

# Two Versions of One Pandemic: Comparing the Facebook Talk of Metro Manila Mayors and Their Followers

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## SUMMARY

Effective leadership has played a crucial role in shaping society's response to COVID-19. However, effective leadership does not depend exclusively on a leader's isolated response, but also on their correspondence with the people's collective needs. This advisory highlights how Metro Manila local governments and their constituents discussed the pandemic online. While mayors tended to highlight their top-down policy implementations, followers voiced concerns that their bottom-up needs were being overlooked. This science advisory presents the importance of recognizing the active role of the public in crisis management and calls for more meaningful engagement between local government units and their constituents. Enhancing political communication in local contexts requires a conscious acknowledgment of the public's role in sense-making during crises, as well as the application of principles that foster genuine leadership engagement.

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## **RESPONDING TO CRISIS: THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN THE PHILIPPINES**

When the COVID-19 pandemic struck globally, it did not strike all societies equally. As described by the Lancet Regional Health (2021), the Philippines was heavily impacted as the country contended with “one of the worst COVID-19 outbreaks in Southeast Asia” (p. 1). As of September 2023, the World Health Organization reports that over 4.1 million COVID-19 cases and 66,000 deaths had been confirmed in the Philippines. As early as mid-2021, the Department of Finance reported that PHP 660 billion had already been spent for the pandemic (Rosales 2021).

An Inter-Agency Task Force (IATF) was organized to manage the public health crisis. The IATF collaborated with city mayors to assess local conditions and enact various programs across jurisdictions. Hence, while a centralized body was built to coordinate the national response to the pandemic, local government units played a key role in its direct and context-specific implementation (Vallejo and Ong 2020).

## **SOCIAL RELATIONS IN EFFECTIVE PANDEMIC LEADERSHIP**

The success of public health responses to the COVID-19 pandemic hinged upon effective leadership. This was particularly relevant for the local governments which directly implemented key interventions. During a crisis, incredible strain is placed upon organizations, governments, and societies. In such contexts of uncertainty and instability, Riggio and Newstead (2023) suggest that effective crisis leadership hinges upon leaders' capacities for communication, sense-making and decision-making, coordinating teamwork, and facilitating learning. These principles highlight the importance not of leaders' innate traits but of leaders' relationships with their people as central to addressing the crises. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, the importance of effective communication between leaders and communities became more apparent.

## **SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY OF POLITICAL TALK**

During a crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, political talk by leaders plays an important role in defining core problems and solutions, directing public norms, and mobilizing institutions. At the same time, the political talk of the public also serves to express collective sentiments and to orient collective behavior during a crisis. The effectiveness of a society's response to the COVID-19 pandemic thus hinges upon the similarities or dissimilarities in leaders' and followers' talk.

## **EXAMINING ONLINE POLITICAL TALKS**

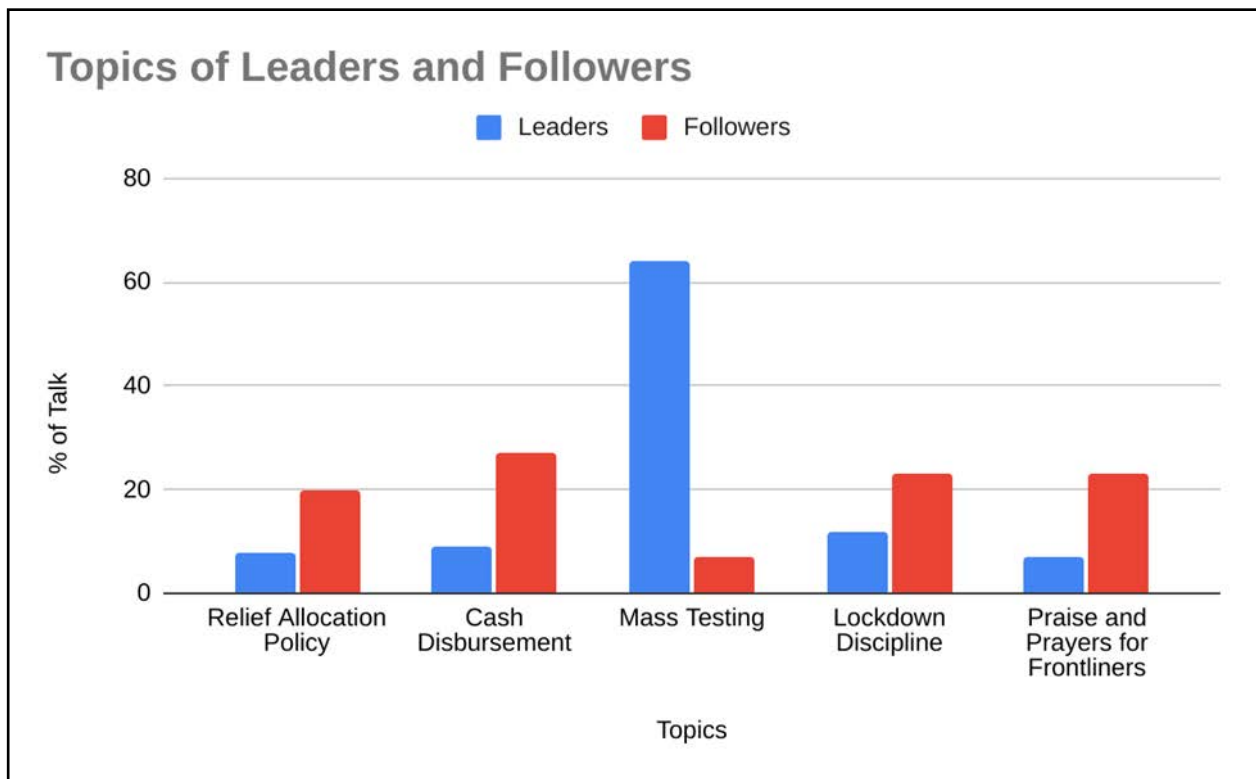
Because quarantine regulations restricted face-to-face interactions, the online sphere provided a valuable forum for leaders and followers to make sense of the pandemic as one community. Social media discourse can thus be examined to assess whether mayors and their followers were interested in the same things during the pandemic. Our research collected Facebook posts of the 17 Metro Manila mayors (N = 6,840) and public comments (N = 553,145) during a five-month period (March 1 to July 31, 2020) at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Given the relatively large-scale nature of the dataset, a quantitative procedure known as topic modeling was employed to detect statistical patterns in the word usage of leaders and followers (Blei et al. 2003). By analyzing the collections of words most often used together, key topics could be identified in online political talk. Then, through a qualitative approach, closer attention was given to how these words were used in context. For example, a quantitative analysis might derive a topic related to the distribution of *ayuda* or relief goods. Subsequent qualitative interpretation was then done to investigate whether mayors and their followers talk about relief distribution in similar or dissimilar ways.

Our findings show that during the first five months of the pandemic, both mayors and their followers talked about five key topics on Facebook: (a) relief allocation policy, (b) cash disbursement, (c) mass testing, (d) lockdown discipline, and (e) praise and prayers for front liners ( $\chi^2(4) = 72.33, p < .001$ ). Figure 1 illustrates the percentage of online talks among leaders and followers across Local Government Units (LGUs) in Metro Manila.

Four of the five topics featured significant differences between what issues concerned mayors and their followers: (a) leaders' Facebook posts focused on performing responsibility while

(b) their Facebook followers' comments demanded responsiveness. Mayors prioritized equity to give the poor more relief aid, assured efficient cash disbursement, attributed higher infection rates to sufficient testing, and blamed noncompliant citizens for worsening outbreaks. On the other hand, communities sought equality in relief distribution, decried ambiguous cash disbursement, criticized testing failures, and faulted weak quarantine protocols for crisis escalation. Only the final topic about praise and prayers for frontliners found agreement between mayors and their followers. Differences between mayors and their constituents can be found in Table 1.



**Figure 1.** Pandemic Facebook topics of Metro Manila mayors and followers.

**Table 1.** Summary of narratives of mayors and followers in Facebook political talk.

<b>Topics</b>	<b>Narratives of Mayors</b>	<b>Narratives of Followers</b>
Relief Allocation Policy	Give the poor more relief aid.	Give relief aid to all, not only the poor.
Cash Disbursement	Cash disbursement is efficient.	Cash disbursement is inefficient.
Mass Testing	Higher infection rates are detected because of sufficient testing.	Insufficient testing is leading to higher infection rates.
Lockdown Discipline	Worsening outbreaks is because of noncompliant citizens.	Worsening outbreaks are because of weak quarantine protocols.
Praise and Prayers for Frontliners	Frontliners are our heroes. We pray for them.	Frontliners are our heroes. We pray for them.

***Relief allocation policy: Equity or equality?***

This topic points to discussions around which households should receive relief goods in the context of a pandemic that disrupted livelihoods and enforced mobility restrictions. The messages of leaders about relief goods centered on the principle of equity, arguing the prioritized allocation of relief goods to poorer households, while followers' comments fought for the principle of equality in relief allocation. Leader and follower narratives thus clashed in discussions of relief aid, as leaders constructed their interventions in terms of targeted and efficient distribution, whereas followers emphasized that everyone, not only the deprived, should receive aid during the pandemic.

***Cash disbursement: Assurance or ambiguity?***

This topic presented the concrete details of how cash would be disbursed to the public, including venue and scheduling information for claimants to follow. Whereas leaders focused on the efficiency of the cash disbursement process, followers were adamant about the ambiguity of the policy. Leaders assured their constituents that cash would be distributed in a timely and effective fashion at a well-determined time and place. However, followers repeatedly informed their mayors that they were not receiving the promised assistance.

***Mass testing: Sufficiency or insufficiency?***

Testing was an important procedure not only for disease detection, but also for collective assessments of the trajectory of outbreaks in various locales. In the political talk of both leaders and followers, concerns were expressed around the sufficiency of testing efforts to obtain accurate and actionable statistics on the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet incongruent narratives persisted between leaders and followers regarding the status of mass testing in the Philippines, particularly in relation to the link between testing efforts and increased infection rates. Mayors framed the increased infection rates in a city as evidence of effective testing measures that were sufficient to detect rising cases. Conversely, the public contended that rising cases indicated weak testing efforts.

***Lockdown discipline: Compliance or coercion?***

Mayors and followers also held incongruent storylines about quarantine. Leaders were satisfied with quarantine guidelines and invited their constituents to abide by these public rules. However, followers demanded more coercive lockdown measures to punish violators of quarantine protocols.

### ***One congruent narrative: Praise and prayers for frontliners***

Finally, among the five identified topics, only narrative overlapped between mayors and followers – a call for social applause and prayers for the pandemic frontliners. Narrative congruence around this topic highlights how, in a Catholic-majority country like the Philippines, religious talk can become a source of unity even during a volatile crisis. It is also worth noting that an overabundance of gratitude rhetoric may eclipse the material realities faced by frontliners. In exclusively associating their work with symbolic and spiritual gratification, frontliners and their labor may be excessively idealized to the point of ignoring their needs and legitimizing poor working conditions.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Narrative differences divided the online political talk between Metro Manila mayors and their followers. Mayors constructed a narrative about their performance of responsibility as leaders, highlighting the efficient and effective implementation of public health and social welfare programs. Conversely, followers presented a storyline around demands for local government responsiveness: not just leaders announcing their top-down efforts but specifically addressing the community's bottom-up needs.

In sum, with the guidance of these social psychological insights, a narrative congruence lens identifies significant challenges and opportunities for political communication and crisis leadership, both online and offline, as well as in and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic. Key recommendations are presented below. Note that while these are articulated with leaders as the subject, these may also be understood from the side of the public as features of political leadership to encourage collaborative relations in the context of collective action during crises.

Hence, local government leaders may want to:

- 1. Focus communication efforts on responding to needs over performing responsibility.** While there may be

benefits to political leaders communicating their competent implementation of various programs to counter a crisis, such performances may ultimately be rendered ineffective—and may even become counterproductive—if they do not resonate with the public's experience of government services.

- 2. Recognize and critically harness the public's active role in making sense of a crisis.** In seeing members of the public as active sense-makers rather than passive recipients of aid, problem areas in policy design and implementation may readily be identified in relation to on-the-ground experience. However, these insights should be used judiciously when taken from social media. Because of skewed online demographics, efforts should still be made toward comprehensive stakeholder engagement with the broader population.
- 3. Identify opportunities for reinforcing social relations with followers through similar narratives.** When leaders and followers seem to a priori agree on certain aspects of a crisis—as in this case, offering praise and prayers for frontliners—these can become the basis for strengthening public trust, possibly even in more contentious areas. For example, beyond the tokenistic repetition of symbolic offerings online, leaders can shift to more material support for frontliners.
- 4. Close the loop in political communication during a crisis.** A consistent feature of the data examined in this study shows persistent divergences in the online talk of leaders and followers, whereby both parties appear to communicate on social media but narratives remain incongruent. Responsive political leadership may be performed not just by improving the design and implementation of various policies and programs, but also by communicating how these improvements have been made as a result of listening to public concerns.

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