

**HOW RELIGION IN THE MEDIA PORTRAYS
REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH IN SECULAR STATES: ROMAN
CATHOLIC AGENDA-SETTING IN PHILIPPINE
BROADSHEETS**

by

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ABSTRACT

A media agenda-setting study was conducted to measure the coverage of reproductive health issues in a secular country with a dominant religion, using Roman Catholicism and the Philippines as a case study. A content analysis of eighty-one reproductive health stories from January to June 2008 were analyzed for topic, inclusion of Catholic reference (yes or no), and position (pro-life, pro-choice, pro-life and pro-choice, or no position). A purposeful sample of newspapers was chosen according to percent readership in the Philippines. Family planning (32.0%) and HIV/AIDS/STIs (16.0%) were the most frequently covered reproductive health topics. The majority of articles were neutral and held no position. Approximately half (50.6%) of all articles included a Catholic reference to illustrate the topic, and when these articles were analyzed further, a slight majority of these stories were positioned as pro-life. Implications of Roman Catholic agenda-setting in the media on reproductive health are discussed.

Keywords: Reproductive Health; Religion; Roman Catholic; Agenda-Setting

Subject Terms: Pro-life Movement; Birth Control; Women; Abortion

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GLOSSARY

HAIN Health Action Information Network

LGU Local Government Unit

MMC Modern Method Contraceptives

RH Reproductive Health

INTRODUCTION

The sphere of religious influence has not been limited to their institutions. Many religious ideologies have seeped into contemporary public health issues, especially those pertaining to reproductive health (RH). Strong religious convictions have the ability to influence RH policy-level decisions. Within the international arena, the Roman Catholic Church, which is the only religion to have been designated state privileges to speak and vote at United Nations conferences, has continuously used its fervour to limit the development of reproductive choice for women (Cook & Dickens, 2003; Plichtová & Petrájanošová, 2008). At the national level of countries with an official state religion, it is conventional to shape laws and social norms concerning RH with religious interpretations (Obermeyer, 1994). Egyptian law is founded on the most conservative interpretation of Islamic texts in the Qu'ran, prohibiting abortion unless there is risk to a women's life (Seif El Dawla, 2000). In principle, the Qur'an condemns the killing of humans but is not explicit about abortion. In a more liberal interpretation of Islam, Saudi Arabia permits abortion within the first 120 days after conception (argued as the time before a fetus receives a soul) (Alkuraya & Kilani, 2001).

Contrary to states with an official religious faith, secular countries are presumably neutral in matters of religion. Nonetheless, religious convictions can still influence RH policy making in countries where a dominant religion exists.

The United States, a secular yet predominantly Christian country has drawn on its dominant religious values to shape its role in global health. Former presidents who were devout Christians restricted foreign aid to international NGO's if they engaged in abortion-related activities (van Dalen & Reuser, 2006). In the secular yet predominantly Roman Catholic country Spain, the Church has been successful in securing influence over Parliament to dismiss legal approaches towards liberalizing abortion (Fleishman, 2000). Similarly, in the Philippines, strong opposition from the Catholic Church has outlawed abortion regardless of rape or in the case to save a women's life (Mello, Powlowski, Nanagas & Bossert, 2006).

The effort to insert religion into RH policy necessitates active promotion and advocacy on the part of religious representatives. Logically, media outlets are excellent venues for this. In countries with an official state religion, the portrayal of RH is presumably biased in the context of religious ideologies. However, the extent to which dominant religious ideologies influence the debate on contemporary RH issues, and manifests itself in the media to sway political opinion in secular countries is less clear.

Encountering Religion and Reproductive Health in Philippine Media

I originally became interested in the religious portrayal of RH in the media and its potential influence on reader opinion during my practicum internship in the Philippines. During my placement at Health Action Information Network (HAIN), an information-sharing non-governmental organization, I became responsible for

developing a media analysis of health topics in major Philippine broadsheets. While sifting through the numerous articles, I noticed how many articles surrounding RH issues referenced Catholic views, or advocated religious dogma within newsprint articles. Whether it was a news article highlighting how the Church would deny communion to politicians that supported liberal RH policies or opinion pieces arguing that publicly funded contraceptives would lead to the destruction of the Filipino family, it seemed to me as if the majority of articles regarding RH issues in newsprint media included a Catholic perspective. This is not to say, however, that there is no room for religious expression in the media. But that a large proportion of RH articles quoted an archdiocese or bishop on matters of RH policy surprised me for the reason that the Philippines is officially a secular state.

I raised these observations to my office mates at HAIN to learn how they viewed the salience of Catholic perspectives in newsprint articles. Similarly, they agreed that there existed an emphasis of Catholic opinions on RH topics, but regarded it as a normalcy. One office mate even felt that the Catholic perspective kept the RH debate “interesting” by including a different viewpoint. Nonetheless, HAIN staff did not wholly agree with the messages that were being published. Whereas the Church strongly advocated against public funds towards MMC, my office mates felt that the individual should be the one to decide what form of contraceptive they want to use, including abortion.

Not all Filipinos felt the same way as my HAIN officemates. I was fortunate enough to live with a Filipino family during my stay in the Philippines and used

them as a source of local information and opinion. In contrast to my university-educated office mates of HAIN, many of my home-stay family members were not as progressive. Although the majority of people I spoke to did agree that contraceptives should be more accessible and affordable for Filipinos, almost universally my interlocutors were strongly against abortion. In a more detailed conversation with a member of my home-stay family, she shared how the priest of her church strongly advocated against abortion and the movements to pass a progressive RH policy during sermons. In addition, he encouraged attendees to sign a petition against the liberal RH policy, which would be later turned into local government officials. Consequently, many churchgoers, like my home-stay family, adopt these beliefs, which directly influences their opinions on RH issues. This is not to imply, however, that people with lower education levels are slow to the uptake of RH information, or that they have been indoctrinated by the advocacy of religious representatives. Rather, this is to suggest that everyone's opinions and beliefs have been shaped differently.

Study Significance & Purpose

Although my office mates alleged that the Catholic depiction of RH was “normal”, I could not help but think that it was *abnormal*. I also wondered how the barrage of Catholic narratives could potentially influence its readers on issues concerning RH, especially politicians on RH policy. Over the years, the Philippines has grown a strong base of groups advocating towards liberalization of many RH services and introducing it through policy. However, they have faced strong opposition from the Catholic Church who appear to have a large voice,

especially in the media. I set out to measure how salient Catholic depictions of RH were in the broadsheet media. In addition, I planned to measure the salience of pro-life messages compared to pro-choice and neutral messages, and examine how the religious portrayal of RH in the media can influence the debate and potentially affect reproductive health policy outcomes.

The implications of using broadsheets as an outlet of information to the public are significant. Newsprint coverage has been shown to influence health-related decisions (Li, Chapman, Kingsley, & Eastman, 2007; Andrist, 1998), and to precede policy decisions (Sato, 2003). For this reason, the portrayal of RH issues in newsprint media can have the potential to set public agenda and possibly influence how policy makers make RH-related decisions.

The Congress of the Philippines is currently gearing up for a crucial vote on a new reproductive health bill. The bill, which includes ordinances for publicly-funded contraceptives and mandatory sex education, faces strong opposition from the Catholic Church which has a strong social and political influence in the country (House of Representatives Bill No. 17, 2008). In a recent statement to the media, the executive director of the Bishops-Legislators Caucus of the Philippines was quoted saying, “this bill dares to violate the Catholic faith, and we are a Catholic country. You can’t imagine an Islamic country bringing in a law against the Islamic faith” (Bland, 2008). The portrayal of RH in the media may be drawn towards a religious perspective by reporters who try to provide a “balanced” account, but who live in a predominantly Catholic country where Catholicism permeates Filipino culture. Consequently, extreme judgements in the

media may have the potential to affect policy ratification in a secular country. This paper uses the Philippines as a case study to further understand how a dominant religion can influence the portrayal RH in newspaper media. The study aims to quantitatively measure the salience of Catholic depictions and positions on RH through a content analysis of newspaper articles, and to discuss its potential in setting the public agenda and possibly influencing public opinion on reproductive health policy in a secular country.

BACKGROUND

Religion and Reproductive Health in the Philippines

In the Philippines, where over 82% of Filipinos are Roman Catholic (National Statistics Office [NSO], 2003), religious concerns surrounding RH and family planning have made many social policies ineffective. The country's population policy is an example of the tug of war between secularity and religion. The population policy in 1971 was the first time an ordinance was implemented that described the government's duty to control population growth in the country (Republic Act No. 6365, 1971). However, government efforts to curb fertility have faced strong opposition by the Catholic Church and have been ineffectual: the population in 2007 was over 88 million and growing at an annual rate of over 2% (National Statistics Office of the Philippines, 2007). The country has also experienced an increased incidence of induced abortion, which are in part due to the social difficulties women face obtaining modern method contraceptives (MMC) in a predominantly Catholic country (Juarez, Cabigon, Singh & Hussain, 2005).

While there exists a secular provision in the present Constitution for married couples "to found a family in accordance with their religious convictions and the demands of responsible parenthood" (Constitution of the Republic of the Philippines Article XV Section 3, 1987), the country's high fertility rate has been attributed to a low use of MMC rooted in the Catholic Church's opposition to

family planning in the policy making process (Herrín, Orbeta, Cuenca, del Prado, & Acejo, 2003; Mello, Powlowski, Nanagas, & Bossert, 2006). Former presidents have been open to various MMC in accordance to the provision (Population Council, 1997). However, the current president, Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, has said in the past that her standpoint on population is the same as that of the Catholic Church. Accordingly, she opposed direct national funding for MMC, and initiated a phase-out plan of donated contraceptives from USAID (United States Agency for International Development, 2003; David, 2003). Without a federal or centralized plan for providing family planning methods, contraceptive accessibility and affordability has become inequitable across the country.

The recent decentralization of health services has created further inequities in reproductive health. In 1991, the Local Government Code (Rep. Act. No. 7160, 1991) devolved the responsibility of health services from the national level to local government units (LGUs) (Bossert & Beauvais, 2002). Although the Department of Health retained its authority in setting general health guidelines, national funds were transferred to LGUs with broad spending discretions. This has allowed many LGU officials to exercise their own policies regarding what RH services are funded (Mello et al., 2006). For some LGUs, this has been detrimental. In 2000, the former mayor of Manila, Joselito Atienza, issued an executive order in line with his Roman Catholic beliefs to ban artificial contraceptive methods from all public health clinics to promote “responsible parenthood”. Consequently, many Filipinos have had to travel to other LGUs for reproductive health services, or obtain none at all (Tan, 2004).

Agenda-Setting Function of the Media

The media serves as a significant source of health information to the general public (Martinson & Hindman, 2005) and, specifically, news print has consistently been found to be an effective and useful channel for health communication (Nishtar, Mirza, Jehan, Badar, Yusuf, & Shahab, 2004; Pelletier, Duclos, Daly, & Kerbel, 1998; Entwistle, 1995). Consequently, it has been theorized that the media influences *what* readers think about by setting the public agenda. Whereas most research on the agenda-setting function of the media have focused on voting behaviour and attitudes toward political candidates, the theory is now increasingly being applied broadly to the field of health (Pierce, Dwyer, Chamberlain, Aldrich, & Shelly, 1987; Hacker, 1996; Sato, 2003). Research has suggested that agenda-setting in broadsheets can affect public attitudes on various health issues such as smoking and organ donation (Clegg Smith, Wakefield, Terry-McElrath, Challoupka, Flay, Johnston, Saba, & Siebel, 2008; Feely & Vincent, 2007).

The origins of agenda-setting theory initially focused on the salience of objects, which is now referred to as first-level agenda-setting. Objects are issues or topics, and are defined as the things that readers develop an attitude or opinion about. Objects have attributes, which are the traits that describe them, or shape our understanding of the object. In this study, for example, an RH issue such as “family planning” is the object, and the “Catholic narrative” used to frame the object is the attribute. In the media, some attributes are emphasized while others are ignored or reduced to minor mention. The salience of attributes in the

media is referred to as second-level agenda-setting. Whereas the media tells us *what* objects to think about in first-level agenda setting, it also tells us *how* to think about objects by attaching attributes to them in second-level agenda-setting (McCombs, 2005). Attributes have two dimensions: cognitive and affective. Cognitive attributes are the descriptions that depict the object, or 'paint' its picture for the reader. Affective attributes are the positions or tones taken on the object (i.e., positive/negative/neutral) (Kim & McCombs, 2007). In this study, for example, the "Catholic narrative" would be the cognitive attribute, and the "pro-life/pro-choice" position of the article would be the affective attribute.

Agenda-Setting by Organized Religion

Organized religion can play a significant role in setting the agenda among their followers. Within the political arena, the United States has received attention regarding the influence of religious agendas during elections. Judith Buddenbaum (2001) noted this in the 1992 presidential election when, "religious communication apparently kept abortion on the public agenda even though mass media attention was minimal. For a small number of subjects, all members of fundamentalist churches that encouraged their members to see a threat to their freedom, constitutional issues ranging from prayer in public schools to support for gun ownership where the most important issues even though those concerns were not part of media discourse about the presidential election" (p. 27).

Many religious denominations are major publishers of books and are active in magazine and newspaper media. In turn, their specialized agendas can shape the way adherents think about issues. Consequently, this can influence

the way people make decisions and carry out their personal lives (Buddenbaum, 2001). In the Philippines, Roman Catholic advocates frequently advocate the health risks of taking contraceptives to dissuade Filipino families from using MMC (CBCP News, 2008). In a national survey of married Filipina women who were not currently using birth control, the top two reasons for not using contraceptives following “wants children” (14.5%), were “has health concerns” (14.3%) and “fears side effects” (14.2%) (NSO, 2003).

Religion can also set the political agenda by dissuading politicians to vote against policies that are in conflict with their religious morals. Resistance from the Catholic Church towards passing ordinances for publicly-funded MMC is one example (Mello et al. 2006). In turn, the Philippines have experienced an unmet need for family planning (15.3% and 19.7% in urban and rural Philippines respectively) (NSO, 2003).

Broadsheet Readership in the Philippines

Broadsheet readership in the Philippines is 12% in Metro Manila and 9.4% in Urban Philippines (Philippine Media Factbook, 2007). With significant readership, newsprint media can be an important resource to increasing public awareness on health-related issues. Respondents frequently cite newspapers as being a main source of information, and sometimes a primary source of health information (Al-Almaie, 2005; Pan, Wu, Hsu, Yao, & Huang, 2002; Ndlovu & Sihlangu, 1992). Specifically, broadsheets act as an effective channel of RH information to the public in the Philippines. 40% of women ages 15-49 are reached with family planning messages through print media. Additionally, printed

media were most often cited as the main exposure to family planning messages in the rural areas Cordillera Admin Region and Eastern Visayas (NSO, 2003).

METHODS

Agenda-Setting Measures

A content analysis measured both first-level (object) and second-level (cognitive and affective attributes) agenda-setting the media used to communicate reproductive health in three major Philippine newspapers. *The Content Analysis Guidebook Online* was used as reference to conduct the content analysis (Neuendorf, 2002). The object of this study was 'reproductive health' and its sub-topics. This measured *what* issues the media compels readers think about with respect to reproductive health. To measure *how* the media influences readers to think about reproductive health issues, the frequency of the cognitive attribute (Catholic references), and the frequency of the affective attribute (pro-life, pro-choice, pro-life and pro-choice, or no position) were calculated.

Newspaper Sample

A purposeful sample of broadsheets based on percent readership in the Philippines was analyzed. According to the Association of Accredited Advertising Agencies Philippines 2007, the three daily newspapers with the highest readership and circulation were: Philippine Star, Philippine Daily Inquirer, and Manila Bulletin. A business newspaper, Business Mirror, was also included for comprehensiveness. All are printed in English.

Topic Sample

Topics on reproductive health that ran between January and June 2008 were examined from an archive of health stories collected by HAIN. Stories that pertained to health were physically cut out by staff and sorted according to month. Of all the health stories collected by HAIN staff between January and June 2008, this study examined only those stories that pertained to reproductive health. The definition of *reproductive health* used to identify reproductive health stories was the definition that HAIN reproductive health staff members operate with, and is according to the Philippines NGO Council on Population Health and Welfare Inc. The *10 Elements of Reproductive Health* include: Adolescent Reproductive & Sexual Health, Family Planning, Infertility, Maternal and Child Health, Men's Involvement in Reproductive Health, Prevention of Gynaecological Problems, Prevention and Treatment of the Complications of Abortion, Sexuality Education & Counselling, STIs and HIV & AIDS, and Violence Against Women (Philippine NGO Council on Population, Health and Welfare Inc., n.d.).

Prior to selecting the final topic sample, a pilot study of all reproductive health stories from December 2007 was drawn from the archive. The purpose of the pilot study was to develop a coding instrument, estimate the distribution of reproductive health topics, and to test the methodology of the study design. After the pilot test, the topic sample for the coding instrument included the addition of two more codes: Sexuality & Sexual Health, and General Reproductive Health. Complete definitions of codes were developed following the pilot (see Table 1).

Table 1. Reproductive Health Topic Code Definitions

Topic	Code	Definition Criteria
Adolescent Reproductive & Sexual Health	ARS	Reproduction and sexuality primarily concerned with adolescents aged 10-19 years
Family planning	FP	Birth spacing, controlling family size, contraceptives (natural and artificial)
Infertility	I	Incapability to carry pregnancy to full term, impotency
Maternal & child health	MC	Health/nutrition during pregnancy & childbirth, health/nutrition of children <5 years, child <5 years growth and development, breast-feeding, mother and child immunizations
Men's involvement in reproductive health	MRH	Family planning, sexual dysfunction, men's support for women's reproductive health, contraception
Prevention of gynaecological problems	GP	Breast, cervical, ovarian, prostate cancer
Prevention and treatment of the complications of abortion	AB	Termination of pregnant before fetal viability (22 weeks gestation), spontaneous and induced abortion
Sexuality education & counselling	SEC	Sexual education in public schools, advertising sexuality, receiving sexual information from professionals
STIs, HIV & AIDS	SHA	HIV/AIDS, reproductive tract infections
Violence against women	VAW	Gender-based physical, emotional, verbal, or sexual violence
Sexuality & sexual health	SH	Sexual orientation or, sexual discrimination as a determinant of health
General reproductive health	GR	Broad reference to reproductive health

Coder Selection and Training

The primary researcher and a research assistant coded an equal number of articles. A 5-hour training session by the primary researcher prepared the research assistant who holds a BA in Communication to manually code stories.

Coding Protocol

The coding protocol included 10 items within 3 sections. The *General Section* included publication details such as coder identification, article number, article date, article title, newspaper, and type of article. A 15-word article summary was also included in the section to focus coders on the topic (Hayes, Ross, Gasher, Gutstein, Dunn, & Hackett, 2007). The *First-Level Agenda-Setting Section* contained items of reproductive health topics to select. Stories were coded according to reproductive health topic descriptions (see Table 1). The *Second-Level Agenda Setting Section* contained cognitive and affective attributes. Coders coded stories conclusive for the cognitive attribute if stories discussed, referenced, or mentioned Catholic ideologies to describe, or frame the topic issue. Articles were further coded for the affective attribute, which included codes for pro-life, pro-choice, pro-life and pro-choice, or no stance (see Table 2).

Table 2. Catholic Narrative Definitions

Catholic Narrative/Frame	Code	Example
Discussion of conflict between reproductive health and Roman Catholic morals	Cn	The present furor over the various reproductive health bills sponsored by various senators and congressmen highlights once again the overindulgent concern the Catholic Church pays to sexual morality at the expense of more serious moral issues like the alleviation of massive poverty, the containment of overpopulation, and the prevention of AIDS. (Manila Times, July 19, 2008)
Mention of the position of the Catholic Church	Ps	Reports have it that the reaction of the Catholic Church to the two pro-reproductive health bills was negative, which led Malacanang to devolve population concerns to the local government units. (Manila Times, March 7, 2008)
Opinion or Quote from an archdiocese or bishop on issues of RH	Qt	"The reproductive health bill could be anti-constitutional, anti-life and even anti-economics". (Bishop Aniceto, Manila Times, July 15, 2008)

Table 3. News Article Position Definitions

Position	Definition/Criteria
Pro-life	Opposes abortion, family planning, contraceptives Promotes sanctity of human life and family Advocates for the right to life of the fetus/embryo/unborn
Pro-choice	Catholic moral values used as persuasive arguments Supports abortion, family planning, contraceptives Promotes informed choice on family planning Advocates right of woman to control her fertility Human rights used as persuasive arguments
Pro-life & pro-choice	Both pro-life and pro-choice positions referenced
No stance/Neutral	No position is taken Purpose of article is to inform/educate readers

A sample of 10 articles (12% of all stories) was drawn and coded by the primary researcher and research assistant to develop a measure of inter-coder reliability. Cohen's kappa coefficient (Cohen, 1960) was used to measure the agreement between coders. Reliabilities for reproductive health topics, cognitive attribute, and affective attribute were 0.68, 0.72, and 0.7 respectively.

RESULTS

First-Level Agenda-Setting

Eighty-one articles were included in the final analysis. The two most frequently cited reproductive health topics were family planning (32.0%), and HIV/AIDS/STIs (16.0%) (see Table 3). The most frequent type of article for a reproductive health story was the news article, followed by column (see Table 4).

Table 4. Frequency of Reproductive Health Topics

Topic	Frequency	% (of total)
Adolescent reproductive & sexual health	2	2.46%
Family planning	26	32.0%
Infertility	0	0%
Maternal & child health	8	9.87%
Men's involvement in reproductive health	2	2.46%
Prevention of gynaecological problems	5	6.17%
Prevention and treatment of the complications of abortion	4	4.93%
Sexuality education & counselling	7	8.64%
STIs & HIV & AIDS	13	16.0%
Violence against women	0	0%
Sexuality & sexual health	10	12.3%
General reproductive health	4	4.93%

Table 5. Frequency of Article Type

Article Type	Frequency	% (of total)
News	53	65.4%
Feature	7	8.64%
Column	16	19.7%
Letter to Editor/Opinion	5	6.17%

Second-Level Agenda-Setting

All articles were coded for the affective attribute, or overall position (pro-life/pro-choice/pro-life & pro-choice/no position) (see Table 6). The majority of articles (n=35) were neutral and took no position. The largest single position was pro-choice (n=21), although by a small margin. All stories were also coded for the inclusion of a Catholic cognitive attribute. Approximately half of all articles (50.6%) contained the attribute to describe reproductive health issues. Articles containing this attribute were separately analyzed for an overall position. Among articles positive for the Catholic cognitive attribute, a minor shift in position frequency was detected such that the pro-life voice became slightly larger. Of these articles, the largest single position was pro-life (n=17), although again by a small margin (see Table 6). All pro-life articles contained a Catholic cognitive attribute. Among all pro-life articles (n=17), news articles were the most frequent type of article (64.7%) (see Table 5).

Table 6. Frequency of Position for Articles

Position	All Stories (n=81)	Stories Including Catholic Cognitive Attribute (n=41)
Pro-life	17	17
Pro-choice	21	14
Pro-life & pro- choice	8	8
No position	35	2

Table 7. Frequency of Pro-Life Articles According to Article Type

Article Type	f (n=17)	Frequency
News	11	64.7%
Feature	1	5.88%
Column	3	17.6%
Letter to the editor	2	11.7%

DISCUSSION

This study quantitatively measured the frequency of RH topics and their religious framing to examine how a dominant religion might influence the debate on RH issues through its manifestation in newsprint media. This is the first time a study has measured agenda-setting attributes of religion in broadsheet health articles. Moreover, this is the first study to measure these attributes in the context of Roman Catholicism and RH.

The media has the power to choose which topics reach the public. In turn, the media has been suggested to influence what the public perceives are the day's most pressing issues (McCombs, 2005). Newsprint, therefore, are crucial to the public construction of reality regarding the importance of a country's RH issues by making some issues more salient than others. The most obvious way the media highlights selected topics is by publishing a greater quantity of stories on the issue.

In this study, Family Planning, HIV/AIDS/STIs, and Maternal and Child Health were the most frequently covered RH topics in the archive of news articles. According to the National Statistics Office (2003), the health challenges of the country continue to be family planning, maternal and child health, and HIV/AIDS awareness. Therefore, *what* the media are conveying people to think about are aligned with what the government perceives are the RH problems of the country, and are making the public agenda. This relationship, however, should

not be considered close and direct. There may be other reasons as to why the media are making these issues more salient. Family Planning, HIV/AIDS/STIs, and Maternal and Child Health are also topics complicated with Catholic moral issues of the country's predominant religion. By virtue of being in a country with a dominant religion, the media may be reporting RH according to what the Church believes is important rather than the government for the reason that Catholicism is so pervasive to Filipino culture. These issues may also be receiving more attention for the reason that they are implicated with the controversial Reproductive Health Bill. The bill, which is surrounded with religious debate and possibly sensationalism, has received notable attention from the media in recent years.

The melodramatic reporting of stories may also reflect the Philippines recent liberty in reporting the news. Since the lift of martial law in 1981, freedom of the press has become a Filipino journalist's most prized possession. Originating from this new wave of democratization, the *Philippine Daily Inquirer* and the *Philippine Star* emerged as a watchdog to corrupt governments. As Hofileña (2005) illustrates, "The importance of individual rights, including the freedom of expression and the freedom of assembly, are heightened as seen in the recent exchanges reported in the media over the right of protesters to rally close to the presidential palace." (p.50). Although one of its most central values is exposing the truth, it has also been criticized for being too negative, thriving on conflict, and generating sensationalism around stories (Hofileña, 2005). The ASIAN Institute of Journalism (1983) asserts, "there is also today a growing and

paranoid preoccupation of media with sex and violence. The general impression is that of a nation soaked in crime, of life being dirt cheap, of morals gone loose if not berserk, of a Roman Catholic civilization losing its spiritual bearings” (p.312).

News media are ultimately driven by what sells, and the sensationalism surrounding religious morals of many RH issues with the country’s predominant religion may be driving how RH stories are portrayed. This *health hype* phenomenon described by Signorielli (1993), asserts that the media are driven to publish stories according to what sells and entertains. To capitalize on this, the media may be dramatizing the religious debate by narrating reproductive health with Catholic frames. In this study, over half of all articles contained a Catholic cognitive attribute, indicating that Catholic references are frequently employed by the media to frame RH issues to the Filipino public.

Including Catholic frames can lead to highlighting strong religious opinions, such as the pro-life stance. However, the pro-life stance did not dominate RH discourse in newsprint media in this study, as the majority of articles held no position. This may be because the majority of RH stories were news articles which were consistently found to be neutral. When analyzing articles that included Catholic narratives, however, there was a shift in the frequency of positions such that a larger proportion of articles were pro-life. Many articles that held Catholic frames were opinion pieces, which may explain the pronounced pro-life voice in stories with a Catholic cognitive attribute. In addition, all pro-life stories included a Catholic cognitive attribute (17/17), suggesting that

the Catholic Church can act to influence the RH debate towards the pro-life perspective, which is manifested through broadsheet media.

Another way the media makes issues salient is by arranging stories in news articles. A news article is a late-breaking layout of information, usually found on the first page of a newspaper. Therefore, it can be the first, and sometimes the only article someone reads, making it a prime agenda-setting location within broadsheets. The majority of RH stories in this study were featured as this type, suggesting that RH is accurately being kept on the public agenda according to what the government perceives are the country's RH problems. However, this relationship may be confounded with the business of media. News articles are usually one of the first stories readers see and has the potential persuade the reader to continue or discontinue reading. Therefore, the media may be trying to attract readers by capitalizing on the sensationalism to make a profit. One indication that this may be the case is that the majority of Catholic, pro-life articles were saliently featured as a news articles.

The salience of any Catholic framing in the media is significant. The media has the potential to set the public agenda by influencing *what* RH issues people think about and *how* they think about them. Although it appears that the media is precisely reporting an unbiased account of *what* RH issues are important, the Catholic Church is an active player in influencing the RH debate. Consequently, when the media tries to present a "balanced" perspective, they may be habituating readers to understand RH issues with reference to Catholic frames.

Limitations

There are several limitations to this study, which are derived from the procedures of data collection. The study only analyzed stories between January and June 2008, which may have not been a long enough time period to generalize conclusions. Stories in the news media tend to be specific to a time period and fluctuate in topic depending on recent events. The short duration of the study however, may have underestimated the impact. In the months following June 2008, there was an increase in newsprint coverage on the attempt to pass the controversial Reproductive Health Bill to the next stage in congress, which may have increased the coverage of reproductive health and its attributes if the study was continued.

This study used a purposeful sample that excluded newspapers due to low readership, which limits its external validity. In addition, there may be systematic biases such as age, education level, social class, knowledge of reading the English language, and regional residence, which may differentiate the readers of these newspapers compared to the rest of the population. With the increase of reading newspapers such as the *Manila Times* online, however, readership may not only be restricted to the city or region of a particular newspaper.

The study measured agenda setting solely by counting the frequency of objects and attributes regardless of their original location in the newspaper, or contributing author. The original placement of the articles was unknown for the reason that they were previously cut out of the broadsheet and filed. In some

articles such as commentary or columns, there were regular authors who consistently wrote on the same issue and held the same view. This study did not adjust for the contribution of regular authors, but focused on the crude rate of first and second-level agenda setting. Qualitative differences such as speech, interviews or images of RH articles were not recorded. Therefore, the lack of this data may not capture the overall impact a story has on its reader. Conversely, it is assumptive to suggest that readers will always be impacted by what they read. Moreover, the effect of reading an RH article, especially with a religious position may not always be the same to each reader.

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Religious Agenda-Setting in Secular State Policy Making

Secularity is the state of being separate from religion. Despite countries who officially declare secularity, if a dominant religion exists, it can still act to influence the debate and potentially, set public agenda and the policy-making process. The media is one channel through which religion can disseminate and potentially sway a politician's opinion, especially on RH policy. By narrating RH articles with Catholic frames, politicians may come to believe that RH is always associated with religious taboo themes and be inclined to treat them as so--taboo, or outlawed. Despite a country's secularity, politicians may also be inclined to overlook the secular law and develop or pass policies according to what some believe is the natural law.

Consequently, there can be serious consequences for the public when policy makers are swayed by religious perspectives. Politicians have the ultimate say on broad policies that affect their citizen's well-being. In the case of RH policy, this could mean access to essential RH services such as MMC or post-abortion services. However, when the verdict of policies are determined by religion, the citizens of a secular country lose their ability to make an informed choice when it comes to making their own health-related decisions.

Future Research

It is assumptive to suggest that the content of news stories directly influences public and policy opinion on RH. Like the majority of agenda-setting studies, this study does not examine both the RH newsprint content and the attitudes of its readers. This study, however, should be used as preliminary data to inform and guide future research. Findings suggest that a significant portion of RH articles carry a Catholic cognitive attribute, and that when stories carry this attribute, overall positions become more pronounced. It would be informative to know how much Catholic framing of stories is indeed influencing the public agenda and public perceptions of RH, as well as possibly RH policy. In this case, it would be interesting to examine the trends in RH newspaper articles and correlate them with public opinion or stages of administrative policy-making.

Implications for Reproductive Health in the Philippines

Despite the Philippines' secularity, religion and religious affiliation still play a role in the policy-making process. Currently, the Reproductive Health Bill is tipping toward being rejected by voting members in the House and Senate. Many public service officials must chose to support or reject this bill, which conflicts with their religious beliefs. In a country with a history of tug of war between religion and secularity, any slight advantage in media advocacy could have the potential to sway a policy maker's decision. Although Philippine reports both pro-life and pro-choice opinions, there is exists harsh criticism from the Catholic Church towards many liberal movements in RH. In a statement regarding the RH

bill, the Catholic's Bishop Council of the Philippines referred to the proposed law as 'anti-life' (CBCP News, 2008).

With my experience in the Philippines, there seemed to be a normalcy to address RH issues with religious narratives and judgements. Nevertheless, there are legitimate, religious moral issues surrounding abortion and contraception that deserve attention. However, consistent references to Catholic frames, many of which are pro-life, could act to influence the debate and ultimately, policy makers to vote in accordance with the religious agenda, limiting the citizens of a secular country from making an informed decision regarding their own health.

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