

# THE PHILIPPINE NEWS AGENCY'S REPORTING ON PHILIPPINE TOURISM DURING THE FIRST TRIMESTER OF THE COVID-19 QUARANTINE

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## **ABSTRACT**

*The study examined all 44 articles under the Tourism and Travel category in the Philippine News Agency (PNA) website (www.pna.gov.ph) which were released between March 16 and July 15, 2020. The objective was to determine the sources used and the way they relate to the manner of reporting on the said theme at a time when people are advised to stay home due to COVID-19. Through content analysis, the study found that during the first trimester of COVID-19 in the Philippines, the PNA used mostly government sources that produced mostly positive reporting. Non-government sources were marginalized. However, the articles were more propaganda than news, contrary to the name it carries. The articles showed that the PNA advanced more the interest of the government that was keen on promoting local tourism even before community quarantine was imposed on the whole country and limiting the diversity of sources that could stimulate public discussion that is necessary for democracy to thrive..*

## **KEYWORDS**

*Philippine News Agency, Travel, Tourism, COVID-19, Propaganda*

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Laslo [1] of the National Broadcasting Corporation of the US reported that newsrooms were already suffering from the collapse of the US economy before COVID-19 became a pandemic. The pandemic worsened unemployment in the US and global recession. As a result, newsrooms are likely to shut down. This would have negative consequences on the quarantined public's access to news at a time when they are most crucial. In this scenario, only government-funded news outlets will likely survive. Provided these outlets operate following the gold standard of news production, the dominance of these organizations may not pose a problem. What happens when they follow agenda contrary to the public good?

Travel and tourism were the hardest hit sectors when the COVID-19 pandemic erupted [2]. It was reported that some airlines would go bankrupt and the International Air Transport

Association predicted that the said industry will lose at least 314 billion USD if it fails to consolidate [3]. The Philippines, according to Camus [4], experienced “the single largest layoff in the domestic aviation business since the new coronavirus disease (COVID-19) emerged early this year”. The Air Carriers Association of the Philippines expressed that the three leading airlines require a bailout from the government [5]. The Philippines stands to lose 4 billion USD this year due to COVID-19 [6].

In an attempt to arrest the 35% revenue loss [7] faced by the travel industry in the first quarter, the Department of Tourism started promoting local tourism even before the lifting of the community quarantine [8]. Amid the beginnings of the promotional campaign, however, news of a fireman with COVID-19 visiting Boracay led to the firing of the fire chief [9]. This put the dangers that await local tourists. Similarly, this put President Duterte in a sensitive situation given that he started promoting local tourism as early as February amid COVID-19 fears [10]. A travel survey, however, indicated the belief that Filipino leisure travelers may be the key to the recovery of local tourism [11].

A study on the contribution of travel on the spread of pandemics revealed that frequent travel by plane increases the rate of spread of infection during a pandemic [12]. This finding is not new in that “one important factor why the Spanish Flu spread so quickly and so extensively was through modern transportation, which at the beginning of the 20th century offered global coverage” [13]. They further added that the efficiency of transportation is directly related to the efficiency of an infecting vector. Specifically, “the velocity conferred by transportation systems for long-distance travel is superior to the incubation time of many flu variants” (para. 6). The flag carrier Philippine Airlines offered “distancing seats” starting July to help reduce the risk of infection during the flight [14]. It has yet to be seen whether plane passengers will find the said seats convincing enough. The different airlines expressed that despite encouraging passengers to take a flight it will be a challenge [15].

The Philippine News Agency (PNA), the media arm of the Duterte administration, provides information releases that are at the service of the government. As an ideological state apparatus (ISA), it is expected to try to co-opt the public to give consent and support to the programs of government. In the case of air travel, its key role is not so much about convincing airlines to follow safety protocols mandated by the government but in providing information that would likely encourage the travel of the public. That said, this study assumes that the PNA is at the mercy of the state and is more loyal to it than to the Filipino public that the government seeks to control. Hence, this paper attempted to determine the extent the PNA serves the promotion of tourism, sought by Duterte himself, in the first trimester of the community quarantine period.

## 1.1 Review of Literature

**Propaganda Studies.** The interest in propaganda arose between World War I (1914–1918) and the onset of World War II (1941–1945) [16] primarily because supporters of the democratic system felt it will endanger democracy when abused. Collins wrote, “In intellectual, political, and social senses, propaganda became the subject of protracted study and deliberation concerning how best to understand its various incarnations in relation to democratic capitalism” (para. 1). Eventually, mass propaganda became standard practice in marketing, Collins added. While acceptable in the business field, the government engaged in propaganda to achieve social

control remains a subject of critique. From the critical standpoint, media used for propaganda purposes reeks of Louis Althusser's ISA (ideological state apparatus), defined as "institutions and systems that legitimate and reproduce the state, above all by producing consent" [17]. According to Brennen [18], "Althusser's understanding of freedom as an ideological creation not only privileges the role of ideology in the construction of social relationships, but also calls into question the complex interplay between media, society, and freedom." That said, the study of media as an ISA has become a staple in media studies, particularly those that make use of critical theory.

### **Government Ownership of Media.**

While democratic societies such as the Philippines are more used to media being controlled by private interests rather than the government, the Philippines has long-operated PTV or People's Television Network Inc. (PTNI), a television entity that has operated for 40 years. It describes itself as "the country's premier source of government news and information... mandated by virtue of RA (Republic Act) 7306, as amended by RA 10390" [19]. It claims that it "continues to have a strong broadcast presence through its bureaus and on-air and off-air stations across the country" (para. 7). Historically, PTV 4 occupied the privately owned and the largest broadcast network in the Philippines during the Martial Law period. Since the return of the ABS-CBN post-EDSA Revolution, however, PTV has never outperformed the two large media companies, making the broadcast industry essentially a duopoly [20]. The Duterte administration is suspected to have orchestrated the non-renewal of ABS-CBN's franchise through the House of Representatives [21]. PNA serves as the official web-based new bureau of the government [22]. It also uses both Facebook and Twitter to disseminate information to the public.

The Pigouvian emphasis on public interest support government ownership of media because the information is a public good, has relatively low marginal costs. It can counter media companies that protect the interest of the ruling classes provided it is less biased, more complete, and has more accurate information not given by the latter [23]. These three arguments served as the launchpad of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). The preference for public choice asserts that "a government-owned media outlet would distort and manipulate information to entrench the incumbent politicians, preclude voters and consumers from making informed decisions, and ultimately undermine both democracy and markets" [23] by failing to supply alternative views to the public. Hence, studies on media ownership are concerned with issues of media pluralism and diversity [24]. Studies on political economy investigate the "power relationships between politics, mediation, and economics" [25]. A study revealed how a single TV station significantly mediates between a country's ruling bloc and the governing classes through the creation and maintenance of hegemony through the granting of licenses for station operation and regulation and advertising, consequently becoming a powerful political actor "distorting, suppressing, and promoting information according to its own interests and those of the class fraction it represents" [26]. It is in the same light that the PNA will be investigated in this paper.

**Public Information.** Media inform the public about events they do not have direct knowledge of or experience in [27]. The study of Happer and Philo revealed that "media shape public debate in terms of setting agendas and focusing public interest on particular subjects" [27]. In the case of government entrenched in scandal or controversy, the said finding would potentially put at risk

the conduct of public debate, a core concept in democracy [28]. Whether debate or the presentation of contrary attitudes, beliefs, and attitudes on the issue concerning government is muted, the PNA will be revealed by the quality of sources of its articles. Should muting of the public debate be found, it indicates that it subverts democracy at the core “for without free discussion, particularly on political issues, no public education or enlightenment, so essential for the proper functioning and execution of the processes of responsible government, is possible” [28]. This implies that investigating PNA’s role in muting public discussion is crucial in sustaining democracy.

## **1.2 Study Framework**

The Propaganda Model of Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky posits that the public is manipulated and their attitudes are shaped when structures of power filter out the news to “marginalize dissent, and allow the government and dominant private interests (in this case travel capitalists) to get their messages across to the public” [29]. Instead of disseminating news, the media company intends to sell by misshaping and reforming the news from its original form. In the case of PNA, the filter that this study is concerned about is its source. The Propaganda Model states that for the media company to flourish or survive it has to keep its source in mind and delighted. Whether the customer of PNA is its sources or the readers it seeks to influence and co-opt, ‘customer delight’ is defined as the emotional bond that is established between the brand and its buyers [30]. This paper sought to surface PNA's sources, and by doing so, reveal the interest that it protects through its articles.

## **1.3 Statement of the Problem**

This paper determined the sources of PNAs articles during the first trimester of the COVID-19 period of the Duterte administration, particularly concerning Philippine tourism. Specifically, it answered the following questions: (1) What is the monthly distribution of articles on Philippine tourism across the first trimester of the COVID-19 quarantine period?; (2) What is the monthly distribution of PNA articles according to the following source categories: (a) Government sources only; (b) Dominantly government sources; (c) Equal government and non-government sources; (d) Dominantly non-government sources; and (e) Non-government sources only?; (3) What is the monthly distribution of PNA articles according to the following manner of presentation: (a) Positive; (b) Neutral; and (c) Negative?; and (4) How does the quality of sources influence the manner of presentation of Philippine tourism during the first trimester of the COVID-19 quarantine period?

## **2. METHODOLOGY**

The study used online data mining to answer the questions above. By going through the archives of PNA, particularly between March 16, 2020, and July 15, 2020, the first trimester of the COVID-19 period of the Duterte administration, when the travel industry was put at a standstill, the study derived 44 articles related to Philippine tourism under a cluster of articles classified as “Travel and Tourism” found in the PNA site on July 16, 2020. While doing content analysis, the paper identified the sources of each article and placed it in a matrix of analysis that indicated whether an article produced positive, negative, or neutral messaging about Philippine tourism. In particular, the statements that deliberately mentioned a source or sources were extracted, and consequently, they were analyzed as presenting either positive (given the numerical value of 1),

negative (given a numerical value of -1) or neutral (given a value of 0). The total of the scores given to each article suggested the overall messaging score. Afterward, the scores per month were analyzed vis-à-vis its sources (government only, dominantly government, equal government and non-government, dominantly non-government, and non-government only) and the collation of findings per month produced the overall findings on the articles of the PNA during the period.

### 3. RESULTS

#### 3.1. Monthly distribution of articles on Philippine tourism across the first trimester

The content analysis of the articles uploaded by PNA during the selected period shows a slow increase in the number of articles within the selected period. The number has almost doubled in the four months despite the number of infections rising to almost 58,850 with a daily infection on the said day reaching 1,392 [31] on July 15, 2020. During the same period, the travel and tourism industry ceased operation and seeking government assistance to help mitigate their losses [5]. This may have stimulated efforts by the Department of Tourism to fast track its efforts to create an impression that local travel could be made safe provided that minimum health protocols are followed. To this, Philippine Airlines offered ‘distancing seats’. Acknowledging that even while airline companies abide by the said guidelines, the greater task is to encourage the public to return to travelling, even if only local. The numbers suggest that the PNA has doubled its efforts, setting its sights on the return of domestic air travel on June 3, initially scheduled on June 8, 2020 [32].

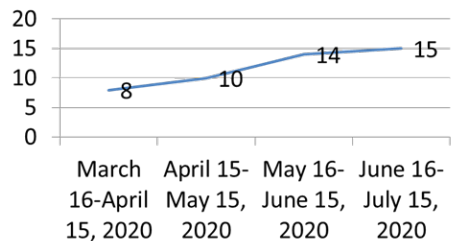


Figure 1. Distribution of PNA articles across the first trimester of the COVID-19 period

#### 3.2. Monthly distribution of articles on Philippine tourism according to the source of information and manner of presentation

Table 1 shows that across all four months, the number of articles with exclusively government sources that were positively presenting Philippine tourism was continuously increasing. It has more than quadrupled in four months. The increase is echoed when the number includes articles that were neutral to Philippine tourism. That said, data reveal that the increase in the number of articles using exclusively government sources is directly related to the overall increase in articles (shown in Figure 1). Most of the articles present Philippine tourism positively and overshadow neutral and negative presentations. As the months pass there is an increasing dependence on government sources only when presenting information about Philippine tourism. There were only two articles that used sources that were dominantly from the government. It only happened in the first month and was never repeated in the following three months. This indicates that there seems to be no need to present non-government sources when government sources are already

present. The inclusion of non-government sources did not challenge the positive presentation of Philippine tourism in PNA articles (see Table 2).

Table 3 shows that the use of equal numbers of government and non-government sources still leads to articles that present Philippine tourism positively. The table shows that only one article showed neutral reporting. No negative presentations could be found. If any, it should be noted that using non-government sources have not changed the tone of presentation. More and more, it can be observed that there is very little effort done to achieve a balance in sources. Knowing that there are 44 articles in total and there are only two articles (5%), at most, that tried to achieve a balance in the choice of sources, suggests that the use of non-government sources is not standard practice in PNA

**Table 1. Monthly distribution of PNA articles according to Government Sources Only**

<b>Period Covered</b>	<b>Number of Articles positive to Philippine Tourism</b>	<b>Number of Articles neutral to Philippine Tourism</b>	<b>Number of Articles negative to Philippine Tourism</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
March 16-April 15, 2020	2	1	0	3	37.5
April 15- May 15, 2000	4	1	0	5	50.0
May 16-June 15, 2020	7	3	1	11	79.0
June 16-July 15, 2020	9	3	0	12	80.0
Total	22	8	1	31	
Percentage	71.0	26.0	3.0		

**Table 2. Monthly distribution of PNA articles according to Dominantly Government Sources**

<b>Period Covered</b>	<b>Number of Articles positive to Philippine Tourism</b>	<b>Number of Articles neutral to Philippine Tourism</b>	<b>Number of Articles negative to Philippine Tourism</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
March 16-April 15, 2020	2	0	0	2	25.0
April 15- May 15, 2000	0	0	0	0	0
May 16-June 15, 2020	0	0	0	0	0
June 16-July 15, 2020	0	0	0	0	0
Total	2	0	0	2	
Percentage	100.0	0	0		

**Table 3. Monthly distribution of PNA articles according to Equal Government and Non-Government Sources**

<b>Period Covered</b>	<b>Number of Articles positive to Philippine Tourism</b>	<b>Number of Articles neutral to Philippine Tourism</b>	<b>Number of Articles negative to Philippine Tourism</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
March 16-April 15, 2020	2	1	0	3	37.5
April 15- May 15, 2000	2	0	0	2	20.0
May 16-June 15, 2020	1	0	0	1	7.0
June 16-July 15, 2020	1	0	0	1	6.7
Total	8	0	0	8	
Percentage	100	0	0		

Tables 4 and 5 present numbers associated with the use of dominantly non-government sources in PNA articles. Of the three articles that had dominantly non-government sources, the majority still produced a positive tone with respect to Philippine tourism. A third was negative. Percentage figures in the last column show that the incidence of this practice did not go beyond 10 percent per month and has decreased even lower in the last two months. One in 44 is just 2 percent – a meager six percent total that points to an attempt to take other voices. This echoes the findings in Table 3.

**Table 4. Monthly distribution of PNA articles according to Dominantly Non-government Sources**

<b>Period Covered</b>	<b>Number of Articles positive to Philippine Tourism</b>	<b>Number of Articles neutral to Philippine Tourism</b>	<b>Number of Articles negative to Philippine Tourism</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
March 16-April 15, 2020	0	0	0	0	0
April 15- May 15, 2000	1	0	0	1	10.0
May 16-June 15, 2020	1	0	0	1	7.0
June 16-July 15, 2020	0	0	1	1	6.7
Total	2	0	1	3	
Percentage	67.0	0	33.0		

Finally, Table 5 presents an exception to PNA, but a reason for it to stay away from non-government sources altogether. In the second month, two articles were using exclusively non-government sources which resulted in a negative presentation of Philippine tourism. This is double the number of articles that are positive or neutral to Philippine tourism. However, two of 44 is a mere 4.5 percent of the total articles produced in four months. As such, it can be observed that non-government sources are generally marginalized by PNA. Overall, the PNA produces articles that are positive to Philippine tourism, and as such, could be seen as performing like a marketing tool for the government that has, even before the community quarantine period, advocated local travel and tourism.

**Table 5. Monthly distribution of PNA articles according to Non-government Sources Only**

<b>Period Covered</b>	<b>Number of Articles positive to Philippine Tourism</b>	<b>Number of Articles neutral to Philippine Tourism</b>	<b>Number of Articles negative to Philippine Tourism</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
March 16-April 15, 2020	0	0	0	0	0
April 15- May 15, 2000	0	0	2	2	20.0
May 16-June 15, 2020	0	1	0	1	7.0
June 16-July 15, 2020	1	0	0	1	6.7
<b>Total</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>4</b>	
<b>Percentage</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>50</b>		

## 4. DISCUSSION

### How the quality of sources influences the manner of presentation

A closer look at the 44 articles revealed a dependency on the Secretary of the Department of Tourism for content on tourism and travel. Far behind her are business groups. Even farther are sectors suffering from the impact of COVID-19. This resulted in a dominantly positive presentation on Philippine tourism ranging from 64 percent of the monthly total to 75 percent. Articles that had the highest distribution every month were those that used exclusively government sources which also presented more positive than neutral or negative information about Philippine tourism during the first trimester since the community quarantine was imposed on all Filipinos and travel was limited overall. Neutral reporting was observed to have occurred only 10-29 percent of the time (monthly), still mainly informed by government sources. In general, it presents a scenario that encourages a return to domestic travel.

Despite the lockdown, the Department of Tourism has never ceased generating information about travel and tourism, creating duplicity of messaging which has become associated with the Duterte administration even before COVID-19 became a problem [33]. The figures overall suggest that non-government sources are marginalized in PNA, indicating that balance in reporting is not a standard it seeks to abide by as a public information institution. From the lens



of the Propaganda Model, the numbers above imply an attempt by the Duterte administration, through the PNA, to marginalize dissent and listen only to dominant social players, primarily government entities. As a result, it misinforms people by claiming that the articles are news (since it is produced by the Philippine News Agency) when it is a propaganda material that seeks to please people in power and concerned business interests, in this case, the travel and tourism industry players.

**Table 6. Summary distribution of PNA articles on Philippine tourism throughout the four months**

<b>Period</b>	<b>Categories of Sources Used</b>	<b>Number of Articles positive to Philippine Tourism</b>	<b>Number of Articles neutral to Philippine Tourism</b>	<b>Number of Articles negative to Philippine Tourism</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
March 16-April 15, 2020	<b>Government Sources Only</b>	<b>2</b>	1	0	3	37.5
	Dominantly Government Sources	2	0	0	2	25
	Equal Government and Non-Government Sources	2	1	0	3	37.5
	Dominantly Non-government Sources	0	0	0	0	0
	Non-government Sources Only	0	0	0	0	0
	<b>Total</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>100</b>
	<b>Percentage</b>	<b>75</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>100</b>	
April 15- May 15, 2020	<b>Government Sources Only</b>	<b>4</b>	1	0	5	50
	Dominantly Government Sources	0	0	0	0	0
	Equal Government and Non-Government Sources	2	0	0	2	20
	Dominantly Non-government Sources	1	0	0	1	10
	Non-government Sources Only	0	0	2	2	20
	<b>Total</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>100</b>
	<b>Percentage</b>	<b>70</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>2-</b>	<b>100</b>	

<b>Period</b>	<b>Categories of Sources Used</b>	<b>Number of Articles positive to Philippine Tourism</b>	<b>Number of Articles neutral to Philippine Tourism</b>	<b>Number of Articles negative to Philippine Tourism</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
May 16-June 15, 2020	<b>Government Sources Only</b>	7	3	1	11	79
	Dominantly Government Sources	0	0	0	0	0
	Equal Government and Non-Government Sources	1	0	0	1	7
	Dominantly Non-government Sources	1	0	0	1	7
	Non-government Sources Only	0	1	0	1	7
	Total	9	4	1	14	100
	Percentage	<b>64</b>	29	7		
June 16-July 15, 2020	<b>Government Sources Only</b>	9	3	0	12	80
	Dominantly Government Sources	0	0	0	0	0
	Equal Government and Non-Government Sources	1	0	0	1	6.7
	Dominantly Non-government Sources	0	0	1	1	6.7
	Non-government Sources Only	1	0	0	1	6.7
	Total	11	3	1	15	100
	Percentage	<b>73</b>	20	7	100	

## 5. CONCLUSION

The data point out that government-owned media like PNA does not serve the public good in terms of allowing public debate by bringing to the foreground alternative voices and views about travel and tourism, and at the very least, people and communities that suffered the most from COVID-19. None of those stakeholders were ever represented in the articles that were analyzed. External stakeholders that played a significant role in the articles are those that belonged to

transnational, international, and national organizations. As a result, the opposite of the Pigouvian perspective on government ownership of media, which advocates public choice, is shown to be at play in the operation of the PNA when promoting, instead of journalistically reporting, travel and tourism in the Philippines amid a current pandemic. Hence, the PNA is likely not promoting the democratic standards of information dissemination as much as specific political and economic interests at the expense of the wellbeing of Filipinos. While the number of infections continues to rise, the government has yet to implement mass testing, and yet, it is actively promoting travel which studies suggest as complicit to the quicker spread of highly infectious diseases [12] [13].

This paper accounted for the first trimester of the pandemic mired in quarantine restrictions imposed by the government. The second and third trimesters have yet to be investigated and must be similarly analysed to ascertain the orientation of PNA, if only during the first year of the pandemic. Information sources outside of the PNA and those known to be critical of the Duterte administration must also be investigated to differentiate media responses and determine which media agencies were truly looking after the welfare of the public. The term of the Duterte administration has been documented as associated with growth and proliferation of troll armies that were out to counter dissenting voices during the pandemic [34] and this should be enough reason to figure out how those machinations limited public access to reliable information when it most counted.

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