

Change, adaptation and culture

Media communication in pandemic times

Commentary: Global lockdowns and border closures during the COVID-19 pandemic have meant that international conferences have taken on a virtual existence for more than two years. Uncertainties surrounding the pandemic and the enormity of its impact became a focal point of academic scrutiny for communication sciences and media research. Themes from the Asian Congress for Media and Communication Conference 2021 (ACMC2021) centred around change, adaptation and culture in pandemic times with 12 streams including democracy and disinformation, media influence and impact, and climate change in the Asia-Pacific. This commentary presents an overview of the conference and introduces four of the presentations delivered at the ACMC2021; two keynotes and two paper presentations. The keynotes discussed information challenges such as media freedom, truth, hate rhetoric and climate change while the papers focused on practitioner perceptions and the role of a higher order in securing media freedom and fair representation.

Keywords: ACMC2021, climate change, hate rhetoric, infodemic, information control, Islamophobia, media freedom, media representations, New Zealand, terrorism, truth challenges

KHAIRIAH A. RAHMAN

Auckland University of Technology, Aotearoa New Zealand

Introduction

MEDIA and communication went into a spiral of the ‘new normal’ on a global scale when the COVID-19 pandemic caused massive death tolls, forcing governments to impose international border closures. Community transmission of the virus resulted in enforced physical distancing. With widely reduced human interaction, social messaging and media platforms saw a surge in usage and information frenzy with an 80 percent traffic increase on media sites and a 67 percent increase in in-home media consumption (Statista, 2020). With unrelenting COVID viral mutations and transmissions, and international travel grounded in Aotearoa New Zealand, the Asian Congress for Media and Communication (ACMC) Conference, which was originally scheduled to be hosted at Auckland University of Technology (AUT) in 2020, was postponed to 2021. In the face of growing uncertainty, ACMC2021 was eventually held online

via the Whova conference app on November 25-27, hosted jointly by AUT's Pacific Media Centre and the ACMC.

The conference theme of Change, Adaptation and Culture: Media and Communication in Pandemic Times covered a broad range of topics about change and adaptation in a pandemic-impacted world. Papers explored the roles of media, government and society in shaping public perception, influencing opinions and ensuring ethical communication practices. Extended abstracts were accepted following a double-blind peer review process. Due to streaming issues in some regions, presentations were pre-recorded to circumvent live transmissions lagging. The scheduled recorded presentations were played during the eight panel sessions. This was followed by the question-and-answer session which was chaired by a moderator.

ACMC2021 was well attended with 130 participants from 10 countries. Overall, there was a strong Māori presence in the conference which gave online visitors the experience of a bicultural Aotearoa. Participants witnessed a recorded mihi presented by Dr Valance Smith from Te Ara Poutama, Faculty of Māori and Indigenous Development at AUT. The conference was officially opened by Professor Felix Tan, acting dean, Faculty of Design and Creative Technologies, who warmly greeted participants in Te Reo Māori in his welcome address. Associate Professor Azman Azwan Azmawati, president of the ACMC, also welcomed participants and expressed her thanks for the ACMC2021 partnership with AUT.

In place of a cultural show, which has been a tradition for the host university of the ACMC conference, the virtual event featured a song that captured the sights and sounds of New Zealand. The song in Te Reo Māori by Maisey

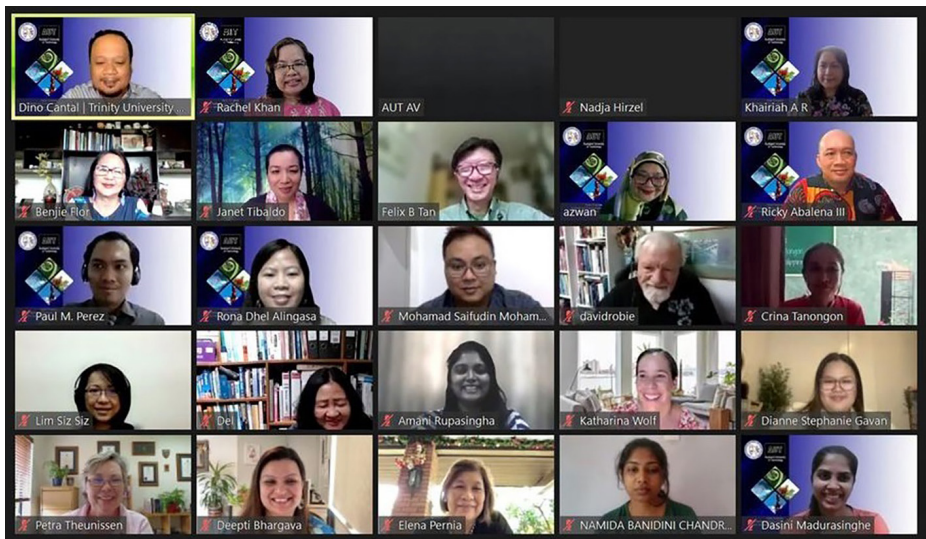


Figure 1: The COVID reality: Some participants at the ACMC2021 conference.

Rika titled ‘Tangaroa Whakamautai’, showcased a tribute to Mother Earth and the Lord of the Sea. It was a fitting reminder of climate change issues and the United Nations Sustainability Goals. The visuals showed off New Zealand’s lush bush and forest, the rough seas and the smouldering, volcanic landscape of Whakaari (White Island).

The second day of the conference continued with appreciation certificates to participants and a closing address by AUT and ACMC senior representatives, followed by a karakia:

Look after one another as members of this fraternity
—the Asian media and communication scholars and practitioners—
May we grow in good health and understanding
And treat each other well.
May we remain authentic and firm in our work
as we join together and collaborate
in this mutually supportive role.

ACMC-themed papers

This article highlights four of the presentations delivered at the ACMC 2021 Conference which are published in this edition of *Pacific Journalism Review*; other papers are due to be published as conference proceedings by the *Asian Congress for Media and Communication Journal*. The two keynotes focused on the nature of media content while the two paper presentations analysed perceptions surrounding the media and the role of a higher influence. The paper on the shifting dynamics of Islamophobic media narratives follows this article on page 19 (Rahman, 2022).

Two other articles in this edition also addressed the ACMC2021 conference theme. Dr Sheila S Coronel, Professor at Toni Stabile Centre for Investigative Journalism, Columbia University in New York, wrote about the challenging times and experience as a journalist under martial law during Marcos’ presidency. She recounted the myth-making of a great leader who in reality represented ‘world-class plunder, torture, and murder—with no acknowledgment, no apology, no repentance, no attempt at restitution’ (Coronel, 2022). Coronel celebrated how the press ‘took down a dictator’ and liberated the country but warned that the return of Marcos Jr to politics could trigger a repeat of history. She called on journalists to report truthfully and uphold what is right.

The second article looked at how online media in Indonesia constructed the reality of COVID-19. Professor Hermin Indah Wahyuni, the director of the Centre for Southeast Asian Social Studies (CESASS) at Universitas Gadjah Mada in Indonesia and the centre’s researcher, Andi Awaluddin Fitrah, analysed eight most accessed online media websites for their context, message, and tone. They found that there was a tendency to emphasise the pandemic’s political context over the

health and economic contexts. They argued that the media was unable to play an optimal role in representation of issues as more coverage was given to politicians compared to scientists (Wahyuni & Fitrah, 2022).

Journalism education ‘truth’ challenges in an age of growing hate, intolerance and disinformation

The first keynote was delivered by newly retired professor of journalism and founding director of the Pacific Media Centre at AUT, Professor David Robie. He identified three main issues: coping with the COVID-19 pandemic and health and social justice; an infodemic that has caused a crisis of communication with disinformation and truth challenges in

a time of hatred and intolerance; and the disproportionate impact of the global climate emergency in the Asia-Pacific region (Robie, 2022).

Robie highlighted the work of some brave journalists who had persevered despite threats to their own safety, in the cause of truth-telling. He highlighted the work of Maria Ressa, Dmitry Muratov, Carl von Ossietzky and Max Stahl, and stressed the importance of truth in reporting and described their actions as a ‘courageous, determined and relentless pursuit of “truth” and justice’.

Robie also addressed the problem of the ‘disinfodemic’ in pandemic times, where inaccurate and misleading information further fuelled uncertainties, caused growing scepticism and questioning of authoritative sources, which culminated in violent protests and attacks on health workers. He closed his keynote with some strategies for communicators and educators. He cited examples from his own experiences and those of other journalists who ventured into ‘project journalism’ in pursuit of truthful and meaningful stories. Robie’s own strategies included a Pacific approach to maintain ‘high standards of journalistic integrity and to foster multi-university collaboration across national boundaries’ such as the Pacific Media Watch project in partnership with the University of the South Pacific.

Robie also highlighted how Scott Waide, former deputy news editor of EMTV News, Papua New Guinea’s major television network, left his job to focus on telling stories of communities via various platforms, including his blog posts and social



Figure 2: Founding director of the Pacific Media Centre (AUT), Professor David Robie, one of the keynote speakers at ACMC2021.

media. In New Zealand, Robie, cited the ‘Let’s Talanoa’ series by Dr Lesina Nakhid-Schuster and Rocky Lavea which shed light on health information. Robie advised communication schools to partner with free press and media taking action that ‘made a difference’.

Holding the line—*Rappler*, Facebook, Duterte and the battle for truth and public trust

The second ACMC2021 keynote was delivered by Glenda Gloria, executive editor of *Rappler* in Manila, Philippines (Gloria, 2022). Gloria’s media outlet is famous for its chief executive Maria Ressa becoming the 2021 Nobel Peace Prize co-laureate. The award signalled the important role that *Rappler*



Figure 3: Glenda Gloria, executive editor of *Rappler* in Manila, Philippines, one of the keynote speakers at ACMC2021.

played in harnessing social media and calling out tech companies to account for their faulty algorithms that value profits over facts. Gloria outlined the dangers faced by journalism today, beginning with challenges to its very existence from repressive laws to death threats. She argued that both journalism and truth were under attack and uncertainty meant that sustainability had become out of reach.

Gloria recounted that when *Rappler* started a decade ago, the vision was ‘to use social media for social change’ and lamented that 10 years on, fakes and memes set alongside well researched news stories for social media prominence. She discussed how media freedom and journalism that were diminished under President Rodrigo Duterte’s administration—through the silencing of opposing online voices—competed with the spreading of half-truths to create a culture of fear and imagined enemies and the cultivation of resentment against the media with derogatory terms such as ‘presstitute’.

Despite this and the government’s 11 investigations of *Rappler* and its staff, Gloria was hopeful that the crisis presented an opportunity to reaffirm the business ownership structure. She reflected that *Rappler* was the only journalist-owned and journalist-led media company in the country and there was merit in defending that space. However, three days before Duterte left office, the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) ordered *Rappler* to close (*Rappler* ordered to shut down, 2022). *Rappler* vowed to contest the order.

Gloria acknowledged how community and technology had been anchors for *Rappler*, with community engagement showing shared values that required transparency and accountability in government. She said that innovation and

storytelling should be community-relevant and actionable to drive business in a meaningful way. With 74 percent of the total Philippines population using Facebook, Gloria acknowledged that the bigger threat against media freedom in her country was ‘beyond Duterte’. It was the social media platforms where the work of journalists sits alongside propagandists, where news and fake news share the same space and level of exposure.

Rappler has partnered with Facebook (Meta) since 2016 in a fact-checking collaboration, while exposing their algorithms and policies. She argued that to regain public trust, journalism should regain its rightful space in the public sphere. This must address the issue of algorithms that only served readers information of the kind they had already accessed, including misleading information. She emphasised the value of journalists who fearlessly spoke truth to power, for without them, ‘alternate facts’ and manipulated opinions would dominate future media space.

Philippine journalists’ perceptions on press freedom

The paper ‘Philippine journalists’ perceptions on press freedom: The impact of international media campaigns’ was presented by Rachel Khan, professor of journalism, College of Mass Communication, University of the Philippines (Khan, 2022). Khan analysed 20 semi-structured interviews involving eight editors/news directors and 12 reporters; 11 of them females and nine males. Sixteen were from national media outlets and four were from the community press. In terms of media, two were online, nine were broadcast and nine were print media.

Using qualitative grounded theory, Khan coded the transcribed video-conferencing and online audio-only calls to identify categories and emerging themes that describe journalists’ perceptions relating to media freedom in the Philippines. She identified five themes, namely, the chilling effect, red-tagging and harassment, limits to coverage, public support for a free press and global media interventions. The chilling effect concerned fears of government threats and the lack of job security while red-tagging and harassment had to do with personal experiences of harassment by government and trolls. Journalists reported receiving hate messages and threats on their social media pages.

The pandemic also limited the ability of journalists to cover stories. Limited media IDs and mediated press conferences online meant there were selective responses to questions and restricted press freedom. While journalists were grateful for personal messages of support from members of the public, the general view was that public support for a free press was not as strong in 1986, when dictator President Ferdinand Marcos was ousted and the press was highly regarded for playing a role in liberating the country. While there was unanimous approval for global media’s support for the local free press, several journalists lamented the lack of foreign funding for media training and activism. Ironically, this source

of funding could cause the government to suspect foreign agenda and the media organisation's independence.

Khan highlighted a marked difference in perceived media freedom based on global support, with *Rappler* rating this highly compared to a journalist who had been red-tagged. She concluded that because foreign media and international coalitions had been selective in their open support, a local outlet that did not have access to such support might not perceive them as supportive. Khan concluded with the view of a media head of a Philippines organisation, De Jesus, who stated that foreign support would create division by giving aid to a single media outlet when it should instead be given to the whole industry.

From foreign influence and the role of an external higher order, the final presentation looks at the power of internal higher orders in society that can shift the narratives of Islamophobia in the media. Khairiah A Rahman, senior lecturer at AUT's School of Communication Studies and a member of the Federation of Islamic Organisations of New Zealand (FIANZ) think tank, presented the paper 'Shifting the dynamics in popular culture on Islamophobic media narratives'.

References

- Coronel, S. (2022). Marcos, martial law and memory: The past in our future in the Philippines. *Pacific Journalism Review*, 28(1&2), 54-66.
- Gloria, G. (2022). Holding the line: *Rappler*, Facebook, Duterte and the battle for truth and public trust. *Pacific Journalism Review*, 28(1&2), 47-53.
- Khan, R. (2022). Philippine journalists' perceptions on press freedom: The impact of international media campaigns. *Pacific Journalism Review*, 28(1&2), 67-83.
- Rahman, K. (2022). Shifting the dynamics in popular culture on Islamophobic media narratives. *Pacific Journalism Review*, 28(1&2), 19-28.
- Rappler* ordered to shut down by Philippines government, says Ressa (2022, June 29). *Asia Pacific Report*. Retrieved from <https://asiapacificreport.nz/2022/06/29/rappler-ordered-to-shut-down-by-philippines-government-says-ressa/>
- Robie, D. (2022). Journalism education 'truth' challenges: An age of growing hate, intolerance and disinformation. *Pacific Journalism Review*, 28(1&2), 29-46.
- Wahyuni, H., & Fitrah, A. (2022). Pandemic in the complexity of the digital era: How online media in Indonesia construct the reality of covid-19. *Pacific Journalism Review*, 28(1&2), 84-103.

Khairiah A Rahman is a senior lecturer at the School of Communication Studies, Auckland University of Technology and assistant editor of Pacific Journalism Review. She is the secretary for Media Education for the Asian Congress for Media and Communication.

khairiah.rahman@aut.ac.nz