSF press freedom index. This is in spite of the fact that RSF do consider journalist assassinations ("abuses") a key factor when scaling countries' state of press freedom—meaning that the other variables must tilt more heavily towards conditions of a freer press. (The other variables are pluralism, media independence, environment and self-censorship, legislative framework, transparency and infrastructure), (RSF 2018). Two questions immediately arise from this: one is whether in some countries detention is used to silence instead of murder, and the other is whether conditions implemented to enhance press freedom instead may contribute to more anti-press violence and killings. I do not set out to answer these questions here, and have not been able to find studies addressing the first question—but two other studies elaborate on the latter (i.e., Bjørnskov and Freytag 2010; Aguilar, Mendoza, and Candelaria 2014), of which one of them make a particularly convincing case about the Philippines. Discussing the relationship between press freedom and violence against journalists, it is, however, difficult to generalise or conclude about the two concepts' paradoxical correlation and dependency. Stating that, "Where press freedom is high but the legal system makes murder an unattractive option, the problem [of antipress violence] is [still] minimized" they conclude that,

> murder of journalists appears to be acute in transitional societies, where press freedom is high but corruption is rife, the legal system is weak, and other institutional characteristics allow this form of violence to escalate. (Aguilar, Mendoza, and Candelaria 2014, 652–653).

Moving on to other repressive means, CPJ's ranking of the most censored countries (since 1992) includes yet another sample: Eritrea, North Korea, Saudi Arabia, Ethiopia, Azerbaijan, Vietnam, Iran, China, Myanmar and Cuba (CPJ 2015) and does not significantly overlap with any of the mentioned categories of murder or detention. This ranking is based on research about use of censorship tactics, ranging from imprisonment and repressive laws to harassment and restricted Internet access.

While war, for obvious reasons, causes a degradation of security for journalists in common with other members of society, it is not essential for antipress violence to persist in a society. Mexico, Brazil, the Philippines, Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala, Indonesia, Nepal, Bangladesh and Egypt are all countries listed among the most dangerous for journalists, and none of them are officially at war. It is important to note that, historically, more than two thirds of journalist deaths are cases of murder in reprisal for work the journalist has done, 2016, due to the wars in Syria and Iraq, has been the only year so far in which the number of combat and crossfire related incidents outnumbered those of murder in retaliation for work (Bersel and Witchel 2016). The 2017/2018 UNESCO World Trends in Freedom of Expression and Media Development Report shows that, of the

530 journalist killings registered in the period 2012–2016, 92% were local journalists (UNESCO 2018). Journalists killed on the job are often local reporters revealing issues in their communities such as electoral fraud, corruption deals and organised crime, and in most instances, they were murdered because they were about to expose illegal activity and identify the people involved. Some journalists are also executed to "set an example" and create a chilling effect on other journalists and entire media landscapes, including witnesses (Rosales 2006).

The propensity to resort to murder in these cases depends greatly on a society's capacity to prosecute those responsible—to what extent the perpetrators have a sense of impunity. Aguilar, Mendoza, and Candelaria (2014) present an important explanation to impunity in provinces, by pointing out the power of local authorities in "keeping the state at bay", even if state authorities make serious attempts to abate crimes against journalists. "[T]he situation goes beyond the formal relationship between central and local state, for what appears is a modus vivendi between rulers of the central state and rulers of cities and provinces" (Aguilar, Mendoza, and Candelaria 2014, 675). In the 2017 World Business impunity index, the Philippines ranks on top (with a significantly higher score than all the rest), India comes second and followed by Cameroon, Mexico, Peru, Venezuela, Brazil, Colombia, Nicaragua and Russia. Dominated by countries in Latin America, the Middle East is largely absent.

Research about influences on journalists' work environments such as threats and violence shows a likely parallel between countries' democratic performance and the numbers of journalist assassinations (Hughes et al. 2017). Levels of violence, public insecurity and economic inequality appear to demand consideration in the study of antipress violence and journalist safety. Based on survey data from 62 countries, and additional case studies from countries in Africa and Latin America, a study by Sallie Hughes et al. (2017) suggests that

> the origins of societal violence, its geographic locations, and the ways in which state actors interact with violent actors and journalists are important for understanding the most extreme influences on journalists in insecure democracies … In democracies where journalists are routine targets of anti-press violence and intimidation, the cases suggest that conditions are worse for journalists where there is an overlap between the criminal, political and media spheres (2017, 646).

Hence, it is valuable for this study to provide a short assessment of the situation in the Philippines before moving on to present the findings.

Local Newsgathering and Antipress Violence in the Philippines

In the Philippines, the period after the mid-1980s saw the end of dictatorship and subsequent liberal and democratic changes in media laws and ownership. However antipress violence and murder persists. This is explained by some as the result of a mix of factors such as the maintenance of de facto power holders—"a post-Marcos legacy of all-powerful and well-entrenched military and politicians" (Rosales 2006, 150)—a weak judicial system and a lack of protection for journalists. Poor ethics and professionalism among journalists are also pointed to by professionals and scholars alike. They are considered key factors among journalists and editors themselves in the Philippine media (Rosales 2006, 150; Tandoc 2016, 7; Høiby and Ottosen 2017). Another concern raised

by scientists (e.g., Waisbord 2002) is the juridical regulation of the media in young democracies, especially laws that "grant officials powerful mechanisms to manipulate the press," (2002, 91) and chill critical coverage. Nearly 60% of Philippines' journalist killings have taken place in Mindanao (CMFR 2018), which is known to be one of the most dangerous places to do journalism in the world.

Dangerous environments for journalists covering war and conflict in the field seem to increase dependency on local journalists and "fixers" (Campagna and Sabra 2004; Palmer and Fontan 2007; Murrell 2014; Palmer 2018a; Høiby and Ottosen 2017). Despite their pivotal role in information gathering, little scholarly attention has been paid to the nature of such local and often unrecognised efforts in newsgathering. Western scholarly contributions to this field, as during the 2003 Anglo-US invasion of Iraq (e.g., Palmer and Fontan 2007; Murrell 2014), have tendentiously focused on the international news media's dependency on local labour. Iraq was a distinct case because of the noticeable and sudden degradation in security for western journalists following the invasion. According to Committee to Protect Journalists, the number of journalists killed on the job in Iraq rose from an annual average of zero (in 1994) to 25 per year in the period 2003–2008 (author's calculations). A small but notable amount of research appeared investigating Iraq studying western news gathering (e.g., Palmer and Fontan 2007), and also measuring local journalists' risk perceptions (e.g., Hun Shik Kim 2015).

In the Palmer and Fontan (2007) study, both fixers and journalists were interviewed about the nature of their collaboration, and both groups described the local fixers as the journalists' "ears and eyes" on the ground. The main arguments among foreign correspondents for hiring local labour were related to language and safety. The fixers' tasks identified in the study were to interpret in interviews and translate local media; arrange interviews and occasionally to select interviewees. The fixers also undertook "some reporting, especially summaries of events to which the European journalist cannot have access for security reasons". They also provided protection for journalists via local networks of influence and—if necessary—negotiated with kidnappers (2007, 10).

In the CPJ report *Under Threat* by Campagna and Sabra (2004), the authors describe how fixers or local journalists sometimes transfer to doing the actual work of other journalists from outside, even to the extent of replacing the reporter on duty. *Los Angeles Times* Deputy Foreign Editor Mary Braswell states to the report that "We might drive to different parts of Baghdad, but we are likely to remain in our cars. At times, we've had to send our translators out with a list of interview questions" (in Campagna and Sabra 2004, no page nb).

According to Giovanna Dell'Orto (2017) the work arrangements between local journalists and/or fixers and non-local journalists from outside are one of the least discussed issues in relation to journalist safety. In the western media landscape, the ideal of objective reporting still holds strong, and the idea of reporting on your local situation with the mere objective of telling the world about atrocities committed against you and your people—so called "activist journalism"—is often not seen as a professional way of doing journalism (Bishara 2006). While concern is expressed about local journalists' partisan role in local conflicts; language, networks, local knowledge and contextual understanding inevitably mean non-local journalists rely on local assistance. Dell'Orto argues that this is a relationship of mutual interest—that "foreigners bring a deeper sense of what will resonate outside a country, distance (literally and metaphorically), and often more in-depth

journalistic training and familiarity with the ethical practices of a free, independent press" (:320). She calls this practice "partnership reporting" (:321), an advantageous method where the local professional is most active in collecting the news and the foreign professional responsible for getting it out.

Empirical Findings: An Environment of Violence and Culture of Impunity— and the Chilling Effects of a "War on Drugs"

When the Philippine Centre for Investigative Journalism (IPCJ) was founded in 1990, they started an investigation into cases of journalist killings in the country. According to IPCJ, the aim was to register how the journalists were killed, who, if anyone, was involved in their deaths and what their motives were. They found that even though the journalists were endangered by the work they did, they were rarely hit in crossfire, or in combat. The perpetrators did not all come from the government or the military as had been expected, but were often unidentified. Among the early cases, none were brought to court and no attempts were made to determine and prosecute the masterminds of the killings. According to interviewees, the free democratic space after Martial Law allowed journalists to interact as part of the political structure, which brought about an increasingly dangerous environment for journalists. Those active in exposing information about people in power were murdered.

When interviewing for this study, one of the expert source interviewees said the situation in the Philippines constitutes the perfect case study:

> [t]here needs to be a certain level of press freedom in order to have a high number of journalist killings. It is the combination of an active press, an environment of violence and a culture of impunity that allows for the slaying to persist.

The interview echoes some ideas about the mutual dependency between press freedom and antipress violence that are discussed earlier in this article (see page 4), while emphasising that press freedom in the Philippines is encouraged by enthusiasm and drive for the journalistic profession. The journalist's motivation to pursue a story they know is going to be risky, or to continue reporting on something in spite of repeated threats and murder attempts, stems from a sense of responsibility ("duty"), career development, the desire for "a feather in the cap" and an influence of culture and habit:

> We're actually the only country in Asia that has a long history of free press – long before Marcos we had a history of a free press. It's also that we've had many media organisations; small media organisations … . People believed that if they printed the four page weekly, that was part of what their community needed. So the fact is that there are a lot of journalists, before the new media, very clearly hired by news organisations, small news organisations, family-run companies that give out newspapers. So, to have a high number of killings, you need to have a fairly well developed media system that makes news a habit.

Journalists' motivation also generally determines the level of risk they are willing to take. The simple risk equation is: "the risk against the catch". The higher the importance or value of the story, the greater the risks reporters are willing to run.

> For the most part, these are people who say, "oh this is such a good story, I need to get this because he is corrupt". Their motivation is career, not really ideology. Basically, they feel that this is what journalism is about, you get the stories that are difficult, the ones that if you can

get somebody that is important – well, that's an even bigger feather in your cap. That's part of the syndrome. And part of the orientation that we've tried to help to establish, is that there is no story that is worth your life. Because when you're dead you can't do any more stories.

Risks and threats facing journalists in Mindanao can be different from those facing journalists coming from Manila to report on issues in Mindanao. Some interviewees highlight that power players involved in the story and the area in which it is taking place can be the strongest predictors of risk. Clan and family (power) disputes in small communities, such as in cases of corruption or during provincial elections, pose a great risk to journalists covering them. The IPCJ interviewee further explains that:

> The pool system of hiring assassins has now become part of that pattern of two assailants riding in tandem on a motorcycle. One drives and the other one shoots. That is national now; it is even used in the drug war, in President Duterte's drug war.

Hiring assassins is part of an impunity climate; where the people they call, "masterminds" can hide behind the work of the "hitmen"—the assassins—and avoid being associated with the murder.

> So, it is the culture of impunity that grows out of a no man's land where you can kill, and maybe you will disappear into the wild for a little bit, and then surface again and nobody is going to catch you.

This "culture" does not imply evasion of judicial processes in itself, but a low barrier for committing serious crimes in a society in which such criminality prompts little or no penalties. The "war on drugs" has intensified this climate, leading to an atmosphere where anyone can kill, and put a note on the dead body saying that he was a drug addict or a pusher, and "that's it, no one would mind". By offering an excuse for murder, the war on drugs is an added threat to the journalists who get in the way of illegal activity. The interviewees tell of a journalist they know who was a victim of attempted murder. He pretended to be dead and was left on the ground with a piece of cardboard on top of him stating "pusher".

> Before they would just shoot you, now they destroy you first: tell other people that you're an addict. And then they shoot you. That you're a liar, you're a yellow journalist, you're biased. They lump everyone into this drug template, and if you decry the killings they'll just say that you're yellow and a friend of the addicts and the pushers, and so you must be a pusher yourself.

Threats and risks are also contingent on which area of the region you are reporting on. One Manila journalist says that:

> … if you talk about Luzon and covering conflict there, that is something different from covering conflict in Mindanao. It is safe even when covering the New People's Army [and we] usually get access to their strongholds if they allow. But in Mindanao, danger of kidnapping, getting mistaken for state agents and being caught in the cross fire is bigger.

Although the risks here may additionally depend on the type of journalist and who they are reporting for, the interviewee has clear perceptions about the dangers that stand out for non-local journalists.

> The risk of abduction in Basilan, Zamboanga and Jolo is high. While in central Mindanao the risk of being hit by IEDs would be the more pressing concern rather than abduction. So its abduction and being caught in the crossfire and the IEDs that are most concerning.

Covering elections in provincial areas has proven to be among the deadliest forms of reporting for journalists in the Philippines. A local journalist covering elections in the southern provinces explains why: "Elections are long-running stories—you [still] have to be there the next day". Not only is the beat dangerous in itself in areas with high prevalence of fraud and corruption, but it entails an aspect of durability that poses an additional threat to the reporters involved. Alternating stories between different journalists is a frequently used strategy to safeguard journalists working on dangerous assignments (Høiby and Ottosen 2016). This however, is a limited option in smaller local news organisations. Thus, the size of the media organisation can affect how safe journalists are.

The type of media and the form of presentation can influence the level of risk. Professionalism is repeatedly brought up by interviewees, and almost always the context is ethics or sensationalism. Being professional, they say, is a way of not inciting threats. But, practically, what does this mean?

> There's this practice, in radio for example, to get more audience, they would be very sensationalized. […] they have this huge drum inside the boot, and to emphasise what the announcer is saying, they would beat the drum. Often the statements are libels, so of course the one that you criticise tends to [react], [and] he sends you a black ribbon or he sends somebody to tell you to stop … or sends you an SMS saying that's your last broadcast. So ethics is actually a big part of safety.

Another interviewee explains how journalists are being trained in how to present their news stories in ways that does not incite threats:

> Part of the training is that you can report without being defamatory. Anything that is exposed is going to be defamatory, but if you choose your words and temper – you know, just present in a way as if you're just presenting facts, then there's no [problem].

The pay system of the media in the Philippines also has ramifications for ethics and safety. In addition to the fact that several journalists are on the payroll of government officials (Rosales 2006), payment of journalists in the Philippines is erratic. One interviewee explains

> Many don't get regular salaries. [In particular the] local community radios … What they get is a commission – like 15 to 20 per cent from the ads. So how can you report about the corruption of the Major, when you need the ad from the Major's office to survive?

Bribery is thus yet another major issue. While there may be journalists who in fact chose to accept bribes or favours, the option does not always exist. If one chooses to accept, a certain "friendliness" is expected in return—while rejecting will pose an extra risk by defining one's stance against the person in question. The risks of poor ethics can have fatal outcomes, and the perpetrator can, in many cases, be hard to determine: "It's always an envelope. Everything comes in an envelope—whether it's a bribe or a bullet."

> Bribes still happen, especially in beats where a lot of politicians are involved. The senate, congress. I have been offered a few. […] Sometimes they're really so adamant, you just take it and surrender it to the office and then the office issues a receipt form to the charitable foundation saying, "thank you for the contribution to the charity".

There are times when the journalists cannot refuse. One of the non-local journalists gave an example from when he was interviewing members of the Ampatuan family in

Mindanao. After the interview, the journalists were offered a packet of money by a local journalist who was sent to deliver it. When they refused to accept, the local journalist responded that his life was in danger if they said no. "He knelt in front of us [saying] 'please accept it'. He was one of the local journalists. The Ampatuans did not give it directly". The risk was present both for the local and for the foreign journalist, but in very different ways. However, most of the usual bribes are not offered in terms of direct money.

> Most of it is money coming from politicians hoping that favours will put them in a good light. Since, yeah, they know how Filipino reporters work, it's a plight to be polite if somebody gives you a gift or something, so you actually corner the journalist who receives the money that you have given in order to paint a better picture of you than really necessary.

Kidnappings in the Southern Provinces

Kidnap for ransom is a cottage industry in the southern provinces, of which insurgency groups have developed advanced methods. Kidnapping journalists from recognised media companies is significantly more profitable than targeting locals. Maria Ressa, *Rappler* Editor-in-Chief and former Head of *CNN Jakarta* and *Philippine ABS-CBN News*, says that "I've been invited to go to [Abu Sayyaf's] base in Jolo, and the journalists who did go were inevitably kidnapped. Their news-groups paid their ransoms." According to Ressa, kidnap for ransoms "is what kept the criminal components of the Abu Sayyaf afloat."

> I know first-hand because I had three journalists [in ABS-CBN] who were kidnapped by the Abu Sayyaf. The group asked for millions of pesos. We got them back in ten days but it was a combination of working directly underground, dealing with them directly so that it doesn't last long, because the longer the negotiations go the more people want a piece of the action, the more people want money. In the end, that is transactional, its economic, they want money. So, safety for journalists in that is, don't go.

After the kidnapping of the ABS-CBN reporters, the organisation, and many others, stopped sending journalists to the area. "I felt like by just getting our three out, there was a big bullseye on [us], because we were the largest news group in the Philippines", and this could make their reporters more prone to another kidnap. Now, their staff will go there only with either the military or special task forces. "They will go in and out, they won't stay, and that real reporting, I mean trying to understand how people live, who they live with, the dangers that they face [is important]—but the safety issues, you can't ignore them."

Ressa says that several foreign journalists who were kidnapped in the past feel that their fixer played a role in it, that they were "part of the conspiracy. […] It's a hall of mirrors." Thus, non-local journalists depend on solid relationships with local journalists, drivers and fixers, for safety. One of the non-local journalists interviewed says,

> The drivers I employ in conflict areas […] we are pretty close, I mean, my life is in his hands. […] He can easily say that 'I've got a few reporters coming in' and drive through this checkpoint or this particular part, and he can just hold us there. You know, journalists get kidnapped in Jolo, it has happened many times.

Empirical Findings: "They get the Story from the Hotel, and I Get the Story from the Battleground. And Yet They Use their Story, not Mine."

A Beneficial Relationship?

One interviewee comments that there has always been a feeling of resentment on the part of Mindanao journalists, against Manila-based journalists, "who would go to Mindanao, cover for just a few days and go back to Manila and report as if they are the experts."

> They call it 'imperial Manila' those coming from Mindanao, and some of their complaints actually have basis. Because some journalists would go to Mindanao [just to] get information from the local journalists. Some of them would bother to really go to the field, but a lot of them actually rely on information from the other journalists, and then they don't stay long enough to really research what they're reporting about. Then they go back and many times they get the context wrong. They don't really understand the relationships between the forces, so they provide a very simplistic picture of what is happening in Mindanao.

During the group discussion with the journalists, there was a conversation about competition between local journalists and reporters from "outside". Some balked at calling it competition, arguing that "it's more like exploitation, actually." They explain that local stringers lose their work when the company sends their journalist from Manila: "you won't have anybody who will buy your [work]. … It's a hierarchy; if the boss is around, your work doesn't get noticed". Local journalists also string for wires, and have the constant pressure of trying to pitch stories for the Manila desk.

> I would come up with excellent story ideas, I would actually write the stories and send them, and then one day a reporter from Manila comes, does the story in a way that you would never do it, and that's the story that gets published. … And they don't have to pay me because they didn't use what I did, but they actually took my idea. … They deprive us of income. … So they can be a friend at one moment, and another time your competitor.

Most of the fixers that go around helping the wire journalists are reporters themselves … "local Mindanao reporters from the provinces". Apart from the wire journalists, Manila journalists usually do not work with fixers, only with local drivers: "You usually just call the driver, [but they] have no say in that story […]". Generally, local labour is for the purposes of transportation and security "because they're very poorly educated [but they] know how to drive and shoot a gun".

The interviews revealed that the local journalists do not welcome the appearance of Manila journalists—it was even confirmed by the Manila journalists themselves: "No, they get angry, because they don't get paid when we're there". The interviewee was further asked, "Does it happen that community journos feel relieved if you do the stories that they don't feel safe to pursue themselves, because of risks?" They answered:

> The Maguindanao massacre, covering that – yes. Most of the local reporters would not cover that. When I say local reporter it's those based in Cotabato. They're not going to touch that. The Ampatuans know them personally [and] know where they live […]. They would know how dangerous writing the story can get.

One of the risks of reporting on your own community is that you cannot leave every time tension grows. One of the local journalist interviewees refers to the "boiling frog syndrome" to describe the difference between them and the Manila journalists:

> Those who live in the community, we are the frog in the pot – where the violence is. We do not get out even if the pressure continues rising. One minute you end up dead. Those from Manila are like the frogs who are going to be thrown in the pot – so they will jump immediately out. It is more dangerous if you live here, because your tolerance to threats gets higher and higher and higher, and you end up dead.

Another says that the local journalists often get the blame in any case; if a sensitive story is published in the Manila outlet, they will punish the local correspondent from the same company—whether or not they have anything to do with the story. Being a fixer for other journalists, they say, is "part of who you are. If we could afford to hire a vehicle, we would hire a vehicle. If we had resources to make it safer for us to cover, we would use those resources."

One thing that interviewees agree on is that journalists local to Mindanao and journalists parachuting in from Manila operate on different terms: they do not have the same resources for protection, equal salary, or the same access to sources. And they face different threats and risks. For example, as one interviewee reflects, when it comes to assignments of a "hostile environment" character, such as shooting and military operations, the surface equality between local and metropolitan journalists is skin deep:

> In that type of coverage, the national and the local would be more or less on equal terms, but they will differ on the equipment. The locals won't have bulletproof vests, they won't have helmets, and they would probably hitch a ride with the military. They cannot afford to hire (a vehicle). And if interviewing the "big-wigs" the locals get bumped off.

Different Journalists, Different Sources

When security situation worsens, it becomes more difficult to access a broader spectrum of sources. Both the Mindanao and Manila journalists say that the local journalists try to get the big picture, while the national and other foreign journalists often depend on specific events and official sources. What they describe is a situation similar to the one Robert Fisk (2005) referred to as "hotel-journalism" during the escalation of danger in the Iraq war (see also Pendry 2011; Harb 2017).

In the group interview, a local correspondent (local staff reporter) recalls covering the siege of Zamboanga City. Since this type of story was attractive to the Manila desk, they sent their Manila reporter working for the same company as the local correspondent, to cover the event. The local correspondent recalls that,

> I just remember spending the whole three weeks there near the shooting area, and then they [the national reporters] had been spending around two weeks inside the hotel – and then they get the statement from military officials, while we could hardly get their numbers … They get the story from the hotel, and I get the story from the battleground. And yet they use their story, not mine.

Interviewees say that the Manila reporters have better access to expert sources and officials because they come from the bigger companies. The Mindanao journalists were asked about who *they* chose to interview, what kind of people were their sources from the battleground—to which one replied:

> From the battleground we talked to the hostages that were freed, we talked to the fleeing residents, we talked to the local villagers who tried to bring other people out so that they

would be safe from the encounter, we talked to the military who were treating the wounded soldiers and we also talked to the suspected attackers.

Then they were asked about the national journalists, and who they perceived *their* sources were—to which one replied:

The spokesperson of the armed forces of the Philippines, [and] the President himself, because he stayed there and he gave a statement for his people. The cabinet secretaries or he [the President] himself calls for the press. We've been inside the military camp, but that is really far away from the incident, from the battle area. … The stories that they get are just the sources that are broadly visible. They very rarely go into the nitty-gritty of the story. Not like journalists on the ground.

Personal Ties

Several interest groups and organisations have made an effort to bridge the gap between local and national media coming to Mindanao to cover stories. The NUJP has provided support for local media and assisted with training and protection for journalists under threat.

… at the same time you actually also have a problem with local journalists reporting about corruption and other issues in their area of operation, because a lot of them are really very involved. The further you are away from Manila, the weaker the rule of law. Of course, [there are] political dynasties and all of that. So if you work in a local newspaper or a local radio station which is dependent on the business that they're being given by the local government unit, then most of the time you would be constrained in reporting critically about the Major or the congressman or the government. So this is what Manila journalists are saying about local journalists, [that] 'you're scared or you are constrained by the economic imperialists of your stations' or that their newspapers prevent them from reporting in-depth on the situation.

The NUJP insists that improvements have to start, not with the individual, but the employers. However, for this to happen, the dialogue must focus on how to make improvements within the existing realities that the journalists face. In smaller communities, where the media consists of one or two radio stations, which usually are owned by political families—sometimes rival families—"they hire people to hit each other. It gets too personal and they send someone to kill you." Instead of targeting the rival politician, they target the journalists who work for them.

The threats are more real in the provinces than in Manila. There have been a few killings in Manila, but it's in the provinces that things can get very personal. If you criticise the Mayor [and] if it gets really personal, he can go after you. That's how a lot of journalists get killed. You have more personal ties. The Mayor would be the friend of your son [for example]. So the ties are usually closer – unlike covering something from Manila.

Thus, local reporters are prone to accusations of bias and self-censorship. However, asking journalists about self-censorship issues is usually not a straightforward task. Such accusations do not take into account the lack of options that frequently lies behind it. Media professionals in many parts of the world argue for the importance of impartiality (Bishara 2006). But the interviewees stress adhering to impartiality is not a simple matter:

That is the challenge. That is the challenge that the individual journo faces every day. That is why [the union] had to [shift] the dialogue – from focus on the individual to the bigger picture.

Because before we used to get bashed about – like, "you in the provinces, you lack ethics, you lack professionalism, you don't know how to keep yourselves apart, how to stay uninvolved". But they don't realise that, every day, you really have no choice. How can you dissociate yourself from these relationships? It is part of your life.

Conclusion

Findings in this study suggest that the threats local journalists are most concerned about can differ significantly from those of greatest concern to the non-local.

One the one hand, local journalists are entangled by their visibility and close (family and/or business) relations inside their community, making them unable to cover certain issues of high importance to society. On the other, when Manila reporters parachute into the provinces, local journalists there face deprival of by-lines and basic pay-per-story income. The local journalists' transition from main to secondary reporter is ambiguous while also beneficial in terms of safety. The non-local journalist, conversely, has much to gain and little to lose from such collaborative arrangements. S/he is often well-equipped and protected by their larger news organisation and gains the advantages of local journalists' contextual knowledge concerning language, network, history and culture. When the work is done and story airs, the local journalists and fixers are left behind to face the perpetrators of the criminal activity exposed in the coverage. It is fair to say that local journalists take the greatest risks, but receive little reward in terms of safety, money and career development compared to their non-local counterparts. However, recognising the advantages of existing collaborative efforts—both at the desk and in the field—and developing best practices to enhance working arrangements between local and non-local journalists may contribute to improving safety for both groups.

Differentiation in threats means safety training should be tailored to journalistic practice and that a universal approach (such as the often ascribed hostile environment training), or trainings provided to NGO workers, in many cases are unsatisfactory to journalists. The high number of targeted attacks as reprisals for published- or prevention of unpublished work, especially facing local journalists, is already an indicator of this.

Extrajudicial killings and acts of impunity for crimes against journalists in the Philippines are grave human rights violations. Safety training cannot alone secure against the threats from a society where crime is rife and murder is considered beyond the law; efforts have to be made on a systemic level.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

References

Aguilar, Filomeno V., Jr., Meynardo P. Mendoza, and Anne Lan K. Candelaria. 2014. "Keeping the State at Bay: The Killing of Journalists in the Philippines, 1998–2012." *Critical Asian Studies* 46 (4): 649–677.

Armoudian, Maria. 2017. *Reporting from the Danger Zone. Frontline Journalists, Their Jobs, and an Increasingly Perilous Future*. New York and London: Routledge.

Bersel and Witchel. 2016. "Journalist Killings Ease from Record Highs as Murders Down, Combat Deaths Up." Committee to Protect Journalists Special Report. Accessed March 15, 2018. https://cpj.org/reports/2016/12/journalists-killed-murdered-syria-most-deadly-war.php.

Bishara, Amahl. 2006. "Local Hands, International News: Palestinian Journalists and the International Media." *Ethnography* 7 (1): 19–46. http://doi.org/10.1177/1466138106064590

Bjørnskov, Christian, and Andreas Freytag. 2010. "An Offer You Can't Refuse: Murdering Journalists as an Enforcement Mechanism of Corrupt Deals". Working Paper Series, Social Science Research Network. Available November 4, 2011. papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1790384.

Campagna, Joel and Sabra, Hani. 2004. "Under Threat". CPJ Report. Accessed April 12, 2019. http://cpj.org/reports/2004/05/iraq-journ-5-04.php

Carlsson, Ulla. 2016. *Freedom of Expression and Media in Transition: Studies and Reflections in the Digital age*. Gothenburg: Nordicom.

Carlsson, Ulla, and Reeta Pöyhtäri, eds. 2017. *The Assault on Journalism: Building Knowledge to Protect Freedom of Expression*. Gothenburg: Nordicom.

CMFR. 2018. "Database on the Killing of Journalists in the Philippines since 1986." Accessed September 13, 2018. http://cmfr-phil.org/mediakillings/.

Committee to Protect Journalists. 2012. *Attacks on the Press in 2011 – A Worldwide Survey*. New York: CPJ.

Committee to Protect Journalists. 2015. "Repressive Nations Threaten Jail Terms, Restrict Internet to Silence Press." The 2015 list of 10 Most Censored Countries is part of CPJ's annual publication, *Attacks on the Press*. Accessed March 14, 2018. https://cpj.org/2015/04/10-most-censored-countries.php.

Cottle, Simon, Richard Sambrook, and Nick Mosdell. 2017. *Reporting Dangerously: Journalist Killings, Intimidation and Security*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.

Dell'Orto, Giovanna. 2017. "Foreign Correspondents and Local Journalists. A Key Newsgathering Partnership, for Safety and for the Global Public Good." In *The Assault on Journalism: Building Knowledge to Protect Freedom of Expression*, edited by Carlsson and Pöyhtäri. Gothenburg: Nordicom.

Fisk, Robert. 2005. "Hotel Journalism Gives American Troops a Free Hand as the Press Shelters Indoors." *Independent*, January 17. Accessed March 24, 2011. http://www.independent.co.uk/opinion/commentators/fisk/hotel-journalism-gives-american-troops-a-free-hand-as-thepress-shelters-indoors-487023.html.

Hamilton, John Maxwell, and Eric Jenner. 2004. "Redefining Foreign Correspondence." *Journalism: Theory, Practice & Criticism* 5 (3): 301–321.

Harb, Zahera. 2017. *Reporting the Middle East: The Practice of News in the Twenty-First Century*. New York: I.B. Tauris.

Harrison, Jackie, and Stefanie Pukallus. 2018. "The Politics of Impunity: A Study of Journalists' Experiential Accounts of Impunity in Bulgaria, Democratic Republic of Congo, India, Mexico and Pakistan." *Journalism* 00 (0): 1–17.

Høiby, Marte. 2016. "Sexual Violence against Journalists in Conflict Zones. Gendered Practices and Cultures in the Newsroom." In *Gendering War and Conflict Reporting*, edited by Berit von der Lippe and Rune Ottosen. Göteborg: Nordicom.

Høiby, Marte, and Rune Ottosen. 2015. "Journalism Under Pressure: A Mapping of Editorial Policies and Practices for Journalists Covering Conflict." In *HIO Report No. 6*, edited by Marte Høiby and Rune Ottosen. Oslo: Oslo and Akershus University College.

Høiby, Marte, and Rune Ottosen. 2016. "Reduced Security for Journalists an Less Reporting from the Frontline." In *Freedom of Expression and Media in Transition. Studies and Reflections in the Digital Age*, edited by U. Carlsson, 183–191. Gothenburg: Nordicom.

Høiby, Marte, and Rune Ottosen. 2017. "Journalism Under Pressure in Conflict Zones: A Study of Journalists and Editors in Seven Countries." *Media, War & Conflict*. doi:10.1177/1750635217728092

Hughes, Sallie, Claudia Mellado, Jesús Arroyave, José Luis Benitez, Arnold de Beer, Miguel Garcés, Katharina Lang, and Mireya Márquez-Ramírez. 2017. "Expanding Influences Research to Insecure Democracies." *Journalism Studies* 18 (5): 645–665. http://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2016.1266278

Kim, Hun Shik 2015. "Forces of Gatekeeping and Journalists" Perceptions of Physical Danger in Post-Saddam Hussein's Iraq." *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* 87 (3/4 Autumn/Winter 2010): 484–500

Krøvel, Roy. 2017. "Learning Safety Education from Journalism Educations in the Global South: A Postscript." *Journalism Education* 6 (2): 65–75.

Merriam Webster. 2018a. Accessed May 28, 2018. https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/anti-press.

Merriam Webster. 2018b. Accessed September 10, 2018. https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/freedom20of20the%20press.

Murrell, Colleen. 2014. *Foreign Correspondents and International Newsgathering: The Role of Fixers*. New York: Routledge. (Routledge Research in Journalism).

Nohrstedt, Stig Arne, and Rune Ottosen. 2014. *New Wars, New Media and New War Journalism*. Gothenburg: Nordicom.

Palmer, Lindsay. 2018a. "Lost in Translation." *Journalism Studies* 19 (9): 1331–1348. doi:10.1080/1461670X.2016.1271284.

Palmer, Lindsay. 2018b. *Becoming the Story: War Correspondents Since 9/11*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press.

Palmer, Jerry, and Victoria Fontan. 2007. "'Our Ears and our Eyes' Journalists and Fixers in Iraq." *Journalism: Theory, Practice & Criticism* 8 (1): 5–24. London: SAGE.

Pendry, Richard. 2011. "The Ethical Space." *The International Journal of Communication Ethics* 8 (3/4).

Ressa, Maria. 2003. *Seeds of Terror: An Eyewitness Account of Al-Qaeda's Newest Center in Southeast Asia*. New York: Free Press.

Rosales, Rey G. 2006. "Shooting the Messenger: Why Radio Broadcasting Is a Deadly Profession in the Philippines." *Journal of Radio Studies* 13 (1): 146–155.

RSF. 2018. "Detailed Methodology". Accessed August 28, 2018. https://rsf.org/en/detailedmethodology

Soomin, Seo. 2016. "Marginal Majority at The Postcolonial News Agency." *Journalism Studies* 17 (1): 39–56, doi:10.1080/1461670X.2014.954891

Tandoc, Edson C. Jr. 2016. "Watching Over the Watchdogs." *Journalism Studies* 18 (1): 102–117.

Tandoc, Edson C., Jr., and Marko M. Skoric. 2004. "The Pseudo-Events Paradox: How Pseudo-Events Flood the Philippine Press and Why Journalists Don"t Recognize it." *Asian Journal of Communication* 20 (1): 33–50.

UNESCO. 2015. "Towards a Research Agenda on the Safety of Journalists" [Draft document dated June 1, 201]. Accessed December 19, 2018. www.unesco.org/new/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/HQ/CI/CI/images/Themes/Freedom_of_expression/safety_of_journalists/Draft_Research_Agenda_Safety_of_Journalists_06_2015.pdf.

UNESCO. 2018. "Trends in the Safety of Journalists" Accessed May 16, 2018. https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/journalists_killed_by_country_2012-2016.jpg.

Waisbord, Silvio. 2002. "Antipress Violence and the Crisis of the State." *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics* 7 (3): 90–109.

World bank.org. 2017. Accessed February 28, 2018. http://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2017/05/04/philippines-economic-update-april-2017.