

# **The Politics of Red-Tagging in Philippine Media: Framing the “Red October” Ouster Plot Controversy**

**GABRIELLE CARISSA MARIE A. PARAS**

*University of the Philippines Diliman & Ateneo de Manila University*

## **ABSTRACT**

The “Red October” ouster plot was the name of an alleged scheme to oust former President Rodrigo Duterte that allegedly involved leftist organizations, opposition groups, and university students. However, the existence of this plot was denied by those allegedly involved, claiming the Red October ouster plot was simply a conspiracy and a massive red-tagging campaign. Red-tagging is the practice of blacklisting individuals who are involved in activism or dissent by linking them to communist-terrorist rebellion. This paper focuses on the reporting of the Red October controversy by two media outlets: the government-sponsored press outlet *Philippine News Agency* (PNA) and the privately owned news company *Philippine Daily Inquirer* through their online news website, *Inquirer.net*. Using McCombs and Shaw’s second-level of agenda setting, which looks into the ways various attributes of an issue are presented by the media, the framing of the Red October controversy by these two media outlets was determined through qualitative thematic analysis. In the frames identified, *PNA* highlighted the grave danger that would befall the nation if this communist-terrorist plot was not defeated. On the other hand, *Inquirer.net* framed the ouster plot by questioning its legitimacy and criticizing the undue focus placed on it by the government. This paper contributes to a discussion of the misalignment in press framing given the context of the Philippines’ embattled media landscape. It also takes a critical look at the Philippine government’s agenda framing of its critics and continuous efforts to tamp down expressions of dissent.

**Keywords:** framing, red-tagging, Philippine Daily Inquirer, Philippine News Agency, Red October

## INTRODUCTION

The authoritarian tendencies of Philippine politicians have risen in recent times. The Duterte administration (2016–2022) and the current Marcos Jr. administration that took office in 2022 have been vocal and strategic in cracking down on dissent by identifying enemies of the state through red-tagging and/or terrorist-tagging. Red-tagging is the labeling or accusation of someone as a communist (Beltran 2021). The implications are complex and far-reaching, especially in the present context of the Philippines. Red-tagging is not a mere label but a potential “death sentence” (Deinla 2021). Communism has been greatly associated with terrorism. The Philippine government during the time of the Duterte administration labeled members of the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) and the New People’s Army (NPA) as terrorists and went on an “anti-communist witch-hunt” to eliminate the perceived security threat rather than following through with earlier promises of peacefully ending conflicts with leftists (Mogato 2018). Alarming, the Duterte administration and the current administration extended the “communist-terrorist” label to persons who have expressed dissent towards the current government, even if they have no proven ties to the CPP or NPA (Jacob 2021). What these red-tagged individuals or groups have in common is that they have criticized and demanded accountability from the government, but are lumped together to discredit their criticisms (Salamanca 2020). There have been several instances of this occurring as released by government-affiliated media and covered by non-government Philippine media outlets.

In 2018, Duterte gave vague details of an ouster plot allegedly consisting of members of the Liberal Party and communist groups forming an aggressive opposition to his administration. Labeled the “Red October” ouster plot, the Philippine National Police (PNP) and the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) supported this claim, stating that violent rallies would be staged throughout Metro Manila to “encourage the public to lose support for the present government” (Talabong 2018). A representative from the AFP then released a list of 18 schools where communist rebels were said to be recruiting students and inciting them to rebel against the government (Cayabyab and Macapagal 2018). This effectively red-tagged students of the said schools who merely protested against the government, leading others to frame the Red October ouster plot as made up to justify a massive crackdown on dissenters (Palatino 2018).

These labels are made more dangerous when taken into context. The name Red October mirrors a label given to a prominent political event in Russian history. The “October Revolution” was a violent uprising by leftist revolutionaries in 1917 that resulted in riots, a crime wave, and finally state collapse (Britannica 2023). There was also another alleged ouster plot unveiled by the Duterte administration in 2019 known as the “Oust Duterte Matrix,” consisting of journalists, human rights groups, lawyers, and popular media personalities (Rappler 2019). Those listed in the matrix were labeled “enemies of the state” or groups providing information to enemies of the state (Parrocha 2019). Aside from calling

the “Matrix” false and baseless, several groups pointed out that it was dangerous as it served as a public “hit list” for those who chose to go against the administration (Patag 2019).

Given the Duterte administration’s penchant for publicly naming and shaming individuals and groups as alleged government destabilizers, coupled with reported extra-judicial killings of activists, the wide net cast for administration critics as communist-terrorists was alarming. The Executive Director of the Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development called out the Duterte administration for their red-tagging or “terrorist-tagging” rhetoric leading to the harassment and death of innocent activists and critics (CIVICUS 2021). In March 2021, nine community-based activists were killed by members of the PNP and the military in what is now called “Bloody Sunday” (Robles 2021). The United Nations (UN) Human Rights Office also spoke against these killings, noting that what should have been a search operation led to a massacre of human rights activists who were red-tagged and labeled as enemies of the state because of alleged connections to the CPP and NPA (UN News 2021). The international organization Human Rights Watch also reported on two human rights defenders who were killed due to red-tagging and their alleged link to the communist insurgency (Robertson 2020). Being a communist is not a crime in the Philippines – unless a criminal act has been committed by them; however, former President Duterte went so far as to order military groups, in a public address, to “shoot (them) dead,” “finish off,” and “make sure you really kill” any communist rebel “walking around” (Galvez 2021; Regencia 2021). Given that prominent government leaders continue to connect most administration critics and left-leaning groups or individuals to an ouster plot or a communist-terrorist rebellion (Gavilan 2020; Sarao 2023; Sevillano 2023), there is a need to be vigilant of government’s agenda when it comes to this issue.

The implications of these public accusations and violent incidents are far-reaching, as they reflect a culture of authoritarianism and impunity carried out to this day as the current Marcos Jr. administration maintains close ties with the Duterte administration. The media and their coverage of these actions also play an essential role, as they have the power to spread misinformation and inflame social divisions (Beauchamp 2019). The media has been shown to affect political outcomes and behaviors (Zhuravskaya, Petrova, & Enikolopov 2020). Media framing can therefore either further the narrative of a red-tagging campaign or discredit it, depending on the frames chosen for reporting. This paper analyzed which of these roles various media outlets take through the lens of agenda setting theory, specifically at the second level of agenda setting, where the framing of attributes is examined.

### **AGENDA SETTING THEORY AND FRAMING**

The Agenda Setting Theory of Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw proposes that the media shapes public agenda over time (Griffin and Sparks 2019). Though media does not reflect reality or tell people

what to think, media is successful in telling its readers what to think *about* and therefore influences the salience of attitudes towards certain issues and objects (McCombs & Shaw 1972). The basic agenda setting theory has evolved to also include six other distinct facets, including the second level of agenda setting: attribute agenda setting or framing (McCombs, Shaw, & Weaver 2007).

Agenda setting and framing converge in our pseudo-realities or our mental images of events. Framing is done through selection, emphasis, exclusion, and elaboration (McCombs & Ghanem 2001). Reese (2001) provides a succinct working definition of frames that sums up what framing is and its functions in communication and society: "Frames are organizing principles that are socially shared and persistent over time, that work symbolically to meaningfully structure the social world" (67). Just as various issues hold varying degrees of salience in basic agenda setting, various attributes or aspects of issues as reported by the media hold varying degrees of salience as well. This is done in a way that promotes a particular problem definition, interpretation, or moral evaluation (Entman 1993). Framing helps us further understand the media's role in political life (Reese 2001) because framing can affect how we think about issues and, consequently, how the media exerts a certain amount of control over both public opinion and behavior.

While using these modes of presentation does not necessarily mean that the press tries to deceive audiences (Scheufele & Tewksbury 2007), framing has been used to promote a particular understanding or perception of the issue or object being described (McCombs & Ghanem 2001). The way media describes an issue has been found to affect public perception. Moreover, researchers have also investigated different media framings and their effects.

### **Implications of Government Media Versus Non-Government Media Framing**

This paper investigated two kinds of media using the lens of the second-level of agenda setting to take a closer look at their differences, similarities, and possible effects on public perception, focusing on the difference between government media and non-government media framing. Government media refers to media input from the government that reflects government agenda (Rodel & Muniz 2018) or content posted by the "mouthpiece" of the state (Zhao & Wang 2022). Pan, Shao, and Xu (2021), in their research on government-controlled media specific to an authoritarian state, proposed that framing from media coming from the government could affect attitudes towards shifts in government policy. The research found that the framing from government-controlled media moves respondents to adapt the policy position taken by the altered media objects regardless of their individual predisposition. On the other hand, non-government media refers to news media that is free from associations with the government or is not representative of the current administration.

Rodelo and Muniz (2018) showed the varying ways these two types of media present various attributes of issues. They found that government press maintains certain frames to push policies and public opinion to match their own. Government media can also be reflected in non-government news media coverage because government press is often a primary source for news, therefore influencing news framing of other media outlets on relevant issues. Similarly, research by Glazier and Boydston (2012) on the press during the 9/11 terrorist attacks found that non-government media uncritically reflected the government administration's frames during the time after 9/11 and surrounding the Iraq war. Their research labels this as an alleged "press failure" but also further qualifies it as an expected or even necessary measure done early on in a crisis. They concluded that while government framing focuses solely on favorable frames, media organizations eventually follow a wider variety of frames once the social or institutional incentive for a positive alignment with frames or the crisis passes.

### **Media Framing in the Philippines**

A comparative exploration or examination of the two kinds of media - government news media and non-government news media in the local context of the Philippines - has yet to be undertaken. Previous works on framing have focused on issues such as population (David et al. 2014), the war on drugs (Geçer & Mahinay 2017), the conflict over the West Philippine Sea (Calutan 2015), the Moro issue (Hagod 2019), as well as prominent political figures like Rodrigo Duterte (Ragragio 2020) and Sara Duterte (Nieva, Gallema, & Tatcho 2022).

In 2017, Geçer and Mahinay described Philippine media outlets as "free" because most are not connected to the state or political powers. Media framing by free media can also alter the attitudes of citizens on certain issues, contribute to the establishment of political values, and lead the public to either accept or reject certain government actions. In their examination of the coverage of Duterte's war on drugs in three Philippine newspapers, they identified that the media mostly covered security and defense, economic consequences, and law enforcement activities and crimes while also reflecting their stance on the threat of the war on drugs (either through the alleged perpetrators of illegal drug use or the government). Similarly, threats, crime, and conflict were integral to the Philippine Daily Inquirer's framing of the West Philippine Sea issue, as it mainly focused on the events of conflict and the invisible effects of the dispute (Calutan 2015).

These framings can be seen as strategic (David et al. 2014) because they reflect a certain view of the issue. For example, by using the same terminology as its source of news, the non-government media outlet purposefully reflects the agenda of that source. In a study on the framing of the Philippine population issue, population is often associated with the terminology "responsible parenthood" rather than contraception because of the relatively conservative approach of the state (David et al. 2014).

Similarly, Ragragio (2020) discusses the news media possibly forwarding a populist-authoritarian agenda by simply reflecting the political positions of its sources without critical or opposing frames in articles about former President Duterte.

While the research on framing has covered a wide range of topics and platforms, government media has not been a focus for previous studies that have explored both online, newspaper, and social media releases. There is also still a gap in the research on red-tagging and specific red-tagging campaigns through the lens of framing, despite its prominence and grave effects.

### **GOVERNMENT RHETORIC ON RED-TAGGING IN THE PHILIPPINES**

The gravity of red-tagging in the Philippines cannot be emphasized enough, as “left-leaning and dissenting individuals and groups—who take no active part in hostilities—become targets of attacks and acts of violence” (Tugade 2023, 560). Of particular significance is how the government has been slowly increasing the association of these aforementioned groups with terrorism and threats to the state. After the breakdown of talks with insurgency groups in 2017, the Duterte administration ramped up their terror-tagging and accused left-wing groups of trying to overthrow the government (Haynes 2021). Tugade (2023) highlighted the government’s recent change in terminology to refer to the CPP-NPA as “communist terrorist groups” in light of the policies they instituted. When information about the Red October ouster plot was released, there was “all-out antagonism” against the radical left, regardless if they were unarmed or not. The rhetoric of the government shifted to create a vilified enemy image out of the radical left terrorists (Imbong 2023), which led to a policy update introducing the National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict (NTF-ELCAC). The NTF-ELCAC continues to spread this rhetoric against dissenters and communists through its propaganda network of several Facebook pages that enables and justifies violence through its framing of online narratives (Hapal & Serafica 2021) that blur the line between activism and terrorism. In spite of the urgency, the academic attention given to red-tagging and terror-tagging is scarce (Imbong 2023).

In sum, second-level agenda setting posits that the way the media frames or characterizes certain attributes of issues can affect the way the public understands or perceives them. Therefore, media reporting can greatly affect public opinion and evaluations of political issues and public policy.

Framing can also differ depending on the source of coverage. While the media agenda can reflect the public agenda, the second-level of agenda setting tells us more about certain agendas that differing institutions or sources want to forward. This paper analyzes media coverage of the Duterte administration’s proliferate red-tagging to explore (1) what the government agenda was, (2) how the

media agenda either differed or aligned with government agenda, and (3) how this may have affected the public agenda or the public's perception of red-tagging and the government's policies.

### **METHODOLOGY**

This paper focuses on online government and non-government media because of their prominence as sources of information in the country, with some 48% of Filipino adults obtaining their political news from the internet (Macaraeg 2021). To analyze government online media framing of the Red October ouster plot, articles from the news website Philippine News Agency (PNA) were selected. PNA is the official news agency of the Philippine government, and during the Duterte administration, was controlled by the Presidential Communications Operations Office – now known as the Presidential Communications Office. Inquirer.net, owned by the Philippine Daily Inquirer, was chosen to represent non-government online media because it was cited as the most popular news site in the Philippines by several sources, besting other online news sites overall (Feedspot 2021; SimilarWeb 2021). The Inquirer has also been used in previous studies about framing in the Philippines because of its identity as a news media company and its wide readership of around 50 million pageviews (Ragragio 2020; Calutan 2015). The objects of analysis were limited to one online site each, so that all artifacts come from similar platforms and are similar types of texts for the press outlets being represented. The researcher also found that these sources are sufficient to exploring government agenda, alignment differences, and effects on the free press or non-government media.

Only online news articles related to the Red October ouster plot and published in 2018, when the controversy surrounding the alleged ouster plot gained traction, were considered. For both PNA and Inquirer.net, articles containing the keywords "Red October" were chosen through the search bar option embedded in each website, a Google site search to find content containing the keywords, and a search for the search engine tags of articles. The articles from Inquirer.net were then further culled to exclude articles released by Bulatlat (Inquirer's entertainment tabloid) and Radyo Inquirer (Inquirer's radio station) to limit the articles analyzed to those published on the news site. A total of 73 articles were analyzed – 39 from Inquirer.net and 34 from PNA.

Drawing from the methodology of previous research, the media framing present in media coverage of the Red October ouster plot was analyzed using thematic analysis. Themes or prominent patterns found salient can be considered the "frames" of the media coverage (Jasperson et al. 2003); these themes were made salient through the selection, emphasis, exclusion, or elaboration (Yioutas & Segvic 2003) of "characteristics and traits that fill out the picture of the object" (Ahmad, Ashari, & Samani 2017, 4).

The PNA and Inquirer.net articles were analyzed separately and then compared according to the similarities and differences in their frames using thematic analysis (Clarke & Braun 2006). According to Geçer and Mahinay (2018), framing can be analyzed using either an inductive approach or a deductive approach. The researcher chose an inductive approach, which allowed an investigation of the news stories with an open mind and without preconceived labels. A manual extraction of the frames was chosen over the use of analytical software to ensure that latent and layered meanings concerning the issue were captured (Foley, Ward, & McNaughton 2019). This was crucial given the specific socio-cultural and linguistic contexts of the Philippines. The overarching picture or pseudo-reality of these frames was then identified and compared to existing and available public opinion data or surveys (Yioutas & Segvic 2003; Ahmad, Ashari, & Saman 2017) to achieve the objective of analyzing both government agenda and non-government media agenda, which play various roles in shaping public agenda.

## DISCUSSION

### Frames from the Philippine News Agency

Red October is one of the first massive red-tagging campaigns conducted by the government, associating a vast majority of opposition groups, left-leaning groups, activists, and dissenters with the CPP-NPA or “communist-terrorist” movement, allegedly aiming to destabilize the administration. Certain frames were identified that reflect various attributes in the image portrayed in PNA’s Red October ouster plot coverage.

#### *“Red October” Ouster Plot as Grave Threat Frame*

The PNA articles emphasized the seriousness and danger of communist activities as a prominent frame and always related this to the orchestration of “Red October,” claiming that the danger and threat were manifested by the identified group of enemies in varying ways, further showcasing the harm they could cause if left to their own devices.

This is evident in the highlighting of occurrences and threats of violence in the PNA articles. For example, several articles attributed violent and deadly encounters to not only the CPP-NPA but also the Red October ouster plot. The government-sponsored press directly linked the massacre of nine workers in Negros Occidental to Red October as part of a “sinister plot” (Nepomuceno 2018c). They also mentioned the threat of violence when discussing other possible institutions or organizations associated with “Red October,” even though they are non-violent actors. In discussing student



recruitment to the Red October ouster plot, for example, an article mentioned that there was a possible “violent mobilization” that was prevented by making this ouster plot known (Parrocha 2018). Several articles also mentioned the seizing of high-powered firearms as a way to prevent Red October from occurring (Pa-a 2018) and emphasized the severity of the danger of this ouster plot. This is consistent with the evolution of “red-tagging” into “terrorist-tagging,” where certain acts of dissension are considered punishable as acts of terrorism or threats to the civilian population (Tugade 2023).

Second, the threat of destabilization planned as part of the Red October ouster plot was also highlighted in the selection of violent wording. The PNA described the Red October plot as forcing Duterte to “sign his own political death warrant” (Reganit 2018) and leading him into “a political death trap” (Reganit 2018). The articles also echoed military statements calling the alleged ouster plot “bloody” (Nepomuceno 2018a). They used strong comparisons such as “if we take this (Red October) lightly, we might be like Marawi,” comparing the alleged threat of Red October to a 2017-armed conflict between Philippine government security forces and Islamic State-affiliated militants that led to the deaths of some 1,200 people and widespread destruction of infrastructure that left Marawi City unlivable. This frame also indirectly connects the ouster plot to violence by emphasizing the need for protection. In one article, the police and military stated they “won’t let any harm befall our *kaluyagan* (provincemate)” (Pasion 2018).

Lastly, PNA also associated both Red October and leftists in general with the socio-economic problems experienced by the country by calling the plot “economic sabotage” (Reganit 2018). One article quoted a government official, commenting on Red October without offering any other context or critique, as stating: “They think that if production is paralyzed and an economic crisis happens, our President would be the one to blame. They do not know that we are the ones who will lose jobs, especially the ordinary Filipinos. How will we feed our families then?” (Caliwan 2018). Another article also implied that leftists are purposefully “pitting them [farmers] against the landowner and other land claimants in the area” (Nepomuceno 2018a).

The nature of the threats highlighted is reflective of common media frames for policy issues (Boydston & Gross 2013) rather than episodic framing that frames political issues according to specific instances (Iyengar 1996). Particularly, the references to violence reflect a security and defense frame that discusses threats to security and needed protection from a danger that has been done or has yet to be manifested but is possible. Other threats also reflect an economic consequences frame (Boydston & Gross 2013; Semetko & Valkenburg 2000), referring to discussions on financial implications for individuals, communities, or the economy as a whole. Notably, after the release of the analyzed articles from around September to October 2018, the NTF-ELCAC was established by the Duterte administration in December 2018 (Hapal & Serafica 2021).

***Leftist Manipulation Frame***

To further support their sentiment on the severity of this threat, the PNA also framed any support given to leftist or left-leaning groups as a product of manipulation or misinformation. They reported various sectors, such as farmers and labor workers, being used as mere “bait” (Nepomuceno 2018a), who are either paid or incited to organize and rally. PNA articles also claimed that showing martial law videos in schools and connecting them to the administration is a leftist attempt to deceive and then recruit students into the rebellion. The government press publishes constant calls to be “perceptive and vigilant in order to protect their interests from being exploited” for political ambitions (Nepomuceno 2018a) and “not to be swayed” by left-leaning groups to join protests (Caliwan 2018).

It is also through this framing that some expressions of dissent are invalidated as mere tactics for ouster. This reflects the government’s actions of “projecting to the radical left not only its failures but also its manufactured enemy image: the terrorist” (Imbong 2023). In one of the analyzed articles, a labor strike is seen as a move to paralyze production and cast blame on the president. A transport strike is framed as “threatening the government [with] a Red October Strike, an abandonment of their state-given privilege to operate public transport conveyance” (Pateña 2018) instead of a legitimate means to protest unfair conditions or policy changes. This kind of government behavior is still continuing with the current administration. Vice President Sara Duterte responded to ACT Teachers Partylist’s sharing of grievances by labeling them as “sympathizers and supporters of the NPA, the Communist Party of the Philippines, and the National Democratic Front of the Philippines” (Duterte 2023). She also called a transport strike communist-inspired and an interference instead of acknowledging the jeepney drivers’ plight (Sarao 2023).

***Marcos-Duterte Frame***

Another interesting frame from the PNA articles is their association of current events with Marcos Sr.-era events. They claimed Red October may lead to “violent mobilizations” using the “First Quarter Storm model” (Reganit 2018), framing the protests made mostly by students against the dictator Ferdinand Marcos in the first quarter of the 1970s as a chaotic and dangerous event in the country’s history. Articles mentioned Red October as following the “FQS Model” and those involved in Red October as hoping for it to “snowball into a People Power” (Ledesma 2018; Nepomuceno 2018b), a nonviolent series of demonstrations that led to the ouster of Marcos Sr. and his family in 1986. The articles also discussed leftist recruiters showing “atrocities committed during the Marcos Sr. regime and equate that to the present administration” (Reganit 2018) to deceive students into joining the CPP-NPA. This Marcos-Duterte parallel has also been found as a frame in previous studies focusing on

editorials about Duterte and may reflect the continuous alliance of the Marcoses and Dutertes (Ragragio 2020).

### ***Government Victory Frame***

Finally, most articles released at a later time introduced a framing that gave the Red October controversy a specific narrative. They framed the lack of any notable occurrence emanating from the Red October ouster plot as the government's success, specifically by reporting on a capability enhancement program and awareness efforts for parents, teachers, and the public that caused the Red October plot to be dissolved (Caliwan 2018). In one article, they stated that "had we not revealed their plans to the media, it might have been bigger" (Nepomuceno 2018c). With this awareness campaign, Red October participants were dissuaded, and any violent mobilization was deterred, which was a victory for the government against the enemies. The PNA used several variations of language to emphasize the plot's alleged failure and underline the power the government held over the alleged leftists. Red October was described as "*lusaw na*" [melted] (Nepomuceno 2018c), "aborted" (Caliwan 2018), or "dissolved" (Parrocha 2018) because the plotters "scampered away when the threat was made public" (Nepomuceno 2018c).

Several articles also mentioned the popularity of President Duterte as one of the main reasons for the failure of the Red October ouster plot. One claimed "we could crush rebels" and cause mass surrenders (Nepomuceno 2018d) if the public rallied in support of the government. Another article mentioned the high satisfactory rating of Duterte's war on drugs as an affirmation of victory and validation that these ouster plots would not be successful (Parrocha 2018). This reflects a combative framing where there are always winners (in this case, the government) that leads to a revelation of wrongdoing (by the leftist's organizations) (Lomibao 2020).

### ***Frames from *Inquirer.net****

When it came to articles released by the non-government news media website *Inquirer.net*, prominent frames were similar in topic or issue but not in attributes.

### ***Government's Manipulation Frame***

The framing of the Red October issue in *Inquirer.net* articles is that of government manipulation for their own ends and not for the good of the public. One frame is that economic issues should have taken

precedence in the government's agenda over its obsession with the threat of an alleged plot. Several articles contained quotes from people from various sectors suggesting Red October is a "convenient distraction" (Farolan 2018) from issues like high inflation, the soaring cost of basic commodities, the struggles of farmers and fisherfolk, and the sentiments of public utility drivers. Inquirer.net framed the government's use of the Red October ouster plot as the looming background for each protest to be labeled as part of a grand scheme to oust the President, rather than as an expression to "advance their legitimate issues" (Roxas 2018). Here, Inquirer.net prominently used an economic consequences frame, which may be because of its wide impact and important news value (Semetko & Valkenburg 2000). Unlike PNA's frame that identified economic and financial losses as part of the Red October plan, the blame is shifted towards the government's misplaced priorities rather than at the leftists who are allegedly manipulating various sectors to start an economic crisis.

This is also related to the Inquirer.net coverage framing the Red October accusations as not a legitimate threat. The analyzed articles mentioned conflicting evidence and statements from various government agencies. They also included fierce denials of the government information reported. Reports repeatedly emphasized Red October as a "loose conspiracy" (Gamil 2018 & Philippines Daily Inquirer 2018;). It has also been referred to or described as "baseless" (Roxas 2018), "fictitious" (Subingsubing 2018; Farolan 2018), an "elaborate drama" (Gamil & Cinco 2018), and the "height of paranoia" (Roxas 2018) on the administration's part. These claims further supported the framing of the Red October ouster plot as a conjured distraction from more legitimate issues that the government should prioritize. They also underscored the government's manipulation of information for its own benefit. While news articles echoed some of the details shared by the government, such as the groups or persons allegedly involved and their plans for destabilization, the same articles also more prominently presented counter-arguments. Some articles stated that no evidence was ever presented to support the existence of an ouster plot, along with descriptions of the vague origins of the purported intel that revealed this supposed ouster plot.

Other articles on political issues also reflected this type of "responsibility frame," where the media decides whether their framing for the cause of an issue or problem will be placed on the government or an individual or group (Semetko & Valkenburg 2000). Here, the responsibility is put on the government by the non-government media platform Philippine Daily Inquirer.

### ***Government Administration as Threat Frame***

Another salient frame may be seen in descriptions of the harassment and silencing of dissenters by the government. The Red October controversy was described as a means to spread "extraordinary fear" (Lalu 2018) through its vilification of critics. Unlike the government-sponsored press, the non-

government media did not shy away from reporting the reactions of the opposition and administration critics to the alleged Red October plot that the government itself released. Red-baiting and red-tagging left-leaning or opposition groups were said to endanger youth activists and dissenters. Moreover, the threat was shifted from the groups allegedly orchestrating Red October to the government, which was unnecessarily focusing on this plot. This threat was emphasized with descriptions of human rights violations and violence. For example, one article described Red October as a “license to arbitrarily infringe on the freedom of expression, the right to petition (the) government, as well as to assembly” (Ramos 2018), while another described the release of the ouster plot as “open season” (Subingsubing 2018), a terminology used in the violent act of hunting where all restrictions are lifted.

### Comparing *PNA* Frames with *Inquirer.net* Frames

While PNA and Inquirer.net had similarities in their discussion about economic consequences, responsibility for the issue, and security and defense matters, many of the most salient attributes or frames in terms of second-level agenda setting were contradictory. While PNA painted the gravest danger as coming from communist-terrorists, Inquirer.net reported extensively on the dangers and threat of the red-baiting being done by the government. While PNA reported that remaining vigilant about Red October and making it known was essential to stopping its danger, Inquirer.net highlighted the illegitimate nature of the destabilization plot. Lastly, while PNA framed certain sectors as being duped or manipulated into joining left-leaning movements, Inquirer.net featured the responses of labor leaders, youth representatives, leaders of public utility drivers, and farmers and fishers speaking about the real issues that they face and the reasons they are actively protesting.

This shows the strategic communication employed by both media outlets to win public approval (David et al. 2014) of the opposing side. On the end of the government-affiliated media, this framing may reflect the necessary “manipulation of language in discourse” needed in perceived counterterrorism efforts to gain “social and political consensus” (Imbong 2018). This is done to justify the state’s actions and form a common enemy of the state. As a result, activists and human rights workers are discredited when included in the blanket label of “enemy” or “terrorist,” therefore further controlling subjects and consolidating power (Imbong 2023).

Though the attributes of government-backed news and non-government online press differ, some frames coincide with each other. In the case of Inquirer.net, these similar frames are not as salient because of the endeavor of the media outlet to provide opposing information and critique. For example, both PNA and Inquirer reported on the President being “forced” to declare martial law due to communist schemes; however, the non-government online media also mentioned that the Red

October ouster plot could be used by the government to justify a martial law declaration despite the plot being untrue.

This is consistent with previous studies indicating non-government online media's tendency to reflect the government agenda (Rodelo & Muniz 2018) while also featuring a wider variety of frames (Glazier & Boydston 2012). Studies in the past have considered too much alignment between non-government media and government media as an instance of "press failure" because unaffiliated media should offer contrasting and more critical frames in comparison to the usual favorable messaging agenda of government releases. On the other hand, Glazier and Boydston (2012) posited that the free press serves less as a "watchdog" but more to cater to solidarity and national unity in a crisis situation. The fact that Inquirer.net coverage of Red October was able to explore positions that the government refused to acknowledge may be reflective of the lack of institutional incentive to align with the government agenda.

This kind of misalignment and willingness to critique the administration during the time of the Red October controversy might also reflect the nature of the ownership of Inquirer.net. The Rufino-Prieto clan, the former owners of Inquirer, are said to be "politically connected to the [opposition] Liberal Party," prompting Duterte to accuse the media outlet of being unfair to him (Geçer & Mahinay 2018). However, in December 2018, or just a few months after the coverage of Red October issue, Inquirer was said to have been acquired by businessman Ramon S. Ang, who is known to be a close friend of Duterte. This might also be an important angle to look into, as past studies have shown framing to be affected by the fact that the government is a primary source of information. News outlets become less inclined to criticize government actions or policies because they can deny access to official information (Chermak 1997) or attack the news or media group.

### **Considering Public Reactions**

Looking into how these opposing frames play a role in the public's agenda on the issue, an analysis of the approval ratings for the government administration at that time could reveal more about the consequences arising from the contrasting framing. Notably, Duterte's high approval ratings dropped for the first time right before the Red October controversy. A Pulse Asia research conducted from September 1-7, 2018, found that Filipinos' trust in President Duterte dropped by 13 percentage points, from 88% to 75% (Rappler 2018). This could have been due to inflating transportation and grocery prices as well as mass transportation issues (Ellis-Petersen 2018). In the next Pulse Asia survey, Duterte's December 14-21 approval ratings soared by 6 percentage points, from 75% to 81%, despite continuous inflation, high costs of living, increased fuel tax, and an extension of martial law in Mindanao (Rola 2019). There could have been many reasons for this rise in approval ratings outside of the release of

the Red October issue by the administration, among them administration projects finally kicking off (ABS-CBN News 2019) or a change in public opinion about the country's problems.

This paper also took a critical look at what could be understood as a manufactured distraction and the government's redirection of blame to their dissenters, considering that this issue was framed by government media, given the context of when it was released. Also noted is that included in government media's framing were their claims that media outlets that wrote articles using different frames were "paid hacks," "hogwash," and "inveterate critics" out to paint the administration as tyrannical. Though not conclusively linked, this kind of effect mirrors the "rally effect" studied in U.S. media. The rally effect occurs when there is a sudden increase in public approval of the president in times of perceived crisis (Hetherington & Nelson 2003). Since the Red October ouster plot was framed as a crisis by the government media, it is possible that the "rally effect" was present, particularly amid PNA's calls for public support to stop any violent mobilizations or ouster plots.

## **CONCLUSION**

Second-level agenda setting or framing focuses on the different ways issues are presented to make specific attributes of the issue more salient and therefore shift people's attitudes (Scheufele & Tewksbury 2007). However, when the framing varies, as in the case of government-aligned media and unassociated media outlets in the Philippines, there is a need to identify which narratives have been met with greater responses and shifts in attitudes.

The approval surveys, when taken in the context of the content analysis of both government framing and media organization framing, indicated that the government's press work was effective in shifting attitudes. Given that government framing is favorable to them and their policy decisions (Glazier & Boydston 2012), the approval ratings for the Duterte administration were consistently high even throughout what non-government media outlets framed as issues of integrity and prioritization for the government, even while the latter was discrediting media organizations that reported criticisms of the administration.

To be mindful of the second-level of agenda setting or framing is to be mindful of how our attitudes are possibly controlled by the attributes that various kinds of media choose to highlight. This paper fills a research gap on media framing on the salient issue of red-tagging, which is crucial in the face of controversies regarding press freedom, media integrity, and controlling messages. While the free press can be critical of government news coverage, as seen in the contrasting frames, the influence of government agenda and press framing should also be given critical attention to understand the messages the administration is conveying to the people.

To further validate these findings, it is recommended to expand the objects of analysis to include more government press sources and non-government media outlets to analyze their agendas. Future researchers should also look into newspaper and radio coverage as well as new media sources like social media pages that are increasing in relevance (Zhuravskaya, Petrova, & Enikolopov 2020). Researchers can also study all communism or red-tagging-related news pieces rather than just the Red October plot, or conduct independent research or a survey on public opinion about recent red-tagging issues to deepen the analysis of public perception and attitude shifts.

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**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

**GABRIELLE CARISSA MARIE A. PARAS** is a faculty member at the Department of Speech Communication and Theatre Arts, University of the Philippines Diliman. She graduated Magna Cum Laude with a BA degree in Speech Communication from the same university and is currently taking up MA Communication in Ateneo de Manila University. Gabrielle's research work primarily explores topics related to women's studies, political communication, digital media, and rhetoric.

✉: gaparas@up.edu.ph