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Crystallising the official narrative: News discourses about the killings from the Philippine government's campaign against illegal drugs

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Abstract

News media's construction of crime and drugs can shape and change public perceptions and influence popular acceptance of policy and state responses. In this way, media, through selection of sources and framing of narratives, act as important agents of social control, either independently or indirectly by state actors. This article examines how the Philippine government's anti-drug campaign, and the thousands of deaths resulting from them, has been depicted by the media to the public. We conducted a discourse analysis of television news stories to extract dominant frames and narratives, finding a pattern of over-privileging of State authority as a source, resulting in a monolithic message of justifying the killing of suspects. Furthermore, the 'event-focused' slant, which dominates the character of reports by media, inevitably solidifies the narrative that the deaths are a necessary consequence of a national public safety campaign. By relying almost exclusively on this narrative, to the exclusion of alternative frames, the media amplifies and crystallises the state's narrative. As we critically examine how drugs, drug use and the zero-tolerance policy are positioned through discourse in news

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texts, the article raises important implications to the ethics and role of journalism in politics and provides explanations relating to crime-reporting norms, values and media organisation realities in the country.

Keywords
Anti-drug campaign, authorial neutrality, crime reporting, critical discourse analysis, news source

Introduction

In the Philippine national election of 2016, presidential candidate Rodrigo Duterte ran on a singular platform of law and order. He promised to wage a 'war on drugs' and declared that he would dump the bodies of dead drug dealers in Manila Bay to fatten all the fish (Andal, 2017). After winning the election, upsetting the national political establishment in the process, he ordered 'immediate and simultaneous' anti-drug operations. In the very first day of this presidency, with the launch of *Oplan Tokhang* and *Oplan Double Barrel* led by the Philippine National Police (PNP), news media reported 39 alleged drug dealers killed. Today, close to 3 years into Duterte's term, the Philippine Drug Enforcement Agency reports that over 5176 suspects were killed by police in the context of acknowledged operations as of February 2019 (Bajo, 2019) and another 22,983 'deaths under investigation' may be linked to drugs (Felipe, 2018).

Drug-related killings dominated evening newscasts and print editions in the first few months of the campaign, with local and international media struggling to cover as many of the incidences as they could. The media played a significant role in the government's anti-drug campaign, witnessing, framing, counting, analysing and authoring the overall narrative of the President's flagship programme. The regularity of the killings, however, has resulted in dwindling media attention on the killings over time, especially as drug-related killings compete for news space with other urgent national and global issues.

In the midst of a multitude of urgent national concerns, the anti-drugs campaign remains forefront in the President's agenda. Duterte is undeterred by international criticism and scrutiny of the increasing number of killings linked to the campaign, saying in his 2018 *State of the Nation Address* that the drug war will continue, 'unrelenting and chilling'. Multiple investigations have characterised the government's anti-illegal drugs campaign as a human rights crisis. A series of Pulitzer-prize winning reports shows systematic police-led violence against alleged drug users and small-time dealers committed largely in poor communities (*Reuters*, 2017) while the International NGO Human Rights Watch (HRW) has documented multiple cases of extrajudicial killings. Academic research has pointed out that this mass violence can be considered as 'acts of genocide' (Simangan, 2018: 88) and as 'crimes against humanity', given the occurrence of 'extra judicial killings and vigilante justice, dehumanisation, and exaggeration of threat' that have political, legal and moral responsibilities for the international community in making the Philippine state accountable (Gallagher et al., 2019: 3, 20). In February 2018, the International Criminal Court (ICC) announced a preliminary examination into the

campaign, and the investigations are expected to continue despite the Philippines' withdrawal from the ICC in March 2019 (ICC, 2019).

In the face of the visceral brutality of the campaign, however, there remains popular public support for the policy. National surveys by the Social Weather Station in September 2018 showed that 78 per cent of Filipinos are satisfied with the government's campaign against illegal drugs (Flores, 2018). In fact, a majority of Filipinos (69% based on the June 2018 Pulse Asia survey) saw the administration's campaign against illegal drugs as its 'most important achievement' (*CNN Philippines*, 2018). It begs the question, how has the government's anti-drug campaign and the killings resulting from it been depicted by the media to the public? What might explain the structure of media narratives, and what might the construction of such narratives imply about the norms of local crime reporting? In analysing news reports as discursive constructions of illegal drug use and state response, we examine the means by which 'latent power structures of institutions and society can be rendered more visible' (Tupper, 2008: 224) by inadvertently giving them 'narrative control', thereby contributing to the othering of suspected drug users and justification of their deaths under a state-led drug policy of zero-tolerance policing.

News reporting as discourse of crime and social disorder

Media as agents of social control

News media are an important agent of social control (Innes, 2014; Van Dijk, 2009), and the way news media construct disorder has been a crucial subject of research. An event that is presented to the public is shaped by the reporter's representation of the event because it is rarely observed directly. News is crucial because it serves as a window for public broadcasting of global or local events as they unfold every day.

Our perceptions of disorder are developed out of a complex mix of the conditions of our neighbourhoods and the discourses that circulate through media and our social and cultural networks (Holbert et al., 2004). Studies provide qualified support for the conclusion that media representations of crime, particularly in local news, are related to increased levels of fear driven by the media (for a sample of these studies, see Holbert et al., 2004 and Romer et al., 2003 in the US context). People who see signs of disorder in their communities, such as dead bodies or depictions of drug users as crime perpetrators, perceive them as signs of deeper underlying problems.

Similarly, the media play an important role in shaping and projecting images of crime policing. Police activity, as emphasised by Innes (2014: 137) is often 'explicitly choreographed for the mass media'. Macek (2006), who studied the relationship between the prominence of media portrayals of cities as dangerous zones of violence and disorder, argues that the fear-saturated discourse of urban crisis in news media – incubated in conservative policy think tanks and disseminated via news accounts and popular films – 'produced a wave of popular alarm over the city that, in turn, was used as the pretext for a campaign to "get tough" on the city's poorest, most oppressed residents' (p. xvi). Once they were demonised as the source of the urban crisis, the urban poor could then be targeted for exclusion and removal through coercive policing or gentrification. In the Philippines' drug war, anthropological research in urban slum communities find that

policing practices have taken advantage of this demonisation by designating drug-linked men as killable bodies, 'worthless', irredeemable and sub-human sources of criminality against whom communities need to be protected and therefore are 'in need of violent police intervention' (Warburg and Jensen, 2018: 6).

The role of media as agents of social control also extends to its influence in shaping the perceptions and behaviours of elites such as policymakers by drawing on media reports as a measure of voters' opinion (Herbst, 1998). Arceneaux et al. (2016) found that Congressional members in the United States responded to shifts in the media environment and altered legislator's legislative and electoral calculations (pp. 17, 26). This may imply that if the media present particular solutions to social issues such as a 'war on drugs' as one that has unquestioned popular support, elites and policymakers may be inclined to support this position.

Framing of drugs as public-safety crisis

As 'drug wars' are waged in multiple countries around the world, public acceptance of punitive approaches to solving a constructed problem of widespread drug use appears to grow. Within high-level groups in national and international contexts, however, there is a continuing struggle to recast this issue as one related to health and rehabilitation rather than of crime and war. It is difficult, however, to change the narratives around drug use when public discourse through news coverage is focused on the criminal aspects of drug use. Sensationalised media depictions of drug users, dealers and traffickers construct them as dangerous, violent and often uncontrollable offenders, fueling social anxieties that underpin the public's understanding of drug use (Taylor, 2008).Various layers of 'otherness' are superimposed on the identities of alleged drug users (Ayres and Jewkes, 2012; Greer and Jewkes, 2005). In other countries, it is based on race, disease and criminality, where multiple types of outgroup status are used to construct an image of a drug abuser, highlighting their deviance 'as images of scourge', 'filth' and 'urban plague' (Keary, 2017: 134–136). Such depictions demonise those with a history of drug use and even single-time users and may lead to reduced empathy as well as willingness to adopt extreme and punitive measures against drug users. This process of symbolic alienation also has a function of altering the user's 'self-perception of personal deviance from subsidiary to dominant aspect of his or her identity' (Giulianotti, 1997: 415).

As central organising ideas of stories, news frames can alter public attitudes towards an issue (De Vreese, 2005: 60), and critical frames can set policy debates in society including more active scrutiny of actions towards an issue (Gecer and Mahinay, 2018; Tewksbury and Scheufele, 2009). More specifically, media depiction of the scale of the 'drug problem' has been illustrated to influence policy directions on drug use. The cultural representation of drugs has historically been dramatised and exaggerated by media, and as a consequence the public rhetoric around them carry messages of fear and trauma, consistent with what scholars have identified as 'moral panics' (Keary, 2017). Furthermore, the view that drug use is entirely attributable to hedonistic, individualistic and personal choice that supposedly leads to uncontrollable violent behaviour oversimplifies drug use. It is a narrative that leads to an understanding of all drug use – at any quantity for any purpose – as criminal and may justify brutal state policy of zero

tolerance for drug use (Lasco, 2018). What this sidelines is the importance of addressing inequality, poverty, discrimination and other systemic social forces that lead to drug use, and stymies health-based approaches that have historically been effective.

Because drugs and their users are portrayed as 'enemies' that must be 'defeated', it follows that the resulting deaths are justified as 'necessary collateral damage' of a 'public safety campaign'. When media reinforces instead of challenges this framing even when there are alternate frames, the reports are unable to encourage alternative understanding of the issue. For example, the use of an alternate frame such as 'crimes against humanity' (Gallagher et al., 2019: 20) or 'act of genocide' (Simangan, 2018: 88) may facilitate broader public understanding of how drug-related killings constitutes a violation of international commitments and conventions with commensurate obligations. In turn, such may help exert greater pressure on international and local bodies into making the government legally and politically accountable (Arceneaux et al., 2016; Gallagher et al., 2019). Following Ayres and Jewkes (2012), we seek to examine whether and how the media representations of drug users and the killings related to the government's anti-drugs campaign, mirror and reinforce the narrative pitched by policymakers and the police.

Selection of key sources in the construction of crime

The press is an active actor in constructing the issue of drugs and crime. The media exercise discretion over not just how drugs and drug users are constructed, but how the drug campaign and the killings associated with it, will be viewed by the broader public. Crucial in this representation is the selection of key sources that drive the narrative of the news report. Reporters often rely on authoritative sources, such as political and criminal justice officials, to construct the story (Dailey and Wenger, 2016). However, what happens in situations where the state actors, or the authoritative sources, are themselves the key drivers of a campaign from which the killings result? Journalists' reliance on government sources may create a level of trust in the official word that, without contrasting information, may be taken as the truth (Dailey and Wenger, 2016: 1703). If information on crime in news reports emanate solely from law enforcement, then they effectively have narrative control on public safety issues.

There are two general explanations for the dominance of official sources in news stories. The first explanation emphasises how the reliance on state officials is determined by macro-level forces. This perspective assumes that the media are important symbolic mechanisms actively used in the construction of ideology, and this ideological power results from their control over people's view of the world. Political and economic elites have preferential access to the media because of their position in society, and they may use this access to define the social order, maintain cultural boundaries and reaffirm the status quo.

Other researchers explain the reliance on these sources from an organisational perspective (Chermak, 1997: 689; Dailey and Wenger, 2016). Although news content may support a specific ideology, this is not necessarily done intentionally. Instead, this reliance results from the organisational structure of news organisations as well as the functioning structure, processes and values of news making. Sources who are able to provide

information in an efficient and newsworthy manner receive the opportunity to influence public discourse on crime and social control. To make the production of crime news manageable, and also given limited resources, reporters may routinise their task by positioning themselves to gain easy access to sources that can supply crime news (Dailey and Wenger, 2016). In the Philippines, for example, crime reporters establish a good relationship with the police and the staff at police stations to ensure continuous access to crime information.

This reliance on official sources, in turn, provides these sources with the tremendous opportunity to shape the framing of crime presented in the news (Chermak, 1997: 692–693). Beckett's (1995) study examined the impact of sources on the presentation of drugs in the media and found support to the sources' ability to influence the presentation of drugs. For example, state officials shaped the issue frames presented in the 'hard' news stories, and that the frequent presence of these frames resulted in a narrow perspective on the drug issue, supporting conservative 'law and order' themes.

'Event-driven' reporting: Problems with 'objectivity' and 'authorial neutrality' as generic structures of crime reports

In his influential study of the history of journalism in the United States, *Just the Facts*, Mindich (1998) argues that the 'ethic of objectivity' is the defining feature of modern journalism, which is also characterised by 'detachment' and 'nonpartisanship' (Thomson et al., 2008: 213). Under this journalistic norm of 'authorial neutrality', hard news reports avoid the authorial point of view and present 'just the facts' (Mindich, 1998). This should not mean, however, that journalists could not offer their evaluation of the issue. Appraisal theory has been developed as an analytical model to better deal with the way journalists or speakers can position themselves evaluatively for the viewpoints of potential respondents and other speakers/writers. For certain types of 'hard news' genres, however, such as crime, accidents or disasters, the 'reporter voice' is more commonly employed (Thomson et al., 2008: 221), wherein the author's role is backgrounded and judgement suppressed. These event-driven or 'episodic framing' of news stories (Iyengar, 1996: 62) describe what happened with a 'neutral' voice where the reporter attempts to minimise his or her active involvement in interpreting the meanings behind the story and avoids explicit evaluations of events or judgement about the intentions of participants (White, 1997). In comparison to the 'reporter voice', specialist journalists may take a 'correspondent voice', usually taken by more senior journalists covering local or international politics (Stenvall, 2014), wherein there is less constraint in rendering judgement and they can explicitly assess the situation. In contrast, 'journalists operating in reporter voice mode refrain from all such judgments of human behaviour, confining such evaluations to the quoted words of external sources' (Thomson et al., 2008: 221). Carpentier and Trioen (2010) criticise this stance of idealising objectivity and emphasised that 'objectivity is, like any value, an essentially particular value that acquires its meaning in relation to other particular values' (pp. 315–317).

In crime reports, the journalist's personal views are either avoided or subsumed to the quoted comments of external sources in news texts, altogether attempting to represent

the report as 'neutral' and 'impersonal'. This underlies the importance of news source selection in the maintenance of journalist neutrality. In avoiding such 'personalising' or 'subjective' meanings on the part of the journalist-author, 'hard news' reporting attempts to stand in contradistinction to the commentary or opinion piece. But to what extent is this objective and authorial neutrality stance relevant when the norms of authorial neutrality result in a reliance on state sources as voices of authority? What we seek to show is that it is this very attempt for event-driven reporting that engages primarily state authorities as key source, which inadvertently makes the report far from objective and neutral.

Methodology

Discourses create representations of the world and construct reality by ascribing meanings to our world, identities and social relations (Machin and Mayr, 2012; Van Dijk, 2009). This study builds on earlier works employing critical discourse analysis of visual and multimodal texts (Jancsary et al., 2016: 180–204; Machin and Mayr, 2012) and examines this orchestration of news elements as discursive strategies. Three major stages of analysis were undertaken as follows:

- In the context of a larger project to document deaths related to Duterte's anti-drug campaign, we gathered and archived television and online news stories that report the incidences. In total, 5021 individuals' killings were covered by the major news organisations between 10 May 2016 to 29 September 2017, reported over 2904 total news stories. Of these, 650 cases came from television/video stories containing 374 unique reports (many stories report multiple killings). Coders recorded the sources of information cited by the reporters, whether family members of the victim were interviewed, reasons why the victim was killed and whether the killing was committed in the context of an acknowledged police operation or by unknown assailants. These background variables allowed the team to do a systematic selection of stories which would be examined more closely through textual analysis.
- From the larger archive of news stories, 30 television stories were randomly selected representing different circumstances of the deaths. A close reading of these stories provided us a clearer picture of the language and form of reporting, focusing on: (1) the general structure of the reporting narrative; (2) the key source(s) of the news report, description of the source and how the source is represented; (3) how the report depicted the scene of the crime; (4) the evidence of the crime cited in the news report; (5) how the dead was/were depicted in the news report; (6) the key argument, analysis or conclusion of the news report; and (7) the assumed role of the reporter/journalist.
- Power manifests not only in presences, but more distinctly, in absences (Jancsary et al., 2016), and in news reporting, the systematic construction of presences and absences shape the narrative of the news story. Related here is the element of voice, concerning the question of who is legitimated to speak in a certain situation and who is not. As news reports purport to authoritatively represent reality, it

Figure 1. Illustration photo of a death connected to the Philippine government's campaign against illegal drugs: a pedicab driver who was shot and killed by unknown motorcycle-riding gunmen. A cardboard signage was left beside the victim's body which read, 'I'm a pusher, do not emulate me' in Filipino. Photo by Raffy Lerma/Philippine Daily Inquirer.

becomes crucial to examine whose viewpoints are used to frame the news narrative. This led us to the third stage of axial coding to examine: (1) the main source of news and how the news source is represented and (2) what the style of reporting 'does' to the dominant discourse about illegal drugs, crime and fear in the country. It is also at this stage where we looked closely at the role and working of power in the structure of news reporting narratives, bringing into the analysis the local context of crime reporting, the realities of news production in the country and the power structures involved in the illegal drugs campaign.

Findings

The first bodies: Dehumanisation and othering

On the day Duterte assumed office, the media recorded 39 deaths, with dead bodies displayed on the street alongside a signboard declaring that the killed are either drug dealers or drug users (Figure 1). These displays began in June, spiked in July, and began to taper off by September of 2016. As part of the first wave of killings, how the media, political elite and communities deal with them would be important to the construction of public support for the anti-drugs campaign.

Victims of killings were abducted, killed, then left on busy streets in the middle of the night, often with their heads wrapped in packaging tape or their mouths gagged, feet and hands bound or full bodies dumped in garbage bags. Alongside the bodies are

handwritten cardboard signs placed on top or side of them. The presence of a signboard suggests these bodies are meant to be seen, their deaths and the warnings meant to be witnessed. The signs usually bear the message 'I am a drug dealer, you are next' ('*pusher ako, susunod na kayo'*), or some variation of it. A close reading of the signage shows that these are always written in the first person and are framed not as accusations against the murderer, but 'admissions of guilt' by the person who was killed. The identities of the victims are usually not known. This first wave of deaths and how these are reported gave the government the opportunity to shape the interpretation and narrative of all future deaths attributable to the campaign against drugs. As argued by Van Dijk (2009: 192), each unit of discourse is produced as being conditioned by previous units and should thus be interpreted and analysed as such. Thus, while we consider the news items to be separate articulations, the created intertextual chain of discourses created by the news reports, where each report builds on to another, also reveals crucial insights.

Images of the gruesome death of unnamed men, rendered literally and figuratively faceless, were broadcast every night across the country. The signs are admissions of guilt coupled with vague threats, '*susunod na kayo*!' (you will be next). When reporters arrive on scene, their interpretation of this killing is shaped by the sign. The placement and words on the signs support the idea that guilt is not to be questioned and it is only right that these men are killed. When news media do not question the narrative of an admission of guilt, '*Pusher ako, 'wag tularan*' (I'm a drug pusher, don't be like me) left deliberately by the killer, they are not being critical about the government narrative. Most of the signs also carry a threat, '*marami pa kami*' (there are many more of us pushers) alluding to further danger, instilling fear and warning spectators that there is a dangerous situation brewing because there are more pushers around. Without the signs, these bodies would be unidentified murder victims, but with the signs they are declarations that the war on drugs has begun and there will be more killings 'of those guilty of drug links'.

None of the 30 reports reviewed for this study raised a question on who placed the signs or how and why the signs are written in the first person. In one testimony captured by a report, the policeman narrating the incident claimed that the dead suspect has clearly admitted fault because, as the police officer testifies, *'nakita nyo naman sa pulyetos na sila ay umaamin na sila ay pusher'* (You have seen the signage, they have already admitted to their guilt; *ABS-CBN News*, 2016b). The reporter does not question the absurdity of the statement (i.e. how the dead could have written what was on the cardboard). Does the reporter assume that the victim wrote the sign to publicly admit being a pusher? As if steered by the signage, the reporter automatically recognises the victim as a potential or suspected user or pusher; instantaneously connects the crime with drugs, providing little interrogation of the victim's guilt as a drug personality into question, nor raise questions about why they were killed. Victims were not victims, they were discussed objects in a narrative, as killings of men who were involved with drugs, almost always identified by people of state authority. This depersonalisation is further enforced by the voiceover of the reporter using passive verbs and neutral tone, one that is supported by earlier findings (Gecer and Mahinay, 2018: 217). The reporter, gazing at the spectacle of the dead body, appears constrained to display empathy or raise critical questions about the circumstances of the deaths.

In the first months of the campaign, the media made specific attempts to treat these killings as different from others, as results of a government policy which needs to be examined or challenged. Networks produced special documentaries to highlight the brutality of police killings and connected the rapid rise of killings with the President's drug war. Yet, once the spectacle had subsided, the novelty and newsworthiness of each killing wore off, and media, particularly television reporting, fell back to the tropes of typical crime reportage. Initial attempts to provide critical commentary on the broader impacts of such a war and the consequences of the violence and deadly force with which it is waged, had passed. The remaining daily coverage lump the killings together with other crime stories, no longer questioning the legitimacy of operations and the disregard for due process by the police. This wall of 'war coverage' portrayed by media leaves little room for discussions about alternative, evidence-based policymaking, instead, in the words of Ayres and Jewkes (2012: 328), it may lead to a 'legitimization of authoritarian, punitive, and disproportionate intervention'. We dissect the elements of this crime coverage in the next section.

Typical crime-reporting narratives

Once the critical coverage of the initial months had subsided, reporting on the killings happening every night became the sole domain of the crime reporters. Perhaps in part because of this staffing assignment, much of the coverage of drug killings for both police operations and 'vigilante-style' assassinations had fallen back into the form that was used to report on all crime stories prior to Duterte's drug war. The narrative and framing of the government continues to dictate the messages in the news, which we argue, serves to reinforce beliefs that these killings are justified. We dissect below the components of the narrative that comprise this argument as presented in news stories.

Event-focused and 'just the facts' reporting. The velocity of daily drug-related killings meant there were a large number of crime scenes to cover each night, and the nature of the killings, narratives around it, and the scenes become normalised and repetitive. However, news reports need to be interesting, entertaining and attention grabbing (Altheide, 1997). As a result, crime reporters fall back on a common event-focused script of sorts, reducing the killing to an ordinary crime, with little questioning of the version told by authorities or the insinuations made by local government officials. In the initial months, each killing was described. After several months of daily killings, the news reports began resorting to 'roundup' stories whereby a news segment presents the killings as a total number of who had been killed in a province or city overnight, 'Seven drug suspects killed in QC buy-bust ops' (*GMA News*, 2016b) and '*Mahigit 100 suspek sa droga, napatay sa Bulacan'* (more than 100 drug suspects, dead in Bulacan) (*ABS-CBN News*, 2016a). These stories go through each incident in rapid succession, reporting only the bare minimum information comprising of the victim's name, the nature of the killing (police or vigilante-style), location and the victim's link to drugs. Visual signs depict dead bodies and cardboards used to 'mark' their guilt, left where they were attacked, along with quick interviews with police or local government officials. The killings are

normalised, presented to audiences alongside and in the same manner as robberies or murders.

Killings that happen in the context of acknowledged police operations are reported with a focus on the actions of the police, depicting the men killed as 'targets', 'suspects' and 'drug personalities' who had no identity other than as targets who police allege 'fought back' or 'resisted arrest'. The language used to describe the incident confers authority and knowledge to the police, with limited questioning of whether arrest procedures were followed or rights of victims respected.

In reports about vigilante-style killings (or murders committed by unknown assailants, often in motorbikes), the men killed are not called suspects, they are often labelled as 'victims'. However, after details of the killing are described, what follows is a presentation of how the victim is linked to drugs. The only relevant identity constructed for the victim of unknown gunmen is as a suspected drug user or dealer. Hundreds of television news stories depict the very same straight crime reporting, clearly driven by the news value of speed, presenting only the information available on the same day that the killing occurred. Victims are often represented solely as drug-connected men, no contextual information about policy or adherence to procedural rules of the police, and no questioning of the framing created by the authorities in their narration or of their accountability of the killings.

State actors as key source. In a given crime scene, there are elements that must be narrated and portrayed to set the interpretation of the crime, the motive, means and succeeding actions. Audiences will rely on the news report to contain that interpretation, and in turn, the reporter is expected to collect information from multiple sources to depict an interpretation that is as close to truth as can be approximated (Dailey and Wenger, 2016). Unfortunately, in the case of many of these killings, reporters relied predominantly on the police and local government officials as sources (see for example, '*Miyembro raw ng akyat-bahay gang at tulak ng droga, patay sa operasyon ng pulisya*' (*GMA News*, 2016a). As a result, much of the coverage of these killings is interpreted only through the lens of state actors.

For 'buy-bust' operations (police entrapment operations) that lead to the killing of suspects, the justification stated by the police is that those killed fought back, or '*nanlaban*'. The common version of events as they are explained by police to reporters is that police officers pose as drug buyers or sellers, and during the conduct of their operation the 'target' notices that something is wrong. The suspect then attempts to pull a gun and the police shoots the victim to death. It is in such circumstance that the shooting by the police would appear to be justifiable under the cloak of 'self-defense'. The word in Filipino language '*nanlaban*' is repeated across stories by different police from different places, phrases that occur often are '*nakaramdam umano ang suspek na pulis ang katransaskyon at biglang bumunot ng baril patay*' (suspect realises transaction with police and brings out gun—dead) or '*2 suspek sa droga sa Laguna, patay matapos manlaban*' (2 drug suspects in Laguna, dead after fighting back) (*ABS-CBN News*, 2017a). The '*nanlaban*' narrative is often reported without question even as some of the victims are minors or handcuffed. The words used to describe these events have an 'officialness' to them, conferring legitimacy to the resulting deaths. An operation's sequence of events is

narrated by the voice-overs of reporters using the words 'engkwentro' (encounter), 'transaksyon' (transaction) or 'operasyon' (operation). Recovered materials from the suspect are displayed for the cameras: sachets of white powder that are 'suspected' to be shabu (crystal meth), cellular phones, some cash and guns allegedly found on those killed are displayed as proof that the victim is a drug user or dealer.

When the deaths are due to police operations, reporters use 'napatay' (unintentionally killed) more often than 'pinatay' (killed), noting the use of the passive verb. This conveys a sense that these killings were not intended but accidental, which is an interpretation that has increasingly become incredible, given the regularity with which these kinds of killings occur in the context of drug buy-busts. The employment of signages to label the deaths – strategically worded and placed in the crime scene with an attempt to orchestrate admission of guilt by the dead – would lead a critical observer to think that these are curated and planned killings. In one example, the report merely narrated the police version and follows the police's conclusion that the 'suspect was killed in a buy-bust operation' and that the 300 pesos found near the dead body was 'buy bust money'. The article also does not question why the person was killed despite being a surrenderee.

In most of these stories, the narrative of killings during police operations are about the events and procedures that led to the killing. The victims are faceless, nameless, seemingly random men who are depicted not as human beings killed, but as drug criminals. On the rare occasions that counternarratives are presented, when the kin of victims are interviewed, they contest the allegations of drug connections, yet their version is not accorded equal importance in the full report. In one report, the wife of the victim was interviewed and she denied the police allegations, '*Wala naman po siyang iligal na ginagawa. Nagtataka kami bakit siya nagkaroon ng baril. Na-set up lang siya*', (He is not doing anything illegal. We wonder how he can possess a gun, that was clearly a set-up). The father of the child was also interviewed: *'Kung sino man 'yung pulis na yumari sa anak ko pasensyahan nalang tayo. Magfa-file ako ng kaso, hindi tama ang ginagawa nila. Ang bata ng anak ko bakit dinamay nila*'. (To whomever killed my son, I will file a case. This is wrong. My son is a child, how can they kill him?) The report, however, claims in end of the story that the victims are getting killed by their own groups and police are not to be blamed. In the end, the report appears to side with the police's conclusion, '*Lumaban sila kasi under threat na sila'* (They fought because they are under threat) ('16 year-old student killed in Baguio buy-bust') (*ABS-CBN News*, 2017c). One report includes the narrative of a bystander, '*alam ko ho nangangalkal lang ng basura eh*' (as far as I know, he is just a scavenger; *ABS-CBN News*, 2016b). Such reports at least attempt to present sources other than the police. Yet often, in the same reports, the police's conclusions are maintained, despite alternate interpretations.

There are very few examples of counternarratives, with few news stories citing a family member or partner of the person killed. When reporters are able to interview people on camera, it is common for them to relay that the surviving kin, often the wife or girlfriend or mother, 'admit' to the victim's drug use, '*aminado ang asawa nito na dating gumagamit ng droga ang biktima*', (the wife admitted that the dead uses illegal drugs). In another story, '*Aminado ang asawa na dati nang nasangkot sa ipinagbabawal na gamot ang kanyang asawa at sumuko na raw sa oplan tokhang*' (wife admits that dead husband was involved in illegal drugs and has already surrendered). Referring to these

statements as 'admission' further cements the identity constructed that the victim is a wrongdoer.

Local government officials' role in tagging victims. When police operations result in killings, *barangay* (village) officials are interviewed on camera, and their role is often to cast blame on those who were killed and to highlight the relationship of the victim to drug use or the sale of drugs. It is consistent across many reports that the role of village officials is to make this link – as local authorities who are on top of the 'drug watchlist' or know about the alleged complaints against the dead. In one story where the police killed three people in an operation, the *Barangay Kagawad* (village officer) directly alleges drug use and says nobody else is to blame but the victims themselves for being killed, he plays up his own role in trying to make the victims stop drug use (*ABS-CBN News*, 2017b). In one report, a village official states on camera '*Kung ayaw nyong mangyari sa buhay ninyo ang nangyari sa kanila* (the 3 killed in a police operation), *umalis na kayo sa lugar na ito. Tutulungan namin yung kapulisan sa pagsusugpo ng ganitong trabaho*' (If you don't want this to happen in your lives, leave this place. We are helping the police in this job).

Local government officials also attest that victims are linked to drugs by labelling the victims one of a handful of common labels. In one report, the victim is called a 'notorious drug pusher', in another, the police official says on camera that the victim was a known drug user, hold-upper and robber. He had been sent back and forth to jail and that they had warned him to change his ways but he did not listen (*GMA News*, 2016a). In most reports, the wife would then be shown crying, and the reporter narrates that she is worried about how she can now support herself and their children. As closing line, these stories would usually state that the police are continuing to investigate the killing. Reporters, citing village officials, spend inordinate space in the stories highlighting how the people killed are linked to drugs and other criminal activity. Issues of due process or legality of operations are rarely raised. The reporting is almost perfunctory, exclusively event-driven or focused on the sequence of events leading to a death, followed by a justification for the killing.

Discussion and conclusion

The Philippine government's campaign against illegal drugs has publicly proclaimed a stance that drug users are criminals – should a zero-tolerance policy lead to violent encounters, the death of the suspected user is justifiable. The emerging dominant narrative is that drug users and peddlers deserve to die, and the multiple elements of the news report support this narrative. If media reporting directly or indirectly does not question such narrative, media not only enables but also broadcasts and crystallises the narrative. We find that the way that these stories are reported through (1) privileging state authorities as the key source and (2) event-focused reporting, inadvertently gives the government narrative control. This treatment of the stories by the mainstream media did not change even with increasing concerns raised by the international community and preliminary investigations made by the ICC in late 2017.

In the foregoing analysis, the relative importance given to the police narrative, and the less privileged attention given to the perspectives of the victim's families, explain the

nature of the crime reports. One plausible explanation is that distraught families of the victims may not be able to put their reality (and grief) into words at the time of the production of a news report. Reporters are compelled to get the story as fast as possible, ending up relying on available reports from traditional contacts at the police station. Crime reporters, some of the most junior in terms of rank in a news organisation, value the connections that they establish with police authorities as key source of regular crime reports. Some reporters, specifically those located in rural areas, also have limited resources and move from one crime scene to another, nudging them to obtain and report 'just the facts' of the story by relying on available and traditional police contacts. This power relationship is crucial for understanding the nature of this reporting genre. However, when crime takes place under the banner of a state-driven policy, reliance on state authorities as a primary source for crime narratives becomes problematic.

Furthermore, as news media focus on 'just the facts' of the event to maintain objectivity and authorial neutrality, they effectively are not, because this mode of reporting leads to a singular understanding of the issue. As this article has shown, an event-driven style of reporting unwittingly serves as a rhetorical device which, when combined with a single source, constructs social reality in a way that privileges a particular narrative. As such, reporters end up enabling the politics of fear of drug addicts/drug addiction, which in turn contributes to the rationalisation of the government's stance that zero-tolerance policing is the only solution to the drug issue. Carpentier and Trioen (2010: 325) argue that journalists' 'self-reflexive and self-critical dialogues' about journalistic ethics should recognise objectivity's 'unattainable horizon', and in this sense, imply an understanding of how the false assumption of objectivity can lead to privileging a single narrative. By invoking frames that do not challenge the government's narrative of the deaths as necessary consequence of a domestic public safety campaign even when there are alternative frames which carry international legal, political and moral liabilities for the Philippine State, media amplify the state's narrative. This media environment may then reinforce public support for the campaign and also deter policymakers and officials from being critical of the campaign in order to maintain electoral support (Arceneaux et al., 2016).

What we found here may not be unique to crime reporting or to reporting about the government's anti-illegal drugs policy, as previous analyses have shown that Philippine media may tend to provide limited diversity or opposition to official views even for other issues (Center for Media Freedom and Responsibility, 2018). One criticism is that 'private ownership of the media has not shielded the press from market pressures', downgrading its watchdog capacity to mobilise against wrongdoing 'in favor of fluff and entertainment' (Coronel, 2009: 5). Relying on a single source and 'events-driven reporting' for a story is a concern, as it demonstrates a lack of depth in reporting, whether it is due to a desire for convenience or it becomes a necessity created by lack of resources. The structure of local media organisations where reporters are assigned to a particular beat (i.e. local crime) may also make it difficult for them to imagine alternate frames, such as international legal frameworks, in the interpretation of a 'local crime', leading to an event-driven or episodic framing (Iyengar, 1996). Future research can explore in-depth the organisational or larger structural forces shaping contemporary journalism in the country.

Media has the power, through mass reporting, to facilitate the witnessing and understanding by broad audiences of events and occurrences. As social reality is often depicted through the lens of the media, the situation about the killings in relation to the state's anti-illegal drugs campaign can often be seen by the public only through the reporter's story. This implies the importance of media to be more reflective and conscientious about how they report on crime, especially when these crimes are connected to state-led programmes and policies.

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