A Semiotic Analysis of Five News Stories in the Philippine Daily Inquirer and the Philippine Star

MARIA ELENA C. REYES
MARY ANN T. GALDO
REEHAM B. MABANDUS
TIZZIANA M. MOJICA
KIRK R. CARVERO

Abstract - The study shed light on how the Philippine Daily Inquirer and The Philippine Star differ in their treatment of each controversial news story. Specifically, it determined the (1) the narrative codes employed by the Inquirer and The Philippine Star, (2) how they treat each controversial issue, and the (3) implications of the uses of these narrative codes in highlighting controversial issues on the journalistic practices of Filipino news writers. The researchers selected and examined carefully five (5) similar news stories from the Philippine Daily Inquirer and The Philippine Star, namely: Maguindanao Massacre, Hostage Fiasco, Acquittal of Webb and et al., Car traders’ murder, and Angelo Reyes’ suicide. In analyzing the news stories, the researchers employed the comparative semiotic analysis. They set a common time to read the news stories and studied carefully the treatment of each code. Afterwards, selected texts were carefully analyzed and interpreted based on how it would affect the Filipino readers. The narrative codes used by the Philippine Daily Inquirer and the Philippine Star were the linguistic style, typography style, and the graphic style. The linguistic style is employed in the selected texts of each news story, in the form of camaraderie, familiarity, informality, connotation and denotation. Also, the typography style, bold typeface headings, and one-word subheadings and the graphic style, camera
angle, shot size, composition, focus and light. As revealed in each of the news articles analyzed, the Philippine Daily Inquirer and The Philippine Star have an inherent style in writing their news stories. However, the use of these codes revealed excesses in journalistic practices, veering away from objectivity, fairness, and balance. The connotations produced by the selected texts are based on the Filipino culture. The complacent use of figurative or colloquial expressions can distort the real score of the event, and it can portray a different scenario compared to what really happened. Nonetheless, it cautions the writers to avoid using informal languages in writing their news stories so to gain the reader’s trust and confidence. Lastly, the depiction of the use of sensationalized languages may suggest a possibility of compromising objectivity in journalistic practice.

**Keywords** - Semiotic Analysis, new stories, journalism, linguistic style

**INTRODUCTION**

In the Martial Law era, suppression of the then national dailies was felt by the Filipino nation. Media ownership was resting on few oligarchs and cronies who were under control of the state. After the martial law era, the growth of the news media has been given the added boost with the change of the government led by the country’s first woman President Mrs. Corazon Aquino and later by President Fidel V. Ramos which was spurred by the Ninoy Aquino’s assassination. This led to the birth and proliferation of newspapers in a free market flow of ideas. As a result, there was a wide range of choices of newspapers, with various titles, editions, styles, orientations, slants, formats, and sizes. One of them is the *Philippine Daily Inquirer*. This era of newspaper printing is characterized by freedom and responsibilities, as more and more Philippine newspapers now express their fearless views for and against the Philippine government.

While undergoing significant changes in content and appearance, the print media channels such as newspapers reflect basic principles developed by generations of editors, the gathering and impartial presentation of news, and the interpretation of that news on the editorial page. Newspapers are a fundamental source of information. They continue to feed and reinforce messages. They deliver news to
the nation, make an analysis and commentary on the day’s news, give entertainment, forecast business trends, record local community news, among other significant and timely events.

Newspapers have changed dramatically in appearance during the past quarter century. Today only a few retain the format of eight narrow columns to a page, which creates a vertical stripe effect. Instead, most use six wider columns arranged in modular style on the page or spread horizontally under headlines running several columns wide. Graphics experts are experimenting with other combinations of type, pictures and color, seeking ways to make pages more eye-catching without complicating production methods so much that deadlines cannot be met.

From a wide perspective, the quality of the newspaper is reflected in the editorial policy. Faced with the increasing complexity and breadth of the news, editors and writers are looking into today’s methods of telling tomorrow’s news. Present-day practices require a packaging process of squaring the newspaper content and format with the needs and demands of the readers.

*The Philippine Daily Inquirer and The Philippine Star* are among the competing broadsheets in the country. They both claim to be number one in terms of readership for the sake of greater revenues and also had caused dispute among the readers as they question the measure of integrity or credibility—which can be determined through objectively analyzing the implications of the selected texts. Thus, it is deemed necessary to determine the narrative codes of the *Philippine Daily Inquirer and The Philippine Star*, in order to observe any practice of either sensationalism or journalistic objectivity in their news articles.

The Philippine Daily Inquirer and The Philippine Star have employed narrative codes that served as the trademark for each newspaper firm. The narrative codes are interpreted differently by different kinds of readers under different kinds of circumstances (Berelson, 1986), which opens variety of interpretations on the same news item. Since the strong opinions of the readers dictate what the journalists should write and what type of content they should provide, thus both media organizations ensued narrative codes which served as their guide in writing news articles.

The purpose of the study was to determine the narrative codes employed by the Philippine Daily Inquirer and The Philippine Star,
how they treat controversial issues, and the role of Philippine culture that served as the foundation of the connotative definition within a journalistic text.

**OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

The main purpose of this study was to investigate the narratives codes of the selected texts on controversial issues of the Philippine Daily Inquirer and The Philippine Star. Specifically, this study determined (1) how the Philippine Daily Inquirer and The Philippine Star employ the narrative codes in publishing controversial news stories, in terms of linguistic, typography and graphic styles; (2) how the Philippine Daily Inquirer and The Philippine Star treat the controversial issues regarding Maguindanao Massacre, Hostage Fiasco, Acquittal of Webb and et al., Car traders’ murder and Angelo Reyes’ suicide; and (3) the implications of the uses of these narrative codes in highlighting controversial issues on the journalistic practices of Filipino news writers.

**MATERIALS AND METHODS**

The study employed a qualitative research design employing descriptive semiotic analysis. The principal method of discovering the narrative codes of the news items on the Philippine Daily Inquirer and The Philippine Star is through semiotic analysis. By semiotic analysis, the researchers analyzed selected texts and interpreted connotative meanings as presented to a Filipino reader in the controversial issues: “Maguindanao Massacre”, “Manila hostage fiasco”, “Acquittal of Webb and others”, “Car traders’ murder”, and “Angelo Reyes’ suicide. In Problem 1, the researchers examined how the Philippine Daily Inquirer and The Philippine Star employed the following narrative codes in publishing controversial news stories. For Problem 2, how the Philippine Daily Inquirer and The Philippine Star treat the following controversial issues. Moreover, the answers to Problem 3 determined the implications of the uses of these narrative codes in highlighting controversial issues to the journalistic practices of Filipino news writers.

Copies of five selected news articles from the Philippine Daily
Inquirer and The Philippine Star, were procured from the library archive. The analysis of the texts was made on Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday of the week. Possible connotations of the texts were being noted.

The comparison is made through analyzing the writing style of the lead paragraph, the headline and the front page photographs, and meticulously scrutinizing the meaning of a particular word, a particular phrase, a particular sentence, or a particular paragraph, and eventually come up with any possible suggestive meaning that would imply familiarity, camaraderie and informality in a newspaper story.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

How the Philippine Daily Inquirer and The Philippine Star employ the narrative codes in publishing controversial news stories, in terms of linguistic, typography and graphic styles

In terms of linguistic style, both the Philippine Daily Inquirer and The Philippine Star employed codes of familiarity, as evidenced by their direct and indirect attributions or citations from their news sources. In quoting the name of the sources both the Philippine Daily Inquirer and The Philippine Star were observed to have been practicing professionalism.

In some instance, The Philippine Star was found to be more objective in writing their news story, while the Philippine Daily Inquirer was observed to have employed dramatic language. However, in the lead paragraph of their news story— particularly the Manila hostage fiasco, it was observed that the Philippine Daily Inquirer employed a journalistic language, while The Philippine Star employed an orally-based language.

In the typography style, both the Philippine Daily Inquirer and The Philippine Star has employed an engaging font typeface, however, The Philippine Star employs a briefer headline compared to the Inquirer. The Philippine Daily Inquirer has been observed being inconsistent in employing a single typeface on their main headline. It either uses Gill sans MT or Baskerville Old Face. The Philippine Star, on the other hand, uses a single typeface, which is Franklin Gothic Heavy. Nevertheless, on their major sub-headings, the Philippine Daily Inquirer has been
observed using Garamond typeface aside from the Times New Roman, while, *The Philippine Star* has been observed using Times New Roman consistently. On their narrative stories, both the *Philippine Daily Inquirer* and *The Philippine Star* uses Times New Roman; while, both used Arial and Times New Roman on their bylines.

**Graphic Style**

**A. Maguindanao Massacre**

The *Philippine Daily Inquirer’s* photograph (Figure 1) shows an army tank going away from camera’s direction and beside the picture is a map which gave a trace on where the crime happened; the army tank was taken on a wide shot at eye-level, and the camera was distant from the tank, and seems like it was shot with a standard lens since it gives a balanced image. This connotes objectiveness because it showed army men carrying their arsenal of ammunition are on their way to Maguindanao where the massacre took place as cited on the map. However, we are on the eye level of the two army tank which connotes that the reader was an apparent observer of the scenery. Therefore, there is an everyday feeling to the photograph as we view it in the public sphere with a degree of objectiveness.

The Philippine Daily Inquirer’s front-page photograph is a symmetrical and static composition. It is static as the angle of the tank shows naturalness and it doesn’t disorient the reader/viewer. Therefore, the composition gives the picture a natural, everyday sense. The photograph is in selective focus since it only focused only on the army tanks, and the lighting is natural and in bright (high key).
This is in contrast with The Philippine Star’s photograph (Figure 2) that shows the army tank in close-up and has been taken with a telephoto lens, which makes the image more dramatic and emphasizes the action of the army men. The Philippine Star also employed an angle that is high, which connotes a more subjective view that places the viewer in a position of weakness and inferiority, while it places the army men in a position of power and superiority.

The Philippine Star’s front-page photograph is also a symmetrical, static composition. However, The Philippine Star’s photograph is in deep focus and contrast, since it displays a larger picture compared to that of the Philippine Daily Inquirer’s; the lighting is in dark (low-key). This dark background and contrast of the photo connotes somberness, and the deep focus employed gives more drama to the news story.
B. Hostage Fiasco

The Philippine Daily Inquirer’s photograph (Figure 3) shows Senior Rolando Mendoza who stands at the entrance of a bus with a Chinese national on the window with a medium long shot, and his photograph below with a bust shot wearing a police uniform. This connotes a disrespectful attitude towards his profession. The bus was taken on a low angle and the camera was distant away from the bus.

![Figure 3](image)

Figure 3. The front page photograph of the Philippine Daily Inquirer

However, the Philippine Daily Inquirer’s take is in contrast with The Philippine Star’s photograph (Figure 5) which shows an extreme close-up of the bus and the police forces. It was shot from the point of view of the assault team. The bloody incident was carried over into the picture. The picture showed a gory scene of the dead body of Mendoza hanging on the door of the bus after he was shot by snipers.

![Figure 4](image)

Figure 4. The front page photograph of The Philippine Star
C. Acquittal of Webb and Others

The Philippine Daily Inquirer’s front-page photograph (Figure 5) shows the devastated face of Lauro Vizconde (upper-left), facing to the left where frame-like photographs of murdered Estrellita, Carmela and Jennifer were placed, which connotes sentimentality. Lauro Vizconde’s photo was taken at medium close-up at eye level, and the pictures of the three victims are obviously composed. This connotes subjectiveness since it invokes the readers to sympathize with Mr. Vizconde.

Moreover, on the center of the front-page spread showed the face of Hubert Webb, facing away from the camera with a smiling face. The photo of Webb was taken on a close-up shot at eye level, and it is probably shot with a standard lens. This connotes objectiveness, since a suspect who gives a carefree gesture can infuriate some readers. Also, adjacent to the photo of Webb showed indexical composition of pictures of the Senior and Associate Justices in the Supreme Court. On the center-left were ‘for acquittal’, while on the center-right were ‘against acquittal’, and in the middle of the Justices’ pictures. This connotes objectiveness since it brings the reader to have a fair judgment between Vizconde and Webb.

The Philippine Daily Inquirer’s front-page photograph is also a symmetrical, static composition since the subjects are in the middle of the frame, and on the level. The photograph is also in selective focus since it viewed not only one subject but they explored more to other subjects involved in the story. The photograph of L. Vizconde is in low-key and contrast, while Webb’s photo is in a high-key and contrast. This implies that L. Vizconde was in great sorrow which resulted from the ‘not-guilty’ verdict of Webb and other freemen, while Webb was in high spirits.

Figure 5. The front page photograph of the Philippine Daily Inquirer
In contrast, **The Philippine Star’s** photograph (Figure 6) shows Hubert Webb with his father at his back, also facing away from the camera, and the photo of L. Vizconde in great anguish on the bottom-right edge of Webb’s photo. The photo was taken on a medium-close up/over-the-shoulder shot, a low-angle shot, with a wide lens, which makes it more theatrical. The background color of the picture is dark (low key) and has a sharper light in the foreground which connotes that Hubert Webb has finally come out from a dark world, which is prison. The photo was also taken at on wide shot.

The Philippine Star’s front-page photograph is asymmetrical, slightly dynamic as two people are slightly to the other side of the body. It is slightly dynamic as the angle of Webb and his father is off the horizon and therefore disorientates the reader/viewer. Therefore, the composition is slightly disorientating, as the low-angle shot bends the horizontal and vertical lines of vision.

![Figure 6. The front page photograph of The Philippine Star](image)

**D. Car traders’ murder**

The **Philippine Daily Inquirer’s** front-page photograph (Figure 7) showed the picture of Angelo Reyes during the first cabinet meeting, putting his bare hands on his face, while, the picture of Venson Evangelista was placed on the jump page. The front-page photo was taken in wide-shot at eye-level and with a standard lens. The photo of V. Evangelista was procured from Facebook, as mentioned by the journalist(s) in the news story.

Moreover, the front-page photograph employed by the Philippine
Daily Inquirer is an asymmetrical, dynamic composition, as the photo doesn’t produce any feelings of surprise or shock. It is purely dynamic as the chosen photograph disorients the reader, since the photo relates neither with the banner headline which talks about Lauro Vizconde’s junked appeal nor the Car traders ‘murder. Their choice of front-page photo connotes objectiveness since the ‘Car traders’ murder’ news story was not the Philippine Daily Inquirer’s major news; the chosen picture also created an atmosphere of authority on the side of the photo editor, since it had given a little emphasis on the two major headlines, ‘The Car traders’ murders: Even Satan will be horrified’ and ‘SC junks Vizconde appeal’. The photograph is in deep focus since it views everyone adjacent to Angelo Reyes’ right side, and the lighting is in high-key but unnatural since the photo was shot indoors.

![Image of Daily Inquirer front page]

**Figure 7. The front page photograph of the Philippine Daily Inquirer**

This is in contrast with The Philippine Star’s front page photograph (Figure 8) which shows Venson Evangelista sitting on the front-side of his car wearing an army-like suite with a gun in his hand. The photo
seems to be procured from the family’s photo-album. It was taken in a wide-shot at eye-level, with a standard lens. The photograph is slightly an asymmetrical, slightly dynamic composition as the subject is to one side of the frame, and produces an everyday, natural feeling. It is slightly dynamic because the gun in his hand intrigues the reader about his work as a car dealer and possible hobby. The photo is in deep focus as it includes the other car parked behind the car where Evangelista is sitting.

![Figure 8. The front page photograph of The Philippine Star](image)

**E. Angelo Reyes’ suicide**

The **Philippine Daily Inquirer**’s front-page photograph (Figure 9) shows the gravestone of Purificacion Reyes (the mother of Angelo Reyes), stained with the remains of spattered blood and on the upper right showed the picture of Angelo Reyes. The photo was taken in close-up and with a standard lens, which connotes a feeling of sympathy. The photograph is in deep focus as it showed the entire perimeter or sides of the gravestone; also taken in high angle which connotes sympathy to the bereaved family or to the victim. It has a natural lighting and carries a bright light (high key), which connotes realism. It also has an asymmetrical and dynamic composition. It is asymmetrical since it allows the readers to relate the picture of Reyes located on the upper-left and the photo of the gravestone in the middle of the frame, and dynamic because the high-angle shot brings the observer to a looking-down position.
The Philippine Star’s front-page photograph (Figure 10) also shows the same gravestone, yet they used different elements that would signify their headline, and also a picture of Reyes in uniform. The photo was taken in extreme-close-up shot and high angle, and probably taken with a telescopic lens, which makes the news story more sentimental. The photograph is in selective focus as it emphasizes only a few words from the engraved quote that has been spattered with blood, and in a dark light (low key) which connotes somberness or sorrow. It uses the same asymmetrical and dynamic composition as the Philippine Daily Inquirer.
How the Philippine Daily Inquirer and The Philippine Star treat the controversial issues regarding Maguindanao Massacre, Hostage Fiasco, Acquittal of Webb and et al., Car traders’ murder and Angelo Reyes’ suicide

Like the constitutional provisions, the media also have their own principles in writing their articles, as they are mandated to inform the reading public about the present issues while mindful on their social responsibility and economic survival. Nonetheless, in the context of their writing, they have a great tendency to sensationalize the papers in an effort to attract more readers. Thus, it is deemed necessary to know how the journalists of the Philippine Daily Inquirer and The Philippine Star treat the following articles, in order to ascertain if they still practice the golden rules of journalism such as, fairness or balance and objectivity.

Generally, the Philippine Daily Inquirer and The Philippine Star has provided lots of sources or attributions to support their news stories. Hence, they tend to practice professionalism and objectivity in writing their news stories. However, the Philippine Daily Inquirer’s use of informal language, such as figurative expression (e.g. Even Satan will be horrified), can produce different interpretations other than the one intended as in literal understanding of the words. The Philippine Star on the other hand has treated their news stories with objectivity, since it directly provides all the needed information in one glance.

Moreover, the Philippine Daily Inquirer has a more promising headline compared to The Philippine Star. Their headline gives full warranty to what was written in their news stories, however, The Philippine Star was observed in one controversial issue that they have treated the headline with texts that overstates other than what was implied by the incident.

Lastly, in their graphics, the Philippine Daily Inquirer is more objective than The Philippine Star since it places pictures related with the main headline and other headlines. The Philippine Star is more subjective in their choice because they can relay somberness or sorrow or human drama in general as depicted in their choice of photograph.
The implications of the uses of these narrative codes in highlighting controversial issues on the journalistic practices of Filipino news writers

Both the *Philippine Daily Inquirer* and The Philippine Star share the same narrative codes. However, it was observed that they differ in style in employing such codes. Their style in using the language can either be formal or informal. In some instances, *The Philippine Star* was observed using orally based language in their text, while the *Philippine Daily Inquirer* used a journalistic language. In other cases, the *Philippine Daily Inquirer* was observed using dramatic language, while *The Philippine Star* used an objective type of language.

Moreover, in terms of familiarity with the events, such as writing follow-up issues, it was observed that both newspapers are well-informed and adept in writing their news stories. Also, the attributions of the news sources have been written professionally.

Through time, Filipino news writers have done away in writing purely straight-news. This can be seen in the selected texts in the news stories of the *Philippine Daily Inquirer*. Perhaps, the *Philippine Daily Inquirer* has enjoyed wide readership by making their news stories more like a feature news story, rather than a straight-news story, which has been the traditional way in writing newspapers. However, people’s liking of purely straight-news stories has died out simply because the ideals of the Filipino society have changed; perhaps some wanted to be entertained, more than being informed.

Nevertheless, *The Philippine Star* which has employed a straightforward kind of writing, wherein the 5W’s and 1H can be seen in the beginning paragraphs. Presumably, The Philippine Star’s avid readers are people who want the story being told in a concise manner.

The narrative codes of each newspaper industry guide the writers in what manner they have to write the stories about a certain controversial issue, which the readers themselves had already known about since it is the ‘talk of the society’. One should realize that these codes are not intended to clarify any ambiguity, rather these codes are purportedly employed to communicate to the readers on what they need to know.

However, each code is not independent with the other codes since a single code alone cannot communicate the desired intent. Seeing the photographs alone can produce a meaning, but relating the photograph
with the news story makes it more meaningful. However, in one instance the *Philippine Daily Inquirer*’s front page photograph doesn’t relate with the substance of the banner and the umbrella headline which is very unusual in a newspaper layout. Thus, the headlines would make no sense if the news story doesn’t have any connection, since the narrative codes are interdependent, and intertextual, meaning every text is interrelated with the preceding and succeeding texts.

As part of the journalistic practices of the Filipino writers, they are bound to write their news stories in an objective manner; however, in one way or another, the writers are found to be subjective in their writing. They have the tendency to insert their own judgments or emotions in a news story, thus made some of the story sensational. In spite of the journalistic practices wherein objectivity, is concerned, it is evident that sometimes the Filipino writers tend to be subjective in their writings. Human as they are, they employ words that are based on their feelings.

As such, Ramirez (1989) cited that a true journalist cannot stay aloof from and unaffected by the unhappy condition of the time and place, the country and people. He also added that more than just the ability to write, it is the ability to understand and to feel that makes up the vital credentials of a true journalist.

To sum it up, as long as the writers of the *Philippine Daily Inquirer* and *The Philippine Star* write with honest motives, wherein integrity is concerned, it would be easy for the readers to accept and believe their credibility in writing news stories.

**CONCLUSION**

Indeed, the Filipino culture has something to do on how Filipinos interpret a single word, sentence or a statement, because the meaning of word may vary from one reader to another depending on his/her cultural orientation. And that meaning is so deeply entwined in their native minds that may result to varying interpretation of the information given to them through what they read in the news.

The Filipinos value *kompañero system* which is inherent in every Filipino may also affect the way they write about the subjects. Despite of the ‘Bahalana’ attitude, it is surprising that most of the writers from the *Philippine Daily Inquirer* and *The Philippine Star* still demonstrate
‘delikadeza’ in writing a news story as observed in their use of narrative codes.

However, one has to consider also that every newspaper industry has its own style of employing words, choosing photographs and even in the use of font typeface that journalists have to abide with regardless of their own preferences. But one thing that is common between the two newspapers is their purpose to inform or educate the readers about the current issues that would affect the society, and the economy, while taking into heart the Philippine Journalists’ Code of Ethics.

RECOMMENDATIONS

From the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made:

1. Other researchers may combine both quantitative and qualitative design in the gathering and interpretation of data.
2. Future researchers may also use tabloid newspapers as their material for semiotic analysis.
3. Other techniques of interpretation (e.g. narrative analysis, genre theory, and content analysis), may be used.
4. Journalists should avoid the use of figurative expressions in writing their news story, so as not to give a false impression on the story itself.
5. Future researchers should conduct further studies on other newspapers using the semiological approach on objectivity.

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