

# Vaccine Hesitancy and the Cultural Politics of Trust in the Dengvaxia Controversy: A Critical Discourse-Ethnographic Study of Online News Content, Producers, and Audiences

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Vaccine hesitancy refers to the delay in acceptance or refusal of vaccination despite vaccine availability. At its very core lies the problem of trust. Yet, there is very little research on the role of trust in vaccine hesitancy, particularly concerning its ideological dimension. This research aims to describe and explore how the online news discourse on the Dengvaxia vaccine controversy legitimizes a particular trust culture in Philippine society. For this purpose, the research adopts the theory of social trust propounded by the Polish sociologist Piotr Sztompka and links it to the study of news media using critical discourse analysis. This research is an interdisciplinary project that adopts various concepts and lenses from sociology, linguistics, media studies, and public health.

**Keywords:** Critical Discourse Analysis; Dengvaxia Controversy; Philippines; Trust; Vaccine Hesitancy



## INTRODUCTION

The Dengvaxia controversy is a public health controversy in the Philippines concerning the use of the Dengvaxia vaccine for dengue that was produced by the French pharmaceutical company, Sanofi Pasteur. After reports circulated alleging that several children had died because of the vaccine, the Philippines Department of Health (DOH) suspended the school-based vaccination program in late November, 2017. Following this, the company stated that its vaccine posed a greater risk to people who had not yet contracted Dengue (Grady & Thomas, 2017).

In the succeeding years, the Public Attorney's Office (PAO), led by its chief attorney Persida Acosta, continued to rally against what they saw as a corrupt medical establishment with close ties to the government, who, by use of their positions, prevented justice from being served to parents who had lost their children to the vaccine. There is still no available evidence suggesting a causal link between the vaccine and children's deaths but PAO continues to conduct autopsies of children's bodies to discredit expert claims delinking children's deaths from

the vaccines.<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, it has been shown that the controversy resulted in growing “vaccine hesitancy” at the community level, most especially among Filipino parents (Larson, Hartigan-Go, & de Figueiredo, 2019; Valido, Laksanawati, & Utarini, 2018).

Vaccine hesitancy refers to the “delay in acceptance or refusal of vaccination despite availability of vaccination services” (MacDonald, 2015, p. 4163). Vaccine-hesitant individuals are those people who reside somewhere in the middle of a continuum between complete vaccine rejection and complete vaccine acceptance (Larson, Jarrett, Eckersberger, Smith, & Paterson, 2014). In short, vaccine-hesitant individuals are vaccine doubters. A key issue in vaccine hesitancy then is *trust* – in vaccine efficacy and safety, the vaccination system that delivers it, and the motivations of policymakers who make vaccine-related decisions (MacDonald, 2015).

A relatively neglected area in the vaccine hesitancy literature is its ideological dimension.<sup>2</sup> Since most studies examining the role of media in vaccine hesitancy have taken-off from a transmission view of communication, the focus has been on the behavioral effects of exposure to health-related messages through everyday media use or strategic media use for health promotion and education (Viswanath, 2008). Questions about the ideological aspects of communication that emphasize the social construction of realities in and through the media are put aside in favor of concerns about information transmission and social control. To argue for the centrality of trust in vaccine hesitancy, while also emphasizing the ideological aspects of health communication, my research aims to describe and explore how a particular trust culture in Philippine society is legitimized through the news discourse on the Dengvaxia controversy. In support of this, the research will be guided by the following objectives:

- document and describe the linguistic and visual semiotic resources used in representing social actors and their actions in online news reports;<sup>3</sup>
- interpret how online journalists and vaccine-hesitant parents view these representations relative to their contexts; and,
- explain the broader implications of the news discourse on Dengvaxia to the normative rules for trust granting and trust reciprocating in the Philippine setting.

## FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

The theoretical framework adopted in this research is anchored on the Theory of Social Trust propounded by Sztompka (1998, 1999, 2003) with a particular emphasis on “trust culture”, which he defined both as a resource and a system of normative rules for trust granting/reciprocating in a given society. Trust granting refers to the

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1 This is although a group of medical experts have called on PAO in 2018 to stop conducting autopsies since only competent forensic pathologists are capable of determining the cause of death of a person.

2 By ideological, I mean those modes of communication (i.e., rationalization, universalization, narrativization) through language or other semiotic resources that are used to perpetuate unequal social arrangements.

3 Semiotic resources are the various textual selections and combinations in written language and visual images (e.g., words, clauses, pose, gaze, angle, composition, background, foreground, etc.).

bestowal of trust to another person/entity by a trustor, whereas trust reciprocating pertains to efforts to become trustworthy by a trustee. The present research applies the concept of trust culture to the description, interpretation, and explanation of trust granting and trust reciprocating patterns between and among producers and receivers of news discourse on Dengvaxia to understand vaccine hesitancy from a critical lens.

Trust is a cultural category mediated through processes of conscious strategic communication (Candlin & Crichton, 2013). However, the media is rarely theorized within the trust studies literature as trust research has mostly focused on the structuring of trust culture or “system trust” at the macrosocial level (Giddens, 1990; Luhmann, 1979; Misztal, 1996) and the micro-level construction of trust relationships between trustors and trustees across various domains such as business, management, democratic governance, healthcare, and law, among others (Barber, 1983; Lewis & Weigert, 1985; Mollering, 2006; Seligman, 1997; Sztompka, 1999). Meanwhile, although trust figured more prominently within media studies, particularly in research on public and economic spheres (Bakir & Barlow, 2007), not much has been said about it beyond the confines of organizational and institutional settings.

The crux of the matter is that trust needs to be problematized *per se* as a phenomenon occurring in concrete social contexts. Vital here is the establishment of a meso-level (middle range) linkage between the macro and microstructures of a trust culture. In response, the conceptual framework that I devised for the research employs critical discourse analysis to encompass the micro, meso, and macro levels of a trust culture.<sup>4</sup> In line with this, the following levels of the conceptual framework (see, Figure 1) will be operationalized with a critical discourse-ethnographic methodology:

1. Texts – online news reports that I semiotically describe in terms of their representations of social actors and their actions.
2. Discursive practice – the production and reception practices of online journalists and news audiences, which I interpret in terms of how both engage with the representations in (1).
3. Social practice – where I trace and relate to society the consequences of the Dengvaxia controversy.

By critical discourse-ethnographic methodology (cf. Wodak & Savski, 2018), I mean a critical discourse analysis approach that is complemented by a mini-ethnographic case study of news producers and audiences to provide greater contextual depth and richer knowledge about the texts to be analyzed (Fusch, Fusch, & Ness, 2017). I view ethnography here as an “orientation to the field” that acquaints one with the local context of the subjects, rather than as a rigid method requiring one to do fieldwork in extended periods, often using participant-observation and in-depth interviews.

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<sup>4</sup> Adopted primarily from Richardson’s (2006) critical discourse analysis approach to newspapers but modified using the ideas of Candlin and Crichton (2013), Machin and Mayr (2012), and Thompson (1990).

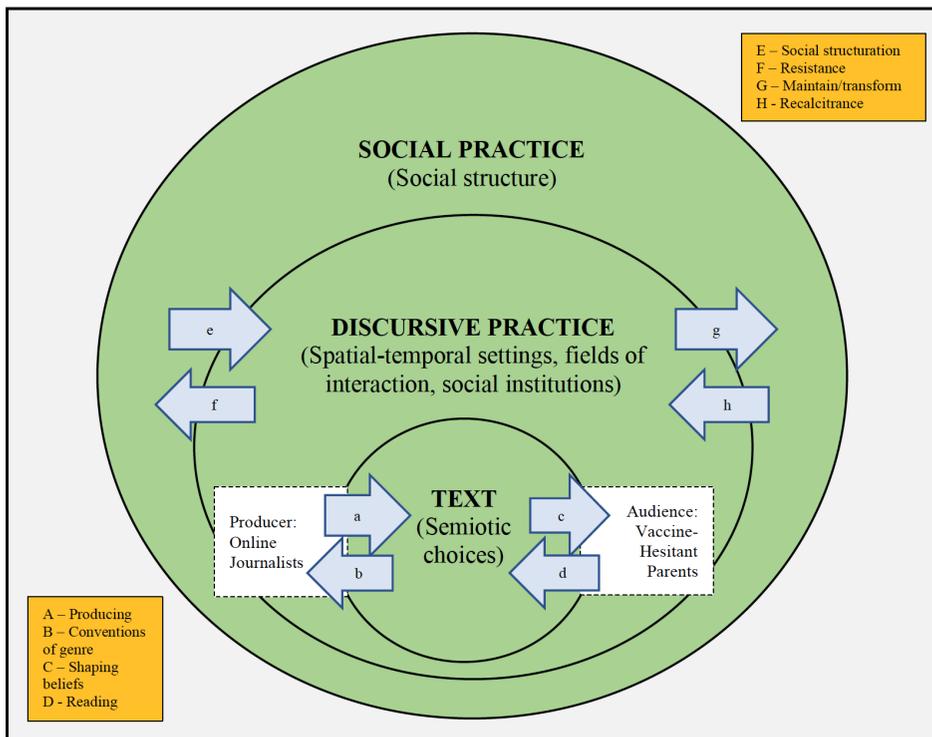


Figure 1: The conceptual framework of the study.

### Methods

This research employs three methods for data collection: (1) content analysis, (2) semi-structured interviews, and (3) focus group discussions. Among the three levels of the conceptual framework, only the textual and discursive practice levels require empirical data. The level of social practice does not require empirical data because, compared to the other two, it seeks to validate whether the overall structural context of a culture is defined by trust or distrust. Such validation refers back to the findings from the textual and discursive practice levels.

Firstly, content analysis will be used to answer the question: what are the linguistic and visual semiotic resources used in representing social actors and their actions in online news reports? This question redounds to the analysis of the textual level of the conceptual framework. Content analysis is “a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use” (Krippendorff, 2018, p. 23). That being said, the deployment of content analysis in this research relies upon the use of a coding scheme or “data language” that sets the analytical categories to be recorded/coded from online news reports.<sup>5</sup>

The categories of the data language that I devised for the study were basically

<sup>5</sup> This data language will be applied to the 58 online news reports from three local newspaper websites in the Philippines that I already collected as of writing.

drawn from the Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) transitivity system, which is concerned with the examination of who does what to whom and to what effect (O'Donnell, 2011). The starting categories were labelled as actor, process, and goal. These categories slightly vary depending on the processes they represent and whether they are part of a visual image or written language. Nonetheless, they both allow us to understand how social actors and their actions were represented multimodally.

Secondly, semi-structured interviews will be used to gain information about online journalists' trust-granting and trust-reciprocating behaviors as social actors who are embedded within the institutional context of Philippine journalism, and how this is reflected in their coverage of public affairs and health topics.<sup>6</sup> A semi-structured interview is a qualitative method wherein the researcher asks participants a series of pre-determined but open-ended questions (Ayres, 2008). The interview guides to be designed for this research shall focus on three, broad, conceptual headings: journalistic roles, journalistic ethics, and journalists' trust (Hanitzsch, Hanusch, Ramaprasad, & De Beer, 2019). While trust is the focus of this research, it is assumed that this concept has significant overlap with how journalists perceive their roles and ethical viewpoints in practice. The interpretation of news production practices will be based on online semi-structured interviews of 30 online journalists working for local newspaper websites in the Philippines.

Third and lastly, focus group discussions will be used to collect information regarding how vaccine-hesitant parents (as news audiences) shape and were shaped in some way by the news discourse on Dengvaxia controversy. Focus group discussion (FGD) is a research method that is "useful when seeking to understand participants' meanings and ways of understanding" in socially-situated contexts (Lunt & Livingstone, 1996, p. 79). To be more precise, focus groups will be utilized to probe for vaccine-hesitant parents' trust granting/reciprocating behaviors relative to pre-existing sets of cultural rules and resources at their disposal. One group composed of 12 participants each will be recruited from six *barangays* (communities) in Quezon City, Philippines, for a total of 72 participants all in all. Vaccine-hesitant parents are defined as those parents who have modified the routine immunization schedule prescribed by the DOH. "Modified" means delaying some/all of the vaccines for their child/children by 30 days or more from the scheduled date. Similarly, modified would also mean refusing some but not all of the prescribed immunizations. Complete vaccine rejectors are automatically excluded because the study focuses on vaccine hesitancy.

## CONCLUSION

The current paper highlights the significance of a critical discourse-ethnographic methodology in studying the legitimization of a trust culture through the Dengvaxia news discourse. Through the framework introduced here, the research responds to the need to operationalize Sztompka's (1999) theory of social trust in media studies by combining the use of critical discourse analysis with a micro-ethnographic

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<sup>6</sup> I am still waiting for approval on my human ethics application for interviewing online journalists. On the other hand, I shall file a separate application for the focus groups.

case study. As an ongoing study, however, the research is still expected to evolve theoretically and methodologically, most especially now that the world is facing the COVID-19 pandemic.

Given that some governments, including the Philippines and Indonesia, were lagging behind their regional counterparts with regards to pandemic response, a COVID vaccine may be the last ray of hope for their citizens. In such situations, the proper starting point may not be vaccine hesitancy at all but vaccine ambivalence – a situation of mixed hopes and doubts or of wanting a vaccine while also suspecting it. Also, methodologically, it is not unlikely that I might reconsider my plan of conducting face-to-face focus groups if the situation in the Philippines worsens or remains unchanged from the time of writing.

Notwithstanding these concerns, the research has the potential to contribute to the growing literature on vaccine hesitancy, stimulate critical inquires in health communication, and extend and validate the interpretive research agenda within trust studies (Mollering, 2006). However, the success of the study depends on the following theoretical and methodological issues, among others, being addressed later on in the research.

First of these is the justification for selecting online news as the medium to be analyzed. What is the theoretical and methodological significance of choosing this medium? This question is important given that not all societies have the same media preference at any given point in time. Historical, social, and political economic factors may be at play in determining the present contours of the local media landscape.

The second issue is about the identification of themes apart from trust that are also relevant to the news discourse on vaccine hesitancy. Although important to society, trust is not the only basis of social order (Luhmann, 1979). The discourse of trust may be co-present with other analytical categories such as expertise, responsibility, credibility, and risk, among others, in certain domains of practice (Candlin & Crichton, 2013). Therefore, the research framework must be applied in such a way that the discovery of other analytical categories apart from trust are not precluded.

The final issue is the description of the macro-structural features of a Filipino trust/distrust culture. The existence of a trust culture is a theoretical assumption that can neither be proven or disproven but only described as it manifests textually and behaviorally in particular contexts. The macro-structural features of a Filipino trust culture broadly refer to its manifestations in a democratic system, which relates to the extent to which people trust/distrust the social and political institutions governing their lives.



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