

*The Politics of Disaster Reporting: A Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis of
News Reports on Typhoon Lando*

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Abstract

Much of what we know about the politics of disaster reporting is limited to a straightforward knowledge of what stakeholders do during crises. Largely unnoticed in previous studies of this topic is the extent by which other modes apart from language are utilized for ideological purposes and the textual mechanisms through which these can be challenged. This paper addresses the issue of representing social action in the online news reportage of Typhoon Lando and its contribution to the maintenance of power asymmetries in Philippine disaster risk reduction. For that purpose, it asks how semiotic resources are used to represent the efforts of stakeholders, in what way are these shaped by the discursive practices of journalism, and who are mainly passivated/activated by these representations and at what cost. To answer these questions, twenty-eight (28) news reports from INQUIRER.net were examined using content analysis before interpreting their meanings and explaining their implications to society through the framework of critical discourse analysis. The core argument of the paper is that even as journalists banked on the presupposed inequality between Lando stakeholders in producing marketable news reports, their conservative representation of the present order may still be scrutinized in other communicative spaces because texts are always open to re-contextualization. Overall, it is suggested that future research into the politics of disaster reporting must take into account the lived experiences of those who actually read and write news reports as part of a broader effort of enhancing the critical media literacy skills of ordinary people.

Keywords: disaster reporting; multimodality; Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA); Typhoon Lando

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Introduction

In spite of developments in critical discourse analysis which have increasingly placed an emphasis on visual images and their interaction with other modes (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 1996), the study of disaster reporting remains stuck with the interpretation of written language. Current research on disaster reporting has been particularly concerned with the use of labelling strategies in representing actors in the Katrina event. As a case in point, Davis and French (2008, p. 246) mentioned that “...labelling Katrina a ‘natural’ disaster versus a ‘technological’ crisis shapes public understanding about the event, the source of the problem, and types of responses required for fixing the problem(s)”

At present, there is no existing study that applied a multimodal approach to the critical discourse analysis of disaster reports. This is unfortunate given the fact that a not-so-distant field from linguistics—*social semiotics*—has a set of tools for documenting and describing the semiotic resources (i.e. written language, images, sounds, gestures) used in a text (Van Leeuwen, 2005). Multimodality is an interdisciplinary approach that considers meaning making as being more than just about language (MODE, 2012). Unlike pure linguistic analysis, the interactions between similar modes (intra-semiotic relations) and between different modes (inter-semiotic relations) are considered in the multimodal analysis of actual texts (Bednarek & Caple, 2012).

Employing a multimodal approach to the critical discourse analysis of disaster news allows researchers to bridge critique with action by offering an explanation of how texts actually communicate what they communicate to people (Fairclough, 2017) As follows, the main question of the present research is: *how does the multimodal reportage of a disaster event in online news contribute to the maintenance of pre-existing arrangements for disaster risk reduction (DRR)?* Corollary to this, three related questions were answered:

- How are semiotic resources used in representing social action during the disaster?
- In what way are these representations shaped by the constellation of discursive practices surrounding online journalism?
- Who are mainly passivated/activated in the news discourse and at what cost?

Critical Linguistics, Social Semiotics, and MCDA

In Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) “both text and image can be thought of as being composed of communicative choices by authors that seek to do certain kinds of work for them” (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 9). Texts will always use linguistic and visual strategies that appear commonsensical or normal but are in fact ideological since they are embedded in existing power relations (Machin & Mayr, 2012). The job of MCDA is to describe “what semiotic resources are drawn upon in communication, or discourse, in order to carry out ideological work” (Ledin & Machin, 2017, p. 60).

MCDA traces its roots to ‘critical linguistics’ (CL) which emerged in the late 1970s in the work of Roger Fowler, Robert Hodge, Gunter Kress, and Tony Trew at the University of East Anglia in the UK (Machin & Mayr, 2012). Drawing from the

Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) model by the renowned English-born linguist M.A.K. Halliday (1925-2018), CL views text as multifunctional, always both representing the world and constituting social relations and identities, seeing them as made up of choices within available resources. Hence, its basic premise is that "...coding events in language entails choices among the models—which the grammar makes available and that such choices are potentially ideologically significant" (Fairclough, 1995, p. 25).

CL has been criticized for paying little attention to the interpretative practices of audiences. Fairclough (1995) notes that in CL, there tends to be a monolithic view of media power which understates the extent of diversity and change in media practices. It is as if the lessons of a hegemonic discourse are received in the same way across spaces. However, this does not seem to be the case when we factor in intertextuality. As Peterson (2005, p. 130) contends: "People are never only audiences constructing readings of texts, they also seize upon, remember, replicate, and transform elements from the media they consume."

By the 1990s, some critical linguists have begun to develop a 'social semiotic' approach to communication (Hodge & Kress, 1988; Kress & Van Leeuwen, 1996). Like CL, social semiotics analyzes the representation of events via the denaturalization of language. Yet, in contrast to it, there is an interest in other modes apart from language. Moreover, productive and interpretative practices have become a major concern in social semiotics as the cultural, historical, and social uses of language and other semiotic resources are taken into account in explaining their potential meanings (Bezemer & Jewitt, 2010).

The Swiss linguist and semiotician Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) originally defined semiotics as "the science of the life of signs in society." As a particular branch within the field of semiotics, social semiotics is a form of enquiry and activity that can be applied to specific instances and specific problems like office design, software development, politics, and journalistic reporting, among others. van Leeuwen (2005, p. 3) postulates that social semiotics does three things:

- collect, document and systematically catalogue semiotic resources—including their history
- investigate how these resources are used in specific historical, cultural, and institutional contexts, and how people talk about them in these contexts—plan them, teach them, justify them, critique them, etc.
- contribute to the discovery and development of new semiotic resources and new uses of existing semiotic resources.

For the present research, the focus will be limited to the inventorization of semiotic resources and the description of their use in a specific instance and context.

Research on Disaster Reporting

Current research on the politics of disaster reporting, particularly in daily media (print and television), emphasizes the role of media organizations in perpetuating a state sponsored social order. Although largely focused on the case of 2005 Hurricane Katrina, it was shown that media outlets legitimize the need for increased social control (viz., Tierney et al., 2006; Fleetwood, 2006; Garfield, 2007) as they "...rely

on the social order to retain their own value in the capitalist mode of creative destruction” (Price, 2006, p. 58). For this purpose, victims were either construed as unworthy or irresponsible individuals in the dominant discourse, who, without state intervention, cannot take action on their own.

By contrast, other studies underscore the impacts of media representations to those who actually experienced the disaster event. According to Ride and Bretherton (2011), communities after disasters are more pre-occupied with talking about memory to make sense of what happened than “recovery” or “bouncing back”. In addition, the motivation in telling each story illuminates just how diverse are the actions and identities of subjects beneath the grand narrative of a disaster event. Through performing and bearing witness for instance, people are able to resist annihilation, question community memory, and to honor the sufferers, unspoken heroes, and the deceased (Carlin & Park-Fuller, 2012). Likewise, an ethnographic gaze into local community life after disasters reveals the presence of organic relationships that defy the logic of state intervention (Ride & Bretherton, 2011).

Missing from the current literature on the politics of disaster reporting are studies which investigate the effects of disaster-related news coverage particularly the potential for differential interpretation of an event by audiences. The pre-existing literature in this area is intent on uncovering how language is used to represent the social identity of disaster victims in the news media. On the other hand, studies that focus on the different ways in which people interpret disasters in everyday life help foreground these representations against the background of social power relations. Overall, however, the growing importance of images in online journalism coupled by the expanding scope of governmental crisis-related activity means that a “stand alone” and language-centered discourse analysis may no longer suffice. Thus, it would have been better if previous studies have employed other methods for the empirical validation of results (e.g. ethnography, corpus linguistics, interviews, FGDs, surveys, and content analysis) while including other modes (visual, aural, gestural) in their critical analysis of discourse.

Media and Disasters: Towards A Discourse-Specific Conceptual Framework

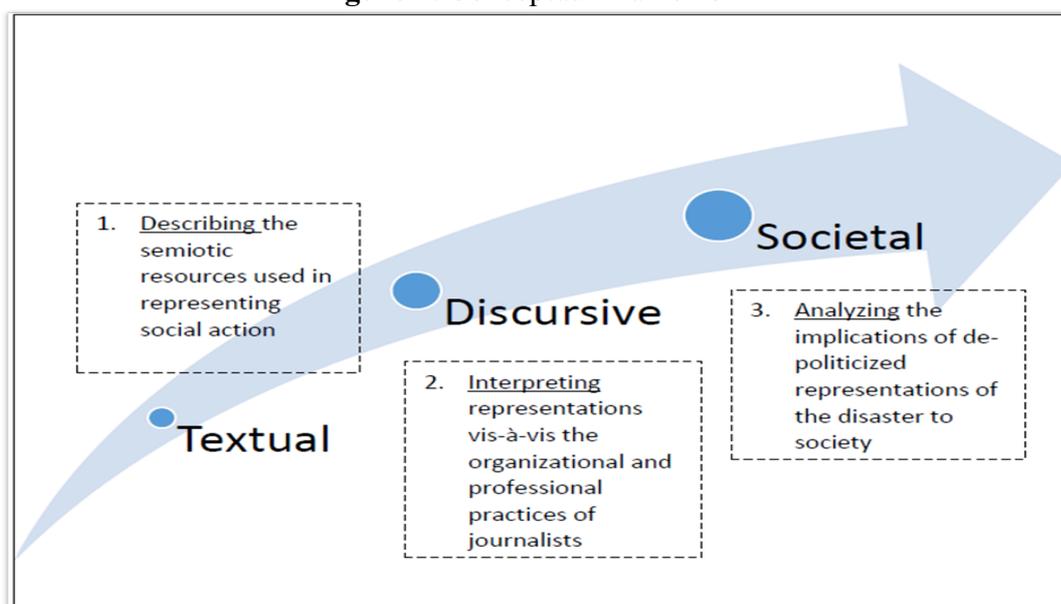
Broadly, the relationship between media and disasters can be viewed in two ways. On the one hand, the media provide the space through which governmental response systems facilitate consistent and clear communication about their activities (Schneider & Jordan, 2016). On the other hand, disasters (as events or happenings) are considered important media products because they attract heavy audience attention. From this perspective, the ‘political’ is seen to reside at the level of discourse practice involving the production and consumption of news reports and the level of social practice comprised by the situational, institutional, and societal positioning of journalism vis-à-vis disasters.

Additionally, however, we must note that news reports on disasters are texts that contain particular representations of social action. They are constructed based on the semiotic choices of journalists who write them. That said, text may be considered as another level of politics in disaster reporting. Viewed altogether, the three levels of politics in disaster reporting (i.e. text, discourse practice, and social practice)

constitute the three steps involved in carrying out a CDA of news reports on Typhoon Lando (see Richardson, 2007).

Figure 1 provides the conceptual framework developed for the study (see next page). The framework underscores that online news reports on disasters should be analyzed at the level of text, discourse, and society. Overall, these levels also correspond to the steps outlined by Richardson (2007) and Machin and Van Leeuwen (2016). At the *textual level*, the semiotic resources used in representing social action is described. On the other hand, these representations are interpreted at the *discursive level* in the context of news production and consumption. Lastly, the broader implications of de-politicized representations of the disaster to society are analyzed at the *societal level*.

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework



Methods and Procedures

The study is pragmatic in nature. A hybrid methodological approach involving the use of content analysis and multimodal critical discourse analysis was employed for the research. The results from content analysis were utilized as the quantitative springboard for more qualitative discussions of disaster reporting in online news. MCDA was used to unpack ideology and power embedded in the representation of social action.

Body of texts

The body of texts is composed of twenty-eight (28) online news reports on Typhoon Lando from INQUIRER.net. The news reports were downloaded on December 13, 2017 using the web import feature of MAXQDA. The strategy employed in selecting the texts was relevance sampling.

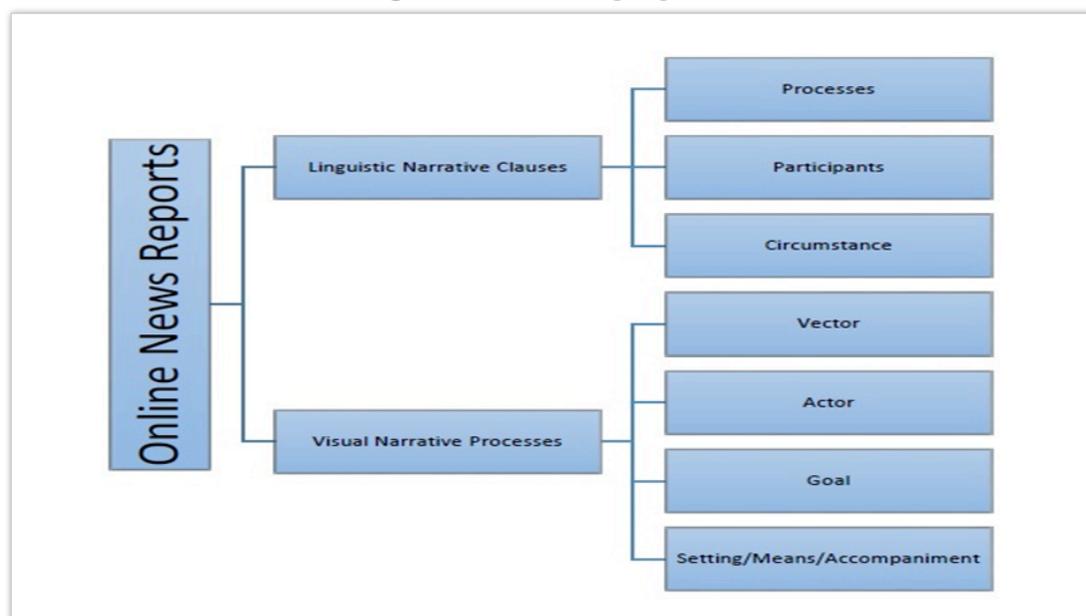
Three (3) steps were followed in the selection process. First, a content search was run in INQUIRER.net using the keyword “typhoon lando.” The results from which became the initial set of texts that the researcher worked on. Next, the result list was narrowed down to news reports with the typhoon-lando tag. Such was done to ensure

that the collected texts are all news reports rather than editorials. Afterwards, only those news reports with press photographs were selected for the final analysis.

Data language

Data languages or “coding frames” are organized sets of descriptive categories that serve as portals to empirical inquiry (Krippendorff, 2013). They link texts to the phenomena of the observed world on the hand and the formal demands made by available analytical techniques on the other. As for the present research, the data language was responsible for transforming the textual material into relevant units that fit the SFL transitivity system (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Data Language



Unit of analysis

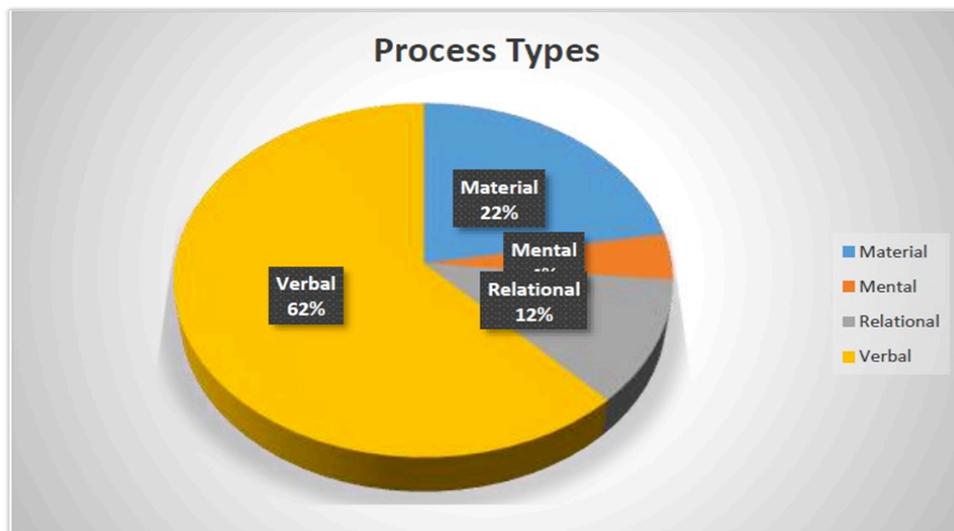
There are three (3) units of analysis in the present research: sampling units, coding/recording units, and context units. First, the sampling units are the *search results* on Typhoon Lando from INQUIRER.net. They were selectively included in the analysis based on relevance to the research questions. Second, the recording units that were separately described, coded, and recorded in terms of the data language are *participants*, *process*, and *circumstance*. These categories are the elements of the SFL transitivity system. Third, the context units that set limits on the amount of information to be considered in the description of recording units are *linguistic narrative clauses* in body texts and *visual narrative processes* in press photographs of news reports. In experiential terms, narrative clauses and processes construe various configurations of participants, process and circumstance (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). As such, they correspond to process types that represent various domains of experience (i.e. material, behavioral, mental, verbal, relational, and existential).

Findings and Discussion

Text

The first research question of the study aims to describe the semiotic resources used in representing social action in Typhoon Lando. In order to answer this question, the content analysis of news reports focused on the following: process types, role construal, and objects of action. It is important to explore these transitivity patterns because they show the actual semiotic choices made by journalists in reporting the disaster event.

Figure 3. Magnitude of Process Types



The extent of each process type in the news discourse is shown in Figure 3. According to the chart, the most frequent are verbal processes followed by material, relational, and mental processes. As can be seen, verbal processes constitute more than half of the coded processes in online news reports. This high percentage is especially important, given that online news, like mainstream journalism, are known to be reliant on elite sources in their reportage of events (Curran et al., 2013). Verbal process clauses allow news reporters to attribute information to sources such as officials, experts, and eye witnesses (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). It is worthwhile to note that verbal processes in the data corpus seem to be patterned according to the perceived importance of authority in legitimizing a news discourse. Knowledge that come from sources whose social positions are viewed as more elevated than ordinary citizens may be the basis of reporters for preferring verbal processes over other options.

As crucial as exploring what process types are present in news reports is the identification of stakeholders in Lando and the way in which their roles are construed. The stakeholders in the Lando disaster are public officials, policy experts, local people, and advocacy groups. As agents (actors), each of them perform various roles in the news discourse. Knowing what these roles are is important for understanding the “who does what” component of transitivity.

Figure 4. Distribution of Agent Roles

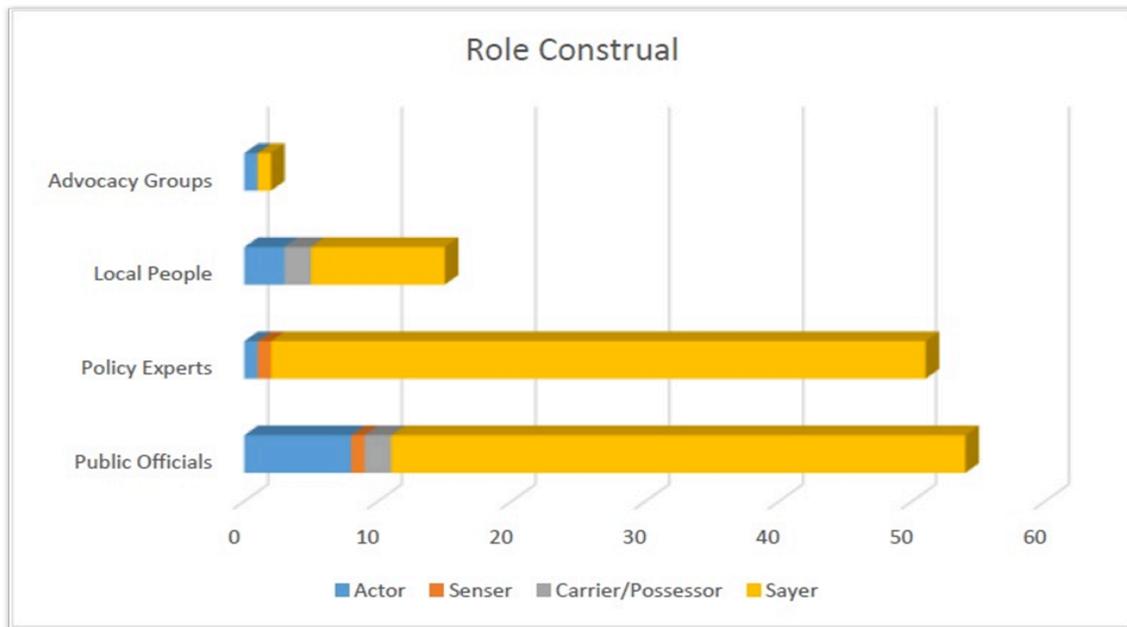


Figure 4 shows the frequency of role construal per stakeholder. Based on the chart, all stakeholders are always assigned the role of sayers and actor but not carrier/possessor and senser. As can be observed, public officials have the most diverse set of roles assigned to them. The diversity of role construal may indicate the degree of importance given to a stakeholder because it highlights the variety of contexts of agency in a news discourse. In that case, the agency of public officials is highlighted for they are construed as sayers, actors, carriers/possessors, and sensers at the same time. By being patterned this way, reporters are able to reinforce the idea that disaster-related activities continues to be steered by the state through public officials.

Meanwhile, the objects of action are more diverse when compared to their subjects as the former includes non-human entities such as typhoon and location. First, verbal processes have *addressees* as their objects. There is almost no addressee in the data corpus except for very few references to the public in general. Yet, upon closely examining their *verbiage* or the statements made by sayers, one can find that a large majority of verbal process clauses deals with disaster response and typhoon status.

Second, the *goal* is the object of action in material processes. The most frequent goal in the data corpus are geophysical occurrence followed by disaster response and impact. The typhoon is the primary actor in material process clauses with geophysical occurrence and impact as the goal, while those with disaster response as the goal, the most frequent actors are public officials followed by advocacy groups.

Third, the object of action in relational processes is *attribute/possession*. They serve as the descriptors of *carriers/possessors* in such processes. In the data corpus, typhoon, areas, and impact are primarily described in terms of location. For example, in the relational clause “...Lando was about 510 kilometers east of Baler, Aurora province”, the carrier typhoon is identified with the attribute of being located 510 kilometers east of Baler. A further instance of identifying something with a particular

location is the clause: “*Areas placed under Signal No. 1 were Batanes, Zambales, Bataan, Cavite, Laguna, Batangas, Albay, Camarines Sur and Metro Manila.*”

Fourth, the object of action in mental processes is *phenomenon*. These unfolding events or happenings are perceived by *sensors*. The primary sensors in mental processes in the data corpus are local people. All of them sense the phenomenon of typhoon. For instance, in the mental clause “*occasional rains and gusty winds will be experienced over areas under Signal No. 1 while those under Signals No. 2 and 3 will have stormy weather*” the sensors are the local people living in areas under Signal No. 1 and 2 and the phenomenon they sense are occasional rains and gusty winds and a stormy weather, respectively.

Discourse practice

The discourse practices of journalism refer to the production and consumption process of news (Richardson, 2007). On the one hand, the process of news production is underpinned by organizational practices which in turn are built on audience expectations. Apart from being citizens, audiences are consumers to whom news products must be sold to. They are also commodities that must be fought over by media companies desiring an increase in their advertising revenues.

On the other hand, journalism has its own ‘culture’ that determines its institutional roles, epistemologies, and ethical ideologies (Hanitzsch et al., 2011). Journalism culture is the organizing “script” that is practiced but normally hidden as an idea in daily news work. Thus, it can only be examined upon closer examination of the actual practices of journalists from the inside.

Organizational practices and audience expectations

As news production is ultimately based on audience expectations, it is useful to reflect on the following questions: What kinds of stories are told to them? In what types of advertisements are these stories embedded? How are language and visuals used? The answers to these questions help us understand who the audiences are in the reportage of Typhoon Lando.

First and foremost, a variety of stories ranging from news to entertainment and lifestyle to technology was found in INQUIRER.net. This conjures an image of a well-rounded audience who are able to consume different kinds of media products.

Next are the types of advertisements in which these stories are embedded. Upon closer examination, it appears that the INQUIRER.net website targets middle-to-upper class professionals because its advertisements are mostly about consumer goods and financial services.

Finally, the use of the English language and the consistent deployment of visual elements in the website creates a “professional” feel to media content. Through this, the news website is able to target middle-to-upper class audience segment that, although well-rounded, prefers to read professional-looking news reports.

Disaster reporting in the context of professional journalism

Analyzing the domain of institutional roles, epistemologies, and ethical ideologies may help us understand the extent by which the set purpose of journalism is translated into practice. *Institutional roles* refer to the ideal social function of journalism. It deals with the question of interventionism, power distance, and market orientation. Meanwhile, *epistemologies* is "...concerned with the accessibility of reality and the nature of acceptable evidence" (Hannitzsch et al, 2011, p. 276). This domain has two dimensions, namely, objectivism and empiricism. The former pertains to whether truth is external or dependent on the observer while the latter concerns itself with the means by which truth-claims are justified. *Ethical ideologies* refer to how journalists respond to ethical dilemmas. It tackles the degree by which journalists base their work choices on universal ethical principles on the one hand and the importance of consequences in their reasoning about ethical dilemmas on the other.

Journalists "reported things as they are" without any regard for educating the audience or advocating for social change. Such is exemplified in their efforts to maintain distance through citing statements about disaster response, typhoon status, and impacts. Moreover, the journalists saw themselves more as "partners" rather than as adversaries of the ruling elite by affirming the present arrangements via objective reporting. Nevertheless, the reportage of Lando was driven by both market logic and political information and mobilization. As this implies, audiences are seen both as consumers and citizens.

With regard to epistemologies, the reportage of Lando is objective and empirical. Journalists positioned themselves as observers from a distance whose interest solely rests in the third person narration of the disaster event. Contributory to this positioning is their use of material, mental, and relational processes that emphasized the external and internal aspects of human experience and the connections between them, respectively. Meanwhile, empirical evidences in the form of verbiage coming mostly from public officials and policy experts are utilized in order to represent the objective reality of the disaster event.

In terms of ethical ideologies, there is no available evidence whether questionable reporting methods have been employed by Lando journalists. Also, the researcher cannot ascertain the weight of consequences in journalists' reasoning about ethical dilemmas because of the absence of an ethnographic dimension which investigates their actual reporting practices. Still though, a closer examination of news content reveals that journalists accurately described the victims, situations, and environments; provided context through research and interviews; and, carefully used language and photographs to avoid sensationalism and unwanted exposure.

Social practice

The third and final research question of the study deconstructs the ideological practice of reporting Lando in online news. This is carried out through an exploration of the social context and consequences of its reportage. The social context in this study refers to DRRM, which, as an ideological practice, prefers certain ways of acting in the news discourse. On the other hand, the social consequences of disaster reporting are the effects of journalism on the social context of disaster reporting, namely, the

different ways in which we perceive others and distinguish ourselves relative to others.

DRRM in the Philippine Setting

Apart from lives lost, persons injured, and properties destroyed, one of the most pressing challenges raised by the issue on disasters is development. The Philippine Disaster

Risk Reduction and Management Act of 2010 (R.A. 1021) emphasizes the role of communities in the disaster risk reduction while acknowledging the socio-economic, environmental, and political dimensions of their overall management. The DRRM act is a critical policy instrument that aims to empower "...local stakeholders to directly engage in disaster risk reduction efforts, whilst recognizing the particular vulnerabilities of marginalized groups such as women, children, disabled persons, ethnic minorities, and the elderly" ("Natural disaster risk reduction," 2016). Furthermore, the National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Framework (NDRRMF) and National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Plan (NDRRMP) operationalizes this principle by taking a proactive and preventive approach to disaster management. Being community-based, the referent of disaster reduction activities under this framework are individuals, households, and communities (Delica-Wilson, 2005).

Activating/Passivating Stakeholders in Typhoon Lando

Figure 5. Attribution of Agency

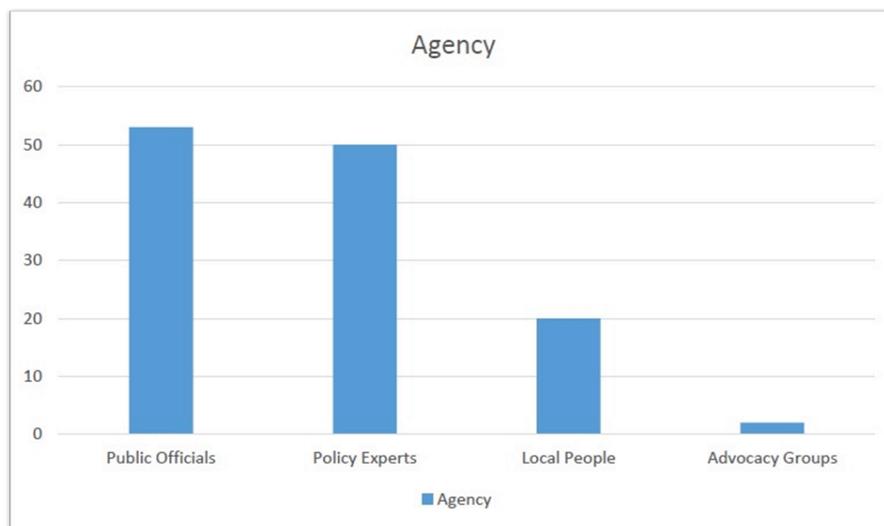
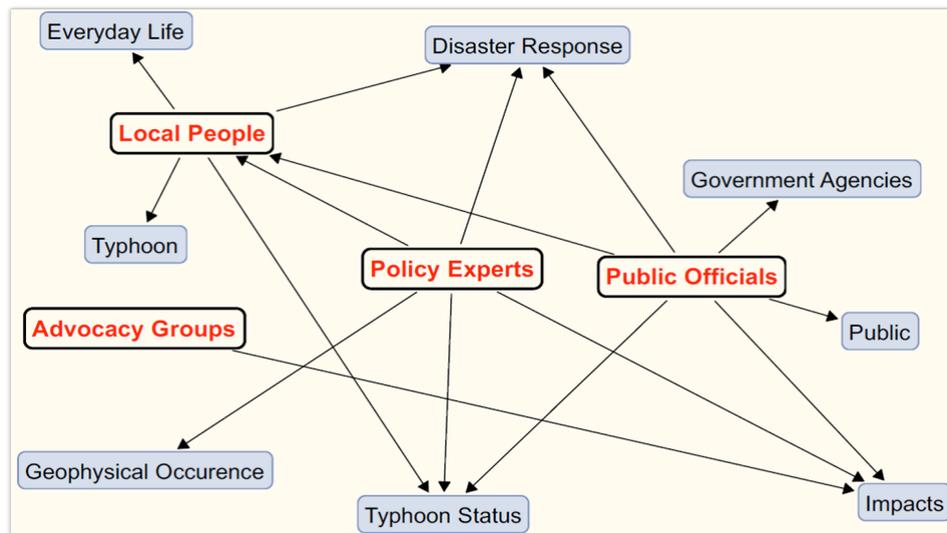


Figure 5 shows the attribution of agency among the stakeholders in Typhoon Lando.

According to the figure, public officials are the most activated stakeholders followed by policy experts. Local people only have less than half of the agency attribution of public officials and policy experts. On the other hand, the agency of advocacy groups are almost completely non-existent. As this shows, the dominance of an already powerful set of actors in the present order are legitimized while hinting at the weak activation of local people situated below the dominant discourse of public officials and policy experts.

In essence, the discourse on Lando has empowered public officials and policy experts at the expense of providing space to the voice of local people and advocacy groups. Still, the activation of some stakeholders more than others in the news discourse is neither inherently bad nor good. The representation of social action simply requires that while one does an action, another must receive it. Because of this inevitable “tidying,” empowerment can only be achieved through an awareness of activation/passivation patterns.

Figure 6. Activation/Passivation Patterns



The activation/passivation patterns in linguistic narrative clauses is shown in Figure 9. Presented in the form of a semantic map, the figure illustrates who acts and to what/whom are they primarily acting upon. Based on the map, the most passivated or objectified are disaster response, impacts, and typhoon status. Interestingly, only local people were positioned as objects of action alongside being actors in the discourse. Overall, these patterns seem to demonstrate that the disaster lies in the response and early recovery phase, given that, while public officials and policy experts are occupied with making calculated responses through statements about response, typhoon status, and impacts etc., local people are inevitably placed at the frontlines as the primary experiencers of the disaster capable of telling stories about their fate.

Notwithstanding this positioning, local people might have remained largely passivated in linguistic narrative clauses if not for the press photographs that highly emphasized their agency. A closer look at the visual narrative processes in press photographs reveals that local people figured primarily as agents in non-transactional actions (7), non-transactional reactions (3), and bi-directional transactional actions (2). An example of non-transactional action is shown in Table 14.

Table 1. A Non-Transactional Action

Non-Transactional Action	
	<p>Actor Vector Goal Setting</p>
<p>Image source: http://newsinfo.inquirer.net/732703/lando-leaves-11-dead-ecija-villagers-saved-from-flood</p>	

The consequences of de-politicized representations of social action to DRRM

While the revelations made about de-politicization here are by no means complete, it is useful to outline some of their consequences to DRRM from the perspective of an informed reader. First of all, the acceptance of certain regularities in DRRM practice without question is crucial letting the overall governmental response system perform its most immediate function of reducing loss in lives and property. Thus, deconstruction needs to give way to the tidying up of disaster reporting in the media according to familiar semiotic templates of representing objects, person, and viewpoints.

Another consequence is that audience expectations of the news media must now reflect an awareness of journalism’s tendency to depoliticize disaster events. This is not to say that all responsibility have to be borne by audiences; rather, it is to suggest that journalistic practice may change in response to the dynamic preferences of news readers. So if we prefer to adopt a critical, multimodal approach to the reading of news texts, then news organizations might be compelled to air or publish media products that cater to voices not usually found in regular disaster news.

Lastly, the wider social understandings of disasters in the Philippine setting can no longer stand unmoved by the vast availability of multimodal avenues to engage in DRRM either as news consumers, citizens, and persons. In this context, de-politicization brings with it a host of questions pertaining to power struggles and the use of new media technologies in everyday life.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study has made two major contributions to the literature on media coverage of disasters. First, it was able to illustrate how a social semiotic approach to disaster reporting can provide a more convincing account of representation taking into account the choices made by authors of news texts in a multimodal communication environment. A second contribution made by the study is to show that de-politicized representations of social action in online news are both causes and effects of social power relations that underpin disasters.

Future research into the politics of disaster reporting should look into *the lived experiences of those who produce and consume news reports*. As mentioned earlier, one of the pitfalls of this study was its exclusion of the ethnographic dimension of journalism practice. That said, the validity of critical discourse findings can be increased to a point if researchers will decide to carry out interviews or FGDs with journalists and news audiences who actually write/read disaster reports.

For journalism practice, an awareness of the critical and multimodal reading of disaster reports as presented in this study raises *a call for implementing collaborative media literacy projects involving social scientists, environmentalists, CDA scholars, journalists, teachers, citizenship advocates, and disaster experts*. Educating the public about climate change and disasters must not be isolated from their socio-economic, cultural, and political contexts.

For future action about disasters, *ordinary people who are not charged with any formal responsibility in DRRM are equally positioned to mobilize change as those who do*.

If by news production, we mean the process in which journalists make the news according to audience expectations and their professional ethics, then, changing the way we read news can make an impact as to how they may frame disasters in the future.

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