

## **2025 Media Electoral Agenda**

As the 2025 midterm elections draw near, we, journalists, media workers, and advocates of free speech, free press, and free expression, reiterate the role of an independent media in a democracy and the need for a media electoral agenda.

While the 1987 Constitution guarantees freedom of the press, freedom of speech, and expression, these rights have been routinely violated by those who wish to distort the truth and to repress the people, especially those who speak truth to power.

The Philippines continues to be one of the most dangerous countries for journalists, with 200 media workers killed since 1986 (NUJP). In 2024, the Philippines was ranked 9th on the Global Impunity Index (CPJ) and 137th in the World Press Freedom Index (RSF).

The initial observations and recommendations by UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression and Opinion Irene Khan during her visit in 2024 reflected the attacks on our ranks as well as some of our urgent demands.

The midterm elections provide an opportunity to highlight our issues and propose possible solutions. These will help us do our work more effectively and serve the public better.

### **1) Enact the Freedom of Information Act.**

An executive order is not enough to guarantee access to information, and colleagues and FOI advocates have reported that even the limited scope of the policy falls short in its implementation.

The eFOI portal is not responsive to many requests.

Government agencies take too long to respond, and if they do, they provide incomplete information.

A law on FOI will help journalists and citizens access government information, especially on matters in the public interest.

### **2) Decriminalize libel.**

Libel laws in the Philippines contravene the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), of which the Philippines is a state party. Criminal libel, which includes imprisonment, is excessive and violates the right to free expression.

A 2023 study by the National Union of Journalists of the Philippines showed that libel is used as a weapon to harass and intimidate journalists. At least 50 journalists have been slapped with libel and cyber libel from June 2016 until March 2023, and 61.5% of these were filed by local

politicians, 12.8% were filed by government offices; 15.4% by private individuals; 77.7% by police officers; and, 2.6% by a religious group.

Decriminalization of libel is long overdue. The harsh penalties on cyber libel as stated in the Cybercrime Prevention Act must be struck down.

### **3) Push for a Media Workers Welfare Law.**

While no journalist goes into this profession with illusions of wealth and comfort, the public service nature of media work should not mean free or poorly-compensated labor and taking unnecessary risks, especially in for-profit media outfits.

We support the proposals for providing minimum wage and hazard pay for regular media workers as well as mandatory written contracts and insurance for dangerous assignments for all, including freelancers

We call as well for support for workplace organizing at media outfits to actively participate in newsroom decisions, especially on wages, benefits, and tenure.

### **4) Amend the Dangerous Drugs Act to remove media workers as possible witnesses.**

The [Republic Act No. 10640](#), which amended the Dangerous Drugs Act, has made it optional for the media to sign the inventory of seized items in anti-drug operations. Still, in many provinces, journalists and media workers are asked to join or sign the inventory of seized items often in exchange for stories.

Further amendments to the law should state that the role of journalists be limited to coverage. Media workers serving as witnesses in these operations endanger our safety and security.

### **5) No to curtailment of rights in the guise of regulating “fake news.”**

While proposals to regulate the spread of “fake news” seems good, this could lead to outright state censorship if the government decides to regulate media content.

The “anti-fake news provision” in the Bayanihan to Heal as One Act caused a chilling effect during the pandemic, and was in fact used by politicians against journalists and ordinary citizens critical of the government’s pandemic response.

To combat disinformation, it is better to prohibit the use of public funds to hire and maintain disinformation networks.

Channel public funds for media and information literacy.

### **6) Clear policy against red-tagging, abolish the NTF-ELCAC.**

No less than the Supreme Court [declared](#) that red-tagging, or the practice of labeling an individual or organization, as “communist-terrorists,” “communist propagandists,” “communist sympathizers,” threatens one’s right to life, liberty and security.

A 2024 NUJP study revealed that red-tagging undermines press freedom as it affects both the professional and personal lives of those targeted. A separate [study](#) by the Amnesty International showed that red-tagging not only inflicted psychological toll on young human rights defenders but also resulted in a collective chilling effect on activist groups.

Under the administration of Ferdinand Marcos Jr., red-tagging has persisted with 26 incidents documented by the NUJP.

Marcos Jr. should issue an executive order denouncing the practice of red-tagging, and abolish the National Task Force to End the Local Communist Armed Conflict (NTF-ELCAC) and similar organizations which are notorious in red-tagging journalists and human rights defenders.

#### **7) Repeal Anti-Terrorism Act and other repressive laws.**

The Anti-Terror Act of 2020 as well as the Terrorism Financing Prevention and Suppression Act of 2012 are increasingly being used against human rights defenders and journalists.

UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights in the context of climate change Ian Fry called for the repeal of the ATA while Special Rapporteur on freedom of expression and opinion Irene Khan is pushing for amendments to the law. Khan expressed concern over the ATA, particularly on warrantless arrest, and expanded surveillance, which, she said, “is having a chilling effect on the legitimate activities of journalists, human rights defenders, civil society activists, and the enjoyment of the right to freedom of expression more broadly.”

Community journalist Frenchie Mae Cumpio has been wrongfully charged with terrorism financing, and another journalist Deo Montesclaros has been accused of the same crime.

Media organizations were among those who questioned the constitutionality of the ATA. We have witnessed in the past four years how this law has indeed been used to undermine freedom of speech and expression..

Aside from the ATA, there are laws that have been weaponized to harass and intimidate the press. The Campus Journalism Act of 1991 which is supposed to promote and uphold campus press freedom has been used to repress school publications, as well as harass and intimidate student journalists.

The same case applies to pending bills through the years like the proposed “Right of Reply Law” which compromises editorial independence and becomes an editorial nightmare for those who

demand equal space and equal airtime even for the most inconsequential and irrelevant replies from aggrieved parties (both real and imagined).

#### **8) Enact the Human Rights Defenders Bill.**

We are supporting the enactment of a law protecting human rights defenders for the larger enjoyment, fulfillment, and promotion of human rights.

The consolidated bills' provisions on the protection of the right to seek, receive, and disseminate information, on the right to communicate with non-governmental, governmental, and intergovernmental organizations, and on the right to privacy are particularly relevant to our work as journalists.

Freedom from intimidation or reprisal and the right against defamation, stigmatization and vilification with a clause for liability of concerned government personnel will protect our job as truth-tellers.

Establishing a sanctuary and the right to effective remedy and full reparation will provide concrete support needed by human rights defenders, including journalists, under attack.

#### **9) Address gender-based attacks against journalists.**

Physical and online forms of intimidation, threats and abuse against women journalists were revealed in 2023-2024 research by the International Association of Women in Radio and Television (IAWRT) Philippines and a 2024 survey conducted by the Ateneo Center for Journalism (ACFJ) and the ADMU Department of Communication showed that more women journalists experience physical than online intimidation, harassment and abuse. Only 10 % said they didn't experience situations of physical abuse, as against 25 % who said they didn't experience it online.

The deluge of online attacks on women journalists covering the arrest of former President Rodrigo Duterte is just the most recent example of how women journalists are more vulnerable than their male counterparts.

We also support measures such as the SOGIE Equality Bill that provide protections for journalists in the LGBTQ+ community. For instance, Roy Barbosa of Manila Today experienced physical and online harassment premised on his non-binary identity after covering a protest in 2024.

Holding perpetrators of gender-based attacks will ensure that journalists can freely report without prejudice to their gender.

#### **10) End the culture of impunity, and end the normalization of repression and censorship.**

- Push for accountability of perpetrators of media killings

Cases of journalist killings remain unresolved. Authorities must enforce warrants of arrest against suspects of media killings. Until now, the alleged mastermind in the killing of Percy Mabasa, for example, remains at large.

- Support the call to free Frenchie Mae Cumpio, and the dismissal of fabricated charges against journalists

Tacloban City-based journalist Frenchie Mae Cumpio has been languishing in jail for five years now over trumped up cases of illegal possession of firearms and explosives and terrorism financing. The charges are based on testimonies of so-called “rebel returnees,” and evidence planted by the raiding team on February 7, 2020.

- Call for the nullification of the National Telecommunications Commission memo blocking 27 websites

The NTC memorandum for the blocking of 27 websites should be junked as it violates the freedom of speech and expression. The NTC memo is arbitrary and baseless, with former National Security Adviser Hermogenes Esperon Jr. failing to present any evidence to back his accusation that the 27 websites are linked to terrorists.

We call on all candidates, political parties and party-list groups to adopt our media electoral agenda.

## **ORGANIZATIONS (alphabetical order)**

Active Vista

Altermidya - People’s Alternative Media Network

Asian Center for Journalism at Ateneo

Asian Institute of Journalism and Communication

Baretang Bikolnon

Bulatlat

Center for Community Journalism and Development

Center for Media Freedom and Responsibility (CMFR)

College Editors Guild of the Philippines

College Editors Guild of the Philippines - Laguna

College Editors Guild of the Philippines - Panay Chapter

College Editors Guild of the Philippines - Southern Tagalog

Concerned Artists of the Philippines

DAKILA

Dampig Katarungan

DavaoToday

Desaparecidos

Filipino Freelance Journalists' Guild

Film Weekly

FYT

International Association of Women in Radio and Television - Philippines

Kaling kag Tugda

Karapatan

Kodao Productions

National Union of Journalists of the Philippines

National Union of Journalists of the Philippines - Laguna

National Union of Peoples' Lawyers

Paghimutad Negros

Panay Today

PanaySayon

Philippine Alliance of Human Rights Advocates

Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism

Photojournalists Center of the Philippines

Philippine Press Institute

PinoyMedia Center

Pinoy Weekly

University of the Philippines College of Media and Communication

Vera Files

## **INDIVIDUALS**

Inday Espina-Varona

Jes Aznar

John Nery, columnist, Rappler

Deo Montesclaros

Jah Rosales

Jhoanna Ballaran

Aireen Perol-Jaymalin

Bobby Espinosa Lagsa

Marchel Espina

Alma Anonas Carpio

Karl Patrick Suyat