

FORWORD

Foreword Elena E. Pernia, PhD

This issue of the PCS Review comes at the right time. The coronavirus pandemic has put the importance of science communication front and center.

We are now almost two years into the COVID-19 pandemic and, over this time, we in the Philippines have experienced some of the deepest lows. Our economy plummeted -16.9% in second quarter of 2020, the deepest contraction in contemporary Philippine history. Our poor health system capacity became even more obvious when the pandemic hit, not just overburdening our hospitals but also decimating the ranks of the best and brightest in their fields. And while the battle against the novel coronavirus and its variants was on, another kind of battle needed to be waged against the COVID infodemic.

Without a doubt, science- and evidenced-based information have been available in various communication and media channels, but COVID-19 literacy remains low across all sexes, age groups, and regions. Good COVID-19 communication was, and has been, lacking.

In the Philippines, and in other countries, there was mixed messaging about COVID-19 and a huge gap in communication among the public, the government, and the health institutions. In such a scenario of confusion, large numbers of people took to online and social media to source updates on COVID-19. However, even well-meaning people spread misinformation, inaccurate claims, erroneous warnings, and false cures or remedies as treatment for COVID-19. The social media helped and hurt the dissemination of correct information.

Monitoring of social media conversations in the Philippines during 2020 has revealed a mix of mostly negative emotions triggered by the pandemic and the consequent lockdowns. Of these emotions, anxiety was the most dominant, set off by dissatisfaction with the government's handling of the pandemic, demands for concrete solutions, among others. It was not uncommon to see profanities and swear words addressed at the government for its inconsistencies. Fear was likewise manifest in feelings of loss: the death of a loved one, the loss of a job, closures of businesses, schools, churches, playgrounds, and not being able to socialize, to attend gatherings, or even step out of the house.

COVID-19 threatened not just the physical health, but also the mental health and wellness, of many Filipinos: a phenomenon experienced by people in other countries. From a communication perspective, it has become clear that another important objective of COVID-19 communication should be to provide support to those who face the unprecedented travails wrought by the pandemic.

At this point, I wish to share some findings and recommendations from our own COVID-19 communication study¹, that are complementary to the overall theme and the specific articles in this issue of PCS Review.

To conquer the fear and anxiety wrought by the uncertainties and myths about COVID-19 (i.e., its symptoms, transmission, effects, and prevention), messages need to be anchored on the themes of hope and love. As noted in our forthcoming report: “The root of fear is the unknown, the unpredictable, and the thing one cannot understand. Fear should not be the driving force when making decisions because it will lead to erratic or short-sighted decision-making on one hand, or indecision on the other hand. Love has been identified as the opposite of fear because it epitomizes certainty, predictability, as well as the intrinsic drive and value to protect the family. That kind of love is the emotion that will lead to action.”

Moreover, we have found that several COVID-19 vaccination campaigns have started to use popular and conversational language with catchy phrases, thereby getting some traction in terms of COVID-19 vaccine awareness. However, these campaigns lack one more ingredient to nudge more Filipinos to reduce their vaccine hesitancy and make that desired action of vaccination, i.e., their conversion into narratives. Filipinos enjoy story-telling and -listening, and it is this narrative tradition that has afforded us the means to create, re-create, and negotiate realities and identities.

Because Filipinos connect emotionally to the messages embedded in stories, the culturally-appropriate genre to build vaccine confidence and instill healthy behaviors related to COVID-19 is the narrative. Narratives anchored on love resonate among Filipinos, which is one reason we developed a feel-good and emotional-but-science-based campaign and titled it: “*Dahil mahal ko kayo, magpapabakuna ako laban sa COVID-19*” (Because I love you, I will get vaccinated against COVID-19). Filipino values — that reflect love,

¹ “Communicating COVID-19 in Post Quarantine Philippines”, funded by the Philippine Center for Health Research and Development (PCHRD) of the Department of Science and Technology (DOST) of the Philippines, was conducted from October 2020 to May 2021. The campaign, messages and materials were designed through a process of consultation with a Technical Panel of health/medical experts and backed by quantitative and qualitative research data from KIIs, telephone survey, social listening, and content and textual analyses of social media posts.

care, and responsibility for our family and which extends to the virtue of *bayanihan* — formed the framework of our message development. These core values drive the desired responses, i.e., to get vaccinated against COVID-19, to encourage others to get vaccinated too, and to continue healthy behaviors after vaccination.

Without meaning to sound like a premature optimist, I believe that there will be a proverbial rainbow after the country's stormy struggles with COVID-19. Good communication, that considers individual and community sensitivities while maintaining the credibility and comprehensiveness of the message, will play a vital role as we approach that new reality.



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