

Philippine News Media's Reportage of an Election Campaign: A Test of the Intermedia Agenda-Setting Theory

Walter Lippmann¹ famously described the media as bridging the “world outside” and the “pictures in our heads,” a notion later validated by communication scholars Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw² through their groundbreaking empirical research that formalized the Agenda-Setting Theory of media effects. This theory posits that the topics deemed most important by the media—whether issues or candidates—are likely to become the priorities of the public, as evidenced by the frequency and prominence with which these topics are covered in news reports.³ This phenomenon, known as the first level of agenda-setting, has been expanded to include the salience of attributes or specific aspects of those topics, forming the second level of agenda-setting.⁴ Over the last five decades, the agenda-setting hypothesis has been tested in more than 400 studies across diverse contexts worldwide.⁵ However, if the media shape public and policy agendas, what influences the media's own agenda? A key concept in agenda-setting research is Intermedia Agenda-Setting, which is the influence of media outlets on one another.

The current study aims to test this theory by analyzing the first and second level agendas and the relations between ABS-CBN and GMA, two of the leading news agencies in the Philippines,⁶ during the 2016 election campaigns. In so doing, this study hopes to contribute to the generalizability of the theory to a Global South, social media setting, where there is a dearth of research on the theory, and guide policies and efforts in making elections a more democratic process amid a changing political landscape.

Intermedia Agenda-Setting Theory

Research suggests that news organizations often look to each other for cues on what to report, with elite outlets exerting significant influence over smaller or less prominent ones.⁷ This phenomenon, termed intermedia agenda-setting, contributes to a homogenized news environment where redundant content circulates across outlets.⁸ As a result, audiences are frequently exposed to similar narratives across various news platforms, reinforcing a societal status quo in terms of agenda priorities.

During election periods, the media play a critical role in shaping the public's understanding of societal issues and political candidates, as well as the relative importance assigned to these topics. For most people, the media serve as the primary source of timely and credible information on these matters, given the practical challenges of accessing such information independently. In this context, the media fulfill their function as a political watchdog, helping voters make informed choices as election day approaches. This role becomes even more crucial in an era characterized by the pervasive spread of disinformation and fake news, which can distort public perceptions and undermine democratic processes. By holding candidates and public officials accountable, exposing false claims, and fact-checking misleading narratives, watchdog journalism counters the corrosive effects of disinformation and ensures the integrity of the electoral discourse.

Philippine Political Landscape

The Philippine political system is a unitary presidential constitutional republic with a multi-party structure, where executive power rests in the presidency, legislative power is shared by a bicameral Congress, and judicial power lies in the Supreme Court. Historically, the country has experienced cycles of democratic openings and authoritarian interruptions, most notably

under Ferdinand Marcos' martial law regime (1972–1986).⁹ Since the 1986 People Power Revolution restored democracy, Philippine elections have been vibrant, highly competitive, and marked by the strong influence of media. In this system, political parties are often weak, candidate-centered, and shaped by patronage politics, which heightens the role of mass media in framing electoral discourse and shaping public perceptions of candidates.¹⁰

The 2016 Philippine elections marked a pivotal moment in the country's political history, as the rise of Rodrigo Duterte to the presidency ushered in a new era of populist leadership and a disinformation-driven political strategy.¹¹ Duterte's campaign capitalized on a mix of traditional media, social media platforms, and clandestine disinformation operators to craft and propagate a narrative that resonated with voters disillusioned by traditional politics. Under the guise of authenticity and "unfiltered" rhetoric, Duterte's messaging appealed to the masses while exploiting the weaknesses of an unregulated digital information ecosystem.

A defining feature of Duterte's electoral strategy was the use of disinformation networks operating covertly on social media platforms. These operators weaponized misinformation to discredit opponents, glorify Duterte, and polarize the electorate.¹² Tactics included the systematic spread of false claims, doctored images, and misleading narratives, often amplified by troll farms and fake accounts. While disinformation is not new to Philippine politics, the 2016 elections highlighted how disinformation could be deployed at an unprecedented scale, catching the country—and even traditional media outlets—off guard.

Since 2016, the spread of disinformation in the Philippines has intensified, with similar tactics employed in the 2019 midterm elections and the 2022 presidential elections.¹³

This entrenched disinformation ecosystem remains highly relevant today, as strongmen like Duterte and his political allies continue to exert influence over Philippine politics. Many of

them occupy, or are poised to return to, positions of power. The lingering effects of their campaigns highlight the enduring challenges posed by disinformation, especially in a political landscape where truth often becomes a casualty of political expediency.

The events of 2016 illustrate the critical importance of studying intermedia agenda-setting in the Philippines. During that election, the traditional media were often reactive, taking cues from social media trends that were frequently manipulated by disinformation operators. This dynamic reinforced the homogenization of news agendas and allowed false or misleading narratives to dominate public discourse. By understanding how media agendas are influenced by one another, scholars and practitioners can identify vulnerabilities in the media ecosystem that enable disinformation to flourish.

Equally significant is the role of watchdog journalism in mitigating the impact of disinformation. During elections, journalists serve as the gatekeepers of truth, ensuring that voters receive accurate and reliable information to make informed decisions. However, the 2016 elections revealed the limitations of watchdog journalism in the face of well-coordinated disinformation campaigns. Traditional media's inability to counter the rapid spread of false narratives highlights the need for more proactive and adaptive approaches to journalism, particularly during elections.

In today's political climate, the lessons of 2016 remain relevant. The enduring influence of Duterte's political allies and the continued prevalence of disinformation stress the need for vigilant and independent journalism. Moreover, studying intermedia agenda-setting can help illuminate how media platforms influence each other in ways that either amplify or counteract disinformation. Together, these insights contribute to the broader goal of strengthening

democratic processes and ensuring that elections remain a contest of ideas rather than a battlefield for manipulation.

The current study proves relevant today, as Duterte and his allies, as well as similar political figures around the world, continue to wield significant influence. This influence persists through mechanisms of disinformation, which have only worsened in subsequent elections. The 2022 elections were similarly marred by disinformation campaigns, with Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos Jr. and Sara Duterte capitalizing on digital propaganda to rewrite historical narratives and suppress criticism.¹⁴ These tactics not only shaped public perception but also reinforced the enduring power of disinformation in eroding democratic values.

As the Philippines approaches the 2025 elections, the urgency to address these challenges cannot be overstated. The persistence of disinformation spotlights the need for robust intermedia agenda-setting studies and a reinvigorated commitment to watchdog journalism. Media institutions must critically examine their role in amplifying or resisting disinformation, recognizing their immense power to shape public discourse. By fostering informed, issue-focused reporting, journalists can counteract the corrosive effects of disinformation, ensuring that the media serves as a pillar of democracy rather than a platform for propaganda.

Methodology

Content Analysis

All Facebook posts published by ABS-CBN and GMA from February 9 to May 7, 2016 (N=89 days) were mined and content analyzed daily and coded into the categories, which also served as the variables of the study shown in Table 1. These coding categories for the general and specific issues¹⁵ and candidates and their attributes¹⁶ were adopted from previous studies.

Additionally, Rodrigo Duterte and Mar Roxas were the two leading presidential candidates during the 2016 Philippine elections, who belonged to Partido Demokratiko Pilipino (PDP) - Laban and Liberal Party of the Philippines, respectively.

Table 1. Variables for analyzing the agendas of the media

General	Specific	Candidate	Substantive Attributes	Affective Attributes
(1) Economics	(1) Business (2) Welfare	(1) Rodrigo Duterte	(1) Political ideology and issue position	(1) Positive
(2) Foreign affairs	(3) China (4) US and others	(2) Mar Roxas	(2) Qualifications and experience	(2) Negative
(3) Government	(5) Policy (6) Infrastructure		(3) Personality and image	(3) Neutral
(4) Law and order	(7) Crime (8) Public safety (9) Corruption (10) Terrorism		(4) Integrity	
(5) Social	(11) Gender and human rights (12) Science			
(6) Election	(13) Election events (14) Election issues			

Lastly, Krippendorff's alpha¹⁷ was employed to measure the intercoder reliability of the content analyses, yielding coefficients of at least “.81,” the standard threshold for acceptable

reliability to ensure that results can be reported.¹⁸ Three trained coders were tasked with analyzing the posts, who also ensured that these were free from false information.

Time Series Analysis

To analyze the intermedia interaction between ABS-CBN and GMA, the Granger Causality Test, a statistical method for examining time series data, was employed. This is a quasi-causal method used by many past intermedia agenda-setting studies applied to different contexts, such as in a multimedia environment in Austria,¹⁹ online news about the COVID-19 pandemic in China,²⁰ and policy issues in Hong Kong depicted in newspapers.²¹

As a hypothesis test, the Granger Causality Test assesses whether to reject the null hypothesis.²² In public agenda-setting research, the null hypothesis typically posits that the media agenda does not influence the public agenda. In the context of this intermedia agenda-setting study, however, the null hypothesis specifically states that the agenda of ABS-CBN does not Granger-cause the agenda of GMA. It is important to note that this hypothesis is framed neutrally, solely for the purpose of hypothesis testing. The optimal time lag for the analysis was determined to be 12 days, as identified through the Akaike Information Criterion (AIC), a standard criterion for lag selection in Granger causality analysis.²³

Results

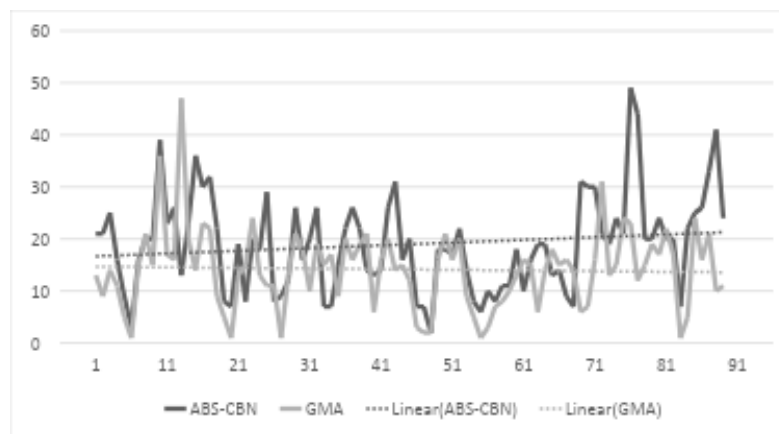


Fig. 1 Trends in the coverage of the media of the 2016 elections

A total of 1,689 posts were collected and analyzed from three of ABS-CBN's Facebook news pages: ABS-CBN News, ANC 24/7, and TV Patrol. These posts contained 1,632 instances of issues and 567 mentions of candidates. Meanwhile, 1,258 pieces of content were gathered and analyzed from three of GMA's Facebook news pages: GMA News, 24 Oras, and State of the Nation with Jessica Soho. From these posts, 1,209 issues and 325 candidates were identified. Altogether, this study analyzed 2,947 Facebook posts.

In terms of the frequency of Facebook posts, ABS-CBN demonstrated more extensive election coverage compared to GMA. Figure 1 illustrates the daily trend in the election-related Facebook posts of ABS-CBN and GMA, with linear trend lines overlaid on the time series data. The spikes in posting frequency are closely associated with the hosting of key presidential debates in the 2016 Philippine Debates series. ABS-CBN hosted the third and final leg of the debates in Mindanao, while GMA hosted the first leg in Luzon.

A visual inspection of the graph reveals that ABS-CBN's trend line (represented by a black dotted line) slopes upward, indicating that its posting frequency increased as election day approached. This pattern shows that ABS-CBN intensified its Facebook coverage as the campaign period progressed. Notably, Day 76 (April 24) recorded the highest number of posts ($n=49$), which likely contributed to the upward slope of the trend line. This date coincided with the final presidential debate, hosted by ABS-CBN, reflecting the network's agenda-setting efforts to draw public attention to the event.

In contrast, GMA's Facebook coverage showed a declining trend over the campaign period. The gray dotted trend line for GMA slopes downward, suggesting an inverse relationship between time and posting frequency. The most active day for GMA was Day 13 (February 21),

with 47 posts, which pulled the slope of the trend line toward the earlier part of the campaign period. This date coincided with the first leg of the presidential debates, hosted by GMA, when its election coverage was at its peak.

The contrasting patterns between ABS-CBN and GMA highlight their parallel agendas during the debates, which are not coincidental. Instead, these trends provide a clear example of intermedia agenda-setting in action, where the two networks influenced each other's focus and timing of election coverage.

Table 2. General issues salient for the media

ISSUES	ABS-CBN		GMA	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Law and order	590	36.15	558	46.15
Election	444	27.21	310	25.64
Social	233	14.28	96	7.94
Economics	178	10.91	126	10.42
Government	102	6.25	76	6.29
Foreign affairs	85	5.21	43	3.56
TOTAL	1632	100	1209	100

Table 2 shows ABS-CBN and GMA's general issue agenda. It can be observed that the two networks almost perfectly mirror each other's agenda in terms of general issues. The only difference lies in the social and economic issues.

Law and order emerged as the leading issue on the agendas of both ABS-CBN (36.15 percent) and GMA (46.16 percent), dominated by coverage of corruption, crime, and public safety. Most crime and public safety reports focused on routine incidents occurring in Metro Manila, with some also addressing the civil unrest in Mindanao.

The second most prominent issue for ABS-CBN (27.21 percent) and GMA (25.64 percent) was elections. These posts primarily provided daily updates on candidates' campaign

activities and events such as the presidential and vice-presidential debates. They also covered logistical and technical issues related to the elections, including concerns about voting machines and the printing of ballots.

Social issues ranked third for ABS-CBN (14.28 percent) and fourth for GMA (7.94 percent). Coverage in this category centered on gender-related topics such as LGBTQ+ and women's rights. It also touched on human rights violations during Martial Law and the alleged activities of the Davao Death Squad (DDS), linked to then-presidential candidate Rodrigo Duterte.

Economic concerns were the fourth most covered issue for ABS-CBN (10.91 percent) and the third for GMA (10.42 percent). Reports included updates on the dollar exchange rate, oil price hikes, market prices, employment, job creation, and corporate press releases.

Government-related news was the fifth most salient issue for both ABS-CBN (6.25 percent) and GMA (6.29 percent). This coverage focused on policy developments, the proposal and implementation of national laws, and the activities of government officials, particularly President Noynoy Aquino, who was in office at the time.

Finally, foreign affairs ranked lowest on the agendas of ABS-CBN (5.21 percent) and GMA (3.56 percent). These reports primarily revolved around the territorial disputes between the Philippines and China over the West Philippine Sea/South China Sea and the Scarborough Shoal. Some stories included candidates' perspectives on foreign policy, particularly regarding China. However, coverage of the Philippines' relations with the United States was minimal. This lack of emphasis on foreign affairs is noteworthy, especially considering how these issues are often prioritized in the media agendas of Western and developed nations⁴. In contrast, superpowers

like the United States and European Union member states typically place foreign policy at the forefront of their media coverage.

Table 3. Specific issues salient for the media

ISSUES	ABS-CBN		GMA	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Election events	342	20.96	224	18.53
Corruption	243	14.89	127	10.5
Crime	227	13.91	277	22.91
Gender and human rights	183	11.21	50	4.14
Business	107	6.56	76	6.29
Election issues	99	6.07	90	7.44
Public safety	81	4.96	111	9.18
Welfare	73	4.47	27	2.23
Policy	59	3.62	44	3.64
Terrorism	48	2.94	41	3.39
Science	47	2.88	45	3.72
China	45	2.76	31	2.56
US and others	44	2.7	21	1.74
Infrastructure	34	2.08	45	3.72
TOTAL	1632	100	1209	100

A closer examination of the specific issues reported by the two networks (as shown in Table 3) reveals some nuanced differences. However, their top seven issues remain largely consistent: election events, corruption, crime, gender and human rights, business, election-related concerns, and public safety.

Meanwhile, the minor issues, which received very little coverage and featured no spectacular events, include welfare, policy, terrorism, science, China, US and others, and infrastructure.

Table 4. Candidates salient for the media

CANDIDATES	ABS-CBN		GMA	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Duterte	388	68.43	216	66.46
Roxas	179	31.57	109	33.54
TOTAL	567	100	325	100

In terms of candidate salience, Table 4 reveals that both ABS-CBN (68.43 percent) and GMA (66.46 percent) devoted more than twice the coverage to Duterte compared to other candidates, effectively placing him in the spotlight for the public. It is evident that Duterte dominated the coverage of the two largest media networks in the Philippines during the election period.

Table 5. Substantive attributes of Duterte salient for the media

ATTRIBUTES	ABS-CBN		GMA	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Personality and image	219	56.44	91	42.13
Integrity	97	25	78	36.11
Political ideology and issue positions	51	13.14	38	17.59
Qualifications and experience	21	5.41	9	4.17
TOTAL	388	100	216	100

In terms of Duterte's substantive attributes, the two networks closely mirrored each other's agendas, as shown in Table 5.

Personality and image ranked highest for both ABS-CBN (56.44 percent) and GMA (42.13 percent), reflecting the networks' interest in his bold, tough-talking persona. Duterte's campaign was marked by controversial behavior, including cursing, kissing, and cat-calling female attendees and even members of the press at his rallies.

Integrity was the second most prominent attribute on ABS-CBN's (25 percent) and GMA's (36.11 percent) agendas, which is logical given its connection to Duterte's personality and image. Coverage under this attribute focused on allegations of undisclosed wealth, including his controversial bank accounts at the Bank of the Philippine Islands (BPI). Critics also called on him to release his Statement of Assets, Liabilities, and Net Worth (SALN). Additionally, the Davao Death Squad (DDS)—a group of vigilantes allegedly linked to Duterte—was a major focal point, raising concerns about extrajudicial killings of drug users and criminals in Davao City.

Political ideology and issue positions ranked third for ABS-CBN (13.14 percent) and GMA (17.59 percent). Reports under this attribute centered on Duterte's campaign pronouncements, including his positions on contractualization, human rights, and crime. His strong stance on declaring a war on drugs and his promise to govern with an "iron fist" resonated with his campaign slogan, "Change is Coming," rooted in the platform of PDP-Laban.

Finally, qualifications and experience received the least attention from both ABS-CBN (5.41 percent) and GMA (4.17 percent). Coverage of this attribute highlighted Duterte's educational background at San Beda College of Law and his nearly two-decade tenure as mayor of Davao City. Some reports also touched on his physical and mental health, raising questions about his readiness to assume the presidency.

Table 6. Affective attributes of Duterte salient for the media

ATTRIBUTES	ABS-CBN		GMA	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Negative	219	56.44	105	48.61
Positive	85	21.91	58	26.85
Neutral	84	21.65	53	24.54
TOTAL	388	100	216	100

Meanwhile, Table 6 illustrates how the media portrayed Duterte in terms of his affective attributes. Despite being the most covered candidate, Duterte received predominantly negative reporting from both ABS-CBN (56.44 percent) and GMA (48.61 percent).

More than half of ABS-CBN's reports about Duterte were negative, while GMA's coverage was slightly more balanced, though still leaning toward the negative. These unfavorable reports largely criticized his machismo persona, highlighting incidents such as his public cursing of Pope Benedict XVI and his anti-feminist behavior during campaign rallies. It is evident that there was a strong association between the media's substantive and affective portrayal of Duterte: they emphasized his personality and image but often depicted these traits negatively. Additional negative reports focused on allegations linking him to the Davao Death Squad (DDS), his controversial stance on the drug war, and concerns about his health. The media also amplified voices from prominent figures who expressed apprehensions and disapproval regarding a potential Duterte presidency.

On the other hand, ABS-CBN (21.91 percent) and GMA (26.85 percent) also featured positive reports about Duterte. These included coverage of his consistent lead in presidential polls conducted by agencies such as Social Weather Stations (SWS) and Pulse Asia. Some visual content also highlighted the overwhelming turnout at his campaign rallies, particularly during his

last one on the eve of election day. Positive stories further included endorsements from influential sectors, such as the Iglesia Ni Cristo, signaling strong support for his candidacy.

Neutral reports primarily consisted of mentions of Duterte within broader election coverage, where all candidates were discussed without particular focus on him.

Table 7. Substantive attributes of Roxas salient for the media

ATTRIBUTES	ABS-CBN		GMA	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Personality and image	113	63.13	48	44.04
Integrity	32	17.88	35	32.11
Political ideology and issue positions	29	16.2	18	16.51
Qualifications and experience	5	2.79	8	7.34
TOTAL	179	100	109	100

Table 7 highlights the portrayal of Roxas by ABS-CBN and GMA in terms of his substantive attributes, which again followed a consistent pattern.

Similar to Duterte, Roxas' personality and image were the most emphasized by ABS-CBN (63.13 percent) and GMA (44.04 percent). His campaign branded him as "Mar Roxas, Mr. Palengke," or "Mr. Wet Market" positioning him as an advocate for the economic welfare of the masses. Media coverage aligned with this narrative, often underscoring this persona. Unlike Duterte, however, the media did not delve into Roxas' behavior or idiosyncrasies during his

campaign sorties. Instead, most of the coverage consisted of brief mentions or straightforward accounts of his campaign activities.

Integrity ranked second on ABS-CBN's (17.88 percent) and GMA's (32.11 percent) agendas. Notably, Roxas was not linked to any corruption allegations throughout the media's coverage. In fact, some reports highlighted his transparency, such as the public filing and presentation of his Statement of Assets, Liabilities, and Net Worth (SALN).

Third on ABS-CBN's (13.14 percent) and GMA's (17.59 percent) agendas was his political ideology and issue positions. The media spotlighted his proposed programs focusing on economic growth, business development, and poverty alleviation. His rhetoric emphasized his privileged background and his desire to extend similar comforts to every Filipino. However, compared to Duterte, the media's coverage of Roxas' stances on key issues was relatively general and lacked specificity.

Lastly, qualifications and experience were given the least attention by ABS-CBN (5.41 percent) and GMA (4.17 percent). During the campaign, Roxas faced questions from his opponents about whether he truly graduated from the Wharton School of Business at the University of Pennsylvania. Subsequent media investigations confirmed that he indeed earned a bachelor's degree in economics from the institution.

Table 8. Affective attributes of Roxas salient for the media

ATTRIBUTES	ABS-CBN		GMA	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Neutral	88	49.16	51	46.79
Negative	52	29.05	35	32.11
Positive	39	21.79	23	21.1
TOTAL	179	100	109	100

Table 8 outlines the media's portrayal of Roxas in terms of his affective attributes, categorized as positive, negative, or neutral.

Both ABS-CBN and GMA followed a similar pattern in their depiction of Roxas. A significant portion of their coverage painted a neutral image of him, with ABS-CBN allocating 49.16 percent and GMA 46.79 percent of their reports to this category. As previously noted, many of these neutral reports consisted of simple mentions of his name, updates on his campaign activities, or straightforward accounts of his whereabouts during the campaign trail.

Negative reports about Roxas ranked second, making up 29.05 percent of ABS-CBN's and 32.11 percent of GMA's coverage. These reports often focused on criticisms of his performance as Secretary of the Department of the Interior and Local Government (DILG), highlighting perceived administrative lapses. Additionally, several reports featured Roxas directly attacking Duterte, notably labeling him a "murderer" and referencing the extrajudicial killing allegations tied to Duterte's tenure in Davao City.

Finally, positive coverage of Roxas occupied the smallest portion of the agenda, with ABS-CBN dedicating 21.79 percent and GMA 21.1 percent. These reports highlighted his economic platforms and often included visuals, such as photos of him engaging with the public. Positive coverage also featured President Noynoy Aquino's endorsement of Roxas and other Liberal Party candidates vying for various positions.

Table 9. Granger causality test results

ISSUE	DIRECTION OF CAUSALITY	
	ABS-CBN to GMA	GMA to ABS-CBN
General Issues		
Economics	0.39	0.1
Foreign Affairs	0.12	<u>0.02*</u>
Law and order	0*	0.04*
Social	0*	0*
Election	0.17	0.08
Specific Issues		
Business	0.09	<u>0.04*</u>
Crime	0.04*	0*
Public safety	0.28	<u>0.01*</u>
Election issues	<u>0.04*</u>	0.1
Candidates		
Duterte	0*	0*
Roxas	0.15	0.07

* <0.05

Table 9 highlights the significant F-values indicating the causal relationships between the agendas of ABS-CBN and GMA, and vice versa. Among the six general issues analyzed, five (all except government) qualified for the Granger Causality Test, demonstrating their potential interdependence. Additionally, out of the sixteen specific issues identified, only four met the criteria for the test. Regarding candidate coverage, both Duterte and Roxas qualified for the test, whereas none of their respective attributes showed significant causal relationships.

The flagged F-values represent significant coefficients, providing strong evidence against the null hypothesis that ABS-CBN's agenda does not influence GMA's agenda (or vice versa). With less than a 5 percent probability of the null hypothesis being true, these flagged values suggest reciprocal influence between the two networks' agendas.

Underlined values indicate cases where one network influenced the other. It is notable that GMA appeared to exert influence on ABS-CBN in more instances, particularly in coverage of foreign affairs, business, and public safety. Conversely, ABS-CBN influenced GMA's agenda only in the coverage of election-related issues. A unidirectional influence occurs if significant coefficients are observed in one direction only. It indicates that the agenda of one media outlet influences the other.

Reciprocal relationships, however, were more prominent in specific areas, especially in the coverage of law and order, social issues, crime, and reports concerning Duterte. These findings suggest that the two networks engaged in intermedia agenda-setting, particularly for topics that resonated strongly with the public or carried high news value. A reciprocal or bidirectional influence occurs if significant F-values are observed in both directions, suggesting that the agendas of the two media outlets influence each other reciprocally, meaning neither has a dominant agenda-setting effect over the other. Such relationships have been frequently documented in prior agenda-setting studies.²⁴

On the other hand, non-significant relationships were observed in certain areas, including economics, elections, and media coverage of Roxas. While these topics passed the assumptions of the Granger Causality Test, no definitive causal relationship between the networks' agendas could be established. This implies that the time series data for these issues did not exhibit the level of interdependence observed in other topics, as far as the test results are concerned.

Conclusion

This study examined the agenda-setting dynamics of ABS-CBN and GMA, two of the Philippines' largest media networks, during the 2016 presidential elections. By analyzing the

salience of general and specific issues, candidate attributes, and the networks' intermedia agenda-setting influence, several key insights emerged.

First, both networks demonstrated a heavy focus on law and order, elections, and economic issues, which dominated their agendas. These topics were aligned with public concerns at the time, particularly around crime, corruption, and economic development. However, ABS-CBN and GMA diverged in their prioritization of other topics, such as social issues and public safety, reflecting nuanced differences in editorial emphasis. Second, the candidate coverage revealed a clear disparity in media salience. Both networks overwhelmingly focused on Rodrigo Duterte, whose strongman persona, controversial rhetoric, and provocative policy positions captured media attention. The spotlight on Duterte's personality and integrity, however, was often framed negatively, particularly by ABS-CBN, which highlighted allegations such as his ties to the Davao Death Squad and his anti-feminist behavior. Despite this, the sheer volume of coverage placed Duterte prominently in public consciousness, supporting the Agenda-Setting Theory's assertion that media salience influences public perception and electoral outcomes. In contrast, coverage of Mar Roxas leaned more neutral, with a focus on his administrative experience, integrity, and economic platforms. This relatively subdued portrayal may have contributed to his diminished visibility compared to Duterte.

Third, the intermedia agenda-setting analysis revealed a complex interplay between ABS-CBN and GMA. While GMA influenced ABS-CBN on several issues, such as foreign affairs, business, and public safety, ABS-CBN reciprocated by shaping GMA's coverage of election issues. Additionally, reciprocal relationships were evident in topics such as law and order, social issues, crime, and Duterte's coverage, suggesting that the networks mutually reinforced their agendas on these matters. However, issues like economics, elections, and coverage of Roxas

exhibited no significant intermedia influence, indicating that each network independently shaped its narrative on these topics.

Overall, the findings of this study accentuate the critical role of media in shaping public discourse during elections. The prominent coverage of Duterte and his subsequent victory align with the Agenda-Setting Theory, highlighting how media salience can influence voter perception and decision-making. Furthermore, the observed intermedia agenda-setting relationships emphasize the collaborative and competitive dynamics between leading media outlets in shaping national conversations.

Future Research

Proponents of the Agenda-Setting Theory argue that media influence persists, adapting to new landscapes rather than diminishing with technological advancements like cable television. This study argues the need for advanced statistical methods to analyze media effects during elections. Communication researchers are encouraged to move beyond cross-sectional designs and simple linear correlations, which overlook the evolving, dynamic nature of communication. Methods such as time series analysis and multiple time lag analyses could also better detect agenda-setting effects. Additionally, increasing significance levels and employing advanced models like vector autoregression (VAR) and ARIMA could further enrich the field, as was done by previous studies.²⁵

Future studies should also explore alternative news sources, disinformation networks, and influencers, areas unaccounted for in this study but increasingly relevant in the age of big data. Quantitative content analysis remains a powerful tool, especially in the post-pandemic "new normal," as it enables the study of naturally occurring sentiments via social media while avoiding

biases common in traditional surveys. With more Filipinos relying on social media for news, researchers must explore this platform's role in shaping public opinion.

The Philippines' political landscape remains chaotic, with elections like 2022 and the upcoming 2025 polls highlighting the stakes. Interdisciplinary collaborations between communication researchers and statisticians are essential for producing studies that illuminate political dynamics and guide policy-making. Such efforts can foster a media system that promotes critical thinking, social justice, and intellectual discourse among Filipinos.

ENDNOTES

¹ Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1922).

² Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw, "The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 36, no. 2 (1972): 176–187. <https://doi.org/10.1086/267990>.

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