



Ethical dilemmas of Filipino reporters during the 2016 Philippine presidential campaign trail: A phenomenology

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ABSTRACT

Journalists play a vital role during an electoral campaign where their reporting on candidates help the voting public make well-informed decisions. However, their dealings with sources may place them in unfavourable situations where ethics are concerned. This phenomenological study intended to capture and examine the ethical dilemmas experienced by Filipino journalists who covered the trails of presidential candidates during the Philippines' national elections of May 2016 that was eventually won by Philippine City Mayor Rodrigo R. Duterte. Data were collected through interviews with journalists from print, online and broadcast news organisations who were assigned to cover the five presidential candidates. Participants of the study were asked to narrate their experiences on the campaign trail, particularly those that challenged their ethical values as reporters. Results yielded the *Wheel of Filipino Election Reporters' Ethical Dilemmas* model that classified and described these dilemmas thus providing valuable insights on the ethical dimensions of political journalism. Furthermore, these findings would enable political journalists to become more conscious of the moral and ethical dimensions of their work, given their crucial task as watchdogs of those who are in power.

Keywords: ***Journalism ethics, ethical dilemmas, political journalism, election reporting, reporter-source relations***

INTRODUCTION

Journalism requires its practitioners to maintain certain profession-based ethical values such as objectivity, fairness and honesty as a profession with a specific public duty (Elliot & Ozar, 2010; Kim & Kelly, 2010). These values are listed in codes of ethics but it is not explained how they can be applied in specific situations. Nevertheless, news companies and professional journalism organisations have adopted their own guidelines which share these values (Boeyink, 1994; Christians, 2005; Elliot & Ozar, 2010).

According to Boeyink (1994) and Meyers (2010), ethics affects the daily work activities of journalists, thus it is important to understand how journalists decide on matters that challenge their values and professional decorum. Further studies have identified several ethical concerns that include the granting of anonymity to sources, interference in the coverage of human suffering, and the effects of reporter-source relations to reportage (Acuña, Alano & Savellano, 2016; Banaszynski, 2010; Kim & Kelly, 2010). As argued by Kovach & Rosenstiel (2001), such cases are problematic when the first obligation of journalism is to the truth; therefore, codes of ethics seek to address these issues. For example, there are pertinent ethical standards from the Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ) that posit the guiding principles of "seek the truth and report," "minimise harm," and "act independently." The SPJ codes (2014, see <http://www.spj.org/ethicscode.asp>) also urged journalists to maintain "independence" from factors that may influence news decisions.

As members of the so-called Fourth Estate, journalists are expected to enjoy freedom of speech and of the press, monitor and hold accountable power] as well as engage the citizenry in the democratic process. This role is further emphasised during elections. Media coverage has become a tool for the electorate to gain information on candidates, thus enabling them to make informed choices. Sartori (1987, p. 86) wrote: "Electoral power *per se* is the mechanical guarantee of democracy; but the substantial guarantee is given by the conditions under which the citizens get the information and are exposed to the opinion makers."

Election coverage has received considerable attention in journalism scholarship. Recent studies often highlight media's influence on voting behaviour, and the relationship between journalists and their political sources (Davis, 2009; Entman, 2010; Teodoro, 2012; Palpal-Latoc, Sanchez & Santamaria, 2016). However, there are research gaps on dealing with ethical dilemmas, particularly in Philippine journalism.

Philippine-based media watchdogs, Center for Media Freedom and Responsibility (CMFR) and the Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism (PCIJ) have published books documenting cases of "envelopmental" journalism (the Filipino practice of media bribery, with money placed in envelopes). However, scholarship on the underlying moral issues of such situations is still inadequate.

Media corruption is one challenge that hounds the Philippine press (Hofileña, 1998), which has had a long-standing tradition of upholding press freedom. This press freedom was challenged during the dictatorship period of former President Ferdinand Marcos. After declaring martial law on 21 September 1972, Marcos ordered the closure of news media outlets considered to be critical of his government whilst only pro-government media were allowed to continue operations. Press freedom was restored after a "People Power" revolution toppled the Marcos regime in 1986 (De Jesus & Teodoro, 2001; Coronel, 2001; De Jesus, 2007).

This paper identified and examined the ethical dilemmas encountered by Filipino journalists who covered the presidential campaigns of 2016 elections in the Philippines. The paper also looked into the conflicting moral and professional values present in these dilemmas,

which might have affected decision-making. Findings of this study hope to contribute to the study and practice of journalism ethics in the Philippines. At a practical level, the research may assist journalists in handling similar ethical dilemmas which they might encounter in the field, especially in the political beats.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Journalism ethics

Contemporary professional ethics revolves around the values that practitioners hold and how these values are reflected in their duties (Patterson & Wilkins, 2014). In journalism, such values include objectivity, accuracy, fairness, and independence — all springing from the idea of journalism as the Fourth Estate (Meyers, 2010). Ethics enable journalists to make sound decisions in situations where their professional and personal principles are concerned. Ethics also becomes relevant "when elements within a moral system conflict" (Patterson & Wilkins, 2014, p. 4).

Journalists learn about ethics in their day-to-day newsroom activities when absorbing the newsroom culture (Boeyink, 1994). An deepened understanding of the profession and its embedded values helps journalists mature ethically. However, it is difficult to establish a direct link between codes and behaviours since there is no singular set of ethical guidelines.

Many journalists believe that ethics are situational, depending on the problem encountered (Deuze & Yeshua, 2001; Kim & Kelly, 2010). Decision-making may also be affected by certain factors such as commercial pressure and interrelationships with sources (Deuze & Yeshua, 2001). Considerably, research on ethical decision-making have focused on various ethical frameworks used by journalists in resolving dilemmas, along with the factors that influence the outcome of these decisions (Boeyink, 1994; White, 1996; Sjøvaag, 2013). This is where codes of ethics come in, rooted in shared journalistic values, and adapted by media organisations and newsrooms to enforce social responsibility (Boeyink, 1994).

However, the extent of whether these codes are invoked in the face of actual dilemmas varies. Some journalists make ethical choices autonomously, or based on personal judgment, often disregarding the ethical rules of a profession or company.

For example, Ayu (2015, p. 16) described the Indonesian media as "...an independent sector but heavily regulated by the government". The government-run Press Council of Indonesia established its own ethical guidelines: the Indonesian Journalism Code of Ethics. However, Ayu's study (2015, p. 44) found 97% of her respondents were knowledgeable of that code, which was said to be "...ineffective and not too helpful". The majority of the Indonesian media workers would not even recommend the code to peers when faced with dilemmas (Ayu, 2015).

Election coverage

The demand for political news becomes higher during elections since citizens rely on the media for information on candidates (Kraushaar, 2009). In this perspective, media can either be an agent of "democratisation" or a publicity tool (Khan, 2004). Studies on election coverage highlight media as a potent force in shaping the opinions and attitude of voters (Davis, 2009; Entman, 2010; Palpal-Latoc, Sanchez & Santamaria, 2016; Teodoro, 2012).

The media can have direct effects on the candidate's visibility through exposure from print and broadcast (Hopmann, Vliegenthart, De Vreese & Albæk, 2010). Further, mass media has become a large avenue for citizens to gather information on political events (Mun & Li, 2011). For example, political figures during the 12th general election in Malaysia utilised media to communicate with the electorate through a concentration on specific issues. Mun and Li further determined attributes in news reporting by a Malaysian daily on the personalities and performances of the candidates. In a sense, voters were able to form their opinions through the news coverage of the campaign trail by that daily newspaper (Mun & Li, 2011).

Media attention towards objects in the news is positively associated with public salience and attitude strength (Kiousis, 2011). The media helps people cast and form stronger attitudes about political candidates, but these attitudes may vary. In the Philippines, Palpal-Latoc et al. (2016) found that print media reporting of the 2016 presidential candidates is correlated with voter attitude and voter attitude strength. The study analysed reports about the candidates in terms of treatment, prominence and tone, which were then linked to pre-election polls conducted in the third and fourth quarters of 2015 by two Filipino public polling firms. Data showed print media reporting of one Filipino candidate; Grace Poe, who received the highest number of published articles in the third and fourth quarters, had a significant relationship with voter attitude. As negatively-slanted articles and reduced coverage on this candidate increased, her pre-election poll rankings declined too (Palpal-Latoc, Sanchez & Santamaria, 2016).

There has been considerable research on the relationship between journalists and political sources (Isotalus & Almonkari, 2014; Davis, 2009; Örebro, 2002). The nature of reporter-source exchanges has a significant influence on news content, and subsequently political information delivered to the public (Davis, 2009). Örebro (2002) contended the relationship between journalists and political actors is instrumental as both parties serve a purpose for each other, therefore, politicians court journalists to their advantage, considering exposure in the media boost visibility. With that said, such instances may lead to media corruption, where loyalty to the public by journalists being compromised (Meyers 2010; Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2001). Journalists -after all, are expected to operate based on the self-perceptions they have of their profession (Elliott & Ozar, 2010). In the political context, this entails pursuing democracy (Singer & Gonzalez-Velez, 2003).

According to Davis (2009), politicians seek favourable coverage by managing reporters; however, journalists are aware that their role in today's politics is understood by their political sources (Almonkari & Isotalus, 2014). Organisations such as the Society of Professional Journalists (2014), Reporters Without Borders (2015), and the Ghana Journalists' Association (2017) have published their own guidelines for election coverage. These guidelines highlight key roles of the media on informing the public as well as avoiding conflicts of interest or affiliations which may damage their integrity and credibility.

There have been books written about media corruption in the Philippines that are prominent in political beats like the Philippine legislature and Malacañang (the Philippine seat of power), as well as in previous election coverage. However, these publications do not discuss on the ethical processes these political reporters face; namely, identification of dilemmas, the embedded conflicting values, and the factors that affect the immediate judgment to resolve these dilemmas. Hence, these are the variables this study sought to address, with the locus being the 2016 presidential elections won by City Mayor Rodrigo R. Duterte.

Framework: Ethical dilemma

Existing literature define an ethical dilemma as a situation, on moral grounds, where one ought to make a choice between conflicting sets of values (Meyers, 2010; Kim & Kelly, 2010; May, 2013). This conflict can be characterised through the terms “right versus wrong” or “right vs. right” (Kidder, 1995; May, 2013). Each day, journalists face situations that ask them to weigh their professional principles against personal values and instincts (Meyers, 2010).

Typologies of ethical dilemmas commonly depict journalists having to choose between pairs of values that represent ethical principles, such as personal autonomy versus organisational authority, professional duty versus personal values, and speed versus accuracy (Kidder, 1995; Deuze & Yeshua, 2001; Kim & Kelly, 2010; Sjøvaag, 2013). Common cases where ethical issues arise include whether or not a journalist should intervene when covering human suffering or grant anonymity to sources, or how reporter-source relations affect reportage (Acuña, Alano & Savellano, 2016; Meyers, 2010; Kim & Kelly, 2010).

One of the most relevant ethical tensions in organisational communication is the tension between foundational versus situational ethics (May, 2013). Foundational ethics suggests that reality is objective and neutral whilst situational ethics views reality as socially constructed and subjective in contrast, specifically, an individual who sternly follows a professional code of ethics draws on the foundational approach since she or he focuses on a core set of principles that can be applied to every situation. Meanwhile, one that follows the situational approach will argue that rules are not enough to resolve dilemmas.

Many journalists believe that ethics in journalism is “situational,” suggesting that the resolution of a dilemma requires an examination of circumstances (Kim & Kelly, 2010). This explains why the existence of ethical codes does not guarantee ethical conduct among practitioners (Henningham, 1996). Envelopmental journalism, for example, is considered unethical and yet some journalists are said to accept bribes from sources, especially politicians (Acuña, Alano & Savellano, 2016).

Philippine non-profit media groups have published books documenting cases of election-related media corruption. Confessionals were written by anonymous reporters who admitted to accepting bribery during the 1992, 1998 and 2004 elections, with these cases widespread across print, radio and television platforms (Hofileña, 1998; Khan, 2004). Hofileña had also cited a study by the Philippine Association of Publishers, Inc. (PAPI) that highlighted the prevalence of bribery in the local beat system. Interestingly, Acuña et. al (2016) suggested that the local beat system is equivalent to embedded journalism, another reporter-source relation phenomenon that may be subject to concerns on professional ethics although the beat system is where reporters interact with sources and get stories. Thus, it is necessary to identify the ethical dilemmas journalists experience while assigned to cover specific candidate beats.

The main objective of this study is to identify and capture ethical dilemmas unique to Filipino journalists who cover elections. The setting was chosen considering the occasion would see a rise to widespread ethical challenges and media corruption (Hofileña, 1998, 2004; Khan, 2004) compared to the usual beat coverage.

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative research aims to determine the ethical dilemmas faced by a select group of Filipino journalists who covered the 2016 Philippine presidential elections. The researchers employed a descriptive phenomenological design in order to capture and understand the essence, or essences, of a phenomenon experienced and shared by a group of individuals. According to Creswell & Miller (2000), phenomenology allows researchers to report on the “personal beliefs, values, and biases that may shape their inquiry.” It allows respondents to reflect on the “social, cultural and historical forces that shape their interpretation” of a phenomenon. Researchers then subject the narrative accounts to interpretive commentary.

Selection and study site

The pool of participants in this study is comprised of 14 journalists, each of whom covered the five presidential candidates and who belong to print, broadcast and online news platforms. The eligibility of interviewees was based on their assignment as beat reporters assigned to presidential campaign trails in the 2016 elections (see Table 1).

Table 1. Participants’ profile

Participant	Candidate	Platform	Gender	Years of news experience
A	Mr. Rodrigo Duterte	Online	M	1 to 5
B	Mr. Manuel Roxas II	Online	F	1 to 5
C	Mr. Jejomar Binay	Print	M	1 to 5
D	Mr. Jejomar Binay	Online	M	1 to 5
E	Ms. Grace Poe-Llamanzares	Print	M	6 or more
F	Ms. Grace Poe-Llamanzares	Broadcast (TV)	F	6 or more
G	Mr. Manuel Roxas II	Print	M	6 or more
H	Ms. Miriam Santiago	Online	F	1 to 5
I	Mr. Jejomar Binay	Broadcast (TV)	F	6 or more
J	Mr. Rodrigo Duterte	Broadcast (TV)	F	6 or more
K	Mr. Manuel Roxas II	Broadcast (TV)	F	1 to 5
L	Mr. Miriam Santiago	Broadcast (TV)	F	1 to 5
M	Ms. Grace Poe-Llamanzares	Online	F	1 to 5
N	Mr. Rodrigo Duterte	Print	M	6 or more

Instrumentation and data collection

Researchers conducted face-to-face interviews with the participants separately from January to February 2017, several months after the May 2016 elections. These interviews were held in agreed-upon locations in Metro Manila, the Philippines’ capital region where the participants were based. Interviews were guided by a two-part questionnaire (*aide memoire*). Prior to the actual interview, participants completed a *robotfoto* (participant’s profile sheet) asking basic personal information and journalistic background.

The interviews revolved around personal definition of journalism ethics by participants and what ethical guidelines were being implemented in their news company. Participants were also asked to narrate instances during campaign coverage which they considered as ethical dilemmas as well as how they were able to deal with such cases.

Ethical considerations

The research instruments were approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the journalism programme from the University of Santo Tomas. Before proceeding with the interview, researchers gave consent forms and oriented participants of the purpose and nature of the interviews. Due to the sensitive nature of the topic, identities of participants were strictly made anonymous and subsequently assigned codenames for this paper.

Data analysis

Each audio recording of the interviews was individually transcribed and subjected to interpretation and analysis using a repertory grid. The grid is composed of three columns: general themes, data categories or sub-themes, and the significant statements drawn from a selection of the most significant quotes and statements by the participants.

The researchers identified the common answers among the participants, which were categorised into sub-themes (cool analysis), which were further classified into general themes (warm analysis). Analysis of answers from the participants then led to the development of an outcome space. This outcome space presents the "...logical relations amongst the different categories of outcome" (Richardson, 1999, p. 54) that are represented in a diagram (Rands & Gansamer-Topf, 2016). In the case of this paper, the different categories of the outcome space are the major themes derived from respondents' answers.

The outcome space is presented as a *metaphorical visual display*, a type of qualitative research data display that "...depicts in a metaphorical way the topics of themes found" (Verdinelli & Scagnolli, 2013, p. 225). Metaphorical visual displays present information graphically "...in a structured and organised way," and use a metaphor's key features "...to convey a second level of representation, (providing) insight or implicit knowledge about the represented information." Illustrations developed in these displays "...represent the connection between themes and sub-themes" (Verdinelli & Scagnolli, 2013, pp. 230–231).

FINDINGS

Cool and warm analyses of verbalisations by participants in regard to ethical dilemmas during the 2016 Philippine Presidential Elections yielded three major themes. These themes were illustrated into a *Wheel of Election Reporters' Ethical Dilemmas* (see Figure 1).

At the core of the figure is the concept of ethical dilemmas, followed by a layer that identifies the three types of ethical dilemmas, namely transactional, or dilemmas that relate to material objects given by sources to the reporter; social, or those that arise from the reporter's personal interaction and relationship with the people in the campaign; and institutional, or those that pertain to ownership influences, management structures, work routines and editorial decisions.

Journalists said they experience ethical dilemmas as they carry out their routine tasks such as dealing with sources and authority within their news organisation. Dilemmas also arise when reporters are offered material objects or favours by sources such as cash bribes, non-monetary incentives, and hotel and travel expenses.

These dilemmas are characterised by sets of values that go into conflict with one another, namely authority and autonomy, individual and community, mercy and justice, what is legal and what is moral, and what is personal and professional.

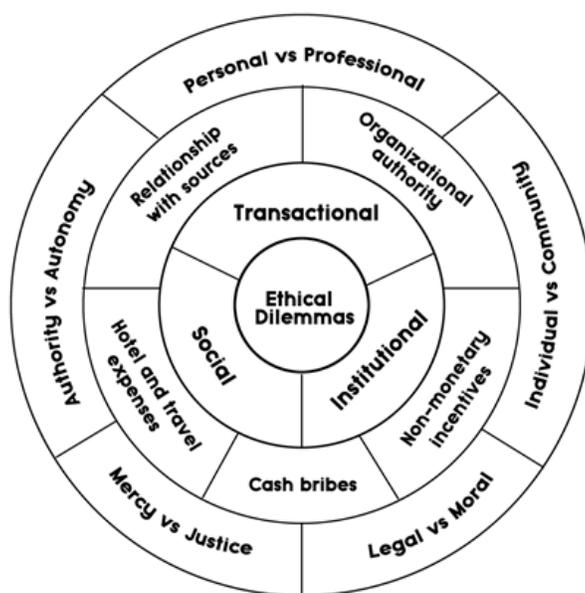


Figure 1. Wheel of Election Reporters' Ethical Dilemmas

Transactional dilemmas

These dilemmas involve exchanges of not just access to sources, but also subtle-to-overt pressures to receive cash and in-kind gifts or tokens in exchange for a candidate's favourable coverage. In this study, all participants agreed "envelopmental journalism" (i.e. cash bribes placed in envelopes or in reporters' ATM cards) was a prevalent unethical practice — and an upfront ethical dilemma — during the campaign trails. This is despite admitting that they had no difficulty refusing offers.

"In every election, money circulates, not just for the media, but for all... other sectors. Unfortunately, candidates do offer money to reporters who cover and sadly, I would think that some still give in to it." [Participant K]

However, these so-called "transactional dilemmas" do not only refer to cash bribes. Participants bared that it was also common for sources from the campaign to send tokens and gifts to reporters. These include food packages, clothes, handicrafts, notebooks and pen drives, among others. Most participants argued that it was tolerable to accept tokens and gifts, which they consider as incentives for their coverage. There were other participants, however, who felt that they were in a dilemma because they were uncertain if these incentives are "considered" as bribes. One participant said:

"*Hindi ko ma-draw yung line between what is corrupt or not kung tumatanggap ka ng regalo.*" (I cannot draw the line between what is corrupt or not when you accept gifts.) [Respondent G]

A few participants confessed that their company allowed them to receive tokens in-kind and not worth more than their monthly salary:

"Honestly, if it's products *na hindi sobra-sobrang laki ng value*, we don't have problems accepting. As long as it's not you know —I don't know, an iPhone,

or definitely *hindi rin pera, di ba?*" (Honestly, we don't have problems accepting products that do not have high value. As long as it's not you know—I don't know, an iPhone, or definitely not money either, isn't it?) [Participant D]

"Usually my rule is I don't accept things that I cannot pay for myself." [Participant C]

The presidential candidate would also often pay for coverage expenses such as food, transportation and hotel accommodations. Most of the participants however said their employers (media companies) would pay for these expenses to avoid owing their sources "*utang na loob*" or debt of gratitude in Filipino. In cases where the company does not pay for food and travel expenses, reporters felt trapped in a dilemma. One participant, whose company only provided out-of-town allowance, candidly shared:

"How do you draw the line? *Parang kapag di mo na man tinanggap, bastos ka. So siguro ang win-win solution na lang doon ay, okay, tanggapin mo na lang, pero 'di ma-apektuhan coverage mo.*" (How do you draw the line? You would be called rude if you do not accept it. The only win-win solution you can find there is accepting it but not letting it affect your coverage.) [Participant G]

"*Ang nakukuha ko nalang from the office, out-of-town allowance. Kaya diyan yung dilemma mo, yung sinabi ko kanina pinapakain ka, binibili ka, tapos babanatan mo.*" (The only thing you get from the office is out-of-town allowance. That's where your dilemma lies, when you're being fed and given gifts but you have to critically report about them.) [Participant G]

Reporters often felt pressured to accept food and travel expenses paid by campaign staff. In cases of abrupt out-of-town coverage, reporters let the campaign staff pay for travel and hotel accommodations but the former eventually repay. One participant articulated:

"The fact that you're being fed, isn't that considered a bribe already? When you're there and your colleagues are eating, it is inevitable to join them. No one goes out to eat somewhere else." [Participant N]

Nevertheless, some participants think reporters do not owe a debt of gratitude to these candidates and their media handlers:

"Why would we owe you a debt of gratitude when you have the budget? You are the one gaining from the coverage. So why would I have a debt of gratitude?" [Participant G]

Institutional dilemmas

Participants also relate dilemmas to ownership influences, management structures, and editorial decisions. Typical problems narrated by participants involve newsroom superiors and company owners exercising authority to censor or block articles from being published because the media organisation allegedly favours a particular candidate. One participant considered it a dilemma when a journalist is influenced by external factors, including editors from their own company:

“So sometimes, the editors, the producers, they will, you know, change the story in a way that they think, ‘This is more interesting if we say it like this,’ rather than how you wrote it. For me an ethical journalist is able to tell his bosses, his superiors that ‘No, you shouldn’t air it like that, because that’s not what the story is.’”[Participant K]

Some participants even get orders from their editors or producers on how to treat their coverage of their assigned candidates. These include refraining from writing negative stories on a particular candidate who had ties with their company’s owners and giving less exposure to a candidate due to their news organisation’s biases.

“Of course, we know that the (news company) is an (owner) so ... *may times na magre-request sila na, may bad PR [press release] kay (candidate), papatigilin iyung story.*” (Of course, we know that the (news company) is a (owner) so ... there are times when they request to stop a story if it involves bad PR for (candidate). [Participant B]

“I was advised by the desk not to give so much coverage on (candidate). That’s where the biases of news organisations come in. They have their own preferences, and because these newsrooms have their bets, they don’t give much space to the coverage. As far as I know, that’s what I was told.” [Participant D]

In response, one participant confessed to feeling helpless and acted out of loyalty to their employer:

“You have to abide by what the company wants. *Di ka ano, doon ka nagta-trabaho. Yung loyalty mo nandoon. Pwera lang kung talagang it's very... masamang-masama.*” (You have to abide by what the company wants. Your loyalty is to your employer, unless, of course, they tell you to do something very, very bad.) [Participant N]

There were instances when reporters were not directly told that the company favoured a certain candidate; based on observations, however, some reporters feel that their company was giving unequal coverage to candidates. This is because some candidates may not be drawing readership. Some participants said:

“I felt there was a preference, not sure if knowingly or unknowingly on the part of editors, but because I feel it’s impossible for any news org not to have any preference or inkling.” [Participant I]

“Because Grace Poe and Duterte are strong candidates, they want to highlight them to generate more views and hits.” [Participant B]

Concerns relating to the ethical manual of a company also fall under institutional dilemmas. Some reporters said their companies do not have “coded” or “written” ethics manuals, which makes it difficult for reporters to decide ethically when their management is the party concerned.

Social dilemmas

Reporters also raised issues about having close ties with sources or people in the campaign. All participants agreed it was necessary to establish close relationships with sources. This enabled them to get substantial campaign schedules and material for reports. However, most participants strove to draw the line between their personal feelings for their sources from their professional responsibilities. Some even found themselves in a difficult situation when they were required to write an article which the source (whom they have developed a friendship with) may find unfavourable.

“You build a close relationship with your sources which places you in an awkward situation sometimes...” [Participant J]

"My concern was that my sources might draw flak but I have no choice except to air it. More of that, I usually write my stories continuously, but at some point, I stop when I realize what my source said may jeopardize them.” [Participant F]

Situations where reporters develop biases or empathy toward sources are considered ethical dilemmas. Most participants said they did not experience this dilemma. Instead, they claimed to have observed it among their colleagues. Participants even likened this situation to suffering from “Stockholm syndrome” (something akin to a psychological alliance with the source whom the journalist is covering):

“There was a time at the press bus, they seemed to have a Stockholm syndrome. They became too attached. They criticized a TV show who interviewed Rodrigo Duterte in a hostile manner.” [Participant N]

“There’s this tendency to ... acquire the so-called Stockholm syndrome. I know that for a fact... I’m not a psychologist but I’d like to think they (my beat mates) were somehow co-opted.” [Participant G]

"Honestly, for some reporters there would come a point it might affect their reporting. But from time to time I think it's the responsibility of the reporter to conduct a bias check." [Participant I]

Only Participant B admitted to having a bias towards a candidate. This participant said the bias affected her/his output but they still made a conscious effort to write balanced stories, in fear of being reprimanded by the company. This participant even admitted to crying when their candidate conceded.

“I admit, I had a personal bias towards my candidate and it reflected in what I wrote. But I make sure it isn’t obvious because the office would know . . . I maintain being critical. Although I have a bias that I want my candidate to win, I am still critical.” [Participant B]

Journalists also considered an ethical dilemma when they are “bullied” by their sources. This leads them to become torn whether to pursue their coverage of the assigned presidential candidate or not. Four participants said they were “bullied” by the candidates or the campaign staff. They were deprived of campaign schedules, barred from interviews, and prohibited from asking questions during conferences:

“He was pointing fingers at me and saying (news company) was attacking (candidate) on a personal level . . . warned me to be careful of what I wrote. He was practically ranting to me about [news company].” [Participant D]

In such situations, the participants sought help from their newsroom superiors, who either dealt with the campaign staff or offered to pull participants out of the campaign coverage. Here are two experiences:

“In my experience, there was a time when (**candidate**) got mad at me at the height of the citizen issue. So I had to consult my editor, what do I do about it? [It came] to a point that they stopped sending me schedules, they stopped sending me information.” [Participant M]

“I had to put up with that for three months, the feeling of being unwanted, that they don’t want you to be there. But you’re still doing it because you feel like it’s a service. I mean it’s part of your job.” [Participant D]

One participant, who experienced covering elections abroad, shared she or he was urged by colleagues in the campaign trail to accept the culture of corruption among Filipino reporters, which she or he considered a “dilemma:”

“Everyone will be against you. That’s the culture —*iyung bayaran*— and *iyang iyung sinabi nila sa akin*. (That’s the culture —being bribed— and that’s what they told me.) Just turn a blind eye. You know this is our job. This is against our integrity and values as a journalist. When I’d hear stories of them accepting money, people would tell me they won’t vote for that candidate, they probably just need the money.” [Participant L]

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This phenomenological study sought to capture the ethical dilemmas experienced by election reporters during the 2016 Philippine presidential campaigns. Since the study is limited only to election reporters, it does not claim to reflect dilemmas of a more diverse population of journalists. Nonetheless, the *Wheel of Election Reporters' Ethical Dilemmas* provides a starting point to understand the ethical issues and challenges faced by election reporters.

Existing literature depict ethical dilemmas as situations where an individual makes a choice between moral values, usually typified as “right versus wrong” or “right versus right.” (Kidder, 1995; Meyers, 2010; Kim & Kelly, 2010; May, 2013). In general, election-related ethical dilemmas involve a number of moral issues, given attempts to bribe journalists and sway reportage to favour certain candidates (Hofileña, 1998, 2004; Davis, 2009).

Confronting dilemmas: Personal and situational

In dealing with ethical issues, participants agreed that ethics are situational (May, 2013). Codes of ethics of new companies do not guarantee ethical conduct, and the resolution of a dilemma depends on what ethical standards an individual reporter upholds or which journalistic value is prioritised (Kim & Kelly, 2010).

Most media companies have their own codes of ethics, but these —as participants claimed— are not strictly enforced or are loosely interpreted. Participants whose news companies have ethical guidelines still admitted their codes have limitations.

In most cases, the participants resolved dilemmas based on personal decisions. Still, participants are conscious that the decisions they make are guided by the journalistic values of accuracy, fairness, objectivity and truthfulness, among others (Meyers, 2010; Kim & Kelly, 2010; Patterson & Wilkins, 2014).

All of the participants equated ethical dilemmas to situations involving media corruption. This gives emphasis on the “right versus wrong” (Kidder, 1995; May, 2013) type of dilemma, that which was barely explored in the literature. Most studies often focus on the “right versus right” type of dilemma because it provides a more complex challenge (Kidder, 1995). Still, there are ethical situations in this study that capture typologies under the “right versus right” dilemma (Kidder, 1995) such as justice versus mercy, truth versus loyalty, and individual versus community.

The dilemmas and their underpinnings

Under transactional dilemmas, most participants were open to accepting gifts from sources as long as they did not involve luxury or cash. They argued that the gifts were not as tainted as cash bribes and considered as incentives for coverage. As Participant K described them: “*Pa-thank you*” (in Filipino, a way of saying thank you).

Transactional dilemmas involve a choice between legal and moral values. Participants were aware that acceptance of any form of gift is unethical, yet use company policies as an excuse to accept non-monetary incentives. In their defence, participants said the value of these gifts does not suffice to incur a debt of gratitude.

Institutional dilemmas also involve a conflict between organisational authority and personal autonomy (Sjøvaag, 2013). The participants considered it wrong that the news companies they worked for favoured a particular candidate, or gave more exposure to other

candidates for readership's sake. Still, reporters refused to defy their superiors or employers at the risk of losing their job (Sjøvaag, 2013).

Because relationships between journalists and sources are instrumental (Örebro, 2002), social dilemmas often involve journalists' efforts to maintain good rapport with their sources without compromising their professional values. In some cases, journalists find it difficult to write an article which sources may find unfavourable (especially when sources have become close friends). Journalists are torn whether their sympathies should trump fairness and objectivity.

Participants likened this sort of allegiance to the "Stockholm syndrome," a psychological condition traditionally associated with kidnapping or hostages where the captive develops an alliance of trust to their captors as a conscious coping mechanism (Jameson, 2010). In the context of journalism, "Stockholm syndrome" is used to describe reporters who compromise their professional duties for the benefit of others, especially sources.

Some participants were also careful not to offend sources in their stories for fear of being denied information or excluded from the coverage. This situational action just reflects the difficulties journalist-participants face during election coverage. The personal versus professional dilemma also occurs when reporters engage in social activities with the candidate and members of the campaign staff. Journalists make sure to keep their guard up, not wanting to cross professional boundaries.

Nuances in Filipino journalistic culture

Though majority of the participants agreed that being exposed to a campaign for a long period led to biases, it was strategic on the part of the news company since the practice also entailed mastery of the beat and trust with sources.

A participant found it difficult to respond to the advice of a colleague in the beat: accepting bribery is a status quo for the Philippine media during elections. This "culture" of media corruption in the political beat and elections go way back (Hofileña, 1998, 2004; Acuña, Alano & Savellano, 2016) to past Philippine national elections. For the participant, it was a clash between her personal beliefs and a prevalent practice.

Cultural nuances also came out from answers of the participants participants . Participants raised the concepts of *utang na loob* (debt of gratitude) and *pakikisama* (camaraderie / companionship) during the interviews, which they said affected ethical decision-making. Both concepts are accommodative surface values founded in *Sikolohiyang Pilipino* or Filipino psychology, anchored on the Filipino perspective and bounded by the culture propagated by indigenous ancestors (Enriquez, 1975; Pe-Pua & Protacio-Marcelino, 2000).

Some participants found *pakikisama* to be a nuisance in certain transactional and social dilemmas. *Pakikisama* warranted "smooth interpersonal relations" through conformity (Lynch, 1961, 1973; Pe-Pua & Protacio-Marcelino, 2000). Enriquez (1978, 1994 cited in Pe-Pua & Protacio-Marcelino, 2000) found that Filipinos are more concerned of *pakikipagkapwa* or treating others as fellows rather than creating smoother relationships, unfolding two categories of *kapwa* (shared identity), namely *ibang-tao* (outsider/other) and *hindi ibang-tao* ("one of us").

There were instances when the participants had agreed with the decisions of their *kapwa* (co-workers and sources) to avoid being left out. An example is a participant who felt pressured to eat at the lunches or dinners sponsored by the candidate he was assigned to. Bribery witnesses (e.g. participants L and M) related stories of how they would see beat mates accepting cash from other reporters since it was a "status quo" —a system that can fall under *pakikisama* (being along with) and *pakikibagay* (in conformity with).

Utang na loob pertains to the principle of reciprocity when a person benefits from another, thus creating a feeling of obligation to return the favour or repay the debt (Kaut, 1961; Pe-Pua & Protacio-Marcelino, 2000). In the context of the ethical dilemmas faced by participants, most of these reporters did not feel any sense of debt or gratitude despite being given free food, incentives and allowances. Most of them claimed that such perks were either part of the campaign trail or were reimbursed by their respective companies. Though a majority of them assured that their coverage would be left uncompromised, they still considered *utang na loob* an ethical issue in the field.

Other Filipino concepts that arise based on the interviews with the participants show the societal values of *kalayaan* (freedom), *katarungan* (justice) and *karangalan* (dignity) when the journalists talked about their personal and professional values.

It is important to note that none of the situations identified by the participants as ethical dilemmas fall exclusively under one of the three general types categorised in the resulting *Wheel of Filipino Election Reporters' Ethical Dilemmas*. Transactional, institutional and social dilemmas may intersect with one another.

In conclusion, the *Wheel of Election Reporters' Ethical Dilemmas* captured and grouped the situations which these Filipino reporters considered as ethical dilemmas. The *Wheel* also identified the value conflicts embedded in these dilemmas. Findings show that there are situations where reporters are made to deal with conflicting sets of values as they execute routine tasks in election coverage such as maintaining good rapport with news sources and dealing with newsroom superiors. Instances where reporters are offered bribes or non-monetary incentives also trigger ethical dilemmas.

Interestingly, participants also raised the presence of accommodative, surface-level Filipino values —*utang na loob* (debt of gratitude) and *pakikisama* (being along with)— as problematic since these affect their news judgment. In their defence, participants said they dismiss any feeling of *utang na loob* towards their sources, despite receiving perks during coverage. In fact, participants claim to be mindful of journalistic principles (such as objectivity, independence and fairness) in the face of dilemmas.

This study advances current literature by presenting the ethical dilemmas experienced by Filipino election reporters. It also relates those dilemmas to country-level cultural traits which affect how reporters respond to the dilemma. These findings could also serve as an aid for crafting ethical guidelines or courses for media scholars and practitioners. Further, this study also stresses the need for journalists to be more conscious of their ethical conduct in the field, especially in political coverage.

Finally, the study recommends future researchers to gather participants of a wider scope to reflect a more diverse population of journalists (the sample group in this study is limited only to reporters based in Metro Manila, the Philippines' capital region). The researchers surmise the findings may be similar in other geographic settings (e.g., other provinces, cities and municipalities of the Philippines) when reporters cover local officials. Researchers from other countries, amid differing journalistic cultures, can conduct studies building up from, or quantitatively testing, the *Wheel of Election Reporters' Ethical Dilemmas*. These future studies can then capture the cultural nuances of journalistic reportage during election seasons.

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