

# Reimagining Journalistic Practices and Digital News Production during Public Health Crises

Katherine T. Valencia

*University of the Philippines Visayas*

## ABSTRACT

Public health crises are an example of a persistent global concern, with news outlets shaping health crisis discourses through the design, production, and distribution of their content. The article is based on a study that examined how social media platforms, such as Facebook, serve as news outlets for presenting and constructing issues related to the COVID-19 pandemic. The study focuses on the production and dissemination of relevant news articles on digital platforms, with a particular emphasis on the Philippines-based Digital News Exchange's (DNX) Facebook News Page in Bacolod City, Negros Occidental. DNX emerged as the first digital news platform in the region following the closure of one of the Philippines' largest television networks. The objective of this article is to explore how semiotic resources are used and analyzed to comprehend how digital platforms construct health communication, with particular attention to news values, semiotics, and platformization of pandemic stories in DNX. Employing multimodal analysis, it examines DNX's digital news content and considers the implications of post-COVID news production for health communications in the Philippines. Findings suggest that media texts can sustain persuasive discourses that may influence how news outlets present stories, while also acknowledging that these discourses may have a limited impact on audience reception. In turn, this contributes to the expanding body of literature on media-based textual analysis and media consumption in the Philippines.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, digital news platforms, journalistic practices, pandemic discourses

## INTRODUCTION

The Philippines is considered a “digital powerhouse” for internet use, with 86.98 million internet users and a 73.6% internet penetration rate, as well as high social media usage in 2024 (Lardizabal-Dado 2024). Studying how health communication is presented on social media platforms opens new avenues for analyzing how the platform influences content creation and how content is tailored to meet the platform’s requirements. Cohen (2008) describes Facebook as a platform that combines various features, including instant messaging, photo and video sharing, and blogging. This platform works on linked personal profiles based on educational, geographic, and corporate networks. With over 86.75 million users in the Philippines (Lardizabal-Dado 2024), it has become a powerful medium that offers significant potential for its use. When the pandemic struck the world, these platform features became even more prominent. Nobody was prepared, including media organizations. When the first case of local transmission in the Philippines was recorded on March 07, 2020 (WHO 2020), a series of nationwide lockdowns were implemented to stop the spread of the virus. With no exception, everyone had to stay at home, and public and private offices were shut down. However, despite the pause that the world experienced, the delivery of news and information had to continue.

This article examines how semiotic resources are identified and analyzed to gain a deeper understanding of how digital platforms influence the news values, semiotics, and platformization of pandemic stories within the context of the Digital News Exchange (DNX) in Bacolod City, Negros Occidental, Philippines.

The initial phase of data collection involved looking for regional digital pages on Facebook, specifically in Negros Occidental, Philippines. DNX Bacolod was the first digital platform providing pandemic news without a traditional media counterpart and was privately created and managed by a former journalist. Four months after the page’s launch in August 2019, COVID-19 occurred. Despite being a new and thriving media outlet, DNX continued to publish news and information about the pandemic in the province. This coincided with the shutdown of ABS-CBN Bacolod, the province’s longest-running television station, which had a 32-year media presence in the province. Its franchise was not renewed, resulting in the station’s cessation of operations and news production (Espina 2020).

DNX has 239,000 followers as of September 2025. Its COVID-19 news coverage ranges from 30 seconds to nearly two hours of audio and video content. The year 2020 was selected as the initial timeframe to enable a comprehensive examination of whether there are changes or developments in discourses about public health crises on Facebook, as well as how it influences the creation of public health information. In 2020, the page produced 108 audio-video news items covering COVID-19. Given that a year’s worth of video coverage is extensive, the dataset was limited to files with running times of 15 seconds to 20 minutes only, along with the most viewed video for each quarter of 2020, resulting in six videos selected for analysis. This ensures video review time depends on views and reactions, not length.

Examining public health crisis news as multimodal texts reveals ways to understand the various semiotic resources and how they influence or alter the meaning being presented. Since the internet is a crucial component of the offline world’s economic, political, and cultural realities (Cammaerts

2008), various understandings of a society are presented in discourses that emerge in online spaces. These observations of digital media are particularly pronounced in the regions of the Philippines where access to information is limited. Local governments, particularly in provinces like Negros Occidental, do not effectively utilize digital spaces for publishing or disseminating health information. It was only when news organizations in the regions became affected by the lockdowns during COVID-19 that digital spaces were seen as potential spaces for content about the situations in the provinces.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

During the pandemic, media companies had to adapt to three constraints instantly to remain relevant entities that serve various publics through the presentation of newsworthy information. These three constraints involved changes in how news is presented (journalistic practices), changes in where news is presented (technological changes), and changes in the relationships between news producers and consumers (structural constraints) (Henderson and Hilton 2018). Bernadas and Ilagan (2020) note that the nation found itself at a “crossroads of changes in digital media” (2). Social media platforms became a significant source of health information worldwide, including in the Philippines. For instance, journalists frequently monitor Facebook as a source of information (Bolledo 2020). In addition to serving as a substitute for the traditional camera setup used for press conferences and interviews, Facebook Live and other photo-sharing features have gained popularity on the platform (Camus 2020). Digital platforms played a crucial role in meeting people’s needs for news and health information.

Moreover, Tandoc (2018) explains that in the Philippines, Facebook has become a source of news and information, altering the relationships between news creators and their audiences. It has become an essential tool for journalists because news organizations’ online visibility has become relevant, as most audiences consume news through social media sites (Tandoc 2018). During times of public health crisis, the requirements for news reporting differ from the norm. The established journalistic practices were modified to a setup where a reporter only needed their computer, an internet connection, and good lighting. What made producing news content possible during this health crisis is the shift in delivering news from traditional platforms to digital online spaces. This influences the production, distribution, and consumption of information, resulting in a greater reliance on digital media over conventional broadcast media.

Scott (2002) also emphasizes the role of the audience in defining a public health crisis. He explains how audiences are becoming increasingly mobile and more fragmented in their information consumption. He illustrates how audiences are becoming less interested in watching television news during emergencies and are dispersing across a broader range of news sources, such as the internet. Van Djick (2012) elaborates on this statement, claiming that technologies shape and are shaped not only by economic, legal, and cultural frameworks, but also by users’ interactions with the content itself. Computers, for example, become a tool for creating and producing news items. Coeckelbergh (2017) expands on this concept by highlighting how humans “create a character” when using technology that is not applicable and capable of producing intelligence and warmth. Humans continue to maneuver within this medium, determining what

type of content to create and consume. Thus, the transition from broadcast to digital media is a crucial aspect of how the medium influences the production of health information and how digital media becomes a content space. In addition, van der Meer et al. (2013) and Lee (2005) see online sources as commonly used by media organizations, not only as a space to present news but also as a source of information that has the potential to influence the broadcast medium (television and radio). Etter and Vestergaard (2015) support this claim by describing online sources as a “popular communication channel” (163), in which people contribute, express, and negotiate their opinions.

These presented concepts challenge the notion that online information is objective, instead suggesting that it is constructed, allowing for the potential unpacking of underlying discourses through analysis. Fast access to information in an archival digital space provides for repeated consumption, and a collection of discourse can shape and influence our understanding of the world, as Foucault (1972) explains. A discursive reading is achieved through multimodal analysis, which examines the relationships and connections between signs found in texts. Multimodality expands our ability to analyze texts overall. It shapes and promotes a deeper understanding of how we formulate and comprehend meanings around us through its links and interconnections with other texts. Kress and van Leeuwen (2001) argue that signs are continually imported from different contexts, and the context in which they are used determines their meaning. In a country where reliance on news and information is increasingly dependent on digital media (Lucas 2014), the need to develop a critical understanding of how to analyze media texts on digital platforms becomes significant.

## RESEARCH DESIGN

Multimodal analysis served as the primary method employed in the study. Kress and van Leeuwen’s (2001) four domains of practice (design, production, distribution, and discourse) served as the framework. This framework views each practice as a unique text containing semiotic resources that, when examined and analyzed individually, present potential discourses about public health crises. To accomplish this, each process was assigned a specific framework.

The practice of creating a production blueprint is known as design (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2001). DNX’s design of producing pandemic stories is examined by utilizing and modifying Galtung and Ruge’s (1965) list of news values as a semiotic resource. Seven news values were used: composition (how a story fits into the overall composition of news coverage), threshold (the intensity or impact of a story), meaningfulness (relevance of story to the audience), consonance (the preconceptions of media organizations’ readiness to report a story), reference to elite individuals (stories or events about powerful, famous, or rich people), and reference to a specific person (how stories can be presented in terms of individual people). This list of news values is treated as the modes of analysis that tend to explain the selection and presentation of information that are supplementary in selecting events or stories to publicize and broadcast. This framework serves as the ‘standard’ guide for analyzing COVID-19-related news coverage from a discursive perspective.

Production, as a domain of practice, is defined as a form of physical work using material resources to communicate and articulate a particular text (Kress and van Leeuwen 2001). Anstey

and Bull's (2010) semiotic system for moving images serves as a guide for analyzing each pandemic story. To maximize comprehension of media texts, they see movies, videos, and the internet as new literacies that require the interaction and integration of a variety of elements, including visual, auditory, spatial, and gestural semiotic resources. These elements are referred to in the study as semiotic resources that interact and integrate to create meaning and gain a better understanding of the possible discourses present during the production of COVID-19-related news coverage on DNX. In contrast to how the design process is analyzed, the production process focuses on the overall composition of the media text. To investigate how DNX produced its pandemic stories, the following semiotic resources were identified:

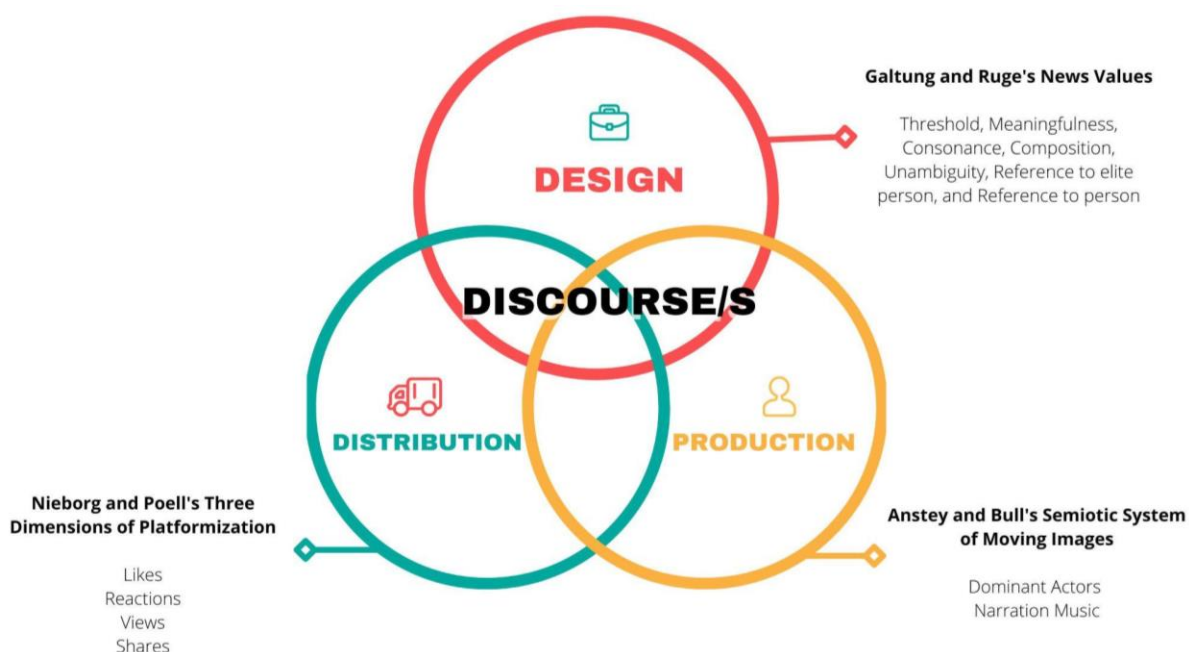
1. Dominant actors: These are the actual images shown in the pandemic story that include the main characters, personalities, or cast represented in the visual composition.
2. Narration: Refers to the auditory component, which can be addressed directly or explicitly by a presenter, such as through dialogue, talking heads, or voice-overs.
3. Music: This refers to the sound added to the pandemic story, either in the foreground or background, to complement or contrast the visual composition.

Finally, distribution is defined as the re-encoding and transmission of semiotic resources for reproduction, in which meanings lose their originality and become a new media text (Kress and van Leeuwen 2001). Distribution becomes a separate process in which the potential for meaning-making is recognized, or, as McLuhan (1996) puts it, the medium has become the message. DNX's Facebook page functions as a multimodal platform for the re-encoding and dissemination of pandemic stories, potentially making content platform-dependent. Neiborg and Poell's (2018) modified platformization framework is employed to analyze the distribution process, treating DNX's Facebook Page as a multimodal text with three distinct dimensions of platformization. These are shifting markets (movement of digital markets from one- or two-sided markets to multi-sided platforms), changing governance (autonomy of consumers that affects power relations in the production of media texts regardless of culture and location), and infrastructural information (how content is consistently altered for distribution and how the process of distribution becomes data-driven). Shifting markets and changing governance are interdependent because both involve the audience's interaction with the content. The semiotic resources recognized in each dimension of platformization are as follows:

1. Shifting markets and changing governance: the number of likes and reactions in each DNX pandemic story. These dimensions also examine how DNX's Facebook page has expanded its reach in covering COVID-19-related news, as the platform blurs regional and cultural boundaries, attracting audiences from diverse places and timelines worldwide.
2. Infrastructural information: the number of views and shares in each DNX pandemic story. This refers to how digital platforms invest in distributing repeated and serialized stories rather than curated content packages.

By quantifying these semiotic resources, discourses about what content is "audience-approved" can be realized in the distribution process, as views, feelings, and reactions on social media platforms become datafied. The analysis focuses not just on the character of the pandemic projected by the stories on DNX's Facebook but also looks at how the identified semiotic resources

from the design, production, and distribution processes present further discourses (hidden, amplified, influential, or powerful) about COVID-19 when these domains interrelate with each other. Figure 1 illustrates the interrelationship between these frameworks.



**Figure 1. Multimodal analysis framework using Kress and van Leeuwen's four domains of practice.**

**Source: author.**

Some studies that employ multimodality as their method of analyzing media texts include Lloren's (2017) analysis of the socio-cultural appropriation of sex billboards, which examined the grammatical and visual syntax of Philippine 'sex-sell' advertisements. Inton's (2015) analysis of the film *Here Comes the Bride* by studying the film's linguistic, visual, and performative modes, and Fajardo's (2016) multimodal approach on how to look at educational texts (picture books, graphic novels, television shows, etc.) to develop the 'reading' habits of students. Much closer to this research is how Mendoza (2018) used multimodality as an approach in examining the politics of disaster reporting, specifically of online news reportage of Typhoon Lando, where he gave importance to how texts communicate to people by looking at the linguistic clauses (process, participants, circumstances) and the visual narratives (vector, actor, goal setting) of 28 online news reports about the typhoon. Through his study, social power in the production of online content becomes analyzable.

These studies demonstrate how multimodality can be employed as a method to 'read' and 'make' meaning. Meaning-making becomes more complex and nuanced since other elements of a text interact and integrate to convey a specific message (Ying 2013). One significant point to consider when analyzing media texts is that, alongside the development of technology, such as the emergence of social media platforms, the ways of producing and consuming media texts have changed. The freedom that these digital spaces provide not only to their producers but also to their consumers influences the way content is produced and consumed. Messages become mediated by


technology, and one interesting thing to look at is how, through multimodality, the affordances that these platforms give to their users affect the content and creation of 'meaning.'

### **DATA ANALYSIS: RESHAPING JOURNALISTIC PRACTICES**





The pandemic has altered the standards by which journalism is practiced. There has been a significant shift in how news and information are presented, from traditional media to digital media, particularly on social media platforms. Quandt and Wahl-Jorgensen (2021) contend that the pandemic became a "turning point, transformation, amplified starting point, or destruction" (2021) for digital journalism. The affordances of social media platforms, which enable their audiences to actively participate in and contribute to the production of meaning in the digital sphere, have also changed how people consume news and information.

Research results show that the social media platform DNX exemplifies how journalistic practices evolved when designing, producing, and distributing pandemic-related content during the crisis. As a newly established news page available at <https://www.facebook.com/DNXNews>, and as the first digital news platform in Negros Occidental, Philippines, it is less popular than other traditional media organizations in the province with an online presence. When it comes to trying to become visible on Facebook, the page also took extra precautions to compete not only with other popular traditional media organizations (television and radio) but also with other individual content posted on the platform itself. DNX adopted traditional basic news elements when designing content, such as highlighting specific news values. Essential to the study's result, meaningfulness and unambiguity are two news values present in all six videos identified. Pandemic stories presented on the page focus on designing content that is relevant and clear. Favoring these news values pushes forward certain intentions to attain certain goals when presenting pandemic information.

In examining the production of pandemic news stories on DNX, each semiotic mode contributes to the wholeness of the stories. Examining the dominant actors, narration, and music of each story reveals that interpretations and understandings of the pandemic are multiple, changing, and motivated. Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) recognize that there is deliberateness in choosing the modes to present and represent a certain understanding of certain realities. The interconnection of these modes looks at how DNX pandemic stories are composed as audio-video material. The dominant actors, narration, and music analyzed in the six identified pandemic stories show that the intersection of modes advances, supports, and actualizes certain pandemic narratives. Examining each mode and comparing and analyzing their interrelations also projects the weight of how these narratives are constructed. The choices made by the producers are seen in how the modes are deployed. Once stories are viewed as an audio-video package, the influence of these choices becomes apparent in terms of what discourses become dominant, whose voices are privileged, which elements contribute to presenting how power and status in society are projected, and how narration and music are used to advance these discourses.

COVID-19 COVERAGE	DESIGN	PRODUCTION		DISTRIBUTION	
	News Values	Dominant Actors/ Visual Appearances	Narration and Music	Views	Likes, Reactions, and Shares
<p>March 16, 2020: Ground War: Bacolod Battles</p> <p>Link to Video 1: <a href="https://www.facebook.com/share/v/1D6JVvFeor/">https://www.facebook.com/share/v/1D6JVvFeor/</a></p>	<p>Meaningfulness</p> <p>Unambiguity</p> <p>Consonance</p> <p>Reference to Elite People</p>	 <p>Volunteer Nurses, Police Officer Source: DNX Facebook</p>	<p>Interview</p> <p>Storytelling</p> <p>Natural sound</p>	144k	<p>Likes: 626 Heart: 45 Wow: 7 Cry: 7 Laugh: 574 Angry: 27</p> <p>Share: 380</p>
<p>March 21, 2020: Bing Goes to War: Bacolod's Modern Wartime Mayor</p> <p>Link to Video 2: <a href="https://www.facebook.com/share/v/17GkeNYALt/">https://www.facebook.com/share/v/17GkeNYALt/</a></p>	<p>Meaningfulness</p> <p>Unambiguity</p> <p>Consonance</p> <p>Reference to Elite People</p>	 <p>Bacolod City Mayor Source: DNX Facebook</p>	<p>Interview</p> <p>Striking music bed for intro and extro</p> <p>Natural sound</p>	139k	<p>Likes: 636 Heart: 104 Laugh: 17 Wow: 4 Cry: 4 Angry: 1</p> <p>Shares: 594</p>



May 11, 2020: COVID Blues  Link to Video 3: <a href="https://www.facebook.com/share/v/19wmf2rKA6/">https://www.facebook.com/share/v/19wmf2rKA6/</a>	Threshold  Meaningfulness  Unambiguity  Consonance  Reference to Elite Persons	  Niño, a man who walked 70 kilometers to go home Source: DNX Facebook	Interview  Natural sound	183k	Likes: 1.3k Heart: 127 Care: 46 Laugh: 6 Wow: 9 Cry: 3.5k Angry: 7  Shares: 2.5k
June 24, 2020: Congressman Gasataya on Bacolod City Hospital  Link to Video 4: <a href="https://www.facebook.com/share/v/1B5g6RXTiQ/">https://www.facebook.com/share/v/1B5g6RXTiQ/</a>	Meaningfulness  Unambiguity  Consonance  Reference to Elite People	  SIT DOWN WITH CONG. GREG GASATAYA STORIES   NEGRENSES IN TABUELAN PORT APPEALS FOR GOVERNMENT HELP Congressman of Bacolod City Source: DNX Facebook	Interview  Natural sound	13k	Likes: 254 Heart: 18 Care: 2 Laugh: 4 Wow: 3  Shares: 64
November 9, 2020: Mayor Sit-down Episode 2  Link to Video 5: <a href="https://www.facebook.com/share/v/18ycayUja/">https://www.facebook.com/share/v/18ycayUja/</a>	Meaningfulness  Unambiguity  Consonance  Reference to Elite People	  CITY GOVERNMENT Bacolod City Mayor Source: DNX Facebook	Interview  Natural sound	2k	Likes: 14 Heart: 18 Care: 2 Laugh: 4 Wow: 3  Shares: 7
December 19, 2020: Tips to Cope with COVID-19 Stress  Link to Video 6: <a href="https://www.facebook.com/share/v/17h8D58Hau/">https://www.facebook.com/share/v/17h8D58Hau/</a>	Meaningfulness  Unambiguity  Reference to Elite People	  College Representative Source: DNX Facebook	Presenting  Feel-good BG music	2.7k	Likes: 18 Heart: 44 Care: 6  Shares: 25

**Table 1. Design, production, and distribution result in the six DNX COVID-19 materials. Source: author.**

In terms of the distribution of pandemic stories on DNX, the number of views highly influences the distribution of content. Most viral and most viewed content is more likely to be serialized and repurposed. DNX posts standalone, individual, and specific video clips instead of presenting a complete story package. DNX also gains access to audiences' personal preferences when it comes to choosing what content to watch and considers these preferences as essential data in

constructing and distributing future stories. The platform's audience metric features, however, do not solely determine the stories produced on DNX's Facebook page. DNX's page highlights stories that impact their immediate environments to develop and achieve the page's goal of becoming a hyper-local news and information outlet.

As a result of Facebook's features, content creation, production, and distribution are facilitated and hampered, making the adage "platform first, content second" applicable to this practice restructuring. Table 1 presents the results and observations from the design, production, and distribution processes of the six COVID-19 materials produced by DNX in 2020. Furthermore, these categories are identified as semiotic resources in accordance with Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) four domains of practice, as discussed in the previous section.

The results in Table 1 rely heavily on familiar stories identified, as well as their relevance to pandemic updates. The findings reveal the platform's impact on journalistic practices and show how power and status affect DNX's presentation of pandemic stories. Each process contributes to and supports the other in pushing forward different understandings of the pandemic. Additionally, it is observed that COVID-19 is constantly remade or reimagined in each process. In most cases, COVID-19 becomes more of a social crisis than a medical condition. It encompasses the understanding that the pandemic is not solely a disease, but a societal experience shared by different people in which power and influence play a significant role, as demonstrated by the dominant actors in the six evaluated videos.

These implications shape how pandemic content is presented on digital platforms and, in turn, how digital platforms influence the creation of potential pandemic discourses.

### **JOURNALISTIC PRACTICE 1: DIGITAL PLATFORM AS A 'FREE' SPACE IS MERELY A POTENTIAL**

DNX highlights how Facebook impacts the way journalists create content, particularly in stories about the pandemic. When reporting stories about COVID-19, certain factors still need to be considered, even with the platform's openness towards its content creators. These factors include how the public responds to news stories, production concerns, and adapting to the constantly evolving safety regulations when conducting interviews or covering the pandemic. These factors restrict the platform's freedom of use while also influencing the way content is created.

Based on DNX's experience, the site does not directly enforce any restrictions or limitations on how content is presented; however, it does have some limiting effects on what kinds of content are acceptable to post. DNX explains, for instance, how Facebook is stringent when it comes to COVID-19 information and how they occasionally have to edit their posts to add or remove text in response to platform warnings. DNX had to concede because they would have to remove the post otherwise. Facebook's "limiting" factor restricts the availability of news and information during a crisis, in contrast to DNX's objective of presenting all perspectives—both positive and negative—about the pandemic. News outlets, such as DNX, often experience fear and self-censor their reporting to prevent errors. To further explain, Table 2 shows the interpretation of the extracted semiotic resources available in the pandemic stories analyzed, from the design, production, and distribution processes.

Results (Multimodal Analysis)		
<b><u>Design Process</u></b> COVID-19 is a relevant and unambiguous topic to discuss on digital platforms  COVID-19 as standalone stories  COVID-19 as predetermined stories  COVID-19 focuses on elite stories	<b><u>Production Process</u></b> COVID-19 as a representation of people's voices  COVID-19 as a fast-paced phenomenon  COVID-19 as a narrative to tell people's stories  COVID-19 as an experience of situations  COVID-19 as a presentation of power in society	<b><u>Distribution Process</u></b> COVID-19 as an interpreted emotion  COVID-19 as datafied content

**Table 2. Multimodal interpretation of the pandemic stories analyzed. Source: author.**

Pushed forward by the results presented in Table 2, DNX stories are designed to be short, raw, and almost unedited. The page's stories become representations of narratives centered on struggles and experiences rather than having a concrete storyline. Digital content is no longer concerned with segmenting information like traditional media but rather with multimedia execution, maximizing the use of materials to produce numerous and diverse stories. Finally, DNX emphasizes and presents the dominance of specific voices, such as those of the elite or those with power or influence, over the voices of ordinary people. Such characteristics highlight the limitations of producing in-depth and comprehensive stories that contextualize and encourage clearer and more nuanced discussions about public health crises.

The majority of DNX's stories are produced with the interviewees' opinions and statements as the focal point, with minimal intervention or narration from producers. These stories are told through either straight interviews or pre-recorded materials. Their presentation of actors and narration also emphasizes the interviewees' images and perspectives. This type of material makes interviewees more likely to make mistakes than producers.

The distribution of pandemic stories is also heavily reliant on data-driven content, such as the number of likes, views, shares, and reactions. The number of views has the most significant influence on content distribution among these metrics. These findings demonstrate that the concept of Facebook as 'free' space is only a possibility, at least on DNX's Facebook News Page. Regardless of the opportunities for content creation and distribution, the platform retains control over what information is accepted or rejected, as well as which content is repurposed and redistributed based on post-'virality.'

### Digital Platforms Amplify Power and Influence

Davidson and Ward (2018) argue that, similar to pandemics, crisis conditions create an inequitable environment, particularly in terms of opportunities and privileges. They say that “we are not all in it together” during difficult times, and a similar idea is put forth regarding the manner in which news and information are disseminated on digital platforms such as social media.

Digital platforms amplify power and influence through their pandemic narrative. Because digital spaces provide broad coverage and a larger network of people to convene, share, access, and remove online materials, pandemic content gains traction in presenting the perspectives of specific populations within the community during health crises.

Unlike traditional media platforms such as print, television, and radio, which arrange and label stories based on segments or columns and present them in a manner that encompasses all viewpoints, digital news stories identify specific segments of the stories and present them as brief excerpts and standalone stories, with no discernible segment and no particular format or structure to adhere to. These journalistic decisions tend to highlight the pandemic’s problems by focusing solely on government responses and downplaying individual experiences. As referenced in Table 1, DNX relied on interviews to present pandemic stories during the initial years of the COVID-19 pandemic. DNX’s stories are often viewed as primarily interview-based, typically pre-scheduled, pre-recorded, and already edited. This makes their pandemic reports into predetermined content, focusing on the interviewee’s point of view. The sense of presenting complete, in-depth, and well-produced stories becomes less of a priority on a fast-changing platform like Facebook, as it accepts almost any type of content that is available.

Unique to DNX is also how user feedback contributes to the creation of potential pandemic stories. For example, the majority of their produced stories involved elite individuals (government officials, people in positions of power, etc.). People in positions of power are often represented with dominant visual and verbal appearances, in contrast to those who are struggling as a result of the pandemic. The majority of the dominant actors present in the six identified videos comprised political personalities, armed forces, and individuals in administrative positions. Distributing these narratives also demonstrates how the number of people’s reactions, views, shares, and likes contributes to the retelling and repackaging of pandemic stories. This affordance becomes unavailable to traditional media since the immediate responses of audiences to news reports are difficult to quantify. In the case of DNX, audience feedback influences how their stories are recirculated and presented. Despite being relatively open and free to all, digital news platforms have reduced the space available for ordinary people who are not visible in the circulating pandemic narratives in the digital sphere.

In general, the pandemic influenced how digital platforms generated pandemic stories, which in turn influenced the digital platforms’ capabilities. Despite the opportunities and freedom that the digital space affords journalists in terms of creating, producing, and disseminating news stories, limitations remain, censorship persists, and preferences for what type of content to present become more visible.

**JOURNALISTIC PRACTICE 2: THE PANDEMIC AS A CONTINGENT CULTURAL COMMODITY**

Nieborg and Poell (2018) define the notion of a contingent cultural commodity as the process through which specific mass media genres—such as games and news—become platform-dependent. They consider how platforms impact the creation of media texts and how they are susceptible to revision and repurposing. Because social media platforms, such as Facebook, provide a digital environment in which communication and information are constantly updated, information spreads faster and becomes more accessible. In the case of DNX, it has created a type of communication ecology in which pandemic stories become interlinked, transforming them into a contingent cultural commodity as a result of how these materials are recirculated and repackaged.

According to Perrault and Perrault (2021), communication ecology refers to the way journalists and news organizations operate during COVID-19 as “part of an ecology in which journalism influences and is influenced by the environment” (977). COVID-19 stories are recirculated and repackaged based on the pandemic’s progress, as well as data-driven user feedback, such as likes, shares, and views, which influence content creation and distribution.

Similar to the concept of Perrault and Perrault’s (2021) communication ecology, Parsons’ (1952) concept of a social system is also relevant, as it describes how individual interactions result in a system of action. This concept of a social system proves applicable in explaining how the pandemic, as a form of content, created a system of action.

In the case of DNX, the constant repackaging and recirculating of pandemic content leads to the formation of shared understandings and notions about what COVID-19 is. This system of action develops into a common understanding of the situation, resulting in the formation of a social structure (Lockwood, 1956). DNX’s Facebook news page portrays a communication ecology in which pandemic-related stories are shaped by their surroundings, particularly the changes that occur on the page.

This digital ecology contributes to the formation of a social system with limited and similar understandings of the pandemic because the same points of view (news values, narration, use of music) of the same people (government officials, politicians, and uniformed personnel) are repeated, recirculated, and repackaged on the page. The repetition, recirculation, and repackaging of nearly identical pandemic stories, albeit with different angles and concepts based on interviews with almost identical people, contribute to how digital platforms, particularly DNX’s page, make the pandemic a contingent cultural commodity.

**Digital News Platforms’ Established Production Practices**

DNX is seen as a platform that serves as a venue for assembling and archiving stories, making the materials accessible while also remaining fluid. The fluidity of pandemic materials generates volatile information about COVID-19, as the disease is prone to change and is highly unpredictable, making it challenging to organize and sustain on a publicly accessible platform. To ensure that pandemic news stories remained current and relevant, DNX developed story treatments that eventually became the standard for presenting pandemic stories, and these story treatments became established production practices.

DNX established and 'normalized' interviews as a way to tell pandemic stories. In 2020, nearly 80% of their pandemic stories were told through interviews. DNX also relied on and treated people in positions of authority and status as sources of information. Referring to Table 1, the same dominant actors in the frame are emphasized in most of their pandemic stories. Distinctive news values, such as meaningfulness, clarity, and allusions to affluent individuals, are present in all six videos. This established practice of using interviews to tell pandemic news reports becomes a 'norm' on the page and becomes 'accepted' by its audience if we base it on the stories' views, which range from 2,000 to 183,000. Based on the quantity of views and interactions per story, it has also grown in popularity and "credibility" among audiences, solidifying specific pandemic discourses.

### **Digital News Platforms Presented Connections Between Pandemic Stories**

Digital news platforms presented connections between pandemic stories, in which the order and flow of information in pandemic narratives corresponded to the progression of the crisis. Since digital platforms display and present standalone COVID-19 stories, pandemic-related content is presented on the platform at random, eliminating the need to understand previous or past posts to comprehend the material. The story's context, despite its brevity, is clear and complete.

In DNX's case, early reports about lockdowns, community quarantines, and executive orders preceded pandemic stories during the first quarter of 2020. After that, the public and government officials are criticized. The effects of lockdowns on ordinary people are emphasized in the second quarter of the year, along with potential ways to contain the pandemic. A summary of government initiatives was presented in stories that concluded in 2020. DNX's news page consistently employs the same narration technique for pandemic stories. Pandemic narratives begin with official pronouncements and programs, then delve into the implications and outcomes of these government actions.

Since there is tangible evidence demonstrating the creation, production, and distribution of COVID-19 stories, multimodal analysis facilitates the establishment and justification of the relationships between these pandemic narratives. The relationships, hierarchy, and specifics of how DNX pandemic stories are created and displayed on the page demonstrate how frequently stories about local situational events and government criticisms are repackaged, recirculated, and repeated on the platform.

### **JOURNALISTIC PRACTICE 3: ON DIGITAL SESSIONS AND PANDEMIC DISCOURSES**

According to Schudson (1994), interviews are an essential component of journalism, and reporters typically use the data they obtain from interviews to tell their stories. Since conferences, briefings, and interviews are the primary means of disseminating information about COVID-19, the digital presentation of this journalistic practice is brought to light during the pandemic.

As a journalistic technique, interviewing people can transmit meanings that "can be affixed by a voice-over, a caption, or a label" in addition to providing information (Bjerknes 2022, 3). As seen on DNX's page, interviewing people becomes a popular technique for presenting and forming pandemic narratives. DNX employs a variety of interview formats, including pre-recorded, staged, and in-the-moment interviews, to produce its stories.

### **Pandemic Interviews as a Linear Process**

The power relationship is a constant frame that emerges during interviews (Goody, 1978). The relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee is evident in this process, which depends on how the interviewer extracts information from the source and how the source supplements the information for the interviewee. At the same time, relevance and reliance on information enhance the reputation of both the interviewee and the source, while vulnerability and public exposure compromise the reputation of both parties (Schudson, 1994). The way the interview sequence is delivered during the interview strengthens this relationship. According to Schudson (1994), a typical sequence-turn consists of a question, a response, and then another question.

Interviewee mediation is minimal in DNX's largely linear interview process. Instead of the traditional question-and-answer format, the interview treatment on DNX's page becomes more of a response throughout, with few to no questions in between. The power dynamic between the interviewee and the interviewer favors the interviewee. There is little to no verification of the accuracy or reliability of the information. Questions that advocate for and promote a more healthy and in-depth understanding of the situation are not posed directly to the sources.

The images chosen or the manner in which sources are portrayed in the narratives also draw attention to power relations. The interviewees' positions and ranks are displayed on the screen (e.g., mayor, congressman). These interviewees are considered 'reliable' and 'credible' sources of information based on how they are positioned in the frame and how their surroundings are projected as clean, organized, and controlled spaces during a period of chaos. The interviewees, who are mostly government officials, are granted greater autonomy, which allows them more influence over pandemic discourses and the chance to project credibility and dependability.

### **The Dyadic Relationship of the Interview Process**

Schudson (1994) states that interviews revolve around a triadic relationship between the public, the interviewee, and the interviewer. When it comes to creating and presenting information, these three make up the communication and information flow. In contrast, a more dyadic relationship is presented when it comes to the production and circulation of information in digital spaces like social media platforms. How the public or audience criticizes and responds to online posts on digital news pages has an impact on the future and the stories that can be produced. These digital affordances have, in some ways, excluded or minimized the role of interviewers.

DNX, in this manner, can be considered a type of data journalism. De-Lima Santos and Mesquita (2021) define data journalism as "inherently technologically driven, enabling flows and information transactions in the digital environment" (1417). This means that the distribution process, including the platform's features (likes, views, and shares), helps legitimize stories. Because the interviewer and interviewee engage in minimal intervention and mediation, the audience fills in the gaps. They become 'digitized voices' that contribute to the creation of pandemic narratives.

## CONCLUSION

Borrowing from Garcia-Aviles' (2021) concept of media disruption, which refers to how technological shifts influence and 'shake' existing journalistic practices, the pandemic has indeed disrupted conventions and caused accelerated changes in the design, production, and distribution of news stories, particularly those related to the pandemic. Most of us are familiar with and skilled at navigating digital platforms and spaces. We are now more accustomed to navigating these spaces and are aware of the environments we inhabit, as the pandemic has exposed us to a larger digital sphere. The shift away from traditional conventions, such as how the platform influences content production, how COVID-19 as a topic becomes a contingent cultural commodity, and how interviewing people contributes to and influences the production of pandemic discourses, has a significant impact on how digital spaces reimagine journalistic practice. How DNX established its design, production, and distribution practices, as well as how the ongoing developments of COVID-19 coincide with changes in the media landscape, in which online materials (such as Zoom interviews and online recordings) and other online nuances have become an integral part of pandemic narrative reporting.

The results of multimodal analysis allow us to examine DNX's pandemic stories. Such complexities are indeed difficult, but analyzing media texts in this manner reveals important insight about how the pandemic influenced news reporting and how the platform contributes to content creation. Multimodal analysis of DNX pandemic stories showed how the pandemic reshaped journalistic practices and prioritized platform affordances over content, thereby limiting opportunities for crafting pandemic stories. Self-censorship becomes a common practice because digital spaces like Facebook also have limited intervention when it comes to regulating content. This leads to the presentation of pandemic content that heavily relies on the opinions and statements of those in power, as these sources are often deemed "reliable" and "credible." The analysis also demonstrates how content producers advance their 'choices' when it comes to what types of stories to present by continuously recreating and recirculating the same stories throughout the year. Furthermore, power dynamics emerge in digital spaces when interviewees wield significant power when presenting pandemic stories.

The digital era of journalism adapted to the 'new normal,' and even years after 2020, we can see visible changes to the traditional way of doing and reporting news. Observing the dynamics of DNX has revealed various actions that demonstrate how such an era influences, changes, and, at times, harms journalistic practices. Based primarily on the six analyzed stories, DNX's portrayal of the pandemic is an elite discourse. Examining pandemic content multimodally, the process reveals that elites are prominently featured in nearly all analyzed DNX videos, thereby lending importance and relevance to the voices of those in positions of power and influence.

What the digital era of journalism has in store for us remains to be seen. It is unclear how it will continue to affect us. Additionally, the digital era of journalism is not slowing down, so we must keep pace with it and adapt to its ongoing changes. There is still optimism stemming from the early days of news and information platforms like DNX, which suggest that people will recognize the need to change how they use and consume digital spaces and content.



The pandemic is just one of the many dangerous situations that our society faces. It is only one of the many issues we must deal with, cope with, and endure. This article aims to give readers hope that there is a way to fully understand the information made available to the public and that action can be taken to elevate voices and expose the covert agenda of some forces. Viewed as more than just passive recipients of information, audiences now have the power to shift the balance in their favor. Today's digital and online presence compels media educators and students to acknowledge the significance of signifying interpretive work in fostering people's media engagement, from content creation and consumption to critical reading and working toward a liberating media landscape.

## REFERENCES

- Anstey, Michèle, and Geoff Bull. 2010. *Evolving pedagogies: Reading and writing in a multimodal world*. Sydney, Australia: Education Services Australia Limited.
- Bernadas, Jan Michael Alexandre, and Karol Ilagan. 2020. "Journalism, public health, and COVID-19: Some preliminary insights from the Philippines." *Media International Australia* 177, no. 1: 1–7. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1329878X20953854>
- Bjerknes, Fredrik. 2022. "Images of transgressions: Visuals as reconstructed evidence in digital investigative journalism." *Journalism Studies* 23, no. 8: 951–973. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2022.2061574>
- Bolledo, JR. 2020. "Newsgathering in the 'New Normal.'" Webinar, Journalism Studies Association of the Philippines, Quezon City, NCR, Philippines, July 24, 2020.
- Cammaert, Bart. 2008. "Critiques on the participatory potentials of Web 2.0." *Communication, Culture, and Critique* 1, no. 4: 358–377.
- Camus, Miguel. 2020. "Journalism in time of COVID-19." *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, March 22, 2020. <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1246259/journalism-in-times-of-covid-19>
- Coeckelbergh, Mark. 2017. How to describe and evaluate "deception" phenomena: Recasting the metaphysics, ethics, and politics of ICTs in terms of magic and performance and taking a relational and narrative turn. *Ethics and Information Technology* 20: 71–85.
- Cohen, Nicole. 2008. The valorization of surveillance: Towards a political economy of Facebook. *Democratic Communiqué* 22, no. 1: 5–22.
- Davidson, Mark, and K Ward. 2018. *Cities under austerity: Restructuring the US metropolis*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- de-Lima-Santos, Mathias-Felipe, and Lucia Mesquita. 2021. "Data journalism beyond technological determinism." *Journalism Studies* 22, no. 11: 1416–1435.
- Espina, Marchel. 2020. "I'm Getting the Martial Law Feels: Negrenses Hit ABS-CBN Shutdown." *Rappler*, May 6, 2020. <https://www.rappler.com/philippines/260067-negrenses-hit-abs-cbn-shutdown/>
- Etter, Michael, and Anne Vestergaard. 2015. Facebook and the public framing of a corporate crisis. *Corporate Communications: An International Journal* 20, no. 2: 163–177.
- Fajardo, Maria. 2016. *Teaching Critical Literacy Using Multimodal Texts to College Students in the Philippines*. Doctor of Education thesis, University of Wollongong, Australia.

- Foucault, Michel. 1972. *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Galtung, Johan, and Mari Holmboe Ruge. 1965. "The Structure of Foreign News: The Presentation of the Congo, Cuba, and Cyprus Crises in Four Norwegian Newspapers." *Journal of Peace Research* 2, no. 1: 64–90.
- García-Aviles, José. 2021. "Journalism as usual? Managing disruption in virtual newsrooms during the COVID-19 crisis." *Digital Journalism* 9, no. 9: 1239–1260.
- Goody, Esther. 1978. *Questions and politeness*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Henderson, Lesley, and Shona Hilton. 2018. "The media and public health: where next for critical analysis?" *Critical Public Health* 28, no. 4: 373–376.
- Inton, Mark. 2015. "The Bakla and Gay Globality in Chris Martinez's *Here Comes the Bride*." *Intersections: Gender and Sexuality in Asia and the Pacific* 38. <http://intersections.anu.edu.au/issue38/inton.pdf>
- Kress, Gunther, and Theo Van Leeuwen. 2001. *Multimodal discourse: the modes and media of contemporary communication*. London: Arnold.
- Kress, Gunther, and Theo Van Leeuwen. 2006. *Reading images*. New York: Routledge.
- Lardizabal-Dado, Noemi. 2024. "The 2024 digital media landscape in the Philippines." *The Manila Times*, May 5, 2024.
- Lee, Alice. 2005. Between the global and the local: The glocalization of online news coverage on the trans-regional crisis of SARS. *Asian Journal of Communication* 15, no. 3: 255–273.
- Lloren, Grace. 2017. "Socio-Cultural Appropriation of Sex-Billboard Ads: A Multimodal Study on the Grammar of Sexually Implicit Advertising Text and Images." *Plaridel Journal* 14, no. 2: 1–24.
- Lockwood, David. 1956. *Media social genres: making sense of the ordinary*. New York: Routledge.
- Lucas, Daxim L. 2014. "Using Smartphones among Filipinos' Top Daily Activities." *Inquirer.net*, October 4, 2014. <http://business.inquirer.net/183389/using-smartphones-among-filipinos-top-daily-activities>
- McLuhan, Marshall. 1996. *Understanding the media: The extensions of man*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Mendoza, Paolo. 2018. "Locating the Ideological in the Functional: A Multimodal Critical Analysis of Online News Reports on Typhoon Lando." *Asia-Pacific Social Science Review* 19, no. 1: 202–210.
- Nieborg, David, and Thomas Poell. 2018. "The platformization of cultural production: Theorizing the contingent cultural commodity." *New Media and Society* 20, no. 11: 4275–4292. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444818769694>
- Parsons, Talcott. 1952. "The Superego and the Theory of Social Systems." *Psychiatry* 15, no. 2: 123–145.
- Perreault, Mildred, and Gregory Perreault. 2021. "Journalists on COVID-19 journalism: communication ecology of pandemic reporting." *American Behavioral Scientist* 65, no. 7: 976–991.
- Schudson, Michael. 1993. "Question authority: a history of the news interview in American journalism, 1860s–1930s." *Media, Culture, and Society* 16: 565–587.

- Scott, Ben. 2005. A contemporary history of digital journalism. *Television and New Media* 6, no. 1: 89–126.
- Tandoc, Edson, Jr. 2018. Journalism is twerking? How web analytics is changing the process of gatekeeping. *New Media and Society* 16: 559–575.
- van der Meer, Toni, and Piet Verhoeven. 2013. Public framing organizational crisis situations: Social media versus news media. *Public Relations Review* 39, no. 3: 229–231.
- Van Dijck, Jose. 2012. "Facebook as a tool for producing sociality and connectivity." *Television and New Media* 13, no. 2: 160–176.
- Wahl-Jorgensen, Karin, and T. Quandt. 2022. "Introduction: global perspectives on journalism and the coronavirus pandemic." *Journalism Studies* 23, no. 5–6: 545–550.
- World Health Organization. 2020. *COVID-19 Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC) Global Research and Innovation Forum*. <https://www.who.int/publications/m/item/>
- Ying, Yan. 2013. "Conveying Argumentation through Multimodal Discourse." *OSSA Conference Archive*, no. 184.
- Ying, Yan. 2013. "Conveying Argumentation through Multimodal Discourse." In *Proceedings of the 10th International Conference of the Ontario Society for the Study of Argumentation (OSSA)*, 1–11. Ontario: Ontario Society for the Study of Argumentation (OSSA).

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**KATHERINE T. VALENCIA** is a Communication and Media Studies professor from the Philippines. She earned her Bachelor of Arts in Broadcast Communication from the University of the Philippines Visayas and Master of Arts in Media Studies (Broadcast) from the University of the Philippines Diliman. She is currently the Division Chairperson of the Division of Humanities. Her research interests include digital discourses, the political economy of digital games, multimodality of communication and media texts, and media studies.

**Email:** [ktvalencia@up.edu.ph](mailto:ktvalencia@up.edu.ph)

