

The Philippine News Agency's Reporting on Philippine Tourism During the Second Trimester of the COVID-19 Quarantine

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Abstract:The study examined all 151 articles under the Tourism and Travel category in the Philippine News Agency (PNA) website (www.pna.gov.ph) which were released between July 16 and November 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 continue to stay home due to COVID-19. Through content analysis, the study found that during the second trimester of COVID-19 in the Philippines, the PNA used mostly government sources that produced mostly positive reporting about tourism. Non-government sources were marginalized. As such, the articles continued to function more as propaganda than news, contrary to the name the Philippine News Agency carries. The articles continued to promote more the interest of the government in pushing for local tourism despite the uncertainty of the end of the quarantine period. After two trimesters the PNA continued to show disinterest in messaging consistent with quarantine mandates of the government.

Keywords: Philippine News Agency, Travel, Tourism, COVID-19, Propaganda, Second Trimester, Quarantine Period

I. Introduction

Last May 2021, Bantugan and Manguerra-Mahusay published an article investigating the Philippine News Agency's reporting on Philippine tourism during the first trimester of the COVID-19 quarantine which started on March 20, 2020. That study was conducted to investigate the disparity between the government policy and "journalistic" publications related to the restricted travel of Filipinos when the pandemic started without a clear view of its end. Guided by the Propaganda Model of Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, that study revealed that there was a continuous increase of published articles in PNA that informed the public about positive developments in Philippine tourism; however, in all four months covered by the study, there was consistent reliance on government sources that was evidence of propaganda at work at the PNA.

In the first year of the pandemic, the whole country remained in quarantine and given the seeming uncertainty of the length of the lockdown imposed by the Duterte administration, it was deemed important to see the developments in the manner by which PNA reported about tourism in the country. Hence, this study looked at the second trimester of the quarantine period, following the protocol set by the study on the first trimester to determine whether the trajectory of writing about tourism in the Philippines changed as the quarantine intensified or was sustained by the government's agenda to present itself as being in control of the situation.

Given the results of the initial study, this paper deemed it important to continue using Herman and Chomsky's Propaganda Model which asserts that power structures can manipulate the attitudes of the public by filtering out the news to disenfranchise dissent. This attempt to use the news to benefit dominant private, often capitalist, interests at the expense of open public discourse seeks to promote conditions that influence and co-opt audiences and result in hegemony.

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?

II. Methodology

The study used online data mining to answer the questions above. By going through the archives of PNA, particularly between July 16, 2020, and November 15, 2020, the second trimester of the COVID-19 period of the Duterte administration, the study derived the total population (151) articles related to Philippine tourism under a cluster of articles classified as "Travel and Tourism" found in the PNA site on December 1-30, 2022. While doing content analysis, the paper identified the sources of each article and placed them 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 second trimester of the quarantine period of the Duterte administration.

III. Results

Distribution of releases from the first to the second trimester

A summary of all the article releases during the second trimester reveals that PNA has more than tripled its output since the first trimester. It indicates that PNA has even become more active in assigning staff to come up with releases despite the intensifying community quarantine and mobility restriction during the covered period. Figure 1 indicates the surge in article production from PNA. The first trimester data came from the preliminary findings of Bantugan and Manguerra-Mahusay (2021).

Figure 2, meanwhile, breaks down the article production per month. The first four months showed a doubling of releases while the next trimester showed more than a tripling of releases at most, particularly in the fifth and seventh months, and more than a doubling of numbers in the sixth and eighth months. The figure also shows that, unlike the first trimester, the number rose and fell. The latter is significant in that the decline constitutes a third of the peak numbers during the second trimester. Given the fixed number of writers in PNA and the emergent events that came with the lockdowns, one can surmise that those assigned to deliver travel and tourism items may have been diverted to other more urgent areas of concern during the periods of decline.

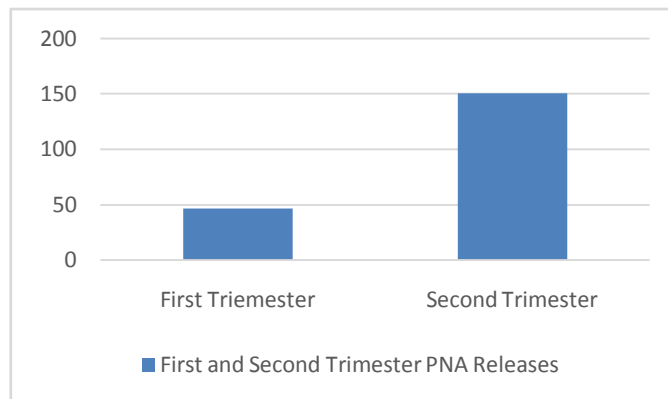


Figure 1

Distribution of PNA articles across the first and second trimesters of the COVID-19 period

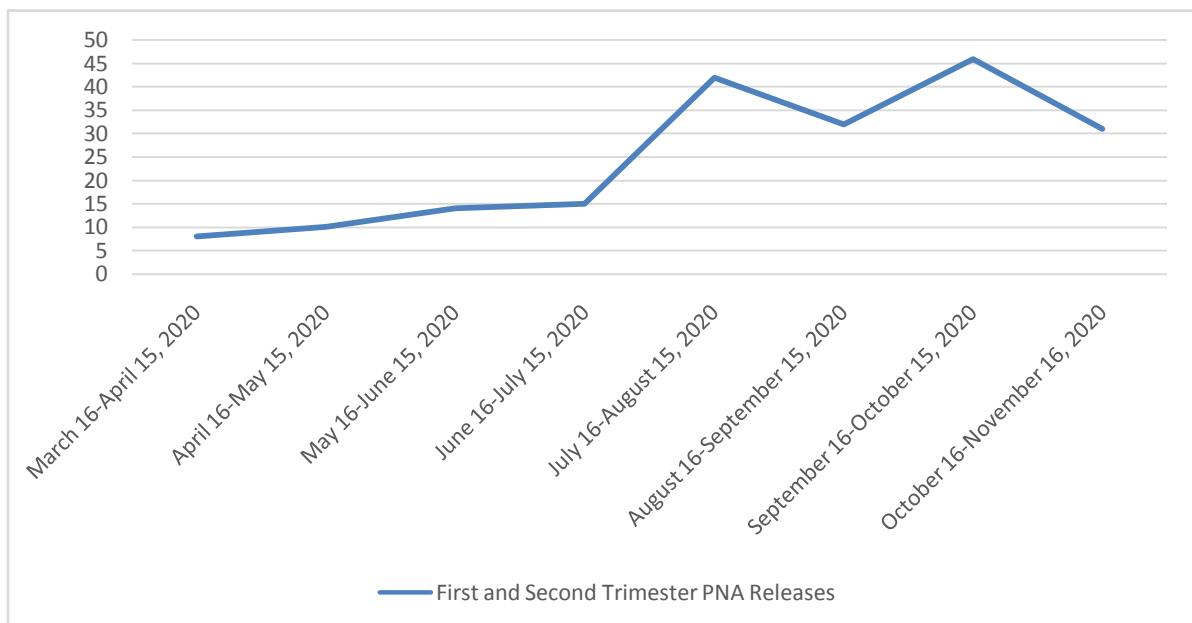


Figure 2

Distribution of articles across months covered by two trimesters of the COVID-19 period

Table 1 shows that across all four months, the number of articles with exclusively government sources that positively presented Philippine tourism was greater than those that were neutral and negative in the four months. Furthermore, except for the fourth month, the number of releases across all writing categories was continuously increasing. Overall, the mean of releases positive to Philippine tourism was twice higher as those that were neutral and 12 times higher than those that were negative. Hence, the numbers advance positive messaging on Philippine tourism through articles relying solely on government sources.

Table 1

Monthly distribution of PNA articles according to Government Sources Only

Period Covered	Number of articles positive to PH tourism	Number of articles neutral to PH tourism	Number of articles negative to PH tourism	Total	Percentage (%)
July 16 - August 15, 2020	2	2	1	5	13.51
August 16 - September 15, 2020	5	5	1	11	29.72
September 16 - October 15, 2020	10	4	0	14	37.83
October 16 - November 15, 2020	7	0	0	7	18.91
Total	24	11	2	37	100.00
Mean	6.00	2.75	0.50	9.25	

PNA releases on Philippine tourism that used dominantly government sources were more numerous than those solely relying on the same. Nevertheless, this adds to the collection of articles that serve as propaganda materials for the government. Table 2 also shows that compared to the latter, the total number of positively framed articles was 50 percent higher than the number of articles exclusively based on government sources. Meanwhile, the number of articles that were neutrally framed using dominantly government sources was twice higher than those solely using government sources. A slightly higher number than neutrally written articles was found in articles that negatively reported Philippine tourism. It should be noted, as well, that, in total, positive reporting was 50 percent higher than neutral writing and seven times higher than negative writing. Furthermore, except for the first month of the second trimester, articles depicting Philippine tourism positively were always higher than those depicting it neutrally or negatively. Hence, what was said about the allocation and mobilization of resources towards positive writing about Philippine tourism found in Table 1 is also found in Table 2. As resources are limited and strategic decisions have to be made, Tables 1 and 2 indicate that such allocation is intentional.

Table 2

Monthly distribution of PNA articles according to Dominantly Government Sources

Period Covered	Number of articles positive to PH tourism	Number of articles neutral to PH tourism	Number of articles negative to PH tourism	Total	Percentage (%)
July 16 - August 15, 2020	8	9	3	20	32.25
August 16 - September 15, 2020	5	3	2	10	16.13
September 16 - October 15, 2020	10	9	0	19	30.65
October 16 - November 15, 2020	12	1	0	13	20.97
Total	35	22	5	62	100.00
Mean	8.75	5.50	1.25	15.5	

Table 3, overall, shows the same trend as those found in articles using exclusively and dominantly government sources – positive writing about Philippine tourism far outnumbers neutral and negative writing – was found in articles using equal numbers of government and non-government sources. However, in terms of the number of releases, articles that gave more space for non-government voices were almost six times lower than those using dominantly government sources and four times lower than those using exclusively government sources. As such, getting non-government sources for articles on Philippine tourism seems more of an exception than the rule in the PNA. This is likely not the norm and a priority in editorial decision-making or gatekeeping in the PNA.

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

Period Covered	Number of articles positive to PH tourism	Number of articles neutral to PH tourism	Number of articles negative to PH tourism	Total	Percentage (%)
July 16 - August 15, 2020	6	7	1	14	35.00
August 16 - September 15, 2020	3	3	1	7	17.50
September 16 - October 15, 2020	6	6	0	12	30.00
October 16 - November 15, 2020	6	1	0	7	17.50
Total	21	17	2	40	100.00
Mean	5.25	4.25	0.50	10.00	

The numbers dwindle further among articles on Philippine tourism using dominantly non-government sources (see Table 4). While articles using dominantly non-government sources were positively written, they were released only once monthly. Neutral and negative reporting was not found; thus, PNA reports using said sources were all positively written. Non-government sources are marginalized in PNA. Furthermore, some of these sources were likely written with framing that is positive to the government.

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

Period Covered	Number of articles positive to PH tourism	Number of articles neutral to PH tourism	Number of articles negative to PH tourism	Total	Percentage (%)
July 16 - August 15, 2020	1	0	0	1	25.00
August 16 - September 15, 2020	1	0	0	1	25.00
September 16 - October 15, 2020	1	0	0	1	25.00
October 16 - November 15, 2020	1	0	0	1	25.00
Total	4	0	0	4	100.00
Mean	1.00	0.00	0.00	1.00	

Table 5 points out that even while non-government sources constitute the sole bases of an article, the tone remains positive mostly (only one was found negatively written). The data below, except for the third month of the second trimester, follows the general pattern found in the previous four categories of sources. This pattern validates the finding that non-government sources are used to strengthen a frame supportive of the government’s agenda to present Philippine tourism positively and that non-government sources are largely marginalized in the message production of PNA. Tables 1 to 5 serve as evidence pointing at PNA as a propaganda organization, and not a news agency as it claims to be - which was also found in the first trimester (Bantugan&Manguerra-Mahusay, 2021).

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

Period Covered	Number of articles positive to PH tourism	Number of articles neutral to PH tourism	Number of articles negative to PH tourism	Total	Percentage (%)
July 16 - August 15, 2020	2	0	0	2	25.00
August 16 - September 15, 2020	2	0	1	3	37.50
September 16 - October 15, 2020	0	0	0	0	0
October 16 - November 15, 2020	3	0	0	3	37.50
Total	7	0	1	8	100.00
Mean	1.75	0.00	0.25	2.00	

Overall, the number of articles that present Philippine tourism and travel positively overshadow those that are neutral and negative (see Table 6). Articles that are based exclusively or dominantly on government sources are also more prominent than those relying on non-government sources. Setting aside the irregularities in the production of articles per month over the second trimester, the total number of articles produced during the second trimester speaks volumes about the more aggressive effort to advance travel and tourism despite quarantine restrictions from the fifth to the eighth month since the lockdown started in the Philippines. This added to the public’s confusion (Morales & Petty, 2020), especially about the pandemic and related contradicting health information (Kottasova, 2020) coming from international agencies like the World Health Organization (Altug, 2020) and national offices like the Department of Health in the Philippines (Ranada, 2020) during the second trimester. As such, PNA delivered distractions and contributed to greater cognitive dissonance.

Table 6

Summary distribution of PNA articles on Philippine tourism throughout the four months

Period	Categories of Sources Used	Number of			Total	Percentage
		Number of Articles positive to PH Tourism	Articles neutral to PH Tourism	Number of Articles negative to PH Tourism		
July 16 - August 15, 2020	Government Sources Only (GSO)	2	2	1	5	11.90
	Dominantly Government Sources (DGS)	8	9	3	20	47.62
	Equal Government and Non-Government Sources (EGN)	6	7	1	14	33.33
	Dominantly Non-government Sources (DNS)	1	0	0	1	2.38
	Non-government Sources Only (NSO)	2	0	0	2	4.76
	Total	19	18	5	42	100.00
	Percentage	45.24	42.86	11.90	100.00	
August 16 - September 15, 2020	GSO	5	5	1	11	34.38
	DGS	5	3	2	10	31.25
	EGN	3	3	1	7	21.88
	DNS	1	0	0	1	3.13
	NSO	2	0	1	3	9.38
	Total	16	11	5	32	100.00
	Percentage	50.00	34.38	15.63	100.00	
September 16 - October 15, 2020	GSO	10	4	0	14	30.43
	DGS	10	9	0	19	41.30
	EGN	6	6	0	12	26.09
	DNS	1	0	0	1	2.17
	NSO	0	0	0	0	0
	Total	27	19	0	46	100.00
	Percentage	58.70	41.30	0.00	100.00	
October 16 - November 15, 2020	GSO	7	0	0	7	22.58
	DGS	12	1	0	13	41.94
	EGN	6	1	0	7	22.58
	DNS	1	0	0	1	3.23
	NSO	3	0	0	3	9.68
	Total	29	2	0	31	100.00
	Percentage	93.55	6.45	0.00	100.00	

IV. Discussion

Based on the data presented in Tables 1 to 5, PNA continued to serve the interest of the tourism sector despite the lockdown imposed by the national government. This data must be seen in the context of the jeepney crisis in the Philippines. On June 24, 2020, a date still covered by the first trimester of the quarantine period of the Duterte administration, the Land Transportation Franchising and Regulatory Board declared that the traditional jeepneys will still be allowed to operate for a week after. But this was countered by Duterte's announcement that only "road-worthy" jeepneys would be accepted (Beltran, 2020). As a consequence, only 49 out of the 900 jeepney routes were permitted to operate thereafter; hence, only around eight percent of 74,000 jeepney routes in the country were able to serve the public, added Beltran. Given that the jeepney is the most affordable and accessible form of public transportation for the general public, this restriction rendered people immobile and unable to address their essential travels during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic. With or without the lockdowns, the disabled jeepney industry poses a significant tourism industry challenge that no press release, even from the government, can help surpass.

Later, it was revealed that the jeepney crisis was part of a larger plan to modernize the transport system that gave no room for the traditional jeepney to continue operating (Beltran, 2020). Given this problem and the articles that depicted Philippine tourism positively, the latter seems misplaced and misdirected. Suspicions of a jeepney phase-out by the government were now positioned front and center of public discourse, and yet travel and tourism remained part of the national government's media agenda in the PNA. The transport sector, an essential player in the travel and tourism sector, clearly marginalized non-government voices during the second trimester.

Transportation plays a key role in the spread of pandemics in that vehicles serve as vectors of infection (Luke &Rodrigue, 2008). The Spanish flu spread quickly because transportation then was modernizing and was already offering global mobility. Hence, promoting tourism during a pandemic poses a grave threat to public health and safety. And yet, the Department of Tourism was aggressively promoting tourism, particularly the development of tourism bubbles or tourism in places where there is no case of COVID-19 (Peralta, 2020). How one gets to such bubbles in the absence of local public transportation and when COVID-19 testing was allowed only for persons who have been exposed to someone infected and are symptomatic (Nuevo et al., 2020) can only be imagined then. In this situation, one is immediately reminded of Kremlin propaganda which was "based on a tangled bundle of lies and half-truths" (Kadygrob&Tarasyuk, 2022, para. 1) that result in a necessary incoherence. In the words of Kadygrob and Tarasyuk:

In the case of Russian propaganda, this consists, on the one hand, of great uncertainty as to what is going on, what is real and what is not, and, on the other, of being overwhelmed with conflicting opinions, interpretations, and hypotheses. (para. 13)

Propaganda, according to George and Sukumaran (2022), is a "systematic method of shaping and dispersing opinions to influence the thoughts of people as per the intent of the propagandist" (para. 1). In the frame of Herman and Chomsky's Propaganda Model, the propagandist intends to shape public opinion by disenfranchising dissent. In this study, dissent is likely to emerge from non-government sources. By limiting the use of such, PNA ensured that the interests of capitalists in the tourism industry is promoted. After all, the government earns from the business sector and loses money from the delivery of services to vulnerable populations. While the transportation crisis during the second trimester of the quarantine period of the Duterte administration does not align with tourism promotion by the government, PNA's releases are ultimately aligned with the economic interests of capitalists badly affected by the pandemic, whether or not tourism was indeed viable during the period covered. Without a propaganda program in the PNA, it is expected that tourism would hardly have any space in a public discourse given more important needs and problems facing Filipinos during the second trimester.

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