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Discursive constructions in televised news: The case of Mindanao, Philippines

Estelle Marie Ladrido  & Ariel Robert Ponce 

News stories carry boundary setting language that constructs nations as homogenous imagined communities and furthers the us-vs-them metanarrative that separates those who belong to one nation from those who do not. However, it may be possible that boundary-setting representations may be applied to groups within the nation-state. This article explores this possibility by examining the discourse constructed by mediated communication such as local and national television news programs about the Mindanao region in the southern Philippines. Results show that Mindanao-based journalists present Mindanao to local viewers as different, neglected, and violent. This is possibly an indication of how historical social processes involved in the emergence of the Mindanao state intersect the discursive ones concerned with national and regional identity construction.

Keywords: journalism; mediated communication; Mindanao; national identity; television news discourse

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“The media have been and still are agents of the national” (Castelló, Dhoest, & O’Donnell, 2020, p. 2). This pronouncement indicates that media are involved in processes of national identity formation through which one situates oneself within national boundaries, and in relation to global contexts. While deeper understanding of identity construction and national imagination is promoted by more recent ethnographic works (such as Briandana, 2019), the discursive construction of nations on news remains a key starting point to that understanding.

In turn, this article explores the discourse constructed by mediated communication such as local and national television news programs about the Mindanao region in the southern Philippines. Scholars such as Scannell and Cardiff (1991) and Van den Bulck (2001) have studied how broadcasting services, particularly public broadcasting, have been employed to forward particular, elitist visions of the nation in television programming. They argue that television is instrumental in furthering hegemonies and myths of homogeneity within national borders. These works are preoccupied with how media institutions, particularly television, have symbolically defined national characteristics within programs. Castelló (2009) is critical of this focus, arguing that the presence of a mass media system does not ensure the nation-building process, even as he agrees that television serves as an important link between individuals and their social environments.

In the Philippines, Hofileña, Lorenzana, and Ladrido (2014) determined that how news workers framed election-related stories depended on organizational biases, individual biases, ideologies, journalistic practices, and commercial pressures, which led news workers to differ in which aspects of a news event they emphasized in their news coverage. Moreover, Ladrido (2017) found that news production was enacted differently in government and commercial television networks, and that news workers ascribed different meanings to values such as public service and autonomy. These gave rise to varying news content on their respective early evening programs. Variability in news practices, as well as to the meanings attributed to these practices, allows not only for differences in the level of visual signification but also in that of discourse.

On the discursive level, studies of news as a carrier of national identity constructions tend to focus on the language of news as it indicates national boundaries, pointing out that these events are happening within “our” borders and to “our” people. First, news workers are careful to indicate whether events are local or international, distinguishing those occurring in our country from those outside. There is a tacit assumption that local events are more important as they directly concern “us.” Brookes (1999) takes issue with how news tends to promote nation as the naturalized form of collective identity, superseding other forms of cultural identity, presenting information in terms of shared threat or else communal concern. The dominance of nation as the precedent form of cultural identity is communicated through “a complex deixis of homeland” (Yumul & Özkirimli, 2000, p. 789), as the collective personal pronouns “we” and “us” take the homogeneity of the nation for granted. A closer look at news as a form though shows that the assumption of

a shared cultural agenda may facilitate the exclusion of ethnicities or minority cultural groups.

Brookes (1999) and De Cillia, Reisigl, and Wodak (1999) have found that news tends to reinforce “implicit commonsense boundaries around nation,” (Brookes, 1991, p. 250) naturalizing nation as a form of collective identity as well as assuming its homogeneous composition. Over the years, more recent studies concerning media representation magnify these claims and continuously construct the collective identity of people in their reportage. For example, the work of Andersen, Silcox, and Isom Scott (2021) found that US and Canadian news articles depicted girls’ juvenile arrests horrendously labeling them “sinister,” “uncivilized,” “harlot,” and “average Jane.” Moreover, negative identity constructions forwarded by media do not only hint of exclusion and present stereotypical vignettes of groups but may also result in physical violence. Nor and Gale (2021) analyzed two leading news outlets in Malaysia and found discourses that developed fear toward Islam, which contributed to violent actions such as defilement of religious symbolism and damage to places of worship. Such work seems to be consistent with Billig’s (1995) assertion that news content may “unmindfully remind us of who and where ‘we’ are” (p. 109) so that nationalism becomes a routine way of talking, listening, and doing.

In this paper, we go further and assert that apart from drawing the line between us and the world beyond national borders, news programs may simultaneously exclude some members of the national community living within those borders. Existing work supports our contention that even as news aims to address a homogeneous nation, its content may be promotive of exclusionary discourses within the nation’s borders (see Crawford, 2012; Law, 2001; Madianou, 2005; McConville, McCreanor, Wetherell, & Moewaka Barnes, 2017; Ong, 2009; Pietikäinen & Hujanen, 2003), and we explore this in the Philippine context by examining news stories produced and broadcast nationally and locally about the Mindanao region.

We are particularly interested in this region because the various conflicts in Mindanao are often presented in terms of hegemonic conflicts between the imperialistic north and the dominated south, or else a dominant Christian (Roman Catholic) versus a minority Muslim religion (see Diaz, 2003). This notion oversimplifies the issues and leads to stereotyping. Moreover, because of the continued demand of its people for self-determination, manifest through the push for a Bangsamoro Juridical Entity as necessary for peace and development, we are concerned that the perceived separateness of Mindanaons may be reinforced by news discourse.

As national television networks in the Philippines are geographically based in the capital, Manila, the one-way flow of content from the capital toward the regions and provinces was observed by Maslog (1988) in the late 1980’s but remains an under-researched area in Philippine communication. Following this claim, it is necessary to study Mindanao’s discursive construction in the news, since these may present stereotypical constructions of Mindanao that may lend to its absence or exclusion from the national imagination, thereby contributing to marginalization practices toward Mindanaons. With this, the study hopes to find light in this question.

RQ: How is Mindanao discursively constructed in mediated communication such as local and national televised news?

Methodology

Since television is widely used for news consumption and considered a credible medium by Filipinos (Suva & Manalo, 2016), we focused our project on televised news content. We selected the program *TV Patrol* produced by ABS-CBN¹ since there was both a national and local broadcast airing daily.

First, we performed a content analysis of stories referring to events occurring in Mindanao, which were gathered across a period of 3 months, from January–March 2016. Stories that aired on *TV Patrol* national edition were classified as “national,” while stories that aired on the Central Mindanao edition were classified as “local.” Once the stories had been determined, we then noted those statements that referenced Mindanao in general or identified a locale within the region. We noted how journalists used words and phrases in their descriptions of news events as well as how they used interview sound bites and images to determine if there were particular ways of talking about Mindanao in news stories. While we began with specific categories suggested by Bishop and Jaworski (2003), Crawford (2012), and Costelloe (2014), we eventually employed a grounded approach to derive categories of discourse based on the statements found in news stories. It should be noted that the research project commenced in December 2015; hence, the collection of news stories took place during the period leading to the national elections scheduled for May 2016. Additional context of the study is that at that time, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) was still treated as separatist and rebel group asserting for agency through the Bangsamoro Basic Law which was still being debated in the senate. Later in 2018, it was enacted as a law which also created the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) that replaced Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM). The new autonomous region is being run by leaders of the MILF who are now no longer considered as rebels. Also, for the first time in Philippine history, a presidential candidate was a Mindanaon.² Mr Rodrigo Duterte eventually won the election and became the 16th Philippine president.

Findings

The discourse of neglect

One prominent strand that presented Mindanao as neglected was found in the commemoration of the *Mamasapano*³ event, when, on January 25, 2015, 44 members of the Special Action Forces (SAF) were killed in an illegal raid to capture known terrorists hiding in the small village. This event generated news stories assessing the effects of the altercation among the residents. One key strand in these reports concerned rehabilitation, rebuilding, and reconstruction. Here is one given by a resident in an interview.

When there was no fighting, no one in the government thought about giving us these kinds of projects. If the SAF confrontation had not happened, there would not be any of these changes. (TV Patrol National, January 25, 2016)

The statement communicates that the clash spurred development projects in the area, and where soldiers were participants in the construction of roads and bridges. The resident's use of *these kinds of projects* emphasizes that these had been absent in the area and attempts to place the altercation in a more positive light: at least the violence brought Mamasapano to the forefront of both government and public attention.

Moreover, journalists made frequent references to the problem of Mindanao without explicitly stating what that problem is. For example, here is a statement made by the secretary general.

Congress is not sincere, not serious in resolving the problem we have here in Mindanao. (TV Patrol Central Mindanao, January 29, 2016)

In this story about the passing of the Basic Bangsamoro Law, recognized as a step toward peace in Mindanao, the secretary general refers to an unspecified problem that the national congress has not moved to resolve. Further, he asserts that the Manila-based Congress is insincere, having no real intention of addressing this key issue that is important to Mindanao. Without discussing how the law relates to this problem that is crucial to progress in the region, the viewer is left to conclude that Mindanao remains to be neglected by the state apparatus in Manila. The use of the phrase *here in Mindanao* conveys a distancing that seems to mean more than a geographical separation. Rather, it is indicative of social position. Those who are in Mindanao are neglected by those with the capacity to initiate necessary change, who are neither *in* nor *from* Mindanao.

The discourse of violence

We found a discourse of violence present when it came to how Mindanao as a place was described. We found statements to revolve first around descriptions of place, designating locations as a peaceful site that tourists could visit. It seems as if the promotion is made under the assumption that the viewer already associates Mindanao with violence. The speaker then compares his place with other locations. Here is a statement made by Cotabato City's tourism officer in a story that included Cotabato as among the most visited cities in the region.

One of the factors why Cotabato City⁴ gained a lot of tourists in the year 2015 is the peace and order. (TV Patrol Central Mindanao, March 22, 2016)

The statement declares there is peace and order in Cotabato, which implies a comparison and contrast with other locations in the region. This also means that peace and order may not be found elsewhere.

We also found statements carrying place description in stories concerned with a variety of topics. One was the maintenance of peace and order during the observance of Holy Week, given by a police superintendent.

For now, we have not yet received a threat; however, despite the absence of any threat, we are always prepared because our place has many peculiarities compared to other provinces. (TV Patrol Central Mindanao, March 29, 2016)

The place, Cotabato City is described in relation to threats of violence, such that even in the absence of the threat its people remain alert and vigilant. The inclusive pronoun *we* is used to indicate that this vigilance is a common characteristic of the residents.

The discourse of difference

Lastly, we noted a discourse of difference, which constructs Mindanao as a region set apart from the rest of the country. This theme was quite prominent in election stories. For example, here is a statement made by a public school teacher.

We will vote for someone from Mindanao because he will understand what the real situation of Mindanao is. (TV Patrol Central Mindanao, 26 February 2016)

Although this statement is made by a public school teacher who is native to Mindanao, it is a deliberate inclusion by the journalist that emphasizes the cultural differences that prevent non-Mindanaons from grasping the “true” situation in the region, stressing the notion that there are differences between Mindanao residents and the rest of the country. Journalists used this type of statement quite frequently as they are found in the responses of ordinary citizens to questions about their criteria for selecting their next president. The phrase *from Mindanao* in these statements carries a boundary-setting function that separates those in or from Mindanao from those who are not, implying that there are key differences between the groups, prevent one understanding or relating to the other.

Boundary-setting language was quite pronounced in references to presidential candidate, Rodrigo Duterte. Here are two examples.

I will vote for Duterte because he is from Mindanao. He knows what really is happening in Mindanao. (TV Patrol Central Mindanao, February 24, 2016)

Duterte boasts that he is the only one who clearly hears about [issues of] peace in Mindanao. (TV Patrol Central Mindanao, February 29, 2016)

These statements forward the notion that Duterte alone among the five presidential candidates has the capacity to understand the region since he is a son of Mindanao. In fact, the second statement implies that Duterte himself used boundary-setting language to promote himself to the Mindanao electorate. By stressing that he alone has the cultural capital to grasp Mindanaons’ desire for peace and progress, he presented himself as an attractive presidential option. The insider-outsider line demarcates possible differences in meaning given to words like “peace” since only those inside or from Mindanao have the “correct” understanding.

Conclusion

What is quite striking about these discursive constructions is they originate mostly from Mindanao journalists, not by the journalists from the national bureau, since 86.79% of our sampled stories were produced and broadcast by *TV Patrol* Central Mindanao counterparts using statements made by ordinary Mindanaons as well as persons who are considered authorities in the areas of politics, security, and culture. Our findings show that local journalists promote constructions of Mindanao as neglected, violent, and different to local Mindanao-based audiences. However, these discourses are invalidated by the Mindanaon student informants in the subsequent study carried out by Ladrido and Ponce (in press). Their focus groups highlighted that these representations forwarded by the televised news about Mindanao, particularly the negative ones, do not necessarily reflect themselves and most of the people from the locality and the Mindanao region in general. However, they have attributed such discursive constructions to experiences of marginalization when interacting with Filipinos in the Luzon and Visayas regions. Their responses indicated that rather than promote a cohesive national identity, news stories about Mindanao strengthened regional ones instead.

Further, *TV Patrol* is produced by ABS-CBN, a commercial network that relies on ratings for advertising support. The findings imply that these marginalizing constructions by local journalists have no impact upon program ratings, as *TV Patrol* continues to be the television news program of choice for local viewers. Indeed, given producers' reliance on ratings, we may further imply that viewers expect or prefer such constructions, leading journalists to continue reinforcing such discourse in their daily broadcasts. This may relate to journalists' task to make news relevant and pertinent to their audience. The findings indicate the necessity of inquiring into news production practices and organizational policies to understand the prevalence of violence, neglect, and absence when referring to Mindanao, as well as examine viewers' interpretation and engagement with news discourse.

Hall's understanding of identity as the meeting point serves as a vehicle for analyzing our findings. He writes that identity is

the point of suture, between on the one hand the discourses and practices which attempt to 'interpellate,' to speak to us or hail us into place as the social subjects of particular discourses and on the other hand, the processes which produce subjectivities, which construct us as subjects which can be 'spoken' (1996, pp. 5–6).

The discourse promoted in news stories may be manifestations of how, on the one hand, news representations and discourse of Mindanao position its people as different, neglected, and violent, while on the other, the historical processes and current events that have and continue to shape the Philippine south intersect the ways that Mindanaons speak of themselves, as well as to others from the same region. The historical trajectory of Mindanao, its avoidance of Hispanization, its leaders' use of strategic alliances with political elites in Manila to strengthen their positions of authority and the national government's inability to fully enforce its authority (Abinales, 2000; Lara, 2014) have generated social processes that may result in articulations among Mindanaons, particularly local journalists, that assert their separateness and distance from

the rest of the national community. This implies that for as long as those processes that currently dominate social and political landscape of Mindanao continue, Mindanao journalists may continue furthering a discourse that constructs the region in the exclusionary terms of violence, difference, and neglect. This, however, requires further empirical investigation.

Overall, our analysis supports the findings relating to how news tends to promote limited and exclusive constructs of national identity and strengthens the notion that such boundary-setting language is inseparable from news representation. Kenix (2015) however contradicts this, as her findings suggest that mediations of national identity need not draw inclusionary or exclusionary lines. She noted how local journalists in Samoa promoted patriotism and national pride by “celebrating the patriotism of minorities within their country” (p. 568) and presents how personal, organizational, or cultural values may generate more inclusive news discourse. Thus, another avenue for future research is to look into the relationship between the national network and its regional bureaus, and how this impacts the content of regional news programs. A national organization whose reporters are knowledgeable about Mindanao struggles might show more cultural sensitivity and understanding, and consequently be less likely to further discourses of violence, difference, and exclusion. Thus, journalists on the local level could deliberately cultivate alternative views toward the Philippine south, or else recognize and reward journalists who promote less exclusionary discourses in their reportage. This, however, would require journalists, and the news organizations that employ them, to be cognizant of two things. First, that their stories are pivotal in the process of regional and national identity making (Pietikäinen & Hujanen, 2003). Second, that their stories carry boundary-setting language that further exclusionary discourses that participate in socio-historical processes that relate to nation building as well as national belonging.

Notes

1. One of the largest TV networks in the Philippines but was eventually shut down in 2020 because of franchise expiration.
2. A term used to call people from Mindanao.
3. A remote province in Mindanao, Philippines.
4. An independent city in Central Mindanao, Philippines.

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