

Hearing the Voices of Journalists in Surigao City, Mindanao, Philippines

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Abstract: *The Philippine media presented itself as the vanguard of the Filipino people's basic freedoms, especially the freedom of speech and expression. However, as with any responsibility that pertains to that freedom, the news media had its flaws that may result in persecution. This study was aimed at investigating journalists' experiences in Surigao City on media persecutions. A qualitative research method was utilized where Colaizzi's strategy for phenomenological data analysis was used to analyze the gathered data. The results showed 18 themes that emerged from the clusters such as responsible execution of duties and responsibilities, coverage of important issues in the society, persecutions encountered through harassment, intimidation, censorship, reasons why journalists were persecuted, public officials as the common persecutors, reactions upon receiving the persecution, addressing and facing the persecution. Therefore, there is a need to strengthen the safety and security of the journalist not only in Surigao City but in the whole country in general.*

Keywords: media setting, anti- persecution, political bias

1. Introduction

Journalists and other media workers carry with them a distinct responsibility that stabilizes and regains the relationship between the public and the government. Mass media is not just a term designated for print, television, radio, and other electronic technologies, but it is also a special kind of communication that seeks to inform and impart significant ideas necessary for the development of a community (Alexander & Hanson, 1997).

Article III, Section 4 of the 1987 Philippine Constitution declares the right of the press for freedom, stating that "no law shall be passed abridging the freedom of speech, of expression, or of the press, or the right of the people peaceably to assemble and petition the government for a redress of grievances." This section of the constitution outscored the sovereignty of the press from the control of any entity in a government and implements the freedom of the press to fully execute its duties and responsibilities. However, as the year's pass, the media now faces challenges in performing their function not by the government's implementation of the law to control the entity but by the deliberate and grave persecutions on media that threaten their voices to be kept silent and contained.

Over the years, media persecutions have risen in a dramatic escalation and now continue to curtail press freedom. Persecutions on media, such as torture, extrajudicial killings, arbitrary detention, enforced disappearances, censorship, intimidation, and harassment have raised great

concerns and have thrown threats to the freedom of expression, and especially here in country where the media is a watchdog caught amid threatened press freedom. In a report by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (2014), 593 journalists were killed globally from 2006 to 2013, emphasizing cases that took place in 2012 and 2013. With 123 killings, 2012 was the deadliest year for journalists since the cases were first compiled in 2008, followed by 2013, which constitutes 91 deaths- a decrease by a quarter compared to 2012. In the Philippines, it has been recorded that 133 journalists were killed since 1992; 77 of them have been killed as a result of their work with confirmed motives, in line with a record via way of means of the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ). It has been proven of their records that forty-four of the victims (33%) have been threatened earlier than the killing, 121 of the deaths (91%) are not investigated or left to impunity, and eighty-one of them (61%) blanketed tales concerning politics.

The defining principle of media coverage of government in a liberal democratic regime is the media's 'watchdog' function as the Fourth Estate. Under this principle, the media monitor a government's performance to ensure transparent, efficient, honest, and effective governance (Teodoro, 2012). However, with the journalists' social responsibility to report and be a source of fair and accurate information, and with the absence of actions to address the continuing media persecutions and political will to investigate and curb the deaths of journalists, journalists are employed to unceasingly risk their lives to provide independent and reliable information and to continuously face the threats of persecutions all over the world, regardless of how it may jeopardize their well-being and affect themselves and their family's lives.

In a thinner scope, the Mindanao region appears to have the most attacked journalists and seems to be the most dangerous region for journalists in the Philippines. Looking more in-depth, Caraga Region constitutes a fair part in the killings of journalists (4 killings), indicating that media persecution is a reality in our society today. Knowing the presence of violence against journalists and the continuous intimidation to the power of the press as the fourth estate of a government, journalists' safety, and security must be fully guarded and improved to preserve and observe the role and importance of the media to modern democracies. With these, the researcher prompted to hear the experiences of journalists in Surigao City towards media persecutions, the current situation of press freedom in the locale; to learn whether the journalists' press freedom is curtailed, and to know the threatened voices of the press.

2. Literature Review

"He who slew a book, slew reason," John Milton declared (as cited in Nsereka & Orlu-Orlu, 2014).

Nsereka and Orlu-Orlu (2014) suggest that "anyone who prevented a viewpoint from being expressed had marred the holder's intellect and so deprived society of ideas needed for growth." Unfortunately, in this age, they stressed that not only books representing the press or mass media are being slain. They added that their writers and publishers representing journalists are also being slaughtered – all on an altar located in a threatened marketplace of ideas.

Although war and conflict have taken an important tool, it has to be remembered that almost all killings of journalists and media support staff within the course of their duties – no but cardinal over the past decade – are premeditated and deliberate, despicable and targeted assassinations. Very often, journalists and their families have had to measure during a climate of terror after receiving warnings that they are targets.

According to McGonagle (2013), “the role of ‘public watchdog’ is extremely often ascribed to journalists and therefore the media in an exceedingly democratic society.” In other words, they ought to monitor the activities of the govt. cautiously and publicize any wrongdoing on their part. In respect of data about government activities, but also more broadly in respect of matters of public interest generally, the Court has held time and again that: “Not only do the media have the task of imparting such information and ideas: the general public also includes a right to receive them.”

More often than not, the continuous presence of persecutions against the media is threatening the press freedom of journalists. Aidan White (2007), General Secretary of the International Federation for Journalists said that we should be concerned that in the early years of the 21st century, the space for free expression has been eroded, is being eroded and, unless journalists are ready to work together in a new and meaningful partnership, will continue to be eroded.

Media Persecutions

According to a report by the World Organization Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (2014), traditional media are the foremost suffering from fatal attacks and persecutions amongst are torture, enforced disappearance extrajudicial killings, harassment, intimidation, and arbitrary detention. Print journalists constitute the most important number of the 593 deaths, with 244 journalists killed (41%). This is often followed by journalists working in television with 154 killed (26%) and radio with 123 killed (21%). The overwhelming majority of the 593 journalists killed over this era are local (around 94%).

In the past decade, press freedom faced continuous blows from media persecutions as these were not fully addressed by the government. White (2007) added that “impunity exists when there is the absence of political will to properly investigate these deaths.” It flourishes when the legal framework for detection and inquiry is weak or nonexistent and thrives on the incompetence, negligence, and endemic corruption that often characterize the work of police and legal investigatory bodies. Also, it remains the single most challenging threat to press freedom and injustice facing modern journalism.

The best approach to combat murder, according to Simon (2007), executive director of the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), is to press governments to thoroughly investigate and prosecute those who carry out the deaths. "Press freedom groups and journalists throughout the world need to call attention to the deaths and make the case that a journalist's murder is an attack on a society's collective right to be informed," he added.

Government's Response and Human Rights Violations

In an online article by Hurights Osaka, local and international human rights groups sought accountability for those involved in the killings. The Philippine media organization and its international organizations also lobbied to prevent the killing of media personnel (Osaka, 2007). The article states that in 2002 the Philippine government established the Commission on Human Rights (PHRC) as "the president's advisory body in the effective management of all human rights issues in the country."

Among the PHRC's steps to address human rights violations are: intensifying efforts to stop violence against members of the media; strengthening the Task Force Usig Regional Units to make them more pro-active, efficient, and capable, specifically through the creation of the Task Force Usig Regional Office. To make them more proactive, efficient, and capable, including the formation of "tracker teams" to track down suspected killers of media personalities; to inject two million pesos into the Freedom Fund for Filipino Journalists to assist bereaved families in seeking justice for slain relatives through the courts; to issue an order requiring all law enforcement agencies to closely coordinate with media organizations, and to hold seminars on

media security and protection. Nonetheless, despite the government's efforts to address the issue of media persecutions, endangered press freedom remains a major concern, particularly in Mindanao, which looks to be the most attacked and hazardous place for journalists in the Philippines.

Media persecutions, such as torture, extrajudicial killings, arbitrary detention, enforced disappearances, censorship, harassment, and intimidation, violate a journalist's right to life (Article 6); the right not to be subjected to torture or cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment (Article 7); and the right to liberty and security of person (including the right not to be subjected to arbitrary arrest or detention) (Article 9). In the records of the CPJ between 1992- 2022, 81 of the 133 journalists were killed in the Mindanao region alone and the clamor for absolute freedom of the press is still part of the journalist's goals to continue performing their responsibility in society.

Knowing these, the researcher prompted to expose the threatened voices of selected journalists in Surigao City through a one-on-one interview about their experiences towards media persecutions, bounded by Edmund Husserl's Descriptive Phenomenology. Through this principle, the researchers aim to gain a deeper understanding of the meaning of people's everyday experiences (Van Manen, 1990; Polit & Beck, 2008; Shosha, 2012); and direct the understanding of phenomenon which is consciously experienced by people themselves (Polifroni & Welch, 1999; Shosha, 2012).

3. Methodology

Research Design. A qualitative frame employing the Descriptive Phenomenology Approach of Edmund Husserl, exercising a Grand Tour Question was employed. This was appropriate for the study because it involved describing the phenomenology of the lived experiences of the informants on media persecutions, aimed at gaining a deeper understanding of the meaning of people's every day and directing the understanding of phenomenon which is consciously experienced by people themselves (Shosha, 2012).

Informants. The informants of the study were five (5) journalists with a confirmed encounter with media persecutions. The participants were five (5) journalists in Surigao City: three (3) male journalists and two (2) female journalists with at least 5 years of journalistic experience. Of the three male journalists, two were print journalists and the other one was a radio broadcast journalist. The two female journalists were both radio broadcast journalists. The informants were gathered using the snowball sampling technique wherein the researcher asked for recommendations from people and managers of media establishments. The recorded interviews was personally transcribed by the researcher and the informants were coded particularly to Z, Y, X, W, and V.

Data Analysis. The collected data from the lived experiences of the informants were analyzed following Colaizzi's (1978) strategy for phenomenological data analysis.

Ethical Considerations. Participants were not forced to offer themselves for the interview. Privacy of the participants, such as their identities was maintained. Consents were personally or virtually asked from them before the interview.

4. Results and Discussion

Before experiencing media persecution, journalists responsibly performed their duties and responsibilities as society's watchdogs and deliverers of reliable and independent information.

From the gathered data, journalists were discovered to responsibly perform their work through observance of the ethics of noble journalism. Journalists gathered information legally, reported information that is factual and verified, and maintained fairness and balance among the sides of any news story. Recorded stories of media persecution support that journalists abide by the laws and ethics of journalism fleshed out in the Philippine Journalists' Code of Ethics, respecting the equally important principles, namely: accuracy, fairness, moral and intellectual honesty, justice, dignity, and decency, among others. However, regardless of how they responsibly and legibly function in society, some of the journalists still become victims of persecution, evident on the interview transcripts gathered and past cases of persecution.

As watchdogs of society, journalists work to inform society of information and events which are pertinent to its development and safety. To ensure better execution of their job, journalists investigate and report important happenings and news, such as news about political, economic, and social issues.

Media Persecution

Persecutions encountered through Harassment. Journalists experienced various forms of harassment: physical attacks, like being beaten and whacked in the head; psychological abuse, such as being barged in, threatened to be killed and massacred by unidentified armed men in their workplace, being almost cocked or readied with a .45 pistol, being belittled for being young and new in their job, being accused of allegations to mar their image, receiving verbal threats on their life and being mistreated in court hearings by court judges; sexual harassment; and economic sabotage, such as losing advertisements.

In a speech ahead of the third International Day to End Impunity for Crimes Against Journalists, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on freedom of expression David Kaye (2016) said that attacks against journalists and threats to their security take various forms, which include attacks against their physical integrity, interference with the confidentiality of their sources and harassment through surveillance, among others. "Protecting journalists from such attacks is important not just for their capability to try to their jobs, but conjointly for society's access to data and government accountability".

Persecutions encountered through Censorship. Journalists experienced censorship while performing their duties and responsibilities. This includes being banned from press conferences and public affairs and being denied information access. With these persecutions, journalists were hindered from gathering necessary information; their duty to expose essential information about societal matters was nullified and blocked by the persecutor. '*Media censorship: Freedom versus responsibility*' that censorship is used to control and suppress any information that can potentially jeopardize the order of a state. As they observed in history, censorship has been used to monitor public morals, to control public awareness, and to silence opposition with an underlying motive to keep the public ignorant of the information that may potentially threaten authorities (Abbasi & Al-Sharqi, 2015). The belief that journalists experience harassment, intimidation, and censorship because persecutors do not want an issue in a certain government agency to be exposed may be true because, as gathered in the conducted interviews, the unparalleled wants of the persecutor and the journalists result in persecution.

Reasons why journalists were persecuted by the persecutor. Common reasons why persecutors persecute journalists are: the journalists' reports defamed, disrespected, or

disheartened the persecutors, journalists were accused of being an opposition of the persecutors, and the persecutors disliked the journalists' reports on certain issues.

A radio reporter in Lapu-Lapu City, Cebu reported receiving death threats after slamming and criticizing a police officer for giving special treatment to a foreign national, which made the persecutor angry, as stated in a Committee for Media Freedom and Responsibility report.

In a MindaNews report on December 3, 2016, businesswoman Elizabeth Matugas, who ran for mayor in the municipality of Dapa in Siargao Island, sued 'Pinas Balita' editor Editor Mapayo, news editor Paul Boncaros and managing editor Jun Ramirez for libel in a report in the weekly newspaper's February 8-14 issue, which alleged that Matugas has not been paying the owners of several lots in Mt. Patag, Barangay Jubgan, San Francisco town in Surigao del Norte where she reportedly operated an illegal mining activity in 2014. But, Matugas denied the allegations and accused the three of allegedly "conspiring and confederating with each other, knowingly, intentionally, and feloniously, with intent to discredit or cause dishonor or contempt (Catoto, 2016).

Public officials as the common persecutors. Journalists receive persecutions commonly from public officials as they are the commonly involved persons in issues in society. According to the informants' claims, government officials and heads of agencies were among the persecutors who intimidated, harassed, or censored them from accessing information, stressing that these persecutors persecute them because they are maintaining an image or reputation as public figures. The officials responsible for policy formulation and the journalists who cover their actions have such fundamentally different jobs that in between them, conflicts frequently erupt. Officials especially those whose power stems from perceived competence and popularity—understandably want to look good as they make and implement policies.

Accordingly, news coverage can accelerate the tempo by heightening public interest. Depending on which aspects of the story the press emphasizes, coverage can also influence public opinion in ways that increase political pressure on the leader to act in a specific fashion, such as more aggressively or more compassionately. The safety and security of journalists are closely connected to the condition of their press freedom. As citizens of a country, journalists depend on the government's enforcement of its laws to assure the zone where they function is safe and danger-free. However, if the officials of the government are the ones persecuting the journalists, it is impossible to breed a safe and transparent community for journalists since most of the persecutions, based on the gathered data and recorded news stories, are perpetrated by government officials who, at best, should uphold their rights and their freedom.

Reactions upon receiving the persecution. Upon receiving the persecutions against them, journalists had mixed emotions before responding to it. They felt scared, traumatized, crazy, insecure, and worried for their family. However, journalists remain brave as they know what they reported was truthful information. Instead of being discouraged or scared, they were encouraged to continue doing their job, improve their skills, and become a better servant of truth in society.

How journalists respond to persecutions

Keeping the journalist's distance from persecutions after receiving it. From the extracted interview transcripts, journalists were found to keep their distance from persecutions after receiving them. To keep safe, journalists escaped the persecution by leaving their job and leaving the area where they were persecuted. Hiding in distant places and avoiding persecution

was also done by journalists. They avoided connection, contact, and covering events related to the persecutor, and chose to find other sources of information rather than the persecutors. Journalists also ignored the persecution and sometimes chose to not believe in them.

On December 3, 2016, three (3) editors of a weekly newspaper in Surigao City have gone into hiding after learning a warrant of arrest had been issued against them for libel. Though they are hiding, Editor Mapayo, editor and publisher of a weekly publication in Surigao del Norte named Pinas Balita, said they will exhaust all legal remedies to have the libel case against them dismissed, claiming the report they published was not libelous (Catoto, 2016).

Addressing and facing persecution. Journalists immediately addressed the persecutions they received. Based on the interview transcripts, the informants faced the action through confrontation with the persecutor and explaining to them how their report became how it was. They explained to the persecutor that they were just doing their job, which is to report on the news with fairness and balance, and that due respect was given to each side of a story. Some journalists also responded to the persecution by replying to threats in messages and using sarcasm and implicit remarks on persecutors. They also reported on the incident in their news stories to inform the public about the happening and filed blotters against the persecutor. Journalists address and face persecutions immediately with the aims of solving the conflict and pacifying their relationship with a persecutor, assuring the persecutors that their reports observed fairness and accuracy and that hurting them was not an intentional act.

Strengthening of journalists' safety and security. Strengthening of their safety and security was a concern addressed by journalists when they received the persecution. The informants said they strengthened their safety and security in their houses through the installment of CCTV cameras, purchase of guard dogs, locking their doors when alone in their houses, and setting computers at their house to do their job at home. The informants also strengthened their safety and security when going out in public places asking for military assistance, police protection, having compare my car to fetch them when going to their job, not riding public vehicles, and not going out in public alone. Their efforts to strengthen their safety and security stem from the possibility of being persecuted again and from fear of suffering the consequences of being threatened.

Diverting the journalist's attention away from the persecution. Journalists diverted their attention away from the persecution to lessen its impact on their work. Journalists perform meditation and immerse themselves in other productive activities to keep their attention away from the persecution. Based on the gathered interview transcripts, journalists divert their attention away from the persecutions to avoid being affected or pressured by them and to continue their social endeavors.

Earning support from other media practitioners. Upon receiving the persecutions against them, journalists earned support from other media practitioners. Through the establishment of media organizations, other media practitioners expressed their condemnation against the persecution and pledged support to the persecuted journalists after their noble execution of duties and responsibilities. To support their fellow journalists, media organizations and groups express condemnation and execute protests and rallies to publicize their sentiments and objectives for assembling such.

Melinda Quintos, head of the Center for Media Freedom and Responsibility, said there were "disturbing" developments that threatened press freedom. She cited the authorities' ban on coverage of the trial of the accused in the murder of the 32 journalists, adding that the ban on media coverage of the trial is a conscienceless assault on press freedom the very right crucial to the democratic state of this country.

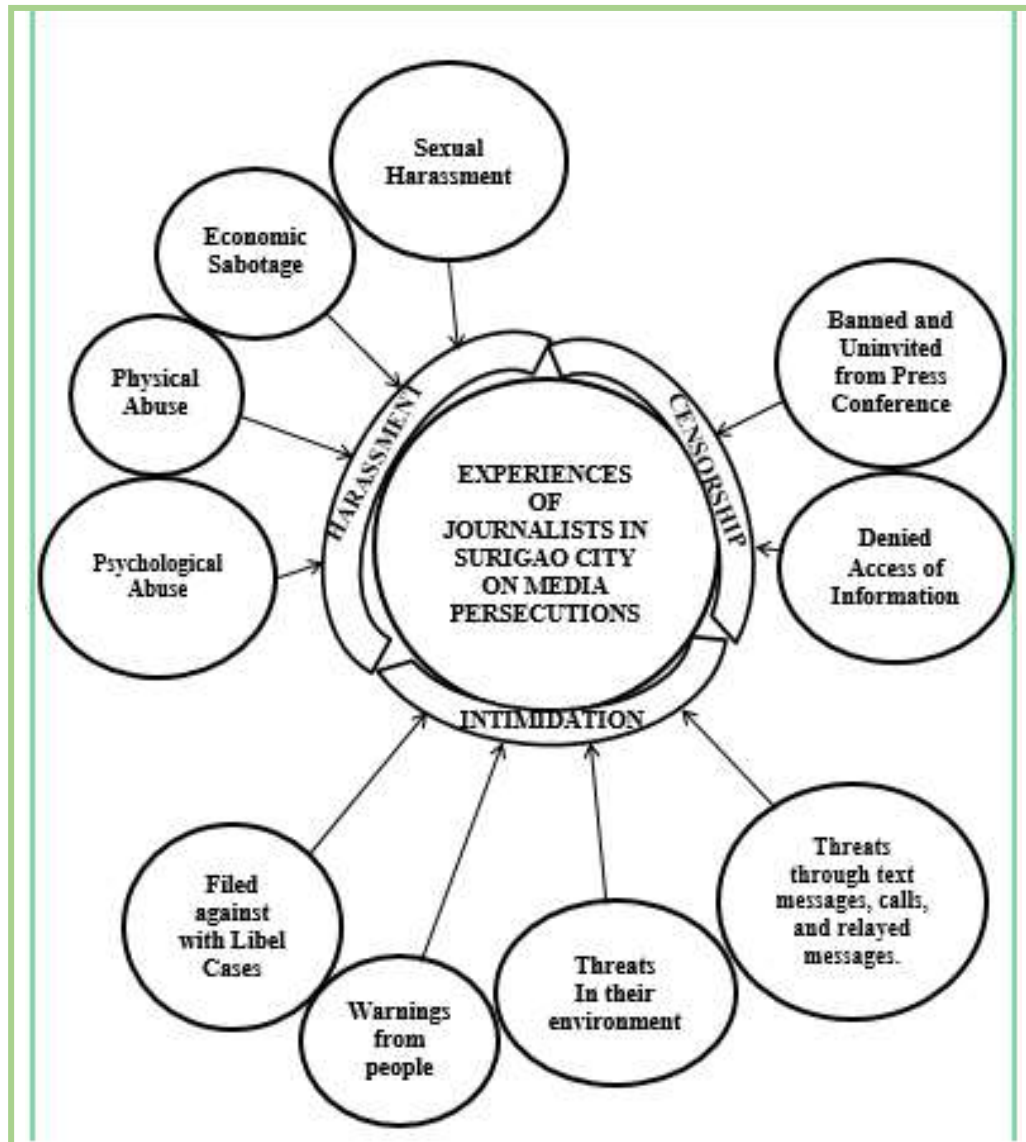


Figure 1: Thematic map of the experiences of journalists on media persecution

Impact of Persecution on Journalists

Emotional Impact of Persecutions. The persecutions the journalists experienced have caused a positive emotional impact on them. These made them more complacent about their skills and capabilities to continue their work as journalists. Also, journalists said that the persecutions molded them into more cautious journalists. Though they admitted being scared and they have resorted to different measures of response, such as hiding from persecutions and seeking help from the authorities, journalists acknowledge how the persecutions helped them become braver in exposing the truth and in performing their duties as deliverers of information.

Economic Impact of the Persecution. Based on the interview transcripts, the persecutions, particularly the economic sabotage where advertisements were withdrawn, have caused economic impacts on journalists. Advertisement is known to be the lifeblood of the broadcasting industry. It is from where journalists get their financial resources for the supplication of the economic needs of a certain media establishment. The revenue earned by journalists from advertisements was affected because persecutors withdrew their advertisements in the companies of journalists. The informants claimed the persecutors did this to intimidate them.

The loss of advertisement means loss of revenues and lesser financial powers since the advertisement is the lifeblood of any media establishment. Media establishments, which present their programming on print or radio, rely heavily on advertising revenue to fund their operations (“Role of Advertising in a Broadcast Media”, n.d.). With lesser financial powers, operations in media establishments may be compromised and may affect the quality of service the establishment provides the society.

Impact on relationship with people and job. Journalists’ relationship with people and their job is affected when they experience persecution. According to the interview transcripts, the persecutions have caused loss of friends, difficulties in approaching people, the sacrifice of jobs and time, and limited engagements in social events. However, even with the persecutions, journalists continue to do their job with the same passion and desire as to how they started their careers.

The loss of social connection is collateral damage to persecutions against journalists. With the persecutions experienced, journalists become cautious with their environment and the people they socialize with, keeping them aloof from ordinary social interactions as being complacent in mingling with strangers becomes unpredictable. The time and job of journalists may also be compromised as rescheduling of routines and plans seem to be necessary to keep themselves safe. According to the informants, they skip, reconsider or postpone meetings with people because persecutors may be connected with the person they will have a meeting with.

Persecutions as part of journalists’ jobs. With the presence of persecution in the media industry, journalists now consider media persecutions as a part of the occupational risk of being a media practitioner. The informants said the persecutions are nothing new to their profession, saying that persecutions are normal incidents in their job and that journalists should get used to receiving persecutions. They also recognize the existence of persecutions, believing they are just tests on their job as the deliverers of truth.

The informants also mentioned that hurting people is unavoidable since there are people who maintain an image or reputation as public figures. As reporters of news stories about issues in society, journalists can’t avoid the chances of being disliked because it is unavoidable that one side of the story will be less favored, even when fairness and balance were observed by journalists in their reports. Greg Dobbs, a former foreign correspondent for ABC News admitted in a self-authored article his encounter with persecutions. He experienced being beaten, shot at, chased by a gang with machetes, having weapons pressed to his forehead, having helicopter gunships searching for him, having mortar shells falling around himself, and having colleagues being killed right next to him. However, according to him, being scared of the possibility of persecution is already normal in the profession, saying persecutions are already part of the job description of a journalist.

The Present Condition of Press Freedom

After experiencing persecution in different forms, journalists were able to describe the present condition of our press freedom, how it is being used by society and how it is affected by the presence of media persecutions.

Journalists in Surigao City believe that information is accessible and media freedom is being exercised in their place. They claimed that they have not experienced restriction in gathering information, and with the advent of new media (social media) now, no one censors or regulates one's news story or post. However, journalists believe that people have abused the intensity of our freedom to express themselves today. According to the informants, some journalists now are ill-mannered, unprofessional, and irresponsible when broadcasting on air. They said that these irresponsible journalists act foully and use words that are inappropriate and are disallowed by media ethics councils. Over a hundred schools in the country offer journalism, broadcast communication, and communication arts, but many practitioners are either untrained or inadequately, or badly trained. He added that the constitutional protection of press freedom and free expression has been ignored and has often been imperiled by those in power (Teodoro, 2012).

5. Conclusion

As journalist and media advocacy groups have learned from bitter experiences, any threat of harm against journalists must be taken seriously. Such persecutions have in many instances been the prelude to journalists being killed and constitute a grave peril to the constitutionally protected right of the press to perform their duties and responsibilities of providing news and commentary.

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