

# Reporting from the Frontline

Possibilities and Limits of Southeast Asian Media Responses to Covid-19



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## Slow Virus Response, Quick Rights Suppression

The Philippine Covid-19 Experience

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### Abstract

Democracy was already in peril in the Philippines even before the pandemic began in early 2020. But Covid-19 has appeared to accelerate the decline of democracy as the government took draconian steps to contain the virus.

My presentation will tackle two main threads. The first thread will be President Rodrigo Duterte's response to the pandemic from the lens of law enforcement—including appointing retired generals to run a national task force and ordering one of the longest lockdowns in the world—and what the country has to show for it. In the midst of it all, the government shut down a major television network for political reasons and passed an anti-terror law that threatens basic freedoms.

The second thread will look at journalists' reporting on Covid-19, the difficulties they faced, including adjusting to virtual coverage, coping with economic pressures, and threats of repression from the state.

# Slow Virus Response, Quick Rights Suppression: The Philippine Covid-19 Experience

The Philippines missed the boat in the battle against the coronavirus. It's been ten months since the virus hit the country—and more than eight since Filipinos went through the longest and most stringent lockdown in Asia—yet there is little to show for it.

As of 24 November 2019, the Philippines had the second the greatest number of cases in South-east Asia, next to Indonesia. But it came out on top when it came to [number of deaths](#) per one million population at 74, followed by Indonesia at 58 ([Worldometer 2020](#)).

Through all these months, the Philippines has not had a moment of reprieve. We have not experienced a steep decline in number of new cases daily; we're still at four digits, hovering from more than a thousand to over 2,000. When the reported cases dip, it is because data is not complete as operations in some testing laboratories have been hampered by typhoons and technical reasons.

We look at our neighbors, Thailand and Vietnam, and are amazed at how community transmission has gone down dramatically, with new cases dropping to single digits—and zero. Unfortunately, the government of President Rodrigo Duterte has not learned lessons from the successes of these ASEAN countries. As it is, the Philippines is on a plateau and is expected to coast along until vital populations are inoculated—and that is some time off.

Our country's failed coronavirus strategy begins with the absence of an early and prompt response. In mid-February, about two weeks after the first COVID-19 death outside China happened in the Philippines, Duterte urged Filipinos to travel with him around the country, assuring the public that it was safe. He made this pitch to boost domestic tourism, [oblivious to the risks the deadly virus](#) has brought to our shores and to the global public-health crisis ([Vitug 2020a](#)).

Not only that. He told the media: "There's nothing really to be extra scared of that coronavirus thing...I assure you [that] even without the vaccines, it will die a natural death" ([Rappler 2020](#)).

In early March, days after the first case of local transmission was reported, Duterte spoke to a large gathering of mayors—hundreds, if not a thousand, of them—packed in an air-conditioned hall, seated beside each other. The President downplayed the virus, saying that "If it's not your time to go, five million handshakes won't give you the coronavirus" ([Vitug 2020a](#)).

## Control is king

As infections spread fast, Duterte appeared to have been jolted when, in mid-March, he imposed a strict lockdown that was to last more than three months. This was the period when control took precedence over public-health measures. The President ordered policemen to shoot lockdown violators, resulting in at least one death ([Reuters 2020](#)).

Duterte's penchant for control showed in his reliance on retired generals to lead the anti-COVID-19 response, rather than epidemiologists, health experts and data scientists. The government had only one testing laboratory and it tried to catch up, working with the private sector to increase the number, along with isolation centers. This was a slow process but eventually showed results. As of November, the country's laboratories have climbed to 177 ([Dept of Health 2020](#)).

However, there was one key area where it performed the weakest: contact tracing. Until today, there's been little progress as government has yet to hire and train thousands of contact tracers ([ABS-CBN 2020](#)). The Department of Health (DoH), which has been consistently criticized for its

poor leadership, was unable to tap the thousands of village health workers nationwide, a missed opportunity.

Duterte was seemingly unperturbed by the near-absence of contact tracing. Instead, he took advantage of the pandemic, when mobility was limited thereby stymieing protests, and crushed free expression ([Vitug 2020b](#)). Law enforcement authorities clamped down on social media, sending chills to netizens who posted criticisms of the President and government's handling of the virus. An artist who posted a sarcastic remark on Cebu, the second largest city in the country, as the "epi-center in the whole solar system" was arrested ([Macasero 2020](#)).

The Philippine government also harassed a Filipino working in Taiwan for her Facebook posts critical of Duterte asking the Taiwanese government to deport her ([Gotinga 2020](#)). This was rejected because, Taiwan said, they respect the freedom of speech. In fact, in the Philippines, thousands of quarantine violators were arrested, more than the number of people who were tested.

As the pandemic raged, the government turned its sights on ABS-CBN, the country's largest TV network, and shut it down, refusing to renew its license for political reasons. Duterte has always loathed ABS-CBN which he and his allies perceived to be critical of his administration. Many journalists regard this as a press freedom issue (ABS-CBN News has shifted to digital platforms but it had to close down many of its bureaus in the provinces, leading to a vacuum in news coverage of local communities).

Then on February 26, congress passed an anti-terror law, Senate Bill No. 1083, that sent alarm signals as it allowed the arrest of citizens who expressed dissent and gave powers to a civilian body, not the courts, to determine who were "terrorists." Various groups have challenged this in the Supreme Court ([Buan 2020](#)).

## Limits to online reporting

Apart from this stifling atmosphere, journalists face other limitations in their coverage of the public-health crisis. Primarily, this has to do with the dominance of virtual press briefings. I've asked a couple of young journalists covering health matters how they manage to report during these difficult times. A common complaint is: It is tough to get complete answers to their questions which they send in advance to DoH and other agencies. The officials or spokespersons choose the questions given the limited time and if these are answered, there is no opportunity for a follow-up. "It's easier for officials to ignore you, for you to get cut off if there's not enough time," Sofia Tomacruz, a reporter for Rappler, told me in an e-mail. "It can be difficult to make sure your questions get asked."

Jovic Yee, a reporter for the Philippine Daily Inquirer, said in an e-mail that DoH recently disallowed reporters from unmuting themselves during Zoom briefings: "This is unfortunate because there are times when we need to raise follow-up questions."

Despite these limitations, many journalists are able to report well, using data from government and research groups. Academics have been helpful in analyzing data, working with journalists to popularize scientific issues.

## Sharing experiences

I would like to zoom out and look at ways Southeast Asian journalists can contribute to a more illuminating and effective coverage of the pandemic. One phenomenon that crosses borders is dis-

information which has escalated during the pandemic. As journalists, it falls upon us, together with civil-society groups and academics, to fight disinformation, especially those that are widely shared on social media, those that come from the lips of leaders, not just from our own countries but from other countries as well.

As Southeast Asia is going through this unprecedented crisis, it would be helpful for media organizations to share and compare experiences so that we can learn lessons from each other. This is happening now, at least in a few webinars.

It would be also be useful to learn more about the success stories of Vietnam and Thailand in managing the pandemic. These two countries have been cited as exemplary in containing the virus. It would also be interesting to know how our other neighbors have been coping.

Finally, we journalists in the region need to go beyond our insular thinking and do cross-border and regional reporting. This would be a deeper way to get to know our neighbors. Some publications in ASEAN have already been doing this like *Malaysiakini* and *Tempo*.

In times of adversity, an opportunity arises, and this is one of them, for colleagues in Southeast Asia to work together. A key issue that lends itself to regional reporting is the COVID-19 vaccine, including steps being taken by ASEAN to help the region gain access to these vials of hope and how multilateralism is helping resolve the problems brought by the pandemic.

For us in the Philippines, we are still in our infancy stage when it comes to cross-border reporting with ASEAN countries. With the help of the Japan-based [Sasakawa Foundation](#), which is actively promoting cross-border reporting in ASEAN, we hope we will be more active in this kind of journalism and contribute to a meaningful dialogue in our diverse part of the world.

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## Bio Note

MARITES DANGUILAN VITUG has been a journalist for almost four decades and is one of the Philippines' most accomplished journalists. A bestselling author, Marites has written eight books on Philippine current affairs. She is the former editor of *Newsbreak*, a pioneering political magazine. Currently, she is editor at large of [www.rappler.com](http://www.rappler.com).

Her latest book, *Rock Solid: How the Philippines won its maritime dispute against China*, won the National Book Award for best book in journalism in 2019. She wrote books on the Supreme Court and the Muslim rebellion in Mindanao, among others.

Marites's works have been published in foreign periodicals including the *Nikkei Asia Review*, *Nieman Reports*, *Newsweek*, *International Herald Tribune*, and books and journals, including *The Politics of Environment in Southeast Asia* (Routledge: London and New York), *The Journal of Environment and Development* (University of California in San Diego) and "Open Justice Philippine Case Study: Transparency and Civic Participation in the Selection of Supreme Court Justices," in *Open Justice: An Innovation-Driven Agenda for Inclusive Societies*, Ministry of Justice and Human Rights of Argentina, 2019.

In August 2018, Marites was a visiting fellow at the Australia National University, a visiting research scholar at the National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies in Tokyo in 2016 and, in Kyoto University in 2014.