

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# A critical discourse analysis of ABS-CBN's coverage of President Duterte's public addresses on the COVID-19 pandemic

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### ABSTRACT

ABS-CBN Corporation has a precarious relationship with the Duterte administration. The company's wide public penetration, elite ownership, and Duterte's blatant attacks against them created a rich political-economic context on ABS-CBN's journalism. The coincidence of the ABS-CBN franchise renewal issue with the COVID-19 pandemic is a crucial discussion on how the media operates when faced under a threat to their business survival. This study aimed to answer the question, "How did ABS-CBN's online news articles report Duterte's public addresses on the handling of the COVID-19 pandemic amidst their franchise renewal issues?" Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), integrated with Carvalho's CDA framework for media texts (2008), was utilized to characterize ABS-CBN's journalistic elements, understand its interdiscursive strategies, and unveil the power dynamics between Duterte and the network. An analysis of 18 articles revealed that the overall journalistic strategies of the ABS-CBN play a crucial role in the public's meaning-making of the government's COVID-19 response. Although their media coverage could be an opportunity to explicitly attack or favor the government, the network presented an objective stance in covering Duterte's COVID-19 speeches. The apparent neutrality of ABS-CBN's portrayal of Duterte is argued to be a strategy to please the various stakeholders scrutinizing ABS-CBN vis-à-vis their franchise renewal issue. The public, therefore, is revealed to be the invisible political actor behind ABS-CBN's journalism. The findings of the research were mapped in a diagram likened to the ABS-CBN logo to unravel the interplay between the network's condition and Duterte's leadership.

**Keywords:** *ABS-CBN franchise renewal issue, Critical Discourse Analysis, political economy of media, Duterte and ABS-CBN, COVID-19 journalism*

**PCS REVIEW | SERIES (2021): 91-118**

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### Introduction

President Duterte's anti-media remarks since the beginning of his presidency has set the climate for the Philippine media. Some members of the Philippine media have faced various forms of threats, which were described as a "war on the press" by both local and international media (Hunt, 2018). Journalists during the Duterte administration experienced coverage bans in the Malacañang office, red-tagging, and cyber libel complaints (Gavilan, 2018). ABS-CBN's shutdown last July 2020 is arguably the most controversial Duterte-and-media saga as they are the biggest broadcasting company in the country (Regencia, 2020).

Duterte had expressed his own issues regarding ABS-CBN, which began with their alleged fraudulence for not airing his paid presidential ad campaign worth Php 6.6 million (Cepeda, 2020a). Not only did the network fail to comply with this agreement, but it also aired an anti-Duterte campaign that was defrayed by an oppositional candidate (Cepeda, 2020b). This pretext marks the dawn of Duterte's threat to shut down the ABS-CBN network. During the congressional franchise hearings, the issues regarding the ABS-CBN Corporation terms and agreements violations were tackled (Cepeda, 2020b). Such issues and violations included tax-avoidance schemes, supposed foreign ownership and the dual citizenship of ABS-CBN's Chairman, and their unjust labor conditions (Santos, 2020). The House panel also mentioned the issue of biased reporting and political meddling.

The President's allies justify that Duterte had nothing to do with the final decision of Congress to prohibit ABS-CBN from the renewal of its franchise (Cepeda, 2020b; Santos, 2020). The President's apparent anti-elite and anti-media discourse, and his antagonistic remarks against ABS-CBN, however, contradicts his party's claims (Mercado, 2020). Many argue that the decision of the Congress to deny ABS-CBN's franchise is likely a response to the several violations they have committed. On the other hand, some argue that the media giant's shutdown puts peril in the press freedom and democracy of the country (Malindog-Uy, 2020).

The outcome of ABS-CBN's franchise renewal gained traction as it occurred during the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic. Concurrent to this time, the Philippine Congress enacted the Bayanihan to Heal as One Act, which granted the President special powers to help mitigate the spread of the virus. To keep the public informed and updated, this act mandated President Duterte to deliver weekly speeches regarding the government's COVID-19 response. These speeches were also supposed to serve as a channel to demonstrate accountability and responsiveness from the Duterte government in the time of the pandemic. Duterte therefore faced

a challenging obligation to safeguard and pacify the anxious public from the health and economic crisis.

The coincidence of the ABS-CBN franchise renewal issue with the COVID-19 pandemic is a crucial discussion on how the media operates when faced under a threat to their business survival. Against this backdrop, this study aims to answer the question, “*How did ABS-CBN’s online news articles report Duterte’s public addresses on the handling of the COVID-19 pandemic amidst their franchise renewal issues?*”

It specifically aims:

1. To characterize the journalistic elements used in ABS-CBN’s online news articles in the coverage of Duterte’s speeches addressing the COVID-19 pandemic;
2. To understand the interdiscursivity of ABS-CBN’s online news articles that covered Duterte’s public addresses about the handling of the COVID-19 pandemic in terms of framing, positioning, legitimation, and politicization strategies; and
3. To unveil the power dynamics between Duterte and ABS-CBN as manifested in the latter’s journalistic texts within the Philippine socio-political climate.

### Literature Review

This section will review the literature regarding the two essential entities in this study which are ABS-CBN Corporation and President Duterte. The first part is the discussion of ABS-CBN as a media institution in which its rich political economic context will be articulated. The recent studies about Duterte and anti-media populism will then be discussed.

#### ABS-CBN as a Media Institution

In 1947, Eugenio Lopez Sr. bought the Manila Chronicles, now known as the ABS-CBN — one of the most powerful media companies in the Philippines. ABS-CBN has then become an operative tool for politicians to advance their political agenda in the guise of an advocacy (Molon, 2011, as cited in Baquilod, 2017). The connection between ABS-CBN and the ruling elite is inevitable because the Lopezes, owners of ABS-CBN, have tight relations with members of the Liberal Party (LP), a democratic party whose members consist of long-time political clans and the richest families in the country (Mansueto & Ochave, 2018).

Critics of the Philippine media have noted that the power of the media is concentrated in only a handful of the Filipino people (Cabalquinto, 2014). As a result, information from media companies is more susceptible to curating

content that will specifically garner more attention, thereby sacrificing credibility to fulfill its capitalist need (Cabalquinto, 2014). Meanwhile, ABS-CBN capitalizes on the Filipino's deep-seated family-centric values implied in their tagline of "*Kapamilya*" ["family member"] which works to their market advantage when they promote their services (Cabalquinto, 2014). ABS-CBN can penetrate the global market through their expansion of broadcasting and non-broadcasting services, through an online platform. ABS-CBN's elite ownership, close political ties, and global reach are testaments to the complex political economy of their franchise renewal issue.

### Duterte and Anti-Media Populism

Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte is widely regarded as one of the world's current authoritarian populists (Bernstein, 2020, as cited in Tapsell, 2021). His rise to power coincided with the Filipino's growing lack of trust towards the ruling elite (Casiple, 2016; Maboloc, 2020). The public saw him as a disciplinarian (Teehankee & Thompson, 2016) who promised to cleanse the Philippines of its illegal drug trades through violent means. Duterte managed to gain the favor of the public with his authentic speaking style (Arguelles, 2019) and relatable nature (Teehankee & Thompson, 2016).

There is rich literature examining Duterte's populism, however there is little scholarly attention about anti-media populism in the Global South countries such as the Philippines (Bhat & Chadha, 2020). Duterte's attack on the media stems back to his mayoralty in Davao, wherein he ordered the killing of a journalist (Villamor & Ives, 2016, as cited in Tapsell, 2021), which parallels his presidential reign when he endorsed the killing of journalists if they are disrespecting a person in power (Tapsell, 2021). Duterte justifies his threats towards media organizations when he accuses them of being run by oligarchs; this is then backed by his supporters and those who perceive mainstream media to be biased and corrupt (Tapsell, 2021).

"Fake news" is a term frequently used by contemporary populists, who often brand media outlets as partisan and corrupt, to invalidate their stories that are critical of their governance (Tapsell, 2021). In the case of Duterte, his supporters and state-sponsored troll accounts reinforce his anti-media narratives of unfair journalism and fake news by pestering media outlets (Curato, 2016; Ragragio, 2020). Duterte was able to justify that media repression was necessary for the "misconduct" that institutions commit in the field. He claims that the Lopezes are members of such elite corporations who are likely to abuse their platform. In this sense, he is perceived as a challenge to the elitist politics of Aquino and the Liberal Party who are said to have close connections with ABS-CBN (Mansueto & Ochave, 2018).

Populists brand media elites either as a “friend or a foe” (Tapsell, 2021, p.13). In this “divide and rule” dynamic, the media elites have learned how to cultivate a relationship with those in power to safeguard their businesses from crackdowns. Hence, the discourse of these media elites in their journalism must be continually examined especially that there is a dearth in literature regarding their potential collusion with anti-media populists (Tapsell, 2021).

### Study Framework

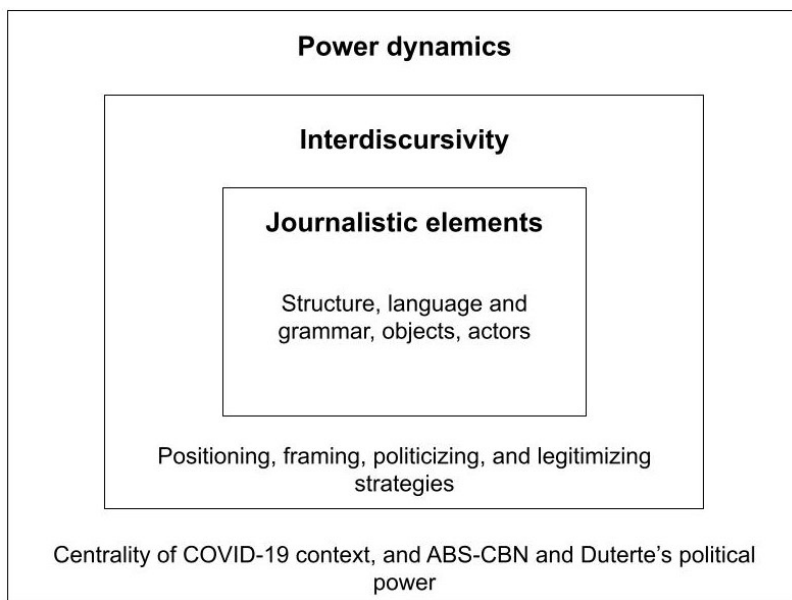
This study employed Fairclough’s Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). This framework involves: (1) the micro-level which concerns the text, (2) the meso-level or the discursive practices, and (3) the macro-level or the social and cultural context where the discursive practices are embedded (Fairclough, 1995, as cited in Sudajit-Apa, 2017).

In the micro-level, the journalistic elements of ABS-CBN news articles that cover Duterte’s public addresses on COVID-19 response were analyzed. Carvalho (2008) outlined a framework to characterize the elements of media texts. Factors such as structural analysis, construction of objects, the actors, and the language and grammar, were investigated in this study. These journalistic elements play a key role in the overall interpretation of the texts because the discursive strategies are implicated in the aforementioned elements (Carvalho, 2008).

After characterizing the journalistic elements in the micro-level, the meso-level of analysis sought to uncover the interdiscursive strategies. Interdiscursive strategies refer to how the textual content containing various elements, discourse, genre, or style are combined and structured to form a narrative (Fairclough, 2003; Jianguo, 2011). The interdiscursivity was dissected by looking into the framing, positioning, legitimizing, and politicizing strategies observed in ABS-CBN’s online news articles.

The macro-level is the layer in which discourses were used to reveal power dynamics through ideological formations in society. These formations were linked with the relevant social events during Duterte’s first major COVID-19 response up to the resumption of ABS-CBN’s TV broadcast operations. These social events were referenced to the date of the publication of the articles, which then allowed the researchers to discern whose power is being validated. Figure 1 presents the conceptual framework of the study.

Figure 1  
*Conceptual Framework*



*Note.* The micro, meso, and macro levels of Fairclough's CDA framework anchored the three main objectives of the study

## Methodology

This study analyzed 18 ABS-CBN online news articles on Duterte's public addresses, which were chosen through criterion purposive sampling. The articles selected were dated between March 09, 2020 (Duterte's first major response, where he formally declared the Philippines to be in the state of a public health emergency), until October 05, 2020 (the date of when the network was able to resume their TV broadcast operations through the Zoe Broadcasting Network).

The texts underwent two cycles of analysis — first-cycle coding methods and second-cycle coding methods, which were divided among the three layers of the CDA framework. The first-cycle coding involved 1) attribute 2) holistic 3) descriptive 4) values and 5) versus coding. During the first-cycle analysis, the researchers identified the basic attributes of each article gathered. This cycle encompassed both the micro-level and the meso-level of the framework. In the attribute coding phase, the researchers input the descriptive attributes of each online news article such as the headline, date, voice, actors, and objects mentioned in the discourse. Through holistic

coding, the researchers identified the article's theme by the coded objects discussed in the article.

The meso-level coding started with values coding, a more in-depth analysis of the content in the articles. Values coding highlighted the biases in media, which were identified by the perspectives validated in the articles and the forms of power embedded in representations. Moving forward, versus coding was used to identify the individuals, groups, and institutions that are in direct conflict with each other.

The second-cycle coding guide aimed to “develop a sense of categorical, thematic, conceptual, and/or theoretical organization” (Saldaña, 2015, p.149, as cited in Reynolds, 2018), through 1) pattern coding and 2) longitudinal coding. During pattern coding, the researchers generalized codes into the dimensions that represent the dominant discursive strategies of the articles to be examined. It is also in pattern coding that the researchers identified the recurring frames and overarching themes. Longitudinal coding surfaced the dynamics revealed in the interactions between Duterte and ABS-CBN within the COVID-19 pandemic.

### Results and Discussion

The journalism of the media giant ABS-CBN Corporation was presented in the online news articles about President Duterte's COVID-19 speeches. In this section, the findings of the study will be discussed starting from the micro-level, wherein the journalistic elements of ABS-CBN were identified. In the meso-level, the interdiscursivity of the articles were thematized as guided by the framing, positioning, politicizing, and legitimizing strategies of the media. Finally, the macro level in the CDA framework involved the centrality of COVID-19 as a context in the political economic analysis of the relationship of Duterte and ABS-CBN.

#### Micro-level: Journalistic elements

The surface level details of the article (i.e., headline, actors, and objects) were identified in the micro-level analysis. Duterte is the main actor of the articles as it is one of the criteria for choosing the sample. Other government officials such as Sen. Christopher “Bong” Go, Department of Health (DOH) Secretary Francisco Duque III, Vice President Leni Robredo, and frontliners were among the other coded actors. Institutions and organizations such as the DOH, PhilHealth, and National Bureau of Investigation (NBI) are also included. The most prominent themes that were coded as the objects of the data consisted of public health, corruption, government funding, economy and livelihood, national security, and criticism against other government officials. Among these themes emerged conflicts between in-groups and out-

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groups. The in-groups are individuals or groups belonging in the authority, while the out-groups are deemed to be those who struggle and fight for societal change against those in positions of power (Saldaña, 2015). The characterized surface level attributes of the texts helped in the analysis of the interdiscursive strategies in the meso-level.

*Table 1. Surface Level Details of the Articles*

Headline	Date	Actors	Objects
“Cut red tape”: Duterte wants fast delivery of medical supplies in fight vs COVID-19	March 24, 2020	Rodrigo Duterte Government officials/LGUs DOTr	Public health Government funding Transportation*
Duterte: “Huwag kayong matakot, may pera ako”	March 31, 2020	Rodrigo Duterte DND Sec. Lorenzana DILG Sec. Año Sec. Carlito Galvez	Public health National security
Duterte warns local officials against using COVID-19 crisis for own gain	March 31, 2020	Rodrigo Duterte LGUs	Government funding Corruption Public health
Duterte offers P30,000 reward for info on local officials stealing COVID-19 aid	May 5, 2020	Rodrigo Duterte Government officials Harry Roque	Government funding Corruption
Duterte warns businessmen against profiteering in time of pandemic	May 5, 2020	Rodrigo Duterte NBI businessmen Iloilo Rep. Jannette Garin Sen. Panfilo Lacson	Public health Economy and livelihood
“Bili kaagad tayo”: Duterte hopes coronavirus vaccine ready by 2021	May 20, 2020	Rodrigo Duterte scientists Moderna chief executive Stéphane Bancel US government	Public health Government funding Vaccination program*



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Headline	Date	Actors	Objects
“You are not mercenaries”: Duterte thanks military officers for service amid COVID-19 crisis	May 20, 2020	Rodrigo Duterte PNP-AFP DOJ NBI DND	Government funding
“I take full responsibility”: Duterte defends DOH over allegedly overpriced PPEs, medical equipment row	May 26, 2020	Rodrigo Duterte Medical frontliners DOH DOH Sec. Duque DBM IATF	Public health
Duterte confident China will be first to come up with COVID-19 vaccine	May 28, 2020	Rodrigo Duterte China WHO	National security
COVID-19 is still here’: Duterte again warns public vs going outside amid pandemic	Jun 16, 2020	Rodrigo Duterte DOH Sec. Duque	Public health Distance learning
“Ang utos ko, upakan mo”: Duterte says communists ‘number 1’ threat to Philippines	June 23, 2020	Rodrigo Duterte communists Abu Sayyaf NPA	National security
“Wag na tayo magsisihan”: Duterte says stop coronavirus pandemic blame game	June 23, 2020	Rodrigo Duterte DENR Sec. Ci-matu Sen. Bong Go Office of the Ombudsman	Public health
“Hulihin talaga”: Duterte asks cops to be stricter in implementing COVID-19 restrictions	July 21, 2020	Rodrigo Duterte PNP LGUs public	Public health Criminal order*
Not joking: Duterte says ‘gaas’ can be used as disinfectant	July 31, 2020	Rodrigo Duterte Harry Roque DOH CDC/WHO/ US Nat’l Public Health Institute	Public health

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Headline	Date	Actors	Objects
Duterte says to prioritize 'poorest of the poor' for COVID-19 immunization	July 31, 2020	Rodrigo Duterte public military DOF Sec. Dominguez	Public health Vaccination program*
Duterte to Robredo after pandemic suggestions: "You'll just destroy government"	August 25, 2020	Rodrigo Duterte Leni Robredo Salvador Panelo	Public health Criticism against other government of- ficials*
"Nakahanap na ako ng pera": Duterte says funds available for COVID-19 vaccine	October 14, 2020	Rodrigo Duterte military frontliners	Public health Vaccination program* Government funding
"Walang sindikato": Duterte says Bayanihan Act funds spent wisely	October 05, 2020	Rodrigo Duterte PhilHealth NBI	Government funding Corruption Economy

*\*Other objects that emerged outside predetermined codes*

### Meso-level: Interdiscursivity

The second layer of analysis or the meso-level includes the discursive practices involved in the production of texts (Sudajit-Apa, 2017; Janks, 1997). This includes the in-group and out-group, the conflicts existing between each other, as well as the process of inclusion and exclusion in the reportage of the ABS-CBN news articles. These are necessary variables to reckon the depth of the themes found in the text.

### ***Positioning Strategy: Depiction of Duterte as Rewarder and Punisher***

Positioning strategy is the construction of actors in relation to the issues present in the articles. The actors were classified into either in-group or out-group members. In-groups are usually individuals or institutions that belong to authority and have the power to shape the media discourse (Saldaña, 2015). Most articles presented Duterte as the subject, which accordingly, makes him the reference point that determines the in-group and out-group. Prominent political figures like Francisco Duque, the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) or the allies of Duterte were also coded as part of the in-group, since they function in the government under the set of beliefs and policies of Duterte. Out-groups are defined as those fighting for societal change or those contended against the identified in-groups (Reynolds, 2018;

Saldaña, 2015). The identified out-groups in this study included corrupt local government officials, opposition members like VP Leni Robredo, and communist groups.

The narratives of out-groups were barely recognizable among the chosen articles since most of the texts were only based on the statements of Duterte. However, Duterte's criticisms or orders to punish out-group actors were apparent in the reports. There were instances when Duterte threatened local authorities with detention if they were caught doing corruption activities. In one of Duterte's public addresses, he exclaimed, "*Mahirap na nga, ikaw may trabaho ka na, kagawad ka ah, p\*t\*ng\*n\* kukunin mo pa 'yong pera ng mahihirap.*" [They are already poor, you have a job already as a Kagawad, son of a b\*\*, but you're still stealing money from them] (ABS-CBN, 2020a, para. 6). Alongside this statement, he called for a mandate to reward P30,000 to citizens who would report misconduct of officials in their district.

Duterte telling VP Leni Robredo, "You will just destroy [the] government" (Punzalan, 2020, para. 2), is also an illustration of Duterte's disregard towards the current opposition leader seated in the office. Furthermore, there were reports where Duterte warned the Communist Party of the Philippines and the New People's Army (CPP-NPA) as he believes that they "will place in jeopardy the democratic values the Filipinos have enjoyed for the longest time" (Agcaoili, 2020a, para. 5). Along with this statement were his explicit orders to assault the rebel groups and request to urgently institutionalize the Anti-Terror Bill. The punisher characteristic of Duterte is observed when out-group members are present in the narrative. The president uses profane language and abrasive warnings when people are considered a nuisance or do not conform to the policies under his administration.

In comparison to the recurring aggressive statements of Duterte to the out-groups, his sense of judgment shifts when people affiliated with him are involved in an act of indecency. Following the reports on the procurement of the overpriced personal protective equipment (PPEs) by DOH and the corruption scandal of PhilHealth, the president assured: "*gusto ko lang malaman ng sambayanang Pilipino na* [I just want to let Filipino people know that] I take full responsibility" (ABS-CBN, 2020c, para. 5). These issues involved Francisco Duque who was appointed by Duterte in 2017 (Cepeda, 2017). Duterte's remark on the controversy is his attempt to take the blame for the surfacing predicament committed by his ally.

The constant effort of Duterte to give recognition to those who bear a commendable service that meets his standards were also found in the articles. "*Kaya bilib ako. Saludo ako kung ginawa ninyo...*" [That is why I am amazed. I salute you for your job] (ABS-CBN, 2020d, para. 3). were some of the words he conveyed towards the military to affirm the armed forces

for their duty. Duterte's rewarder attributes manifest when the in-group actors are the ones he is addressing. He is argued to be a rewarder, in a sense that his statements would often consist of promising merits or even material incentives if people remain congruent to his orders.

### ***Framing Strategy: Reiteration of Duterte as Man-of-Action***

Framing strategies are defined as the classification of whether the actor, object, rhetoric, and other facts are either included or excluded in the news articles (Carvalho, 2008; Entman, 1993). Most of the COVID-19 related issues present in the articles reinforced Duterte's demeanor as a "man of action". The reports often pertained to what he ought to do as the head of the state, such as warning corrupt officials and exploitative businessmen. The theme that was most prevalent in the articles was Duterte as a leader with zero tolerance. Examples of statements that support this finding are "I will detain you" (Gutierrez, 2020, para. 6) and "*Kaya ang utos ko talaga sa Armed Forces, sa sundalo, upakan mo* [I command the Armed Forces, the soldiers, beat them up]" (Agcaoili, 2020a, para. 3), which Duterte declared in his speeches. Moreover, despite his detachment from government officials who were not his allies, Duterte still assured the public that he will do whatever it takes to do what is right as the president. ABS-CBN's online news articles highlighted the more positive aspects of Duterte's speeches, wherein he talks about the empowerment of his armed forces, his plans to strengthen ties with China, his updates regarding the country's vaccination program, and his pleas of trust from the public. In this regard, ABS-CBN fulfilled their role as a provider of information, while taking on a neutral stance. As a result, they failed to include the narratives of the people or groups in conflict with the Duterte administration (i.e., VP Leni Robredo, leftist groups). Respectively, the articles presented a lack of journalistic investigation, as they were merely reports of Duterte's speeches.

As frames present which part of the stories are highlighted, the important questions for media political analysis are whether frames promote or undermine democracy (McChesney, 2008). In the selected articles, Duterte is framed as a reassuring leader by highlighting the action-oriented policies of the government in response to the pandemic. This finding is connected to Kostopoulos' (2020) claim that analysis of how news is framed sheds light on the nature of media through a political economic approach.

### ***Politicizing Strategy: Depoliticization of Controversial In-groups***

Journalistic strategies were examined by two types of conflicts that emerged from the texts: direct and potential conflicts. Direct conflicts show Duterte as an explicit rewarder to in-groups and punisher to out-groups.

On the other hand, potential conflicts are those that appear to be indirect or implicit but still pose an implication on the socio-political environment. The types of conflicts further surface whether the news is politicized or depoliticized. The former refers to the incorporation of political ideologies (Carvalho, 2008), while the latter refers to the elimination of the political nature or status in a certain reality. Potential conflicts are usually discerned from topics that involve political actors, which the researchers posit as controversial in-groups. This includes China, Francisco Duque, Bong Go, and the military. They are deemed controversial in-groups because of their political status that were susceptible to public flak.

In an article mentioning China, for example, the country was presented as if it were an uncontroversial or value-free news item. It can be noted that China is the epicenter of the COVID-19 pandemic and is often associated with Duterte's peculiar foreign policy regarding issues of territorial sovereignty. However, the journalistic investigation of ABS-CBN was only limited to the presentation of China as an aide to the government's immunization plans. Additionally, the issues involving Bong Go and Francisco Duque during the pandemic were presented by ABS-CBN in a more lenient manner. The article emphasized Duterte's statement saying, "*Wag na lang tayo magsisihan kasi nandiyannarin 'yan* (COVID-19) [Stop blaming each other because [COVID-19] is there already]," (Agcaoili, 2020b, para. 1) referring to the public who were criticizing Bong Go's controversial "*Balik Probinsya*" project, a program which assists Filipinos who wish to relocate back to their provinces, and Francisco Duque's inadequate handling of the virus outbreak (Agcaoili, 2021). In that regard, depoliticization occurs by highlighting Duterte's *bayanihan* rhetoric over presenting facts that could potentially invoke criticism from the public.

Meanwhile, there has been explicit regard for the military by President Duterte. This is seen in the prioritization of the military over medical healthcare workers in the vaccination program. Despite the public's clamor against the militarized COVID-19 response, an article about vaccination priority states: "Soldiers and police officers will also undergo the treatment, so they can continue to serve at the frontlines. Tayo, kaming mga civilians, pwede tayo [last] [*Us civilians, we can be last*]" (ABS-CBN News, 2020e, para. 7-8). This article was written in October and there was a journalistic intervention done by ABS-CBN wherein it quoted Duterte's remark in July that the "Philippine military will be the 'implementing arm' of the immunization program" (Merez, 2020b, para. 1). ABS-CBN deliberately reinforced Duterte's glorification of the military in the battle against COVID-19. This peculiar journalistic intervention of ABS-CBN is discerned to be related to the depoliticization of controversial in-groups.

### ***Legitimizing Strategy: Construction of Duterte's overarching power***

Legitimation is the justification of a represented social action or current affairs covered in a news report in the narrative (van Leeuwen & Wodak, 1999). In this study, the presentation of Duterte as a dominant authority is the social action being legitimized. Two elements are found to be essential in this finding: the article's headline and the reader's positionality.

#### **Headline as a key element in news discourse.**

A key task in analyzing media discourse is to understand how the discursive strategies of each social actor are reproduced, challenged, or excluded (Carvalho, 2008). The headlines are key components of analysis because Duterte's portrayal as the main social actor is either emphasized or challenged. Headlines are one of the most manipulated news features, thus, journalists make captivating headlines to engross the audience (Kuiken et al., 2017; Janét et al., 2020).

The meso-analysis revealed that the active or passive tones of ABS-CBN's online news article headlines present themselves in a spectrum. Some articles may appear active, while at the same time exhibit passive tones. This then imposes the idea that some headlines are seen as "more active" than others. An example of a "more active" headline includes "Not joking: Duterte says 'gaas' can be used as disinfectant" (Merez, 2020c). The general theme for headlines with less active tones is that they do not use strong, resounding verbs, which can be illustrated in the headlines, "Nakahanap na ako ng pera": Duterte says funds available for COVID-19 vaccine (ABS-CBN News, 2020e)" and "Bili kaagad tayo": Duterte hopes coronavirus vaccine ready by 2021. (ABS-CBN News, 2020b)"

The use of strong or less compelling verbs is not the only factor in determining the tones of the headline; the quote that is attached to the rest of the headline also plays a key role. In an example, "Hulihin talaga": Duterte asks cops to be stricter in implementing COVID-19 restrictions," (Merez, 2020a). The article assumes both active and passive tones if the reader's disposition about Duterte is disregarded. This headline is a mere reiteration of the President's orders, but it can also be read as a journalistic frame to further a narrative, i.e., Duterte's militaristic solutions over medical ones.

The tone of the articles is determined by two factors: the kind of verb used to describe the events and the quote attached to the headline. The overarching tone is then determined by the reader's biases, prejudices, and political leaning. Findings therefore show that headlines with a more active sentence structure reinforce an anti-Duterte sentiment, while passive headlines or less active headlines reinforce a pro-Duterte sentiment.

**Positionality of the reader as a key dimension in interpretation.** Carvalho (2008) posits that in understanding the legitimation, the relations

between the news discourse and social actors, which in this study is Duterte, must be examined. Hence, we argue that the positionality of the reader, whether pro, anti, or neutral about Duterte, has an influence on the interpretation of the articles. Reading through the lens of the pro-Duterte stance reinforces the idea of Duterte as an authoritative and powerful leader that cares for his people. This notion is manifested in his demands for prompt actions on COVID-19 response, zero tolerance for corruption, and his pro-poor and anti-elitist discourse. Meanwhile, anti-Duterte judgment is more challenging to discern because of the active presentation of Duterte and the inverted pyramid nature of the news articles. Understanding how the articles proved and disproved the readers with anti-Duterte stance involved a more critical reading of the whole article. The principles employed in this reading is the comparison of the presentation of conflicts and the consideration of the objects that are relatively controversial in the Philippine context. The positionality of the researchers towards Duterte helped this critical reading.

For the neutral stance of reading, the main theme that surfaced is President Duterte's sense of effort in addressing the pandemic. The central idea in this reading is the presentation of the complexity of government as an institution and the various facets of the COVID-19 response vis-à-vis President Duterte's overarching power. The articles read in the neutral stance still reveal a display of power in two ways: 1) explicit through presentation of Duterte as a powerful and direct social actor who rewards and punishes and 2) implicit through the presentation of the limits of his power when confronted with political threats that may lead to public distrust.

Thus, the articles prove and disprove notions whether one is pro or anti-Duterte. This finding then unravels the apparent neutrality of ABS-CBN's online news articles. ABS-CBN's two-pronged strategy reveals this finding: the media company fulfills its role as a provider of information in the time of the pandemic while at the same time, keeping a neutral stance in their reportage of news and content. This strategy is arguably due to ABS-CBN's consideration of various stakeholders, namely, the public, the President, and the legislative body.

### **Macro-level: Power Dynamics**

The macro-level involves the analysis of the power relations purported by the encompassing findings constructed through ABS-CBN's journalism. This section discusses the implications of the context wherein the articles were written, which is during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the political nature of the two important actors in the battle of ABS-CBN for franchise renewal: the media giant and the President himself.

### *COVID-19 Pandemic as a Context*

The pandemic has been a critical and defining moment for the Duterte administration. The public relies heavily on the government to create policies and systems that would bring solutions to the health crisis. Instead, the crisis has unveiled the precariousness in the Philippine political system. The state insurer PhilHealth's corruption issue is a prime example of how the truth unfolds in times of crisis. In the month of August 2020, a whistleblower had accused PhilHealth of stealing 15 billion pesos from the Filipino people, allegedly through fraudulent schemes of their Interim Reimbursement Mechanism (Malindog-Uy, 2020, para. 11). During this time, news also broke out that Facebook had deleted numerous China-based troll accounts. This was met with threats from President Duterte to prohibit the use of Facebook in the Philippines; even going to the extent of accusing the social media network of aiding communist penetration in the country (Gutierrez & Mozur, 2020). It was later revealed that some of Duterte's military men had been managing troll accounts, with speculations arising that their intentions are to further push the militarized agenda of the Duterte administration. In relation, the critics have often dubbed the pandemic response as militarized, as Duterte's speeches were always characterized by his regard for the military. This is also evident in his prioritization of strictly imposed community lockdowns overseen by the police and military, over a medical response.

The pandemic is a matter of health and economic survival. People are exposed to information during the quarantine more than ever; the policies implemented by the government are subjected to magnified public scrutiny. Hence, the media plays an important role in a health crisis, wherein there is a criticality of information. The limitations of this role, as watchdog and source of information to the public, are however influenced by the power of the government.

The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed the continuous challenges and threats toward the media with the conviction of Rappler CEO Maria Ressa of libel, and the passage of the controversial Anti-Terrorism Bill. Maria Ressa's arrest stirred hefty conversations on the issues of decriminalization of libel, media censorship, and press freedom. Though the Palace has denied its connection towards the libel case, it can be noted that Rappler has been attacked by President Duterte for their criticisms of the administration. Shortly after, the controversial Anti-Terrorism Bill garnered controversy from the public because of its questionable policies regarding the media, freedom of speech, and human rights. Though the bill does not primarily touch on media censorship alone, there are implications that the media's critical role in reporting controversial news may be seen as an act of defiance.



These are the issues concerning the media that happened during ABS-CBN's battle for the renewal of their franchise.

### ***The seeming interdependence of ABS-CBN and Duterte***

In this study, we argue that the framing and overall journalistic strategies of the ABS-CBN play a crucial role in the various stakeholders' meaning-making of the government's efficacy in COVID-19 response. In an anxious climate, there is an impending lack of public trust on the part of the government. There is then a need for public validation so that the political capital of Duterte, as the head of the state, would be sustained. This shows that in some sense, the Duterte administration needs the country's biggest broadcast company to be an extension of the government's public relations. On the other hand, ABS-CBN needed the government's approval to stop their impending major business loss. More weight, however, is on ABS-CBN, because ABS-CBN's fate depended heavily on how those in power perceived their value and role.

ABS-CBN Corporation's CEO Carlo Katigbak's apology speech addressing their shortcomings to President Duterte proves how the network has gone an extra mile to send a message to the Congress and the public. In the apology, Katigbak cited Section 4 of the Fair Election Act allowing any broadcast of election propaganda by television or radio for or against a candidacy. Though it is within the corporation's discretion to air what they deem necessary, this act shows that they still are subjected to Duterte's overarching power.

ABS-CBN continued to provide information amidst the franchise renewal issue and the ongoing pandemic. Even so, it is imperative to understand that no text is innocent. While ABS-CBN tried to maintain their role as a watchdog, they also tried to keep their business going. With all eyes monitoring their every action, the network employed a strategy wherein the positioning of their news and content remained neutral.

### ***Rationalizing the Legitimacy of ABS-CBN***

The denial of franchise renewal of ABS-CBN was not the first time the network was shut down. The broadcasting network faced a similar predicament when Ferdinand Marcos' declared Martial Law in 1972. The first shutdown of the Lopez-owned properties happened after Marcos ordered the sequestering of the facilities of media networks (Elemia, 2020). Hence, the fall of Marcos' dictatorship gave rise to the iconic relevance of ABS-CBN—a symbol of democratic revival after the dark years of being suppressed. Exactly twenty-five years after former President Fidel V. Ramos

signed a law granting them a 25-year franchise, ABS-CBN experienced the same crisis of being forced to shut down under the Duterte regime.

Republic Act No. 7966 acknowledges the necessity for ABS-CBN's franchise in the country as the media giant provides avenues for public information, participation, and education. One of the representatives, Vilma Santos-Recto, filed a new franchise renewal bill in 2019, accompanied by an explanatory note arguing that ABS-CBN remains the "largest entertainment and media conglomerate in terms of revenue, operating income, net income, assets, equity, market capitalization, and [a] number of employees" (p. 2-3). This fact validates that the economic landscape of the Philippines will be jeopardized, considering that there are over 11,000 employees in the corporation (Punongbayan et. al, 2020), and that the country is already facing an economic crisis due to the pandemic (Rivas, 2021). Congress also emphasizes the reach of the network as a means of information and entertainment for people who reside in far-flung areas.

Despite efforts to express dissent and clamor on the necessity of ABS-CBN while in a pandemic, the government proceeded with sanctions lacking in thoughtful consideration. The rhetoric of *bayanihan* [a spirit of civic unity and cooperation among Filipinos] during crises as declared in the passage of "Bayanihan to Heal as One Law" does not align with the final decision of the Congress. Above all, Duterte as a state leader who continues to refute and stifle the credibility of the media, embodies characteristics of an authoritarian, masked as a populist leader. This further entails the significance to defend and protect the media's prestigious function in a democratic country.

### ***Rationalizing ABS-CBN's Shutdown***

Various violations of ABS-CBN Corporation were raised during the congressional franchise hearings. One of these is the network's alleged foreign ownership through its Philippine Depositary Receipts (PDR) (Buan, 2020). It was discovered that the foreign holders of PDRs own 62% of the total shares of ABS-CBN Corp. Other issues were the company's failure to regularize employees, and the dual citizenship of the Chairman. The media giant's tax avoidance was also raised which was then debunked by the Bureau of Internal Revenue.

Nevertheless, Duterte's expression of his personal issues against ABS-CBN is an important pretext to rationalize the network's predicament. It can be noted that Duterte expressed firm statements that he will see to it that the network will not have its franchise renewed (Ranada, 2019). The relationship between Duterte and the institution who decided on the fate of ABS-CBN is also exhibited by the supermajority composition of the House (Corrales, 2019).

In a recent study examining Duterte's populism and media crackdowns in the country, it was revealed that "the divide in the Philippines media ownership landscape has strengthened the ability of the Duterte administration to crack down on those companies whom he sees as critics and justify these crackdowns as related to professional mismanagement" (Tapsell, 2021, p.12). Thus, Duterte's populist character and friend-or-foe dynamic (Tapsell, 2021) cultivates a polarized discourse regarding the rationale of ABS-CBN's shutdown. Some believe that the shutdown is the materialization of Duterte's effort to stifle press freedom just as he singled out Philippine Daily Inquirer and Rappler that were critical of the drug war. On the other hand, some people firmly believe that the issue is not an attack on press freedom as the decision of Congress is just a consequence of their misconduct.

### *The Public as the Invisible and the Powerful*

The centrality of the public's validation of the government during the pandemic is two-fold: 1) the collective experience of health and economic crisis intensifies scrutiny and 2) the relatively longer exposure on media increases information retention rate. In this regard, we argue that the public remembers the news in a relatively longer term by associating events together, which as a result, empowers them to weave an amplified political narrative. The Grand Mañanita and the Manila Bay beautification program — events highly criticized by the public during the pandemic — shows the public's power to construct a rhetoric that can be weaponized against prominent political actors and the political system. These events are resounding to the public because of their perceived and tangible relevance: the violation of laws and the waste of public funds. The public then shows a voice and dictates what is appropriate, just, and moral through various forms of mockery, condemnation, and dissent.

This only proclaims the centrality of objects of discussion regarding what triggers the public most. The power relations sought in the analysis of the macrostructures of texts is figured out to be reliant on the discourses of the public. The public is revealed to be the invisible political actor behind the ABS-CBN's journalism. The analysis showed that the media giant is cognizant of the objects and themes that usually receive flak against the Duterte administration. Their journalistic presentation of conflict is then turned in a different manner.

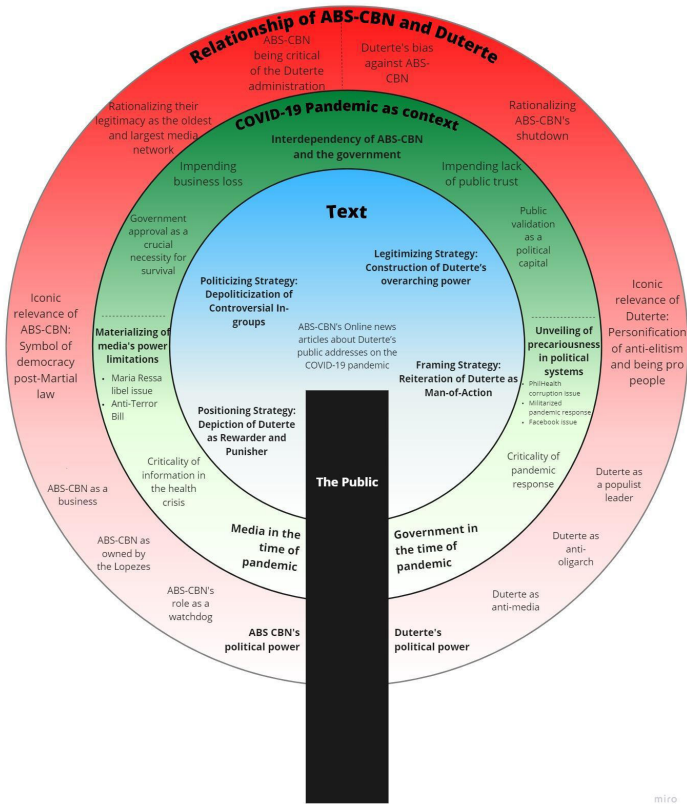
The study posits that ABS-CBN, even on the brink of survival, did not bother to be in a head-on battle against the administration through their journalism. Their coverage of Duterte's speeches about the COVID-19 response have been found to be in a neutral stance. However, this neutrality

is argued to be a strategy as it does not aim to directly please the boss by employing explicit rent-seeking journalism techniques. This is an essential truth in understanding the dynamic between the two as their powers are not intrinsic and do not exist in a vacuum. After all, the people sustain, negotiate, and challenge the political power of Duterte and ABS-CBN Corporation through currencies of public trust and ratings.

The diagram of the findings in this study is illustrated with that of the semblance ABS-CBN's logo, mimicking its three-layered sphere symbol along with the colors representing each layer. The blue color represents the text, which personifies the neutrality in ABS-CBN's journalistic texts and the portrayal of Duterte as a strongman. The second layer, COVID-19 pandemic as a context, is represented by the color green because of its symbolism of rebirth or life (Parikh, 2013), and the need to sustain it. The last layer in red shows the conflicting relationship of ABS-CBN and Duterte at the height of a pandemic milieu. The gradients in colors display the hierarchy of nuanced representations and intensification of concepts.

The black bar in the middle shows the divide between the two actors. It is in the text and the interdependency between the two actors where they seem to merge, as it is represented by their need for each other. The left side of the diagram illustrates the side of ABS-CBN, while Duterte and his government are advocated on the right. The shape of the logo is a symbolism for a signal tower used in broadcast communication mediums. There is power in who gets to use these airwaves. Therefore, the relevance of this to our study is its parallelism in journalistic texts, where there is power in the positionality, themes, and validation of ideas. The journalistic texts constructed during the fight of ABS-CBN for franchise renewal, as influenced by the active audience, send a message about the Philippine political system.

Figure 2  
Diagram of findings



## Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic and ABS-CBN's relationship with Duterte was analyzed through the evaluation of the social events coinciding the franchise renewal issues. Results were framed within the implications of their role as a media and as a head of government. The public reveals to have an amplified call that can be weaponized against political actors and the political system. It is in this concept that the study drew upon: the criticality of public validation for the government and the media. The crisis has unveiled precariousness in political systems which necessitate the government's protection of its political capital. This shows that because the pandemic response is a defining moment for the Duterte administration, it needs the media as an ally. This strengthens their narrative of pursuing a

morality against the media giant as Duterte has threatened to shut down ABS-CBN long before the height of the franchise issue.

Nevertheless, the interdependence of media and the government is illusionary. There is more weight of dependence on the side of the ABS-CBN as a business entity that needs government approval for survival. During the network's franchise renewal issue, they were cognizant that their reportage of Duterte in relation to the COVID-19 response is an opportunity to "play the cards." However, the analysis of texts revealed that the use of strategies can both prove and disprove the people who either support or antagonize President Duterte. There is then an apparent neutrality on their reportage as exhibited by their journalistic techniques. Remaining in the spirit of the critical tradition, we argue that no text is innocent; hence, this seeming neutrality is a strategy.

This study unravels that the seemingly innocent texts are reflections of truths about our society. The findings reveal the invisible, but powerful role of the public in the relationship of two important social institutions — the government and the media. We believe that these findings would warrant the readers to not just be passive consumers of news, but critical audiences of these media artefacts. We desire that the constant challenging of the texts by the scholars in the critical tradition would lead the public to evaluate their own political choices and be better participants of a democratic society.

The critical analysis of this historical watershed is an essential insight towards Philippine broadcast media development. Thus, the findings of this study help in building the knowledge that ought to be institutionalized in the Media and Information Literacy (MIL) curriculum. MIL teachers would benefit from the findings in a way that they become the forefront in making these concepts accessible to a larger audience.

For further analysis, we suggest doing interviews with people affiliated with ABS-CBN to better understand and solidify the presumed stance of the company. Moreover, for a better assessment of the journalistic intervention in news text (Carvalho, 2008) in an online mediated set-up, the researchers suggest cross-referencing other online news articles from different media companies by utilizing a comparative-synchronic analysis.

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### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The researchers would like to extend their utmost gratitude to Associate Professors Julienne Thesa Y. Baldo-Cubelo, PhD and Jonalou SJ. Labor, PhD of the UP CMC's Department of Communication Research. The success of this study would be impossible without their mentoring and encouragement all throughout the fulfilling research journey.

To Giselle Manuel, we deeply appreciate the time you have given us for the improvement of our manuscript. To Diego Fodulla, your help during the initial conceptualization of this study gave us the drive to do better. To our CommRes batchmates, we thank you for your unwavering support. To our families and friends, thank you for being with us on our highs and lows, for listening to all our frustrations, and for celebrating with us in our successes. Your patience, understanding, and encouragement kept our morale high, for that we cannot thank you enough.

### ABOUT THE AUTHORS

The lead author of this study, Sarah Faith D. Rulloda (sdrulloda@up.edu.ph), together with the corresponding authors, Mary Cielou B. Garganera, Amiel Loïc C. Pazcoguín, Chloe Therese B. Rodriguez, and Luise Gayle C. Sangalang are BA Communication Research students from the University of the Philippines Diliman. This study was awarded as the best undergraduate paper in the National Communication Research Conference (NCRC) 2021. The team's other brainchild titled, "Shoot them dead": Influence of the Headlines and Captions of Online News Articles towards Comments on Facebook," was also a finalist for the said competition.

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Sarah is interested in communication as culture, political communication, critical theory, and new media studies. She is currently working on virtual communities. Cielou's communication research interests include the new media, film & television, and feminist studies. Amiel's areas of interest include internet culture, new media, and sports communication. Chloe is interested in research topics about political communication, new media, and feminist studies. Luise's research interests include gender studies, cultural communication, fandom studies and new media.