

3. The night watch: Filipino TV journalists and Oplan Tokhang

Experiencing coverage of the
Duterte Administration's bloody
campaign against illegal drugs

Abstract: Filipino journalists covering the graveyard shift were the first recorders of violence and brutality under Philippine President Duterte's anti-illegal drugs campaign. The first phase in 2016, called Oplan Tokhang, was executed ruthlessly and relentlessly. This study aims to explore how graveyard-shift TV journalists experienced covering Oplan Tokhang. The intention is to get a deeper understanding of how the experience impacted on the way they reported on the Oplan Tokhang stories. To get the essence of the Oplan Tokhang coverage experience, the study used a phenomenological research approach. Four graveyard-shift TV journalists agreed to face-to-face in-depth interviews. The participants came from major TV networks in the Philippines. Analysis of the results was framed within the lens of symbolic interactionism and discussions of past literature. The study presented constructed realities of four television journalists who described their nightly struggles to perform their duties, surrounded by a climate of death and suffering, in the violent world of Oplan Tokhang. Four themes emerged describing the experience: a) A 'horror fest' of violence, brutality and suffering; b) A constrained and controlled coverage; c) Objectivity and the truth; and d) Post-mortem: Falling short of fulfilling journalistic duties. These themes revealed ethical dilemmas encountered by the television journalists. They faced realities of intimidation and threat, resorting to self-censorship. Repeated exposure to violence desensitised the television journalists. The rush to meet nightly deadlines resulted in simplified treatment of stories, missing the context of the issue. In reflection, the TV journalists realised they fell short in fulfilling the journalist's obligation to search for the truth and to report it.

Keywords: Duterte's war on drugs, graveyard-shift news, intimidation, television journalists, journalism ethics, journalism trauma, media harassment, Oplan Tokhang, phenomenology, Philippines



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Figure 1: With many of the killings happening at night, graveyard-shift television journalists who service 24-hour news operations led in covering Oplan Tokhang operations. The killings became a staple of nightly newscasts.

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Introduction

WHEN the day is done, and most people go to sleep, they are the ones who go out to keep watch at night. They are the journalists assigned to the graveyard or night shift. They cover and report newsworthy events to keep the public informed of what happened while they were sleeping. For major broadcast networks in the Philippines, news operation is 24 hours. With a largely Metro Manila-centric news content (Rimban & Cabaero, 2008), major television networks assign TV crews on the graveyard shift to cover urban Metro Manila after dark.

At night, journalists mostly cover events related to criminality, disaster and violence (Corotan, 2008), such as street brawls, fire disasters, vehicular accidents, robbery, police raids and homicide. In July 2016, however, the regular graveyard-shift crime coverage started to change. There were more dead bodies and more killed in police raids in connection to President Rodrigo Duterte’s anti-illegal drugs campaign, which has become the cornerstone of his presidency (The kill list, 2016; ABS-CBN Investigative and Research Group, n.d.).

Oplan Tokhang

The anti-illegal drugs campaign became widely known as Oplan Tokhang. It was initially implemented in Davao City where Duterte was a mayor for almost 23 years. Under Oplan Tokhang in Davao City, the police knocked on the doors of suspected drug pushers and peddlers in the *barangay*, or village. The Davao police would warn drug suspects to stop their illegal trade or else the police would make them stop, with an implication of physical harm (Colina, 2016).

A consolidated report on the killings in Davao City from 1998 to 2015 (Picardal, n.d.) identified 1,424 cases of people, mostly suspected drug users and pushers, killed by the Davao Death Squad. The Davao Death Squad is a group of assassins believed to be composed of the Davao police (Arguillas, 2017).

When Duterte assumed the presidency on 30 June 2016, the Philippine National Police adopted Oplan Tokhang nationwide as part of a ‘two-pronged approach’ in the government’s campaign against illegal drugs labelled as Project Double Barrel (National Police Commission, 2016).

Soon after, what happened in Davao was replicated in Metro Manila and elsewhere in the country. Early morning newscasts, primetime news programmes and newspapers bannered deaths from Oplan Tokhang raids. ABS-CBN news online counted at least 3,155 drug-related deaths from 10 May 2016 to 21 March 2017, an unprecedented number of killings in less than a year. The perpetrators were either policemen claiming that they had shot the suspects in self-defence, or vigilante killers whose identities have not been established except in very few cases. Although Duterte has disavowed knowledge of the summary executions, which have been called extrajudicial killings, some of his pronouncements tended to support or encourage such killings.

The night-shift news beat

With many of the killings happening at night, graveyard-shift television journalists who service 24-hour news operations led in covering Oplan Tokhang operations. The killings became a staple of nightly newscasts. Soon enough, reporters and photographers became news themselves, cited as sources who had first-hand knowledge or bore witness to the killings and their aftermath. Several articles published on international online news sites and institutional websites (Berehulak, 2016; Coronel, 2017; Espina, 2017; Syjuco, 2017; See, 2016) told of Filipino, as well as foreign, journalists’ accounts of horror and dread in covering the violent operations.

Extrajudicial killings and media coverage

In the Human Rights Watch report titled *License to kill: the Philippine police killings in Duterte’s ‘War on Drugs’* (Bouckaert, 2017), investigators found that law enforcers were behind the extrajudicial killings and that those targeted

were mostly poor. These killings, according to HRW, are proof that the Duterte government has disregarded the rule of law and summarily executed suspects without the benefit of charges and trial.

Given the controversy that has attended these killings, and the many questions surrounding them, journalists are relied upon to tell the stories behind them by providing factual and complete accounts of these cases. They are expected by the public to expose abuses and hold authorities accountable. Considering the front-seat view graveyard-shift television journalists have in covering Oplan Tokhang, it is important and necessary that they report events accurately and give context to the Oplan Tokhang stories.

The purpose of this study is to describe what graveyard-shift TV journalists experienced in covering Oplan Tokhang, what meanings they made out of it and how these meanings affected their coverage and reporting of the events. The study focused on television journalists who, unlike their print counterparts, have to rush to the scenes of the killings in their immediate aftermath, as the medium requires visuals for the story, and produce stories within a short span of time. Among television journalists, those on the graveyard shift are the ones who consistently cover the Oplan Tokhang. This study also aims to find out how interaction with their peers in the news beat and interaction with their respective newsrooms influenced the presentation of the Oplan Tokhang stories.

Violence in drug-related coverage in Mexico

Although much has been written about journalists' experience in covering Oplan Tokhang as journalistic account, there is not much social science research into this problem. Similarly, in Asia there are not many published studies about journalists and their coverage of state-run campaigns against illegal drugs.

There have been a few studies, however, conducted on journalists who covered the 2006 Mexican war against drugs. In 2010, a seminar conducted at the University of Texas gathered 26 journalists from Mexico and the US who

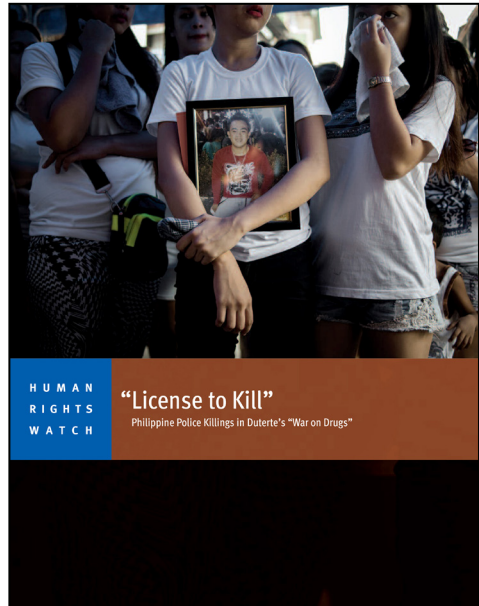


Figure 2: In the Human Rights Watch report *License to kill: The Philippine police killings in Duterte's 'War on Drugs'*, investigators found that law enforcers were behind the extrajudicial killings and that those targeted were mostly poor.

were part of the violent coverage of Mexico's war on drugs and the drug cartel wars. The Mexican government's 2006 declaration of war on drugs had resulted in the deaths of more than 100,000 people (Associated Press, 2016). The outcome of the seminar was a report (Medel, 2010) that revealed several daunting challenges faced by the journalists in their coverage. Among these challenges were physical and verbal threat and intimidation; psychological and emotional stress; restricted access to information; lack of training in trauma coverage and not enough support from newsroom and media owners. The journalists became scared and constrained in their coverage. Some were manipulated while some were corrupted. These challenges negatively affected the quality of the stories produced, resulting in the failure of the press to comprehensively discuss the complicated issue of illegal drugs and the war launched by the Mexican government to eradicate it.

In 2012, a study was conducted among Mexican journalists who were exposed to traumatic and violent coverage, and to intimidation and harassment (Feinstein, 2012). The study found that Mexican journalists who covered the war on drugs suffered similar symptoms of psychological distress as the author's previous research found on war journalists.

Methodology

This study used a phenomenological approach to explore the television journalists' experience of the Oplan Tokhang coverage. In phenomenology, the study is concerned with discovering the definition of the experience or the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2013) shared by the participants. In this case, the phenomenon is the Oplan Tokhang coverage. The intention of the study is to be able to attain deeper understanding of the news coverage experience shared by journalists who moved in the same environment—that is the graveyard news beat and the world of TV news.

This research chose as participants Filipino TV journalists who covered the nightly Oplan Tokhang raids within the period July 2016 to March 2017. The incidence of killings and violence, as monitored in various news sites, was highest during the months of July, August and September 2016 (ABS-CBN, 2016). The TV journalists chosen were limited to the positions of reporter and cameraman to make the sample manageable. The participants are affiliated with major TV networks based in Metro Manila, where most of the Oplan Tokhang killings happened (ABS-CBN Investigative & Research Group, 2016).

The study also used the lens of symbolic interactionism, zooming in on how the graveyard-shift television journalists viewed their world as individuals and as a group of individuals.

American sociologist Herbert Blumer (1969) described symbolic interactionism as an approach to understanding 'human group life and human conduct'

(p. 1). In his book, *Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method*, Blumer said there were three premises to the theory: 1, people act towards things or objects based on the meanings they place on them; 2, the meanings are conceived from social interaction with other people; and 3, people interpret the meanings and continually recreate meanings as they interact with society. Blumer explained that the ‘things’ referred to in the theory include not only physical objects but anything that a person can refer to or acknowledge in his world such as individual values, institutions, other people’s activities or situations one encounters.

This study analysed how interaction between things defined the television journalists’ reality or world situated in the context of the coverage of Oplan Tokhang (see Table 1).

Data collection and analysis followed these steps:

1. The researcher conducted face-to-face in-depth interviews with the participants using open-ended questions.
2. The researcher transcribed interviews and examined the texts for key words, phrases and themes.
3. After extensive examination of transcripts and notes, the researcher looked for common meanings and grouped them together. Cresswell and Poth (2013) refer to these groupings as clusters of meaning.
4. From these clusters of meaning, the researcher identified general themes that describe the essence of graveyard shift coverage of Oplan Tokhang.
5. The resulting themes are presented and discussed within the framework of past literature and through the lens of symbolic interactionism. The themes provide a deeper look into the constructed world of graveyard-shift TV journalists who cover Oplan Tokhang.

Research ethics clearance and protocol

The research was conducted after receipt of approval from the Ethics University Research Office of the Ateneo de Manila University. Protocol was established to address potential risks and emotional distress that may be experienced by the participants. DART Centre for Trauma and Journalism Fellow Rowena Paraan and Dr Reggie Pamugas of Health Alliance for Human Rights were on call during the interviews to address potential emotional distress. The DART Centre is a global network of journalists and trauma professionals that advocates awareness on trauma journalism (DART Centre for Journalism and Trauma, n.d.). After the research was completed, participants were offered stress debriefing sessions but all participants chose not to avail them. Participants have been given contact details of the researcher if they choose to avail of trauma debriefing.

Table 1: Clusters of meaning derived from significant statements

Basis for clustering	Clusters of meaning	Sample of selected significant statements
Witnessing the event	1. Oplan Tokhang was a showcase of blood, violence and extreme human anguish replayed every night	<i>Para akong nanood ng horror film. Magstart makakita ka ng taong nakatakip ng packaging tape and mukha. Tapos may alambre sa leeg. Tapos meron pang saksak ng ice pick. Meron pang pako sa ulo. Parang nakakatakot.</i> (It's like I'm watching a horror film. You start to see a person whose face is wrapped in a packaging tape. Then, one has a wire around his neck. Then one was stabbed with an ice pick. Another has a nail on his head. It's horrifying.)
	2. Many of those killed have criminal records but police operations were dubious and questionable.	<i>Yung iba natutulog nung binabaril, e. Marami na akong experience, yung iba natutulog.</i> (Others were killed while sleeping. I've experienced this a lot, knowing they were killed while sleeping.)
	3. Covering Oplan Tokhang was exhausting to the body, the mind and the emotions due to the number of deaths to be covered in various areas in Metro Manila	<i>Talagang sunod-sunod, gabi-gabi. Patayan kabila't kanan.</i> (It's really incessant, every night. Killings left and right.)
Covering the event	4. Access to information is limited and controlled.	<i>Pag sasabihan kami (ng pulis). Pag inulit pa raw. Sige, subukan nyong ulitin pa. Sige subukan nyo kuhanan.</i> (We would be scolded by the police. Go on and try it again! Go and try us and shoot your video.)
	5. Emotions are numbed or purposely detached to be able to continue to function in the coverage	<i>Nagko-cover lang talaga ako. Kuha lang ako ng detalye. Wala na akong nararamdaman. Umiyak yung family, ok wala, wala sa akin.</i> (I just cover. I just get the details. I feel numbed. The family is crying and I feel nothing. It's nothing to me.)
	6. The press corps and pack reporting	<i>Sa amin sa gabi kami-kami yung mag-kakakampi. Kung бага kami-kami yung magkaka-dikit. Ang then tulungan sa info kasi may kanya-kanya kaming asset.</i> (Every night, we are allies. We stick together. We help each other with information because we have our own police assets.)

Basis for clustering	Clusters of meaning	Sample of selected significant statements
<p><i>Writing and reporting the event</i></p>	<p>7. The way to address internal struggle between risks and pursuing truth behind police operations is to report the basic facts available.</p>	<p><i>Para akong nanood ng horror film. Magstart makakita ka ng taong nakatakip ng packaging tape and mukha. Tapos may alambre sa leeg. Tapos meron pang saksak ng ice pick. Meron pang pako sa ulo. Parang nakakatakot. (It's like I'm watching a horror film. You start to see a person whose face is wrapped in a packaging tape. Then, one has a wire around his neck. Then one was stabbed with an ice pick. Another has a nail on his head. It's horrifying.)</i></p>
	<p>8. Newcasts air Oplan Tokhang stories as regular police stories fit for short TV reports.</p>	<p><i>Unless meron akong visuals na very compelling na puede sya umere sa amin, saka ko lang talaga pinu-pursue. (Unless I have very compelling visuals acceptable for airing, that's the only time I pursue the whole story.)</i></p>
<p><i>Post-mortem: Assessment of the whole coverage.</i></p>	<p>9. Challenges in covering Oplan Tokhang leads to measuring a journalist's fulfillment of his/her duty.</p>	<p><i>Parang sa journey ko as a journalist na nag co-cover nitong Oplang Tokhang, parang di ko ma-prove yung worth ko as a journalist kasi parang di ako nagiging totoo. Wala po kasing, ano ba, venue para masabi ko sya o maisulat ko sya. (In my journey as a journalist who is covering Oplan Tokhang, I can't seem to prove my worth as a journalist because I have not been truthful in my reporting. I don't have a venue to tell the truth or write it.)</i></p>

Results, findings and discussion

Brief background of the participants

The researcher invited nine television journalists from the three TV networks that permitted their reporters and cameramen to be approached. Four agreed to participate in face-to-face interviews under the condition of keeping their identities hidden. For this study, the participants are labelled as such: TVreporter1 or TVR1, TVreporter2 (TVR2), TVreporter3 (TVR3) and TVCameraman1 (TVC1). The anti-illegal drugs police operation Oplan Tokhang was launched in July 2016. All four television journalists have covered Oplan Tokhang.

Clusters of meanings

From extensive analysis and contemplation of significant words and phrases, the researcher came up with nine clusters of meaning that describe the experience of covering Oplan Tokhang. In clustering the significant statements, the researcher

used as a basis the simple process of covering news events. This process involves witnessing the event; covering the event; writing or reporting the event; and assessing the coverage.

Table 1 shows selected significant statements that were formed into nine clusters of meaning. The clustered meanings are:

1. Oplan Tokhang was a showcase of blood, violence and extreme human anguish replayed every night.
2. Many of those killed have criminal records but police operations were dubious and questionable.
3. Covering Oplan Tokhang was exhausting to the body, the mind and the emotions due to the number of deaths to be covered in various areas in Metro Manila.
4. Access to information was limited and controlled.
5. Emotions are numbed or purposely detached to be able to continue to function in the coverage.
6. The press corps and pack reporting
7. The way to address internal struggle between risks and pursuing truth behind police operations was to report the basic facts available.
8. Newcasts air Oplan Tokhang stories as regular police stories fit for short television reports.
9. Challenges in covering Oplan Tokhang leads to measuring a journalist's fulfillment of his or her duty.

Themes

From the nine clusters of meaning emerged four themes that describe the essence of the experience of the graveyard-shift TV journalists in covering Oplan Tokhang. Each theme is discussed and includes direct quotes and narrations from the participants. The narrations in the language of Tagalog are translated by the researcher in English. Table 2 shows the emergence of four themes from the clusters of meaning.

Theme 1: A 'horror fest' of brutality, suffering and criminal minds

When the four participants were asked to describe police operations under Oplan Tokhang using a phrase or a word, they all used the word *madugo*, or bloody. The participants narrated feeling shock at the many dead bodies they covered every night.

TVReporter1 related how he reacted to the first few months of Oplan Tokhang operations in 2016:

Yung may kino-cover kami na patay, mamaya may patay nanaman sa isang lugar. Parang tama na. May patay na naman? Ayoko na. Kasi bihira lang ang ano dati e, ang patayan sa gabi. (We would be covering a dead body

in one place and then we will get a tip that there's another one in another place. Another one again? I don't want to go anymore. Before, it was rare to have a story on killings and dead bodies at night.)

TVReporter2 has a more vivid description of her coverage. She described her coverage as if she was watching or acting in a horror film. She made this comparison:

Para akong nasa isang...para akong nanood ng horror film. Ganun sya sobrang nakakatakot. Imagine sa isang bahay limang patay. Sabi ko hindi lang limang patay yan. Masaker yan! Kinikilabutan tuloy ako. (It feels like I'm inside...like I'm watching a horror film. That's how scary it is. Imagine, in a house there are five dead bodies. I say to myself, those are not just five dead bodies. It's a massacre! I'm having goosebumps.)

Clusters of meaning	Themes
1. Oplan Tokhang was a showcase of blood, violence and extreme human anguish replayed every night	1. A 'horror fest' of violence, brutality and suffering
2. Many of those killed have criminal records but police operations were dubious and questionable.	
3. Covering Oplan Tokhang was exhausting to the body, the mind and the emotions due to the number of deaths to be covered in various areas in Metro Manila	2. A constrained and controlled coverage
4. Access to information is limited and controlled.	
5. Emotions are numbed or purposely detached to be able to continue to function in the coverage	
6. The press corps and pack reporting	
7. The way to address internal struggle between risks and pursuing truth behind police operations is to report the basic facts available.	3. Objectivity and the truth
8. Newcasts air Oplan Tokhang stories as regular police stories fit for short TV reports.	
9. Challenges in covering Oplan Tokhang leads to measuring a journalist's fulfillment of his/her duty.	4. Post-mortem: Falling short of fulfilling journalistic duties

TVReporter2 described the brutal ways the suspects were killed. One dead body had his face wrapped in a packing tape. One was found dead with barbed wire around his neck. Another body was stabbed with an ice pick while another one had a nail on his head. TVReporter2 revealed that the Oplan Tokhang coverage had given her frequent nightmares.

The participants admitted they were unprepared to witness and cover the intensity of violence and killings from Oplan Tokhang. In a night, they had to cover an average of three to five incidents of Oplan Tokhang operations. Running from one incident to another prevented them from finding out more about each story they covered, resulting in spot police reports.

In the code of ethics of the Society of Professional Journalists (2014) in the United States, one of the principles of ethical journalism is to ‘seek truth and report it’. The code stated that journalists should be accurate in getting information and should provide context of the story. The participants in this study failed to provide context in their stories. What they produced were simplified versions of the events: that those killed were suspected drug users and pushers, and they were killed because they tried to shoot at the police operatives. This became a sort of story template that repeated itself night after night.

The participants shared they did not exert effort to get the background of the suspects and the circumstances surrounding the killings because of lack of time. There was also no effort to analyse and look at the big picture in the conduct of Oplan Tokhang operations.

TVReporter3 shared:

Dahil nga sunod sunod yung nangyayari, may mga time na one side lang talaga makukuha mo. Kasi kailangan mo tumakbo from one area to another area kasi may incident na naman dun. Kaya hindi rin nakukumpleto yung pagbuo ng storya. ((Due to simultaneous crime incidents, there are times when you can just get one side because you must rush from one area to another because there’s another incident there. That’s why you can’t complete the story.)

Another factor that discouraged the participants from taking time do more inquiry were the disturbing images of brutality and suffering. TVReporter3 purposely avoided looking at the crime scene because the images caused her nightmares. She just wanted to get basic details of the event and then move on to cover the next dead body.

Deadline pressures and disturbing images in violent crime coverage like Oplan Tokhang both negatively impacted on the emotional state of the participants and their coverage. This result is aligned with general findings of studies in trauma journalism (Smith, Newman & Drevo, 2015; Dworznik, 2011; Long, C.C., 2013; McMahan & McLellan, 2008; Simpson & Cote, 2006; Shulman, 1997).

A report on the coverage of the Mexican government's war on drugs (Medel, 2010) found that journalists' treatment of drug-related killings as simple police stories took away public discussion from the complicated and complex issue of the illegal drugs in the country (Medel, 2010). Similar to the 2010 report findings, the result in this study showed that under the pervasive climate of violence and fear, the participants tended to focus more on getting graphic details and compelling videos than completing the stories.

As the number of dead bodies increased over the months, the participants found themselves numbed and desensitised from the suffering and anger coming from relatives of those killed. Lack of sensitivity and respect in treating victims of violence, like relatives of killed suspects, goes against the journalist's ethical principle to minimize harm in reporting on a story (SPJ Code of Ethics, 2014). TVCameraman1 related how he guides a new reporter on the graveyard shift in getting interviews from the relatives:

Yung reporter ko bago, (sabihin ko) wag na nya tanungin kung puedeng ma-interview. Itutok na nya kaagad yung mic saka na nya tanungin para hindi na makakatanggi yung ano. Makita mo reaksiyon nya, umiiyak, mas maganda yun. (My reporter is new. I would advise him to not ask for permission for an interview. Just shove the mic right away then quickly ask the question so the person won't have the opportunity to decline. If the person reacts by crying, that's even better).

TVCameraman1 has become unaffected by grieving relatives after covering the same thing every night. He focused mostly on getting the most 'compelling' videos for the story. Journalists, however, have the responsibility to respect the dignity and rights of the victims to refuse interviews (Hight & Smyth, 2009). Crime trauma experts believe that television journalists should especially be careful in using the camera since many victims are intimidated by broadcast equipment (Bucqueroux & Seymour, 2009). TVReporter2 was aware that she has stopped empathising with the relatives because, like TVCameraman1, she got used to witnessing the sufferings and horror every night. TVReporter2 shared:

Kinabukasan ganun na nanaman ulit. To the point na na-de-de-sensitized ka na. Parang tipong wala ka nang maramdaman. Na normal lang sayo na may patay. Umiiyak yung family, ok wala, wala sa akin. (The next day, it's the same again to the point that I've become de-sensitized. I don't feel anything anymore. It's normal for me to see dead bodies. The family would be crying, and I would feel nothing.)

The participants did not consult or share their experiences with their news editors or managers. Instead, they shared their thoughts with peers on the graveyard shift.

The participants added that on the other hand, their news managers did not ask nor encourage them to talk about their experiences.

Theme 2: A constrained and controlled coverage

In their coverage of Oplan Tokhang stories, graveyard-shift television journalists faced several difficulties in getting relevant and vital information about the killings. The most daunting task was getting credible sources to relate what really happened. The participants stated that neither the police nor the witnesses would agree to be interviewed. The participants observed that when they asked police operatives details about the incident and the crime scene, the police would either ignore them or tell them to direct all questions to the station chief. The witnesses, meanwhile, were too scared to talk. The participants observed that the suspects' relatives were usually in a state of intense grief and suffering, unable to provide coherent account of what happened. In the few times that the police agree to an interview, the police would always claim the suspect was killed because he fought back. The participants, however, detected inconsistencies with the statement and the observable evidence in the crime scene. TVReporter2 narrated:

Yung pakikipag-usap rin sa mga pulis, may times na alam mong nagsisinungaling sila. Itshura palang ng patay sa crime scene alam mo na tinanim lang yung bala. Like nasa isang maliit lang na kwarto sabihin nila nanlaban, nagpapatok. E ang liit ng kwarto. Sir, nasaan po yung tama ng mga baril sa pader? Wala! Wala silang masabi. (In conversations with the police, you just know they are lying. The way the dead body is positioned in the crime scene, you know the bullet was planted. Like inside a very small room, the police will say the suspects shot at them. Sir, where is the bullet hole in the walls? Nothing! They have no answer.)

The participants experienced doubts and suspicions over the legitimacy of Oplan Tokhang. However, the participants felt conflicted in exposing inconsistencies due to police intimidation, threat and harassment. TVReporter2 revealed that when a police officer is grilled on suspicious circumstances surrounding an operation, the officer would appear composed on-camera. The intimidation happens off-camera. TVReporter2 shared this encounter with a police officer:

Kahit gisahin mo sila ng mga questions sasagutin lang nila yan. Pero after nun.. minsan may lumapit sa aking pulis: Alam mo naman yung profile di ba? Opo sir. O, bakit ganun pa yung tanong mo? E sir gusto ko lang po malaman...Parang napapahiya ako. Kasi pag may nakakarinig na reporter baka iniisip ko, baka tama nga si sir. Masyado nga ba kong aggressive? (Even if you grill them with questions, they'll just answer them.

But after that...one time a police officer approached me: You know the suspect's profile, right? Yes, sir. Then why are you asking those kinds of questions? I just want to know the answers sir...I feel embarrassed. I'm conscious other reporters around me might think that maybe sir is right. Am I being too aggressive?)

TVCameraman1 also shared his encounters with police operatives. In one instance, he was warned not take videos of a crime scene, yet he continued to do so. The police threateningly scolded him not to again challenge the police order. In the end, TVCameraman1 decided not to shoot crime scenes when not allowed by the police.

The participants faced the dilemma between discharging their duty to investigate the events and suffer police intimidation or cover what is allowed by the authorities and maintain good relations with police sources. The participants chose the latter.

Another factor that constrained graveyard-shift journalists from pursuing other story angles was pack journalism in the form of the police press corps. The participants are members of the press corps that exist in each major police district in Metro Manila. Press corps generally represent a group of journalists covering the same beat. In covering Oplan Tokhang operations, the participants go as a pack to cover the event. This kind of arrangement limits efforts for enterprising stories on Oplan Tokhang that may go beyond the common story coverage. TVReporter2 admitted that pack reporting results in uniform coverage and presentation of Oplan Tokhang stories. She pointed out, however, that the press corps provides safety in numbers and emotional support to graveyard-shift journalists who face intimidation and threats. TVReporter 3 described her relationship with the press corps:

Parang family din sa press corps. In a way nakakatulong din sya na parang coping up dun sa mga nakikita. Kasi after nun, parang tinatawanan nyo na lang after yung mga shooting incidents na nakikita ninyo e. (We are like a family in the press corps. In a way, it helps me cope with what I witness during the coverage because after the coverage we just laugh off what we see in the shooting incidents.)

Theme 3: Objectivity and the truth

This theme focuses on the TV journalists' mental struggle in writing and reporting on Oplan Tokhang operations. The TV reporter-participants struggled over inconsistencies between suspicious evidence in the crime scene and contradictory accounts of the police operatives. Knowing that it is a journalist's responsibility to find out the truth and report it, the participants felt guilt and frustration that they could not do so for the reason discussed in the previous themes.

Journalists are supposed to make ethical decisions when faced with moral dilemmas, but it is not an easy task and there is a lot of gray area in the situation (Knowlton & Reader, 2009). TVReporter2 shared this conversation with a police officer who was then informing the media of a scheduled Oplan Tokhang operation:

Minsan nakaka-guilty actually kasi may mga pulis talaga na parang sobrang comfortable na sila sa media, sinasabi nila sa amin: "O meron tayong trabaho mamaya." Ayan, trabaho ang term. "Sir, may trabaho?" Expect mo na na merong mamamatay. At ikaw as a journalist alam mong may mamamatay, anong gagawin mo? Nandun ka lang naman kasi to cover the story. (Sometimes I feel so guilty because there are some police officers who appear too comfortable with the media and they talk to us like this: "Hey, we have a job later." Job, that's the code. "Sir, we have a job?" You should expect that someone will be killed later. And you're a journalist and you know someone will die later, what are you to do? You're here just to cover a story.)

TVReporter1 felt bothered and confused on how to report on doubtful police accounts. He sought guidance from his news editors on how to write his stories. He narrated:

Bothered ako. Yun din ang consult ko sa boss ko na, pano ko isusulat yung ganung storya? Kasi para sa akin, isulat ko kung ano yung katotohanan. Sabi nya, puede mo naman isulat yung katotohanan pero dapat hindi maano yung buhay ko kasi walang katumbas na storya ang buhay. Sabi nya, kapagka may ganung sitwasyon, kunin mo yung parte ng pulis, kunin mo yung sinabi ng kamag-anak, yung ang ipalabas mo. (I was bothered. I consulted my boss on how to write the story. For me, I wanted to write only the truth. He said, you can write the truth but you don't have to put your life at risk because no story is worth your life. He said in those kinds of situations, get the side of the police, get the side of the suspect's relatives, that's how you report it.)

All participants resorted to the template of reporting simple facts or adopted the He-said, She-said news writing formula in an effort to present both sides of the story. By presenting the side of the police and the victims, the participants believed they were objective in the treatment of the story. Objectivity, however, is not achieved by just getting all sides of a story. According to Kovach and Rosenstiel (2014), 'balancing a story by being fair to both sides may not be fair to the truth if both sides do not, in fact, have equal weight' (p. 63). The participants admit that in their television reports, the police version was usually given prominence since relatives and witnesses were afraid to give interviews.

The participants shared that the news producers' treatment of their stories also

influenced how they covered and wrote their reports. TVReporter1 and TVReporter2 noticed that due to similarities in circumstances surrounding the killing incidents, their news producers tended to compile the coverage and produce them into one short packaged report. If the several Oplan Tokhang operations they covered would be compressed into only a one-and-half-minute television report, the participants considered that getting basic facts and not pursuing more angles was acceptable to their editors. TVReporter2, however, acknowledge the disadvantage of this kind of news writing:

Nung una, nakaka alarm na ang dami. Tapos nung tumagal ng tumagal parang nasanay ka na. To the point na ni-wra-wrap na yung stories. Parang di na masyado na bibigyan ng importance yung isang particular na crime kasi pinag-sasama-sama na lang sa isang story. (At first, the [dead bodies] were too many it became alarming. Then after a while, you get used to it to the point that the stories were wrapped into one. This fails to give importance to a particular crime because they were lumped into one story.)

All participants described their interaction with news editors and producers as mostly limited to discussion of crafting stories and beating deadlines. There were no extensive discussions and guidance in handling ethical dilemmas that would have helped them make better decisions.

Theme 4: Postmortem: Falling short of fulfilling journalistic duties.

Among journalists, the search for truth is an obligation (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2014). All participants looked at their coverage of Oplan Tokhang as a test of their worth as journalists. Common among them was the need to convince oneself that each tried to do her/his best to report on the truth.

TVReporter3 and TVCameraman1 measured their value as TV journalists by the number of reports aired on their newscasts. TVReporter3 lamented, however, that most of her Oplan Tokhang stories failed to make it on air because her network's newscast followed a format not inclined to give prominence to crime stories.

TVReporter1 and TVReporter2, on the other hand, were concerned with more than just the airing of their news reports. Both tended to agonise over their perceived failure to question the legality and morality of the police operations. TVReporter2 reflected:

Parang sa journey ko as a journalist na nag co-cover nitong Oplang Tokhang, parang di ko ma prove yung nga po yung worth ko as a journalist kasi parang di ako nagiging totoo. (In my journey as a journalist who is covering Oplan Tokhang, I can't seem to prove my worth as a journalist because I have not been truthful in my reporting.)

TVReporter1 has been bothered by his inability to write about certain incidents he witnessed or information he gathered that may get him in trouble with the police. He reflected he could not be 'fearless' in his reports for fear of retaliation from the police. TVReporter1 said the recurring thought on his mind is: no story is worth your life. He determined that in his reports he would just present the claims of all involved sides and let the viewer decide who is telling the truth.

Despite these challenges, all participants believed their stories had somehow opened the eyes of the public to the alarming gravity of the illegal drugs problem. However, to prove their value as journalists, the participants yearned for the chance to report truthfully on Oplan Tokhang operations without fear and repercussions.

Symbolic interactionism: Interpretation of realities

The symbolic interactionism theory promotes the belief that people act on things based on the meaning they give to these objects, and that these meanings are derived from interpretation of language and symbols (Blumer, 1969; Carter & Fuller, 2015). Adapting this theoretical lens, this study was able to formulate realities constructed by the four graveyard-shift television journalists in their coverage of Oplan Tokhang operations.

From the resulting themes, this study found that graveyard-shift television journalists who covered the extremely violent Oplan Tokhang operations experienced constant mental struggle as they faced moral dilemma in the practice of their profession. The study provided a look at the world of TV graveyard-shift journalists where they consider themselves not free to report the truth without consequences of police intimidation, threat and harassment.

In the themes *A horror fest of violence, killings and suffering* and *A constrained and controlled coverage*, the study found that television journalists experience the grim atmosphere of violence and the menacing attitude of the police as deterrents to their intention to present an accurate and complete picture of the Duterte administration's war on drugs. They practise self-censorship to avoid intimidation and complication in reporting on inconsistencies.

This study also found that TV journalists face the reality of the lack of willing credible sources. With witnesses silenced by fear, the journalists depend on the police to provide the details. This, despite them being aware that the police lie or at least do not tell the whole truth.

In the themes *Objectivity and the truth* and *Postmortem: falling short of journalistic duties*, the study discovered that television journalists resort to treating the complex issue of the war on illegal drugs as simple police stories that at most contain the two sides: of the police and of the victims. This is an attempt to convince themselves that despite daunted by police restrictions and threats, they are still able to adhere to objectivity. Objectivity, however, is a journalism

principle that does not simply mean reporting two sides of the story. Objectivity is achieved through a dedicated and thorough search for facts and the truth (Knowlton & Reader, 2009). The TV journalists are aware of this—that they have an obligation to report the truth. Yet they are unable to.

Guilt and shame over failure to abide by ethical and moral standards of journalism may imply moral injury. A study by clinician-researchers (Litz et al., 2009) associated emotional distress—particularly guilt and shame over ethical and moral violations—with moral injury. The study that focused on war veterans contends that moral injury ‘involves an act of transgression that creates dissonance and conflict because it violates assumptions and beliefs about right and wrong and personal goodness’ (p. 698). Although no extensive research has been conducted on moral injury as a clinical condition (Litz, et al., 2009), a recent quantitative study (Feinstein & Storm, 2017) on journalists who covered the 2015 refugee crisis found many experienced emotional stress related to moral injury. Feinstein and Storm (2017) revealed these journalists were distressed when they witnessed or failed to act on events that violated personal morals or ethical codes.

Faced with similar moral dilemmas, the television journalists exposed to state-sanctioned violence and killings under Oplan Tokhang, suffered doubts about their worth as journalists. This experience has influenced their reporting on the killings, missing out on the bigger context of the issue and failing to expose abuses in the anti-illegal drugs operations.

In the middle of this internal struggle, news managers are unaware of the ethical dilemmas that graveyard shift journalists face in covering such events. This study found that newsroom managers have not exerted much effort to find out what challenges graveyard shift journalists face in covering the anti-illegal drugs campaign. They have failed to address the fact that the extreme violence and brutality that define Oplan Tokhang make it an unprecedented type of coverage. Lack of attention and encouragement from newsroom managers send a signal to the journalists not to actively seek guidance on their coverage.

Conclusion

Media critics have criticised media coverage of the initial months of implementation of Oplan Tokhang in 2016. They found media slow and shallow in reporting on the violence and brutality that happened every night (‘Media and the war on drugs,’ n.d.). This study has provided a deeper insight on what graveyard-shift journalists experienced in covering the violent operations of Oplan Tokhang. It presented a world where TV journalists grappled with realities that challenged their commitment to uphold the principles of ethical journalism.

Four themes described the essence of the experience of graveyard-shift TV journalists in covering Oplan Tokhang. These four themes are:

- A “horror fest” of violence, brutality and suffering

- A constrained and controlled coverage
- Objectivity and the truth
- Post-mortem: Falling short of fulfilling journalistic duties

These themes revealed the ethical dilemmas they faced. Initially shocked at the death toll, the reporters talked about becoming desensitised to the violence, and foregoing basic duties like interviewing relatives of victims. There was also the reality of censorship that took the form of policemen dictating the coverage, or news editors not airing stories for some reason or another. Truth became a casualty as reporters sacrificed a probing reportage for good relations with policemen. And all these leading to their realisation that they fell short of journalistic duties.

Journalists champion the truth (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2014). Yet, the four graveyard-shift television journalists who participated in this research found themselves assigned to cover the violent world of Oplan Tokhang characterised with brutality, sufferings and untruths. All the participants described the experience of reporting Oplan Tokhang stories as a process of constant struggle in deciding how to stick to their journalistic duty to truthfully report on the incidents despite limitations and constraints they faced every night. Surrounded by a climate of crime and death, the four participants displayed anxiety and disappointment in what they witnessed and how they translated it in their reports. Attention and guidance from newsroom managers on how to handle the Oplan Tokhang coverage could have helped the television journalists courageously make ethical decisions. However, with their attention focused more on daily news operations, newsroom managers missed detecting the internal conflict experienced by television journalists.

In the study, the television journalists also expressed the desire to break away from restrictive coverage. The experience affected not only how they covered but also how they presented the news to the public. It is time to heed the signs to counter threats against good journalism.

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Resources

Dart Trauma Centre Asia Pacific <https://dartcenter.org/asia-pacific>
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