

## **The Philippine News Agency: Setting the public information agenda after the signing of the Anti-Terrorism Act of 2020**

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### **Abstract**

The study conducted a mixed-method analysis of all 44 articles on the website of the Philippine News Agency which are labeled as news reports, published a day after the Anti-Terrorism Act 2020 (ATA 2020) was signed by President Rodrigo Duterte. They were downloaded from [www.pna.gov.ph](http://www.pna.gov.ph) a week after. The total population of articles released on July 4, 2020, underwent content analysis, and the articles that were directly about ATA 2020 were textually analyzed for Priming and Framing using the lens of Agenda Setting Theory. The study revealed that PNA did reverse-priming for ATA 2020 and that all articles on the latter served to frame it positively using public relations writing and not news writing standards.

**Keywords:** Philippine News Agency, Agenda Setting, Priming, Framing, Anti-Terrorism Act of 2020

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### **Introduction**

The Philippines' Anti-Terrorism Act of 2020 (ATA 2020) was signed by President Rodrigo Duterte on July 3, 2020, amid protests from many sectors (Venzon, 2020). The ATA 2020, which takes effect 15 days after publication, amends the Human Security Act of 2007 by "expand(ing) the definition of terrorism, which human rights advocates say could lead to abuses and stifle free speech... (and permitting) the surveillance, warrantless arrest and detention of suspects for up to 24 days" (para. 3). Different lawyer groups and a congressman sought the said law to be stricken down by the Supreme Court as it is unconstitutional and violates civil liberties (Aljazeera, 2020). As the law was pushed and reached the office of President Duterte, the largest media network was being tried (ANC 24/7, 2020) like a criminal, according to Representative Lito Atienza, in the franchise renewal hearing of the House of Representatives, which was reported to be strongly oriented against a renewal (Saballa, 2020). As the number of daily COVID-19 confirmed cases reached the 2,000 mark, Senator Risa Hontiveros, only two of 24 senators who voted against the bill, considers the ATA 2020 an indication of the government's misplaced priorities (Ramos, 2020). Fellow senator Vicente Sotto III asserted that "terrorists or their supporters are the only ones who will be afraid of the bill" (Rey, 2020, para. 2).

The Philippine News Agency (PNA) describes itself as "a web-based newswire service of the Philippine government under the supervision of the News and Information Bureau (NIB) of the

Presidential Communications Office (PCO)” (PNA, 2020). The Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) considers PNA as the “Malacanang-mouthpiece” that has repeatedly reported the former and its affiliated armed organization National People’s Army (NPA) as terrorist organizations (Valbuena, 2020, para. 2). In the context of the ATA 2020, the CPP and NPA are sure targets even while the former claims that both are not United Nations-designated terrorist organizations, contrary to PNA reports, according to Valbuena. That said, one begins to see that the PNA is a state tool incapable of neutrality vis-à-vis the Duterte administration. As such, it is not a news agency independent of the government which it should watch after. Through the lens of Marxist theory, the PNA serves as an ideological state apparatus (ISA), particularly the communications ISA type, which, unlike repressive state apparatuses or RSAs (the government, army, police, courts, prisons, and the like), do not use violence; instead, it uses ideology to facilitate collusion with the state (Althusser, 1970). As ideas and beliefs that manifest in religions, families, laws, politics, economics, and cultures, ideologies enable their human believers to replicate the very ideologies that shape them without conscious awareness that they are doing so (Felluga, 2002). As such, the PNA may be seen as a hegemonic tool, disabling resistance, and critique of the state. In a democracy, the PNA will be far from enabling social critique, an “inevitable condition for every democratic or emancipatory struggle” (Lievens, 2012, p.1).

Aware of the mounting opposition against the ATA 2020, the PNA has a distinct role as an ideological state apparatus (ISA) – to set an agenda that will help diffuse the intensifying antagonism against the law (Gomez, 2020), in particular, and against the Duterte administration (Reuters, 2017; Tomacruz & Hapal, 2020; Virtudes, Baizas, & Isinika, 2020), in general. With the State of the Nation Address a few days away from the signing of the ATA 2020 and the increasing social unrest arising from the unaddressed needs of the people during the coronavirus outbreak, the PNA is expected to influence public opinion in favor of the state using ‘news’ as a tool. It has been reported as early as 2017 that there are concerns about the administration’s “distortion of online information” (Palatino, 2017), and the growing troll armies in the country (Bengali & Halper, 2019) seems to point to further intensifying efforts to sway public opinion online. It is likely that such armies, now flagged as ‘digital predators’ (Dumlao, 2020) and “used by Duterte supporters to smear and boycott the ABS-CBN network with the aim of blocking renewal of its congressional franchise” (para. 4), will continue to operate and the PNA is likely not to undermine the hand that feeds it. PNA’s ‘news’, then, is rendered questionable as it is an entity attached to the government itself, and as such, will be partial towards its employers. It is because of this that the nature of PNA’s articles will be scrutinized based on how it framed information the day after the ATA 2020 was signed.

## **Theoretical Framework**

The Agenda Setting Theory of Maxwell McComb’s and Donald L. Shaw asserts that “the influence of media affects the presentation of reports and issues made in the news” (communicationtheory.org, n.d, para. 1) that shape public opinion. Furthermore:

The news reports make it in a way that when a particular news report is given importance and attention than other news the audience will automatically perceive it as the most important news and information are given to them. The priorities of which news comes first and then the next

are set by the media according to how people think and how much influence [it will] have among the audience. (para. 1)

PNA is the media organization in the study. In the lens of Agenda Setting Theory, PNA may influence top-of-mind thoughts of its actual audiences through its control of gatekeeping or content selection for public release (influenced by what market-oriented media companies deem audiences care about, or ISAs think the public should care about). By its choice of content, it is capable of ‘priming’ audiences to public information that it considers more important for them to know. How content is written by its content creators constitute ‘framing’ or how audiences will decide to see or perceive the content it presents. Given this, the PNA is likely to be given an important role in shaping the public’s opinion of the state, especially in the context of controversy or issues potentially damaging to the state’s image and reputation.

### **Statement of the Problem**

This paper looked into the news releases of the PNA on the day immediately after the ATA 2020 was signed by Duterte to unravel the ways it operated as an ISA. Specifically, the paper looked into the categories of issues it covered on the said day, the extent of their coverage, and the agenda-setting that resulted from the articles released on the selected day. This seeks to expose how the PNA operates as an ISA of the Duterte administration.

### **Methodology**

This case study bound to a specific time (July 4, 2020) used a mixed quantitative and qualitative research design. Through content analysis of all 44 news articles uploaded in PNA’s website, [www.pna.gov.ph](http://www.pna.gov.ph), on July 4, 2020, emergent categories were surfaced to determine the distribution of the said articles under the said categories. The frequency of coverage per category indicated the importance or insignificance of the categories in directing attention to or away from the publicly contested ATA 2020 and to issues leading to more favorable public responses to the state. The terrain of the news coverage is considered indicative of the agenda-setting by the PNA and the direction set by the PNA as an ISA that labels any writing it produces as a news report. The information PNA considers news reports, particularly those focused on the ATA 2020, were textually analyzed through the lens of priming and framing within the Agenda Setting Theory.

### **Results**

#### **News covered by PNA**

**Top issues on the day immediately after ATA 2020 signing.** There are 44 news articles released on July 4, 2020, a day after the signing of the ATA by President Duterte. These articles show the kind of events that are considered relevant by the PNA, specifically on the said date. Table 1 shows the ATA is not the focal point of ‘news’-making for that day. It was overtaken by armed conflict and COVID-19 in Mindanao. Coming in third place is a cluster of news that is not related to any of the other news categories. They are not particularly related to COVID-19 or the ATA. Thus, the third category has very little relevance to ATA and could very well serve as a distraction to the most important issue of the day. The COVID-19 issues in the Visayas and the reopening of services, commercial or otherwise (except the reopening of schools that is yet to happen in August) were at the last two spots among those news categories that were given higher editorial priority.

These five highest emergent news categories suggest that ATA was not considered the priority issue or event by the PNA. The rising number of cases in Mindanao [category 01] and the Visayas [category 07] (together totaling 9 and may be the highest priority news category. if taken together), would constitute the most important news category, if taken together, and would easily overshadow the ATA. ATA 2020 and armed conflict, taken together, meanwhile, can equal the combined COVID-19-related reports from the Visayas and Mindanao, and the combined number of reports under categories 07-09 after the five highest categories. Still, ATA evades the top spot of the editorial priority list. The list of news releases by the PNA has seemingly placed ATA 2020 under the radar, so to speak.

Table 1. *Distribution of editorial content across emergent categories*

Category Number	Content Categories	Number of News Items	Percent of Total News Items	Rank
01	ATA 2020	3	6.8	6.25
02	Armed conflict	6	13.6	1.5
03	COVID-19 in Mindanao	6	13.6	1.5
04	Others	5	11.4	3
05	Overseas Filipino Workers	4	9.1	4.5
06	Reopening of public services and commercial operations	4	9.1	4.5
07	COVID-19 in the Visayas	3	6.8	6.25
08	Dispute in the West Philippine Sea	3	6.8	6.25
09	General COVID-19	3	6.8	6.25
10	Transportation problems	2	4.5	8.3
11	Resumption of school	2	4.5	8.3
12	Locally stranded individuals	2	4.5	8.3
13	Issues of the Department of Health	1	2.3	10
TOTAL		44	100	

**Secondary issues.** Instead, ATA was one of four that placed immediately after the highest five articles mentioned above. ATA, by virtue of the number of articles released, was deemed equally important as COVID-19 in the Visayas, the dispute in the West Philippine Sea, and general COVID-19 updates. By so doing, it has rendered ATA 2020 as just one of the secondary news categories. Despite the ATA being the most hotly debated issue weeks before it was signed, the PNA considers it not worthy of greatest attention a day after it was signed. As such, one can surmise that the PNA refused to acknowledge ATA 2020 as worthy of public attention even if the reasons for its being were in the two highest news categories. By making ATA 2020-related articles part of the set of secondary news categories, PNA cannot be easily accused of evading the issue of the day or sweeping it under the rug.

**Marginal issues.** Issues that directly impact people not infected by COVID-19 like the transportation problem, resumption of school, locally stranded individuals, fell under news

categories that were least important for that day. The Department of Health that received the most flak for misinforming people was ranked the lowest in editorial priority. Surprisingly, each of the article categories that were ranked least fared lower on their own than articles on the return to the status quo (reopening of public services and commercial operations). That said, issues of local workers that make possible the reopening of essential operations are not part of the PNA editorial priority, at least on the day immediately after ATA 2020 was signed.

## **Discussion**

### **PNA Priming**

The previous discussion on the ranking of emergent article categories reveals that the PNA is trying to keep the ATA 2020 away from the spotlight when the day called for it to be celebrated by government. The PNA, given its power, seemed to have kept it away from public attention without overdoing it. Two weeks shy of its actual implementation, the PNA focused on the articles that could help justify its signing – the armed conflict (which Duterte associates with the National People’s Party or the communists) and COVID-19 in Mindanao (the epicenter of the war against terror represented by the Marawi siege by non-communists). By doing so, PNA lays the groundwork for the public discussion of ATA 2020, should it happen, facilitating PNA’s preferred audience reception, that is, in the context of armed struggle with any state-identified “terrorist”. Priming asserts that the “amount of time and space that media devote to an issue make an audience receptive and alert to particular themes” (Buffalo State University, 2011, para. 9) and the numbers show this in the case of PNA.

Further set in the background than in the foreground by other urgent issues like Overseas Filipino Workers needing immediate repatriation and government assistance and the return to economic activity, which direct the public’s attention to more tangible economic forces and livelihood consequences, the ATA 2020 is reduced to one of many other national concerns, and not the largest threat to freedom and human rights which was the rallying cry of many protesters against the ATA 2020 (Heydarian, 2020). Together with issues that have come before the ATA 2020, the latter is reduced in importance on its supposed day of commencement. The PNA, hence, brushed the ATA 2020 issue aside and proceeded with other matters that must be perceived as more pressing on July 4, 2020. The ATA 2020, being less painful for those who live on day-to-day basis and less immediately threatening than COVID-19 or community quarantine for those who are more economically well-off, could be made easily dismissible to the working class who care more about the availability and safety of transportation.

As such, PNA has done reverse-priming to minimize dissent against the negative effects of ATA 2020 on ordinary Filipinos. Instead of making ATA 2020 almost impossible to ignore, it has become easier to do so given the other issues surrounding it and given more importance by PNA. As such, the PNA has functioned more like a public relations organization and not a news agency as indicated by its name by the sheer practice of manipulation of public perception for the greater benefit of government. Given that ordinary Filipinos are more primed by the need to go back to work or remain untouched by COVID-19, removing the ATA 2020 from public attention on the day after its signing, the PNA seemed keen on keeping the audiences primed on the same life- or livelihood-threatening issues that have yet to be resolved by the same government that created the ATA 2020.

## **PNA Framing**

Three articles on the ATA 2020 were released by the PNA on July 4, 2020. The first article written by Ruth Abby Gita-Carlos titled “New law uses ‘comprehensive’ approach vs. terrorism” (published at 10:14 AM), explains mostly the provisions of the law and includes a comment by Presidential Spokesperson Harry Roque which aimed to address the misgivings of critics, claiming “that Duterte, along with his legal team, took time to study the provisions of the law and weigh the concerns of different stakeholders” (para. 25). Gita-Carlos broke down the different sections of the law but interpreted very little in relation to the larger social context or the multisectoral resistance against it.

The second article (also by Gita-Carlos) titled “New anti-terror law fixes flaws in Human Security Act: Andanar” (published at 10:34 AM), explains the ATA 2020 from the perspective of Presidential Communications Operations Office (PCOO) Secretary Martin Andanar. The article explains that the ATA 2020 is an upgrade of the repealed Human Security Act of 2007 and a more apt response to the Global Terrorism Index of 2019 where the country is reported to be greatly afflicted by terrorism. This report places a larger context around the ATA 2020 and presents it as a step in the right direction. The report also includes a more abridged presentation of the law which was extensively presented in the earlier article of the same author. Like the previous article, it includes only a government source and one who protects the interest of the President who signed it. Like Roque, Andanar is a government mouthpiece and is expected to speak in favor of the law and the President. He was quoted as saying, “We support President Rodrigo Duterte’s move to further affirm the administration’s proactive campaign against terrorism by signing into law the Anti-Terrorism Act of 2020.” Together with the previous article, this solidifies the impression that PNA “news” takes only the side of the government on an issue that has the nation divided.

The third article, written by Priam Nepomuceno, titled “New law ‘powerful’ in curbing terror threats” (published 12:12 PM), is an affirmation of the newly signed ATA 2020. The article reported the support given by three government officials, namely, AFP spokesperson, Marine Maj. Gen. Edgard Arevalo, Department of the Interior and Local Government (DILG) Secretary Eduardo Año, and Philippine National Police spokesman Brig. Gen. Bernard Banac. All of them spoke highly of the new law and expressed support for the President. Arevalo and Año thanked the President and the lawmakers for making ATA 2020 a reality. Banac expressed faithful commitment to its implementation. In short, these government officials were all-support for the law, as expected. They are, after all, bound to the President. Like the two earlier articles, the sources are exclusively from the government. But unlike the two, this makes ATA 2020 even more powerful with the support of the military, police, and local government’s top management.

In general, the three articles frame ATA 2020 as a positive development in that it only has positive effects in Philippine society. It also presents the new law as having complete support of most branches of government (the executive and the two legislative branches), and the police and the military, which Loius Althusser considers part of repressive state apparatuses that use “mental and physical coercion and violence (latent and actual)” (Oxford Reference, 2020). The



reports are not just favorable to the law, they are also bound to those responsible for it because PNA is a government-managed agency. ATA 2020, contrary to claims of those who oppose it, is to be celebrated as one of the accomplishments of the Duterte administration, according to the PNA. This framing of the ATA 2020 is far from fair as it relies solely on government sources. This reeks of partiality and lacks representation of dissenting voices. That said, the PNA, at least in this context, performed more like a public relations agency, not a news agency as its name indicates. According to Edward Bernays, who is considered the founder of modern public relations, while public relations is a word softer than propaganda, it is still propaganda (Bernays, 2018). It is “propaganda in times of peace” (para. 3). With the PNA labeling public relations writing as news, it is responsible for deception and disservice to the people who pay taxes so that they are given balanced information, especially on a law that can potentially threaten their freedoms and legal protections, as concerned stakeholders assert.

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