



Online News Coverage of the Presidential Candidates in the 2022 Philippine Elections

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Abstract: *The study investigated how the media covered the presidential candidates of the 2022 Philippines elections. The top presidential candidates were Isko Moreno Domagoso, Ping Lacson, Bongbong Marcos, Manny Pacman Pacquiao, and Leni Robredo. The sources of the data were the online news articles published on the official Facebook page of three news organizations selected based on a specific and chosen criteria.*

The conduct of the content analysis revealed that some candidates are more frequently reported than others, topics are mostly from campaign sorties, almost all sources are presidential candidates, most main issues and actors are treated positively. Tones are almost straightforward. Majority of the objective are report sentences. Headlines are almost positive and events are captured most as a photo subject.

The media for the longest time has been acknowledged for its important role during elections, as it provides information that is necessary for the public to know for their decision making. Hence, as a watchdog of the society they are expected to practice ethically and legally.

Keywords: *Content Analysis, Communication Research, Online News Coverage, Philippine Journalism, 2022 Philippine Elections.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Information is vital to society. It provides the people with the knowledge they need to understand what is happening in the community. The many relevant information consumed by the people helps them decide on things for their decision-making and their participation in the events of society. Realgo (2021) stated that the community needs to be informed about what is happening around as this might, in a way, affect its people. Moreover, the mass media play a vital role in informing the public. The news delivered by the media is vital for the



people to be updated on social, political, ecological, economic, cultural, and technological issues, among others.

During an election period, the media provides the public with relevant information about the election itself, the candidates, and their campaign sorties through reporting either on the traditional or digital platforms. The media coverage during an election is considered a significantly massive event.

In the Philippines, extensive mass media coverage commenced during the campaign period of the 2022 Philippine Presidential Elections. The three-month election campaign started on February 08, 2022, amid a continuing pandemic scare. During this time, different media organizations are in a race for extensive coverage. Moreover, since more people are now relying on social media to be updated, the different media organizations maximize their presence and online news coverage on their official social media platforms, such as Facebook. However, a serious challenge to media organizations is to be accused of being biased in their coverage. As Valderama (2022) articulated, the mainstream media has been constantly bombarded with accusations of biased reporting. The accusations come particularly from politicians and their supporters who are the subjects of critical reporting, including those who cannot distinguish news from opinion or commentary. Relativo (2021) added that as the 2022 polls draw nearer, allegations of media bias for or against aspiring candidates — online and offline — also become apparent. Specific sectors of society have long tagged critical reportage as politically motivated, pressuring journalists to report more on positives than negatives.

Hence, this study aims to discover how different media organizations handle their election coverage. The study aims to provide a clear picture of how the media cover the presidential candidates by conducting a content analysis of the online news articles, that would prove or disprove the assumptions of the media's alleged bias toward some of the presidential candidates. The study's findings can also add to the number of studies conducted about the election that is considered historical in the Philippines as the first election in a pandemic after 100 years and the second elections in the country that is closely monitored because of massive disinformation in the social media.

The research question that the study investigated is:

How did the 2022 Presidential candidates covered by media organizations during the election period through online news articles in terms of:

- a. frequency,
- b. topic,
- c. sources of information,
- d. treatment of main issues,
- e. treatment of the main actor,
- f. tone,



- g. level of objectivity,
- h. headlines, and
- i. photo subject?

2. METHODOLOGY

A. Research Design

The study is descriptive research that employs content analysis to describe how the media cover the 2022 Presidential candidates through news articles. Allen et al. (2009) described content analysis as a general type of research design in quantitative research. Furthermore, content analysis is where (oftentimes) qualitative data are collected and then categorized into discrete categories. The content analysis then involves the decoding of messages. Coding is necessary to reduce the data to a manageable mass, but any piece of text can be coded in many different ways.

B. Sources of Data

The data that were analyzed in the study are news articles about the five (5) presidential candidates who were considered as front liners of the 2022 national elections. The news articles are posted to the official Facebook page of three (3) selected news organizations during the last month of the campaign period from April 7, 2022, to May 7, 2022. The news organizations that were included in the study were selected based on the following criteria: (a) acknowledged news organization for more than ten years; (b) publishing daily newspapers and now maintaining a verified Facebook page for publishing news articles; and (c) with at least 2 million Facebook followers. Hence, the study focused on The Philippine Star, Daily Inquirer, and Manila Bulletin.

C. Data Analysis Procedure

A coding sheet that is designed by the researchers and approved by the advisory committee were utilized in the conduct of the content analysis. The variables that were included in the coding sheet were adapted from various literature such as the treatment of main issue and actor (Pernia, 2004), tone (Pernia, 2004; Malinao, 2006), level of objectivity by Hayakawa-Lowry news bias category, and headlines. Meanwhile, frequency, topic, sources of information, and photo subject were included based on general literature and were adjusted based on what the study is looking for.

From the data gathered, the researchers tabulated, analyzed, and interpreted the data to answer the research question of the study. The results of the analysis were validated through confirmability.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This portion presents and discusses the findings of the study on the online news coverage of the presidential candidates during the 2022 Philippine elections along frequency, topic,



sources of information, treatment of main issues, treatment of main actor, tone, objectivity, headlines, and photo subject.

Frequency

The conduct of content analysis revealed the frequency of reporting of the three (3) media organizations to the frontrunners during the 2022 Philippine elections as shown in Table 2.

Table 1. Frequency of Reporting

	ISKO	LACSON	BBM	LENI	PACQUIAO
Inquirer	20	9	33	51	10
Manila Bulletin	18	6	38	116	2
Philippine Star	11	10	31	93	7
TOTAL	49	25	102	260	19

As shown in Table 1, Leni Robredo reported more frequently, (260) followed by Ferdinand Bongbong Marcos (102), Isko Moreno (49), Panfilo Lacson (25), and Manny Pacquiao for at least 19 times. This may imply that there are more stories related to Leni Robredo compared to other candidates during the time of the study, allowing the news organization to write about the mentioned candidate. As Brichacek (n.d.) stated that the first way journalists get involved in elections is by choosing which candidates to cover and how much. Such choices alone can have a huge effect on voter perceptions. The idea here is that media organizations may give more coverage to one candidate over the other. Such is supported by Yavuz (2012) saying that frequency of exposure given by specific media outlets had a noteworthy influence on shifting votes. Hence, looking how frequently an online news organization covers a candidate is necessary as one way to establish fairness of reporting. The result may also imply to the notion of some observations that some media organizations are favoring some candidates by more frequent coverage because of internal connections and interests. Such, leads to tagging organizations as biased to a particular candidate (Valderama, 2022; Relativo, 2021). Meanwhile, Niven et al. (2015) stated that candidates offering the media easier access enjoyed substantially more positive coverage that reflected an imbalance in their favor both in candidate-driven news and in the use of candidate quotes. Abbey (2022), cleared that news coverage often represents the voices of those only on both extremes of the spectrum or voices of those who are the most powerful. Election coverage is a good example of this. In many countries, candidates from non-mainstream parties garner little news coverage. This, critics argue, leads to candidates never building recognition and, therefore, never getting elected. Brichacek (n.d) citing Lawrence stated, the biggest thing that drives elections is simple name recognition. Research has shown that some candidates can be literally left invisible because they cannot win enough interest from the media such as the frequency of being reported.



Topic

The four hundred fifty-five (455) coded news articles revealed that the campaign sorties (348) of the presidential candidates is the topic commonly written by the news organizations, followed by personal issues (78), and platform (29) as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Topic of News Articles

	CAMPAIGN SORTIE	PLATFORM	PERSONAL ISSUES
Inquirer	82	18	23
Manila Bulletin	128	7	45
Philippine Star	138	4	10
TOTAL	348	29	78

This implies that news organizations focus on political events and personal issues of the candidates instead of the candidate platforms. This concept is commonly known as horse race journalism. This kind of journalism has been prevalent in media outlets even before. Media and Election coverage always talks about candidates who are leading the survey. Ordway (2022) stated that when journalists covering elections focus primarily on who is winning or losing instead of policy issues — what is known as horse race reporting — voters, candidates and the news industry itself suffer. This will make voters being left behind with the proper information they must consume and serve as a basis in their choices for voting. According to a study from the Harvard Kennedy School cited by Galley (2020), journalists placing such a heavy focus on the election race, will make the public suffers from a scarcity of information regarding crucial policy issues and as such they head to the polls well-informed of the likely outcome, but without knowledge of what this outcome might mean for them, and the country as a whole. Thomas Patterson, cited in Klurfeld (2015), makes a strong case that the news media must deliver more “knowledge based” reporting, reporting based on verified information and expertise on substantive issues. Patterson warns that the precipitous drop in public confidence of the news media can only be remedied by a fundamental change in how reporters go about their work, especially in developing their knowledge of complex topics whether it is national health care, economics or foreign policy, to name just a few.

The most vital news topic which a voter must consume within an election campaign should be the candidates’ platform because it is the guarantee of every person's right to suffrage. The future depends partially on the visions of each candidate but what the researchers observed seem so erratic, it is not appreciated by news organizations because it sounds cliché in the political spectrum of the mainstream arena. This is comparable to the study of Andrews (2020), ideally, the media serve several essential roles in a democratic society. Their primary purpose is to inform the public, providing citizens with the information needed to make thoughtful decisions about leadership and policy. The media act as watchdogs checking government actions. They set the agenda for public discussion of issues, and provide a forum for political expression. They also facilitate community building by helping people to find common causes, identify civic groups, and work toward solutions to societal problems. And,



this can only be achieved if the media will be critical enough in the selection of the topic that they will be reporting.

Sources of Information

The accuracy of a news article can also be associated with the sources of information discussed in a story. Hence, looking at the sources of information is one important factor in analyzing the coverage of media organizations to political stories. As shown in Table 3, the leading source of information to the coded news articles are the presidential candidates (136), followed by personalities from private sectors (120), general public (113), combination of sources (40), spokesperson/political party (33), and 13 stories were coded that the source of information are the other government officials.

Table 3. Sources of Information

	Presidential Candidate	Spokesperson/ Political Party	Other Government Official	Personalities from Private Sectors, Organization	General Public	Combination
Inquirer	44	15	7	41	9	7
Manila Bulletin	36	11	4	16	81	32
Philippine Star	56	7	2	63	23	1
TOTAL	136	33	13	120	113	40

This implies that news organizations prefer the presidential candidate as the main source of information, as they are more in the authority rather than other possible sources. This is similar to the study of 24h dans une rédaction (n.d.) stating that politicians are a sensitive, but inevitable, source. News organizations prefer them as a source because of the possibility that they can convey their message vividly because they are the highlight of the election. Arnesen (2018) finds that candidate choice is driven more by knowledge about candidates' issue positions than by knowledge about their social characteristics and that citizens value substantive representation more robustly than descriptive representation.

In addition, sources are what makes news articles credible and reliable. It is the backbone of every featured news for if there are no sources, articles may become opinionated. As discussed by The News Manual (2022), sources are very important if a journalist wants to report on events or issues and explain the world to the audience. Journalists try to work as much as possible from their own observations, but this is often not possible. Journalists should deal in reliable facts, so it is important that the sources used for writing stories can give accurate information about what happened or what was said. Furthermore, Trageser (2020) suggested that credible news stories include an author's by-line and a dateline (when



and where the story originated) as well as facts, figures, and quotes attributed to specific people and groups.

It is also found out that news organizations do not depend on single-source but a combination of multiple possible sources. This implies that news organizations prefer to further strengthen and give more details to the news story itself, or proportionally give two points of views to avoid biases. Using a variety of sources can diminish the effects of bias—the preference of one view over another. Using multiple perspectives in this way will help create a well-rounded news article. According to Neemeh as cited by Salisbury (2020), using multiple sources for news is an important way to make sure that readers are getting the most accurate information, and also to make sure that readers can make their own educated opinions, free of news bias.

It is also interesting to note that from the three (3) news organizations, Philippine Star considers personalities from private sectors and organizations as sources of information. This implies that different news organizations have their unique sources of information and that they are not the same in nature. Sources from private sectors and organizations will only guarantee free speech from different people, the contents of the article might be opinionated and less reliable. These sources are fillers of the news in case presidential candidates or other different sources are not available for an interview or either journalist does not have yet a story to tell.

Treatment of Main Issues

The conduct of content analysis revealed online news coverage to the presidential candidates of the 2022 Philippine elections in terms of treatment of main issues. Pernia (2004) categorized treatment of main issues as positive, negative, neutral. As shown in Table 4, positive treatment of the main issue outstrips the negative and neutral treatment of the main issue. The former got a whopping 374 in number, almost ten times higher than the two latter determiners which are in 38 and 43.

Table 4. Treatment of Main Issue

	POSITIVE	NEGATIVE	NEUTRAL
Inquirer	99	16	8
Manila Bulletin	130	19	31
Philippine Star	144	3	5
TOTAL	372	39	44

This implies that the online new coverage treated more stories positively. According to Pernia (2004) a positive treatment to an issue means there are more favorable statements, descriptions, and implications for the issue. Hence, it can be said that at some point during the coverage of the 2022 Philippine elections, some news organizations choose to present news stories as it happens based on available information, and avoid criticism for a particular issue. One of those for example are supporters of a presidential candidate initiating a program helping people. Cited by Suttie (2018), a study stated that people who read inspiring news



stories were more willing afterwards to sign up for generous actions related to the story. However, it is not avoidable for the public to consume negative news as it is what they are more seeking in because of the revelations it may bring. Meanwhile, Soroka et al. (2015), stated that work in political communication has discussed the ongoing predominance of negative news, but has offered few convincing accounts for this focus.

In the content analysis, the research tagged the treatment of the main issue by looking at how it is presented in the news articles. The researchers considered the treatment of the main issue as positive if the news articles favored the issue related to the presidential candidates. Meanwhile, the researchers coded news articles as negatively treating the issue if the story criticizes the issue instead of the neutral treatment of presenting both sides as it is. As Pernia (2004) articulated, treatment is neutral, where there is merely a listing of events that give neither positive nor negative implications about the issue. Pernia (2004) emphasized that treatment in news articles pertains to whether the topic is handled simply or elaborately. The same is also applied by the researchers in analyzing the treatment of news articles to the main actors of news articles, that is further discussed below.

Treatment of Main Actor

On Table 5, the result of coding a news article shows the treatment of the main actor as positive, negative, and neutral. Table 5 shows how articles treated the main actors of the news articles. The analysis revealed that there were 386 coded news articles coded as positive treatment, 38 negative treatment, and 31 news articles were coded as neutral in treating the main actors. Almost all articles came out in a positive treatment to the main actor.

Table 5. Treatment of Main Actor

	POSITIVE	NEGATIVE	NEUTRAL
Inquirer	102	13	8
Manila Bulletin	139	21	20
Philippine Star	145	4	3
TOTAL	386	38	31

This implies that positive treatment of main actors is preferred by news organizations one month before the election day. However negative treatments likewise draw criticism for some main actors. Treatment of main issues and of main actors are what makes a candidate boost its survey from below average to leading. It might as well stabilize the effects of perception towards any candidate. Karlan et. al (2006) stated that citizens learn about politics and government primarily from television and newspapers; these media outlets can influence voters not only through the slant of a particular report but also merely by choosing which stories to cover.

Tone

The conduct of content analysis revealed the tone of the online news coverage to the presidential candidates of the 2022 Philippine elections. Pernia (2004) described tone as the manner in which the article was written. It can be straightforward, interpretative, emotional,



satirical, and light. As shown in Table 6, 255 of news article codes are written in a straightforward tone. Malinao (2006) discussed that a straightforward news reporting is event centered, it is usually about recent events. This implies that half of the news articles retrieved almost follow a straightforward tone because basically it is the most compact and easiest form of writing articles without any elaborations given. This illustrates that straightforward tones are what most written as news articles on campaign seasons. This is comparable to the study of Rosentiel et al. (2000) that the inverted pyramid, or straight news account, remains the most common way of telling a story. But it is hardly the dominant one. This is a story in which the news is presented not in any thematic way, but as a traditional description of what happened, offering who, what, when, where, why, and how in rough order of their importance. Interestingly, straight news accounts are the primary way in which the press writes about candidates' ideas.

Table 6. Tone of News Articles

	Straightforward	Interpretative	Emotional	Satirical	Light
Inquirer	40	52	15	7	9
Manila Bulletin	123	9	29	13	6
Philippine Star	92	32	18	4	6
TOTAL	255	93	62	24	21

Level of Objectivity

Utilizing the Hayakawa-Lowry News Bias Category, the conduct of content analysis revealed the level of objectivity of the news articles. As shown on Table 7, there were 355 coded report sentences, 58 inference sentences, 42 judgement sentences.

Table 7. Level of Objectivity

	REPORT SENTENCE	INFERENCE SENTENCE	JUDGEMENT SENTENCE
Inquirer	94	23	6
Manila Bulletin	116	29	35
Philippine Star	145	6	1
TOTAL	355	58	42

Obviously, Report Sentence got the highest, this shows that above all, most of the articles coded are verified and factual. This implies that almost all news stories published during election season are report sentences due to being easily verified. Sitton et al. (2004) citing Hayakawa and Lowry discussed that report sentences are factual and verifiable statements; inference sentences are subjective and not immediately verifiable; and judgement sentences are an expression of the writer's opinion. Since election season is the highlight of news organizations.

Headlines

Table 8 shows the result of coding on the identification of the type of headline that became prominent during the online news coverage to the presidential candidates of the 2022 Philippine elections. The table shows that positive headlines (403) have a huge average gap



with the negative headlines (52). Generally, there are two types of headlines namely positive and negative headlines. Positive headlines must be concise, informative, target a broad audience, remain socially relevant, and must be negative but not overly so, meaning that the good news about bad news it sells. Meanwhile, negative headlines are not concise, more geared towards opinion-based content, does not remain socially relevant and most of all is there for profit and is biased.

Table 8. Headlines of News Articles

	Positive Headline	Negative Headline
Inquirer	107	16
Manila Bulletin	145	35
Philippine Star	151	1
TOTAL	403	52

This implies that positive headlines dominate the news coverage about 2022 presidential elections because of the possible attraction of readers since headlines are made to attract and some readers are prone to positive statements. But this does not mean that positive headlines always follow positive contents. As Frampton (2015) discussed headline writing has long been considered a skill but, in the digital age, a new word has become synonymous with online journalism - clickbait. Put simply, it is a headline which tempts the reader to click on the link to the story. Negative headlines were also present in some of the news articles as these headlines may divert readers and voters collective thinking. Scacco & Muddiman (2016) added that past research has found that headlines can change perceptions of a criminal suspect's supposed guilt, influence how individuals assess political candidates, and affect comprehension and memory of news articles. Hence, looking at how headlines are presented is also pivotal to explore that can help describe the election coverage during the 2022 elections.

Photo Subject

The presence or absence of photos was also explored in this study. As shown in Table 9, from the 455 news articles coded, 170 has a picture of the 'Events', followed by 'Political Candidates' with 167, next comes 103 under the premise of 'Other Personalities', and the least news articles without photos with 15. Wanke (2022) discussed that photos make or break media products. However, these images must be relevant to the event and society to be effective. In addition, the photos must be accurate, informative, and able to convey what is happening during a particular moment in time. This implies that most news articles are inclined with photos that focus events to make readers visualize the contents of each news. Furthermore, some media organizations choose photo subjects in their articles as they can influence audience perceptions. This is comparable to the study of Brichacek (n.d) explaining the photos news organizations choose to publish and such factors as their size and layout can also influence voter perceptions — and reveal possible bias.



Table 9. Number of Coded Photos in News Articles

	POLITICAL CANDIDATE	EVENTS	OTHER PERSONALITIES	NO PHOTO
Inquirer	54	38	29	2
Manila Bulletin	50	85	36	9
Philippine Star	63	47	38	4
TOTAL	167	170	103	15

4. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

The media organizations in the study favor candidates because of more frequent coverage than the others. Since it's election season, policy issues or platforms must have been the focus of media organizations. However, campaign sorties remained the highest content of these news articles, same as the concept of horse race journalism.

The news organizations involved in this study preferred the presidential candidates as the primary source of information as they are more reliable in answering issues as they are the highlights of the election. Also, news organizations play safe in producing news articles because such treats main issues and actors positively.

In terms of style, news organizations prefer a straightforward tone to efficiently deliver the story about the presidential candidates to the readers.

In terms of objectivity, news organizations wrote more stories following report sentences that, according to the level of Hayakawa-Lowry sentences, are factual. Hence, opinions and information that are not immediately verifiable do not necessarily report during election and campaign season.

Meanwhile, the following recommendations are forwarded based on the findings and conclusions:

The different media organizations should provide an equal platform to all political candidates. They should also practice ethical journalism to be able to truthfully perform their function of the source of information that makes the electorate well-informed, which may guide them in selecting whom to support.

A similar study adding other news elements should be conducted every national and local election to assess how the media is performing their media coverage.

Lastly, future researchers should also explore other research methodologies, such as qualitative research, to understand election reporting from journalists' experiences and perspectives.

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