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REPORTING IN THE “NEW NARMAL”. HOW THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AFFECTED JOURNALISTIC PRACTICE IN THE PHILIPPINES¹

Streszczenie

RAPORTOWANIE W „NOWEJ RZECZYWISTOŚCI”. JAK PANDEMIA COVID-19 WPŁYNĘŁA NA PRAKTYKĘ DZIENNIKARSKĄ NA FILIPINACH

Naukowcy starali się udokumentować wpływ pandemii Covid-19 na filipińskich dziennikarzy poprzez badanie jakościowe. Celowo wybrano trzydziestu dziennikarzy,

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** Christian V. Esguerra – filipiński dziennikarz polityczny i edukator. Obecnie prowadzi Facts First, polityczny podcast transmitowany na żywo trzy razy w tygodniu, w którym porusza bieżące kwestie związane z polityką i rządzeniem. Esguerra, wytrwały krytyk działań dezinformacyjnych, był byłym prowadzącym i redaktorem zarządzającym politycznego programu dyskusyjnego After the Fact na ABS-CBN News Channel (ANC), uruchomionego w maju 2020 r. Swoją karierę dziennikarską rozpoczął jako reporter dla Philippine Daily Inquirer w 2000 r. a w 2015 r. dołączył do ABS-CBN jako korespondent informacyjny i prezenter.

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aby odzwierciedlić różnorodność platform (telewizja/radio, prasa, internet), zakres relacji (krajowych i lokalnych/regionalnych) oraz region (Metro Manila, Luzon, Visayas i Mindanao). Pogłębione wywiady przeprowadzono z wykorzystaniem przewodnika opracowanego przez Global Risk Journalism Hub (<https://www.globalriskjournalismhub.com>), międzynarodową sieć badawczą naukowców z 35 krajów. Główne ustalenia badania obejmowały następujące obszary: 1.) poglądy dziennikarzy: kluczowe problemy, przed którymi stoją Filipiny podczas kryzysu związanego z COVID-19; 2.) sposoby raportowania w czasie pandemii; 3.) wyzwania osobiste i zawodowe dziennikarzy; oraz 4.) postrzeganie roli dziennikarzy. Pomimo wyzwań związanych z pandemią, zarówno dla ich życia osobistego, jak i zawodowego, oraz zgodnie z powiązаныmi badaniami, dziennikarze, z którymi przeprowadzono wywiady, powrócili do swojego moralnego obowiązku i poczucia celu, zwłaszcza w pandemii: mówić prawdę, przekazując dokładne informacje i kontekst i zminimalizować szkody wyrządzone cierpiącemu społeczeństwu.

Słowa kluczowe: Covid-19, pandemia, dziennikarstwo, dziennikarze, newsroomy, relacje w wiadomościach.

Summary

The researchers sought to document the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on Filipino journalists through a qualitative study. Thirty journalists were purposively selected to reflect the diversity of platforms (TV/radio, print, online), scope of coverage (national and local/regional), and region (Metro Manila, Luzon, the Visayas, and Mindanao). In-depth interviews were conducted using the guide developed by the Global Risk Journalism Hub (<https://www.globalriskjournalismhub.com>), an international research network of scholars from 35 countries. The main findings of the study covered the following areas: 1.) journalists' views: key issues confronting the Philippines during the covid-19 crisis; 2.) reporting methods during the pandemic; 3.) personal and professional challenges encountered by journalists; and 4.) role perception of journalists. Despite the challenges posed by the pandemic, both to their personal and professional lives, and consistent with related studies, journalists interviewed went back to their moral obligation and sense of purpose, especially in a pandemic: to tell the truth by providing accurate information and context, and minimize harm to a suffering public.

Keywords: Covid-19, pandemic, journalism, journalists, newsrooms, news coverage

1. INTRODUCTION

While the principles of journalism and the nature of news remain the same, the coronavirus pandemic has profoundly changed the way news stories are produced, disseminated and consumed. The Philippines in particular has seen the shutdown of legacy media such as broadsheets and tabloids, reduced television and radio news operations, and the resurgence of digital media, including social media. Government regulations, particularly quarantine restrictions, have also limited the movements of journalists and affected news coverage. Access to public officials has been significantly reduced and confined to virtual news conferences and other electronic means.

There is a need to examine the impact of these regulations as well as changes in journalistic practices, to find out which ones work and which ones have been detrimental to the profession and the people's right to know. The study will also enrich journalism education through the documentation of newsgathering practices during the Covid-19 pandemic. The study aims to find out how quarantine regulations, given the novel coronavirus pandemic, have altered the newsgathering practices and the editorial approaches of Filipino journalists and their news organizations.

These are in consideration of ensuring the public's (and journalists') safety; of assessing the (clarity of) information that government and public health authorities provide; and asserting the people's right to know. Many of the studies on journalists and epidemics are content analyses (mostly quantitative, and some qualitative content analysis) of news coverage on various health emergencies.

2. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Research on journalism and health emergencies have mostly focused on the framing of news coverage, with results often unflattering to the news media², examining news about the swine flu in the United States³, who looked into science reporting of disease and death, found news coverage to have been sensational and market driven. C. Rossman, L. Meyer and P. J. Schulz⁴, analyzing the news coverage

² See: T.-J. Shih, R. Wijaya, D. Brossard, (2008). *Media coverage of public health epidemics: Linking framing and issue attention cycle -toward an Integrated Theory of Print News Coverage of Epidemics*, Mass Communication and Society, 11(2), 141-160; A. D. Dudo, M. F. Dahlstrom, D. Brossard, (2007). *Reporting a potential pandemic: A risk-related assessment of avian influenza coverage in U.S. newspapers*. Science Communication, 28(4), 429-454. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1075547007302211>.

³ K. Molek-Kozakowska, (2016). *Framing disease, ageing and death in popular science journalism*. Brno studies in English, 42(1).

⁴ C. Rossmann, L. Meyer, P. J. Schulz, (2018). *The Mediated Amplification of a Crisis: Communicating the A/H1N1 Pandemic in Press Releases and Press Coverage in Europe*. Risk Analysis: An International Journal, 38(2), 357-375. <https://doi.org/10.1111/risa.12841>.

of the AH1N1 outbreak in Europe, concluded that both quality and tabloid papers amplified risks of the disease and preferred drama and emotion. In a study of print news coverage of the 1918 flu pandemic, M. Spratt⁵ found that while journalists depended on experts and factual or empirical data, they propped up the status of scientific and government authorities and took average citizens for granted. This is a cause for concern in the digital era, as the problem of misinformation becomes even more pronounced during public health emergencies⁶. Journalists also need to be mindful of the “power they wield during a health crisis”⁷.

Two major framing studies found Chinese and Singaporean journalists to have exercised Western-style gatekeeping functions amid authoritarian settings. Analysis of severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) news coverage by C.A. Luther and X. Zhou⁸ showed that Chinese newspapers used economic consequences, conflict and leadership frames, similar to American newspapers, and did not overemphasize human-interest frames thought to be promoted by the government as a diversion. S. T. Lee and I. Basnyat in 2013’s study of H1N1 news coverage in Singapore⁹ showed that journalists significantly filtered government press releases, and functioned as public health agents and advocates by focusing on basic and preventive health information.

Studies involving interviews with journalists and editors provided more insights into journalistic practices during pandemics. C. Klemm, E. Das and T. Hartmann¹⁰ found journalists in Germany and Finland shifting roles toward becoming public health mobilizers who were more of cooperative agents rather than watchdogs. C. Hooker, C. King and J. Leask¹¹ interviewed 16 journalists in

⁵ M. Spratt, (2001). *Science, journalism, and the construction of news: How print media framed the 1918 influenza pandemic*. *American Journalism*, 18(3), 61–79. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08821127.2001.10739324>.

⁶ R. Kouzy, J. Abi Jaoude, A. Kraitem, M. B. El Alam, B. Karam, E. Adib, K. Baddour, (2020). *Coronavirus goes viral: quantifying the COVID-19 misinformation epidemic on Twitter*. *Cureus*, 12(3); N. M. Krause, I. Freiling, B. Beets, D. Brossard, (2020). *Fact-checking as risk communication: the multi-layered risk of misinformation in times of COVID-19*. *Journal of Risk Research*, 1–8.

⁷ K. Thomas, A. D. Senkpeni, *What should health science journalists do in epidemic responses?*, *AMA: Journal of Ethics*, 22(1), E55–E60.

⁸ C. A. Luther, X. Zhou, (2005). *Within the boundaries of politics: News framing of SARS in China and the United States*. *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly*, 82(4), 857–872. <https://doi.org/10.1177/107769900508200407>.

⁹ S. T. Lee, I. Basnyat, *From press release to news: mapping the framing of the 2009 H1N1 A influenza pandemic*, *Health Commun.* 2013;28(2):119–32, doi: 10.1080/10410236.2012.658550. Epub 2012 Mar 22, DOI: 10.1080/10410236.2012.658550.

¹⁰ C. Klemm, E. Das, T. Hartmann, (2019). *Changed priorities ahead: Journalists’ shifting role perceptions when covering public health crises*. *Journalism: Theory, Practice and Criticism*, 20(9), 1223–1241.

¹¹ C. Hooker, C. King, J. Leask, (2012). *Journalists’ views about reporting avian influenza and a potential pandemic: a qualitative study*. *Influenza & Other Respiratory Viruses*, 6(3), 224–229. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1750-2659.2011.00319>.

Australia in 2006 and 2007 and found that practitioners, mindful of the impact of their work on the public, saw themselves as informants who must report the news accurately. Journalists expressed willingness to continue doing their jobs despite the avian influenza pandemic, and placed emphasis on independent news coverage.

In a separate paper by the same authors from 2010, independent and expert doctors were perceived to be the most credible sources, as journalists struck a balance between “different, sometimes competing, aims amidst significant operational constraints.” Sensitivity to potential conflicts of interests of expert sources became a major concern among journalists during the 2009 H1N1 outbreak in Australia¹². In Africa, journalists placed more importance on credibility over access in their coverage of the 2014 Ebola outbreak, and expressed difficulty contacting experts¹³.

Comparing European journalistic cultures during the 2009 swine flu pandemic, A. Cornia and others¹⁴ found that Italian and British newspapers focused on the government’s handling of the health emergency, although more dependent on political leanings in the former. Swedish papers eschewed criticism of the government and concentrated on the technical aspects of the disease. Participatory journalism influenced Swedish news coverage of the swine flu pandemic¹⁵. S. Lee and J. E. Paik¹⁶ found news coverage of the MERS-CoV outbreak in South Korea to be sharply divided along party fault lines.

Research on journalism during the Covid-19 pandemic is growing. J. M. A. C. Bernadas and K. Ilagan¹⁷ explored the relationship between journalism and public health, which was often “overlooked,” amid a shrinking space for press freedom and information access, as well as threats to physical and mental well-being. F. Salvosa¹⁸ observed that the transition to digital platforms advanced

¹² K. Holland, R. W. Blood, M. Sweet, A. Fogarty, (2013). *A legacy of the swine flu global pandemic: Journalists, expert sources, and conflicts of interest*. Journalism, 15(1), 53–71. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884913480460>.

¹³ D. Secko, B. Morel, A. Edimo, (2014). *An Exploration of the Lived Experience of African Journalists During the 2014 Ebola Crisis*. Research report for Concordia University – Department of Journalism and the World Federation of Science Journalists.

¹⁴ A. Cornia, P. Mancini, M. Gheretti, T. Odén, (2016). *The Partisans, the Technocrats and the Watchdogs: Domestication in media coverage of the swine flu pandemic in 2009*. Journalism Studies, 17(8), 1030–1050. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2015.1040891>.

¹⁵ M. B. Karlsson, (2010). *Participatory journalism and crisis communications: a Swedish case study of swine flu coverage*. Observatorio (OBS*), 4(1).

¹⁶ S. Lee, J. E. Paik, (2017). *How partisan newspapers represented a pandemic: the case of the Middle East respiratory syndrome in South Korea*. Asian Journal of Communication, 27(1), 82–96.

¹⁷ J. M. A. C. Bernadas, K. Ilagan, (2020). *Journalism, public health, and COVID-19: Some preliminary insights from the Philippines*. Media International Australia, 177(1), 132–138.

¹⁸ F. Salvosa, (2020). *The digital new normal: Implications on journalism and journalism practice*. The Antoninus Journal, 6.

tremendously, with Philippine news organizations taking full advantage of social media for distribution amid significant restrictions imposed by the national government on journalists.

In an exploratory analysis of survey data, A. Casero-Ripollés¹⁹ saw a “resurgence of the role of legacy media, especially television,” with citizens reconnecting to the news because of the coronavirus pandemic and the ensuing lockdown. V.-P. La and others²⁰, using an extensive dataset of nearly 15,000 news items, found the news media, the scientific community, and the government to have effectively informed the Vietnamese public, resulting in a low number of Covid-19 cases and zero deaths. Cooperation between journalists and experts had been stressed by E. Thompson²¹.

However, other aspects of pandemic news coverage need to be explored, such as journalists’ responses to 1.) health risks posed by field work, 2.) newsroom or news organization policies, and 3.) government quarantine and social/physical distancing restrictions. Pandemic coverage in the Philippines has been characterized by lack of, or limited access to, news sources. This is exemplified by virtual press briefings where questions are often screened and there is not enough time for follow-ups and interaction between journalists and sources²².

Journalistic practices in the context of public health emergencies remain a fertile ground for research. The research project eventually aims to produce materials that blend theory and practice, and grounded on the real-life situations faced by journalists.

3. METHODS AND DESIGN OF THE STUDY

The study was guided by the following research question: How did the Covid-19 pandemic affect newsgathering practices and the editorial approaches of Filipino journalists? Specifically, the study sought to:

a. find out how the work of journalists relate to the global scope of the pandemic;

¹⁹ A. Casero-Ripollés, (2020). *Impact of Covid-19 on the media system. Communicative and democratic consequences of news consumption during the outbreak*. Casero-Ripollés, Andreu (2020). “Impact of Covid-19 on the media system. Communicative and democratic consequences of news consumption during the outbreak”. *El profesional de la información*, 29(2), e290223.

²⁰ V.-P. La, M.-T. Ho, M.-H. Nguyen, K.-L. P. Nguyen, H.-K. T. Nguyen, M.-T. Ho, Q.-H. Vuong, T.-H. Pham, T.-T. Vuong, T. Tran, Q. Khuc, (2020). *Policy response, social media and science journalism for the sustainability of the public health system amid the COVID-19 outbreak: The Vietnam lessons*. *Sustainability* (Switzerland), 12(7). <https://doi.org/10.3390/su12072931>.

²¹ E. Thompson, (2019). *Communicating a Health Risk/Crisis: Exploring the Experiences of Journalists Covering a Proximate Epidemic*. Science Co.

²² F. Salvosa, (2020). *The digital new normal: Implications on journalism and journalism practice*. *The Antoninus Journal*, 6.

- b. find out how journalists handle misinformation/disinformation and fake news in relation to the pandemic;
- c. find out where journalists get their information about Covid-19; and
- d. determine the risks, pressures and challenges faced by journalists in covering the pandemic.

Selection and Study Site

The researchers conducted in-depth interviews with at least 30 journalists who reported on the Covid-19 pandemic from different platforms from February to May 2022. Interviews were conducted in person, by phone, or using webconferencing facilities such as Zoom or Google Meet.

The selection of interviewees took into consideration the different lived realities and experiences of journalists, reporters, editors, and emerging news professionals and new news actors. It was also purposive, meaning the researchers deliberately selected news professionals, news portals and crisis news actors to gain insight into their expert knowledge. Key organizations/players delivering news on Covid-19 were identified (Global Risk Journalism Hub in 2021). The interview guide developed by the Global Risk Journalism Hub (<https://www.globalriskjournalismhub.com>), an international research network of scholars from 35 countries, was used. Selection of interviewees followed a two-step process as set forth by the Global Risk Journalism Hub. First, the researchers listed key news outlets and media professionals in the crisis public ecology, meaning the key news organizations or players delivering Covid-crisis news in the country in the various news platforms. The Philippine Report of the 2021 Digital News Report²³ of the Reuters Institute and Oxford University, which listed TV, radio, print, and online news organizations in the country, and the membership directory of the Philippine Press Institute, were used as guides. Second, the researchers identified representatives of these news outlets. In drawing up the listing of key news outlets (stage 1), the researchers ensured geographical representation, i.e., selection of key news outlets in Metro Manila, Luzon, Visayas, and Mindanao as well representation across platforms (print, online, TV, radio). In selecting representatives of news outlets (stage 2), the researchers also sought to ensure gender representation.

More than half (16) of the interviewees came from news organizations publishing on both print and online platforms. Eight came from purely online news operations, while others were from TV and radio and a nonprofit. There was one freelancer. Nineteen journalists had a national scope in terms of news coverage while the rest were covering local or regional news. There was an almost even

²³ Y. Chua, (2021). *Reuters Institute digital news report 2021: Philippines*. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism.

distribution in terms of sex: 14 interviewees were female and 16 were male. The table below shows the profile of the journalists interviewed for this study:

Table 1. Profile of Interviewees

Interviewee	Sex	Region	Platform	Scope of Coverage
I1	Female	Metro Manila	Wire Agency	National
I2	Male	Metro Manila	TV/Radio	National
I3	Male	Metro Manila	TV/Radio	National
I4	Female	Metro Manila	Online	National
I5	Female	Metro Manila	Online	National
I6	Male	Metro Manila	Online	National
I7	Female	Metro Manila	Online	National
I8	Female	Metro Manila	Online	National
I9	Female	Metro Manila	Online	National
I10	Female	Metro Manila	Online	National
I11	Female	Metro Manila	Print/Online	National
I12	Male	Metro Manila	Print/Online	National
I13	Male	Metro Manila	Print/Online	National
I14	Female	Metro Manila	Print/Online	National
I15	Male	Metro Manila	Print/Online	National
I16	Female	Metro Manila	Nonprofit	National
I17	Female	Luzon	Freelancer	Regional
I18	Female	Luzon	Print/Online	Local
I19	Male	Luzon	Print/Online	Local
I20	Male	Luzon	Print/Online	Local
I21	Male	Luzon	Print/Online	Local
I22	Male	Luzon	Print/Online	Local
I23	Female	Luzon	Print/Online	Local
I24	Male	Luzon	Print/Online	Local
I25	Male	Visayas	Print/Online	Local
I26	Male	Mindanao	Print/Online	Local
I27	Male	Mindanao	Print/Online	Local
I28	Male	Metro Manila	Print/Online	National
I29	Female	Metro Manila	TV	National
I30	Male	Metro Manila	Online	National

Ethical Considerations

Informed consent was secured from all interviewees before they were asked to participate in the interview. A consent form was provided to each interviewee, which meant they were given the choice to participate or not. For the sake of confidentiality and privacy of each interviewee, no precise identification was made in the study. The in-depth interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for further analysis. Recordings of interviews and their transcriptions were stored in a domain-restricted (ust.edu.ph) cloud storage application (Google Drive) protected by passwords with two-step verification, and accessible only to the researchers.

Ethics clearance was secured from the Social Science Ethics Review Board of the Philippine Social Science Council.

Analysis

Thematic analysis was done after all the data have been collected. V. Braun and V. Clarke²⁴ define thematic analysis as “a method of identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns within data.” The first step of the analysis is the reading and re-reading of the transcripts. The data will then be categorized into groups while relevant points are noted. The next step is to come up with broader themes relevant to the research topic. A review of whether the themes are logical and distinct from each other follows. The fifth step is to identify the “essence” of what the themes are about²⁵. The final stage is the write-up or the narrative of the entire process.

Data was analyzed using the framework of the Social Responsibility Theory, the most enduring of the normative Four Theories of the Press expounded by F. S. Siebert, T. Peterson, and W. Schramm in 1956 based on the recommendations of the Hutchins Commission in 1947. The Social Responsibility Theory, which lies between libertarian and authoritarian press systems, acquires a health dimension amid extensive news coverage of the Covid-19 pandemic. While news organizations are free to operate under private control, they have moral obligations to society.

4. FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

The main findings of this qualitative study covered the following areas: 1.) journalists' views: key issues confronting the Philippines during the Covid-19

²⁴ V. Braun, V. Clarke, (2006). *Using thematic analysis in psychology*. Qualitative research in psychology, 3(2), 77-101.

²⁵ Ibidem, p. 92.

crisis; 2.) reporting methods during the pandemic; 3.) personal and professional challenges encountered by journalists; and 4.) the role perception of journalists.

1) Key issues confronting the Philippines during the Covid-19 crisis

The researchers found three key issues that concerned journalists as they covered the pandemic: the country’s unpreparedness to respond to the global health crisis, misinformation and disinformation, and the perception of corruption in the government’s pandemic response.

The biggest issue confronting the Philippines early on, according to the interviewees, was unpreparedness as shown by inconsistent and unclear and shifting policy pronouncements, including those pertaining to lockdowns and other restrictions. Here, they had to work harder to try to make sense of information coming from key government officials, including—or especially—the president.

Interviewees pointed to the problem of misinformation and disinformation as seen in the vaccine hesitancy of many Filipinos soon after the government announced that inoculations were now being planned. Much of their reporting had to focus on the importance of being vaccinated and how and why vaccines work. As stated by a veteran journalist (I3) working in a multi-platform newsroom:

“For me, yung media is part of the confusion kasi nga unang-una, kung kukuha ka ng reliable information, kukuha ka sa DOH (Department of Health) syempre. E kung mali na yung impormasyon ng DOH, magiging mali yung ipapasa mo sa tao.”

Said an online journalist in her 20s (I5):

“So announcements like these create confusion at saka sometimes, they make it seem as if kami, yung media pa, yung nagkamali in reporting. I think nakaka-contribute din yun sa accusations na inaccurate na information yung inilalabas kahit yung source of confusion naman talaga is from the officials.”

The prevalence of misinformation and disinformation had a two-fold impact: the need to allocate more newsroom resources to deal with the problem and the additional workload imposed on journalists:

“[W]e also had to dedicate time and resources into fact-checking during the pandemic, and that was, we were already fact-checking before that but those were mostly political statements,” said an editor of a news website (I9).

“Right off the bat we were fighting disinformation left and right,” said an editor of a community newspaper (I26).

“It’s been very tiring to dispute disinformation and misinformation,” a journalist from an alternative news site (I10) said.

Interviewees also cited the questionable, multi-million-peso procurement by the Department of Health, through the budget department’s procurement office, of

supplies for medical front-liners. It was tough for them seeing huge government resources allegedly being wasted while many Filipinos, at least at that time, were struggling even with basic supplies such as face masks and face shields.

2) *Reporting methods during the pandemic*

Journalists developed or reinforced existing reporting methods to cope with the challenges posed by the coverage of the pandemic. The researchers documented four based on the in-depth interviews conducted: a.) the use of “verification dashboards”; b.) vertical / horizontal verification; c.) utilizing virtual lines of communication; and d.) ascribing levels of trustworthiness.

a) Verification dashboards

A number of interviewees said they regularly tracked data, statistics, or other type of information from various online sources, such as the Coronavirus Resource Center of Johns-Hopkins University; the data drops, website, and social media accounts of the Department of Health; and reliable global news organizations. The availability of these online resources allowed cross-checking, validation, and verification of official government pronouncements, according to an online editor interviewed by the researchers. This online editor (I9) described these resources collectively as her “verification dashboards.”

She said:

“So one set of dashboards would be social media, another set of dashboards would be Covid information, a third party that would be reliable. Another set would be wires and global news from news media around the world din.”

Another journalist, who covers for a print news organization (I28), said the Johns-Hopkins University Covid-19 map and tracker were useful in making meaningful comparisons on the magnitude of cases reported by the Philippine government versus those of other countries:

“Ako po personally I tried to access the database of Johns-Hopkins para lang ma-compare yung number of cases ng Philippines, and not just number of cases but the deaths and active cases to compare our statistics with the numbers of other Asian countries.”

b) Horizontal / vertical verification

Journalists found it imperative to check official pronouncements against official or field data, and validate further using international data. For instance, if a national government official said action was taken in a local government unit, then verification needed to be done at the latter level (“vertical verification”), and vice-versa. If officials quoted international resources, verification also needed to be done at the latter level. Pronouncements by national officials likewise needed

to be laterally cross-checked with other officials or relevant agencies (“horizontal verification”). Official was not necessarily factual.

Said a TV news reporter (I29):

“Even if it’s official, I validate. Yung galing sa taas, national level? Bababa ako. Gan’on kakulit. Pupunta talaga ako sa barangay o magtatawag ako ng barangay official. ,Totoo po ba iito? Ganito kasi narinig ko sa taas.’ Tapos babalik na naman ako sa taas, ,sabi ng nasa baba, iba.”

An online news reporter (I7) had a similar routine:

“I would check again experts’ sources and then, I’ll check those experts’ sources against with those local against with more international.”

c) Virtual lines of communication

Given restrictions on mobility posed by the pandemic, journalists developed virtual lines of communication with news sources, whether official or unofficial. In addition to the usual telephone or mobile phone communications, direct messaging became an acceptable substitute for face-to-face interviews:

“Ang local, as much as possible face to face. Pero kung hindi talaga pwede, phone call, phone interview,” a community journalist and editor (I26) said.

“Direct message, sir, or ano mismo personal,” a Manila-based TV journalist (I2) said.

“Open naman yung mga sources for online interviews, so it’s either via Messenger, via Zoom or via Google Meets,” said an editor of a community paper (I27).

d) Levels of trustworthiness

Journalists evaluated source credibility using two primary criteria: expertise and motivation, balanced vis-a-vis other sources. Institutional or expert sources went through minimal vetting. Determining levels of trustworthiness went through three levels: 1.) ascribed credibility; 2.) validated expertise; and 3.) inclusion in the journalist’s pool of expert sources.

Said a TV journalist (I29):

“Firstly, you have to see the source. Is the source the, how do you call this, not necessarily the authorized spokesman. Because we can get sources, right? The source you actually get the information from or a person involved in that issue, directly involved in that issue. Does he sit in meetings? Is he part of, you know, that team who worked on that?”

Journalists kept tabs on the credibility and reliability of sources, and determined whether these sources harbored their own agendas. Political appointees to the government generally had lesser credibility compared with career government officials or sources who possessed technical expertise. The pronouncements of

sources who had a record of prioritizing public relations talking points or spreading propaganda were subjected to more careful vetting and even discarded.

Said the Manila-based TV journalist (I29):

“And credibility. Next, agenda. The person speaking, what’s his agenda? May propaganda ba siya, may sarili ba siyang interest? ‘Yun, so second ‘yun. Tinitingnan ko palagi ‘yun.”

“So, I make sure that I get information from people who are supposed to be the ones credible to speak and privy to the information that I needed.”

An online news editor (I9) placed importance on the history and credibility of the institutions where the sources belonged:

“It’s really the provenance and the source of the information. Where it’s coming from, who’s saying it, and also the history of those institutions.”

A print reporter (I13) said he maintained a list of “trusted officials” who were generally not subjected to much scrutiny especially amid tight newsroom deadlines. An example was the chief of the Food and Drug Administration, Dr. Eric Domingo, an ophthalmologist who trained at the University of the Philippines and in Spain.

“If you have a source who has a history of spinning [...] then the more fact-checking, or [the] more rigorous the verification process will be, but if for example, we have the likes of one of the trusted [officials], si former FDA chief Domingo, he’s a very reliable person, admittedly, mas kaunti.”

3) Personal and professional challenges encountered by journalists

The challenges that confronted journalists amid the pandemic blurred the lines between the personal and the professional. The researchers found three major challenges: a.) longer working hours; b.) mental health issues; and c.) the fear of failure.

a) Longer working hours

The pandemic lockdowns in the Philippines, the longest in the world, took a toll on the journalists who participated in the study. Many of them worked longer hours at home, often staring at blurred the lines between personal time and professional duties, which were both more or less defined prior to the pandemic.

At the height of the pandemic, a reporter for an online news organization said she worked between 12 and 18 hours minimum because of numerous government briefings and former president Rodrigo Duterte’s meetings with the Inter-Agency Task Force on Emerging Infectious Diseases and late-night press conferences broadcast over state-run television.

b) Mental health issues

Mental health was also a significant issue among journalists, as a result of longer working hours and experience covering victims of Covid-19. Working alone at home, away from colleagues and connected only via messaging apps, was also taxing for many of them. A photojournalist/reporter (I17) recalled how she would cry while writing her stories about people suffering during the pandemic:

“Halos ‘di ko matapos yung story kasi iyak ako nang iyak dahil doon sa kinukwento ko. Yung mga narratives ng mga survivors, tapos na-realized ko na, ‘O, wala pa akong contact sa parents ko.”

The “balancing act” was a struggle, as mentioned by one senior journalist (I16), who said:

“Lahat naman ng journalists, siyempre as individuals, may kanya-kanyang pinagdadaanan na personal. I think yung pag-merge ng mga yun, yung pag-balanse noon ay, I think, was most challenging.”

Said a Manila-based print reporter (I15):

“Parang harassment na. Wala kang katahimikan sa buhay. At saka, yung work-life balance, affected na affected yung work-life balance. Parang ‘di na siya nag-eexist. Ganoon pala yun, ‘pag nagpuyat ka.”

Many of the respondents also feared going down with Covid-19 as they monitored the rising number of cases, and with more and more people they knew getting afflicted. A veteran reporter (I1), who works for an international news organization and who got sick with Covid-19, said:

“Feeling ko, sometimes, slow na ako, nagha-hang na.”

c) Fear of failure

Despite the personal and professional struggles, a common denominator among the respondents was the fear of failing to perform their job as journalists. The fear, they said, was evident especially early on when access to more reliable sources was limited and they weren’t many opportunities to validate information coming from the government.

Said a veteran journalist (I3):

“I think yun ang biggest challenge natin. How to get more accurate information? From health experts and from the government.”

4) Role perception of journalists

In the course of the interviews, journalists spoke primarily of two major roles amid news coverage of a global health crisis, first, as a provider of accurate information, and second, as a provider of context. The provision of accurate information, the first of the six journalistic functions in the Social Responsibility

Theory²⁶, was the main emphasis of the journalists interviewed for this study. The critical role played by journalists as accountability-seekers on behalf of the public was also brought up during the in-depth interviews, but to a lesser extent. This was somewhat consistent with the findings of previous studies²⁷ that found Western journalists to be more of agents of public health information rather than watchdogs.

The challenges posed by the pandemic made the role of journalists even clearer, as can be gleaned from the responses in the study. Most of them pointed out that any mistake in pandemic reportage—whether intended or unintended—could have direct and serious effects on ordinary news consumers.

“Walang room ang journalism sa unverified information, sa hearsay, ano? Dapat ang ating reporting ay nakabase sa facts at saka ... trusted data from experts and from reliable sources of information. Primary sources of information,” said a veteran journalist, who used to work for a wire agency (I3).

Aside from accuracy, context is also important. A newspaper editor (I12) spoke of “humanizing” the issues to better explain them both to ordinary Filipinos and policymakers:

“Di lang reportage of facts and figures, but to ... put the stories in context for them, for our readers to better understand issues. Humanize issues, like you have jeepney drivers who have not gone back to driving or passengers who have not gone back to work because of restrictions.”

An editor of a news website (I6) put it this way:

“Yung role natin [is] to help people make sense of all the problems we are facing and to shine the light on disinformation, and make their lives a bit lighter.”

5. CONCLUSIONS

During the pandemic, the Philippines was confronted with issues of unpreparedness on the part of the government, perception of corruption, and misinformation and disinformation, according to journalists interviewed for this study.

Misinformation and disinformation posed bigger challenges to journalists, who acknowledged that any wrong information they might inadvertently spread

²⁶ F. Siebert, T. Peterson, W. Schramm, (1956). *Four Theories of the Press: The Authoritarian, Libertarian, Social Responsibility, and Soviet Communist Concepts of What the Press Should Be and Do*, University of Illinois Press.

²⁷ C. Klemm, E. Das, T. Hartmann, (2019). *Changed priorities ahead: Journalists' shifting role perceptions when covering public health crises*. *Journalism: Theory, Practice and Criticism*, 20(9), 1223-1241. C. Hooker, C. King, J. Leask, (2012). *Journalists' views about reporting avian influenza and a potential pandemic: a qualitative study*. *Influenza & Other Respiratory Viruses*, 6(3), 224-229. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1750-2659.2011.00319>, M. B. Karlsson, (2010). *Participatory journalism and crisis communications: a Swedish case study of swine flu coverage*. *Observatorio (OBS*)*, 4(1).

could have serious consequences to people during the pandemic. To avoid this, newsrooms had to allocate more resources to gather only credible information in the face of misinformation and disinformation. This also meant additional workload, especially for smaller newsrooms, which were already struggling with limited human and financial resources even before the pandemic. Given restrictions to access, journalists were quick to adapt to the situation and adopt methods and mechanisms to gather and validate information, such as verification dashboards, vertical and horizontal verification, developing virtual lines of communication, and ascribing levels of trustworthiness to sources.

The pandemic lockdowns forced journalists to log longer hours, sometimes working as long as 18 hours, and often blurring the lines between personal and professional time since they were staying at home. This set-up led to mental health concerns, driven largely by uncertainty as to when the pandemic would end, and with more and more people they knew getting sick. Thus, the question: Am I, or a loved one, going to be next?

Despite the challenges posed by the pandemic, both to their personal and professional lives, and consistent with related studies, journalists interviewed went back to their moral obligation and sense of purpose, especially in a pandemic: to tell the truth by providing accurate information and context, and minimize harm to a suffering public.

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