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# The Pope of Pandemic: A Critical Discourse Analysis on America's COVID-19 Coverage

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## ABSTRACT

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This study explores the ways in which America: The Jesuit Review, one Catholic media in the United States represents the COVID-19 pandemic to the believers. Using Critical Discourse Analysis, the analyzed materials include 35 selected articles appeared from March to May 2020 publication. Stylistic devices, discursive practice, and ideological implications are the three main analyzing foci. The analysis reveals that, first, rhetorical style predominates. Secondly, comforting rather than disabling is the mode used in the reporting. Lastly, Pope Francis as the head of the Catholic Church is the moral reference in his call for faith, hope, and compassion during this pandemic time.

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## 1. Introduction

The wealth of research on Critical Discourse Analysis on mass media coverage mostly examines political attitudes towards both the events and the ideology of the media covered. While studies on Western media coverage on terrorism have continued to fascinate scholars to date (Baker, Gabrielatos, & McEnery, 2013; Byng, 2010; Rothe & Muzzatti, 2004), in Indonesia, the political turmoil surrounding the Jakarta Regional Election, the 212 Rally, and General Election of 2024 has been the subject of recent studies (Arsyad & Asdar A.B., 2019; Isti'ahan, 2014; Octastefani, 2019). Meanwhile, in Australia, the discussion on the Bali Bombing is a burning topic, especially in relation to terrorism and the problem of immigrants in that country in the last few years (Betts & Krayem, 2019; Cooper, Olejniczak, Lenette, & Smedley, 2017; Don & Lee, 2014)

The COVID-19 pandemic is a global disaster that has affected world citizens across ethnicities, nations, and religious beliefs including atheists. Therefore, it is necessary to see how different specific groups interpret this disease and how this interpretation will help the transformation process. For example, the media coverage of the 2003 SARS outbreak from the affected countries with predominantly Mongoloid population such as Singapore, China, Taiwan and Hong Kong are different from that of the foreign media belonging to countries with large economic powers in Europe and North America (Joye, 2010; Leung & Huang, 2007; Wallis & Nerlich, 2005). It is clear here that any viral outbreak, indeed, will be differently perceived by different groups.

This current pandemic time is, likewise, highly politicized and media outlets play important roles with regard to their positioning. Extensive literature has recently explored how language is used to foreground themes and attitudes during the upheaval (Al-Afnan, 2020; Allen & Ayalon, 2021; da Silveira, 2020; Hons, 2020; Jupowicz-Ginalska et al., 2021; Kumar & Krishnaswami, 2020; Ruobing, 2020; Schweinberger, et al, 2021; Van Buuren, Tang & Martimianakis, 2020; Wang, 2021). Critical Discourse Analysis (henceforth CDA) is a powerful theoretical framework related to the concepts of "critical", "ideology", and "power" (Wodak & Meyer, 2009). It sees language as a social practice, whereby a relationship between language and power takes place. The goal of CDA is transformation. Its mission is likened to an agent provocateur who questions the grand narratives of various discursive

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practices. As it is, the media coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic can be examined using CDA to unravel its socio-cultural and political stance.

This study, therefore, aims at examining how the pandemic is represented in *America: The Jesuit Review* (n.d), an online media run by the Jesuits in the United States. There are at least four reasons why this is of an important issue. First, the United States is the superpower country that has experienced slow recovery in fighting against the COVID-19 pandemic (Atkeson, 2020; Mahajan & Larkins-Pettigrew, 2020). Second, although the Catholics are among the minority groups in the country, it is all the more interesting to see how the Catholic communities as represented by the Catholic media perceive the pandemic, to say nothing of the now Catholic president Joe Biden. Thirdly, the Jesuits (members of the Society of Jesus) are the largest religious order of men in the Catholic Church founded by Saint Ignatius de Loyola in 1540. While playing an important role in church history, the Jesuits have for centuries planted Catholic faith worldwide, excelled in educational institutions, and committed themselves to walk with the poor and the marginalized. Lastly, *America: The Jesuit Review*(n.d) is the oldest media that has often become referenced on account of its vast coverage on how world leaders view issues of global significance across the time. This study would argue that linguistic devices used in news media such as frames, domains, and metaphors can indicate social (in)equalities related to certain contexts and with certain complexities (Van Dijk, 2016). CDA is thus one of the useful tools to read how the Catholic media reflect on the COVID-19 pandemic

## 2. Methods

This descriptive-qualitative research mainly made use of data sources in the form of 35 news articles on COVID-19 in *America: The Jesuit Review* (n.d) from March to May 2020. This current study combined the analysis of language details and the larger political purposes on the COVID-19 coverage by the journal. The unit of analysis was individual articles on COVID-19 procured from <https://www.americamagazine.org> using the keywords “COVID-19”, “coronavirus”, and “corona pandemic”. The steps are as follows. The selected 35 articles were scrutinized and the collected data were clustered thematically. They were interpreted with CDA by way of three important postulates of this method, namely orientation to social problems, dismantling of ideology and power, and the reflective process of research through the objectivity of the researchers (Wodak & Meyer, 2009). Next, linguistic and rhetorical devices were identified and analyzed thoroughly. The third step looked at the cultural references to see the intertextuality level of the reporting. Lastly, the linguistic devices and the larger socio-political context were expounded.

## 3. Results and Discussion

### 3.1 Perspectives and central roles

From the 35 news articles gathered, 25 are news reports and 10 are reflection notes. While March coverage includes news reports and 1 reflection, issued in April are 6 news reports and 4 reflections. Articles collected in May consist of 12 news reports and 5 reflections. The distribution of themes and subjects of all monthly reporting is presented in tables.

Table 1: Distribution of themes and subjects in March coverage

Themes	Types	Subjects
(1) Death of friar	NR <sup>1</sup>	Brother John-Sebastian Laird-Hammond
(2) Pray for the world	NR	Pope Francis
(3) Health	NR	Pope Francis
(4) Church closure	NR	Bishops; world leaders
(5) Virtual Holy Week	NR	Pope Francis
(6) Call for prayers	NR	Pope Francis
(7) Evacuation	NR	Boston College Students
(8) Trump's Racism	R <sup>2</sup>	Ricky Manalo <sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> News Report

<sup>2</sup> Reflection

<sup>3</sup> Author

Table 1 shows that *America's* coverage of COVID-19 in March 2020 is as varied as casualties (1), mitigation (4), (5) and (7), impacts (3), spiritual guidance (2) & (6), and world leaders' reactions (8). As confirmed cases and mortality rates continued to escalate throughout Europe and the United States by late February 2020 (Burke et al., 2020; Gatto et al., 2020), *America* covers news from the home country (i.e. USA) and abroad, mainly in Rome, Italy. For example, appeared in March issues are news about the death of Franciscan friar Brother John-Sebastian Laird-Hammond, the first American cleric to die of COVID-19 (1); President Trump's xenophobic naming of the disease "Chinese virus" (8); and Boston College sending its students home to prevent contagion (7). The only article in the March issues of reflection category is Ricky Manalo's concerns about racism in the United States that is exacerbated by anxiety about the COVID-19 pandemic.

Meanwhile, the media is also concerned with the Catholics abroad. With the help of the media's Vatican correspondent, it has monitored events in the Vatican City to inform readers how has Pope Francis, the Head of the Catholic Church, responded to the outbreak by means of his spiritual guidance as seen in (2), (5), and (6), including news about the Pope being tested positive of but not infected with COVID-19 (3). Just as the World Health Organization has called on acts of global solidarity in handling the virus spread, the Pope has also made his mark. With the worldwide closure of public settings including places of worship, Pope Francis has implored Catholics and benevolent people to pray the "Lord's Prayer" together on 25 March 2020 (2). The Pope's historical gesture was live-streamed; and Catholics around the world gathered virtually showing a simple but powerful act of solidarity. Coverage of the Pope's subsequent calls for prayers and trust during this upheaval time dominates the news articles in March as seen in data (2), (5), and (6).

The frequent use of engagement markers (White, 2003) in the eight articles discussed enables authors to align their opinions with the authoritative voices, such as that of the Pope in Excerpt (1) and (2) or the cardinal in Excerpt (3), in order to build confidence in their readers.

(Excerpt 1)

Earlier in his homily he told people worldwide: "Do not be afraid," and he sought to assure them that "the Lord will not leave us at the mercy of the storm."

(Excerpt 2)

At the same time, he called on everyone "to be converted and change our way of life."

(Excerpt 3)

Cardinal Tagle emphasized that Pope Francis "is calling upon the church's entire vast network to face the challenges ahead."

Indeed, as said elsewhere, through direct citations help strengthen the author's arguments (Pasaribu, 2017; Saraswati & Pasaribu, 2019). With regard to the big role the Pope plays, the use of rather excessive direct quotes is evident of his authority. Almost every mention of Pope Francis is followed by the quotations taken from his speeches/addresses and news about his day-to-day activities. To mention but one stylistic choice used by the media is quoting Pope Francis' use of the term "generous gesture" in his appreciation to the Chinese Catholic bishops and other communities in China for the gifts of medical supplies to the Vatican to impede the spread of COVID-19 as seen in data (11). What *America: The Jesuit Review* (n.d) has in store for the April coverage is presented next using the table below to begin with.

Table 2: Distribution of themes and subjects in April coverage

Themes	Types	Subjects
(9) American pragmatism	R <sup>1</sup>	Patrick Gilger <sup>3</sup>
(10) Virus of injustice	NR <sup>2</sup>	Arturo Sosa, S.J.
(11) Thanking China aids	NR	Pope Francis
(12) Pray for saintly help	NR	Catholic saints
(13) Virtual masses	R	Michael Bayer <sup>3</sup>
(14) Water pollution	NR	American farmers
(15) Catholic education	NR	US Bishops; Donald Trump
(16) Saint Catherine	R	J.D. Long-Garcia <sup>3</sup>
(17) Immigrants	NR	US Bishops; Laborers
(18) Time for justice	R	David Dark <sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Reflection                      <sup>2</sup> News Report                      <sup>3</sup> Author

As shown in Table 2, articles of reflection type increase by four times compared to the one published in the previous month. The reflection notes were written by contributors including the senior editor of *America* J.D. Long-Garcia. The pandemic allows Long-Garcia, for example, to learn from the spirituality of St. Catherine of Siena who witnessed the Black Death – a bubonic plague that killed 60% of the population in Europe in the 14<sup>th</sup> century (15). Written using “I” instead of “We”, other reflective journals appeared in April show that the COVID-19 pandemic has helped each author strengthened his own journey of faith via online masses (12); his understanding and auto-criticism toward American pragmatism and banality (9); and compassion for poor people and the needy who are badly affected by the pandemic (17). In the meantime, with the exception of data (11) on the China-Italy closer ties as proven by medical aid exchanges, other news reports gave a somewhat dismal atmosphere of what happened in the United States. Next, in addition to the ecological issues such as farm runoff that was worsened by the pandemic (14), the media reported the setback of Donald Trump’s anti-immigration politics (17) and his avoidance to discuss sensitive issues when meeting with the US Bishops by focusing instead on education issues (15). *America* also calls for its readers to observe the long tradition of the Catholic Church to pray to ask for the intercession of the saints and holy people to help during the COVID-19 pandemic (12). Lastly, the perspective and central role of the highest authority in the Jesuit Order in viewing the pandemic is also shown through the coverage of news about the webinar on April 2, 2020. Live-streamed from Rome, Father Arturo Sosa, S. J., the superior general of the Society of Jesus addressed 1,000 Jesuits and lay people across the globe to live out the pandemic not as a nightmare but “a spiritual and intellectual challenge” (10). Quotations from the highest commander of the Order, again, are abundant in this news report. The last part of this section is to discuss the coverage of COVID-19 in the May issues of *America*. The following table is useful to start the discussion.

Table 3: Distribution of themes and subjects in May coverage

Themes	Types	Subjects
(1) Death of friar	NR <sup>1</sup>	Brother John-Sebastian Laird-Hammond
(2) Pray for the world	NR	Pope Francis
(3) Health	NR	Pope Francis
(4) Church closure	NR	Bishops; world leaders
(5) Virtual Holy Week	NR	Pope Francis
(6) Call for prayers	NR	Pope Francis
(7) Evacuation	NR	Boston College Students
(8) Trump’s Racism	R <sup>2</sup>	Ricky Manalo <sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> News Report                      <sup>2</sup> Reflection                      <sup>3</sup> Author

Table 3 presents 12 news reports and 5 reflections with diverse themes that focus on human incapability to cope with the severity of COVID-19. As the virus continued to rage by May in the United States and around the world, *America: The Jesuit Review* (n.d) responded to the situation by highlighting that the global pandemic today does require global solidarity for better solutions. By May 2020, WHO

reported 1, 655, 378 cases and 98, 723 deaths in the Americas alone (World Health Organization, 2020). Out of the 12 news articles, Vatican voices prevail. Pope Francis is the central subject in the news as shown in data (19), (20), (23), (25), (28), (30), and (34). He emerged as a world leader addressing the humanitarian crisis caused by COVID-19 with which the formation of the new post-pandemic world order is urgent. To achieve this end, the Pope calls for interfaith collaborations (19), global justice (28), sustainability (30), and better politics for the pursuit of justice and common good. All subjects in Table 3 play important roles in their respective relation with Pope Francis. The media highlights the Holy See's concerns with the poor and the downtrodden as COVID-19 hit them the hardest like job loss (20) and hunger (28). It featured the Vatican task-force chaired by Cardinal Peter Turkson from Ghana to ensure food security in the developing countries (28). The May coverage also pointed out the importance of individual piety as exemplified by the religious today (22) and (27), as well as the martyrdom in the past (35). Another variety of news covered in May is recognition for those serving for humanity like nurses and midwives (23) and relief workers (31).

To sum up this section, the three-month reporting of COVID-19 by *America: The Jesuit Review* (n.d) deals with a variety of responses. The March articles view the pandemic as sudden, overwhelming attacks that have made people worldwide caught off guard to which prayers are the best refuge all Catholics should seek to find. By April, Lenten season for the Christians, more reflections are on offer whilst reports on the viciousness of the virus continued to inform readers. Having grappled with the new way of life with COVID-19, in May the media coverage invites the Catholics to share common concerns to fight the pandemic by way of contemplation and action, hence sowing the seeds of compassion and solidarity. It is to the oscillation of fear and hope that the discussion now turns.

### 3.2 *On producing narratives that navigate hope and fear*

Based on a comprehensive critical discourse analysis, the 35 news articles are expressions that bring together both hope and fear in this time of anxiety and uncertainty. This Jesuit-run mass media aims at raising the Jesuit voice. The Jesuits are the largest religious order of men calling themselves “companions of Jesus” in the Catholic Church established in Spain almost five centuries in the past. The long record of the birth, dissolution, restoration, and survival of the Society of Jesus to this day has contributed to the roles and characteristics of how the Jesuits’ works both locally and globally including their involvement in the media industry.

Historically speaking, in the Middle Ages, a multidimensional crisis between the state and the Church elites resulted in refusals to accept the Society of Jesus in several European countries such as Portugal, France and Spain. The Order of the Society of Jesus, on the contrary, turned the setbacks into abundant blessings with the addition of its members, residencies, colleges, and various other missionary works. In Latin America, Japan and China, for example, the Jesuits also experienced difficult opposition (Chu, 2013). Competition that came from outside of Catholicism also put to the test the existence of the Society of Jesus, as portrayed in *The Jesuits and the Thirty Years War: Kings, Courts, and Confessors* (Bireley, 2003). Dale K. van Kley (2018) muses that the world alone is powerless against the Jesuits. From the restoration in the nineteenth century until now, the Society of Jesus has practiced a spirituality that is adaptive and responsive to the world and history. History records the role of the Jesuits in the fields of science, art, education, and even political reform (Banchoff & Casanova, 2016; O'Malley, 2016). In short, the “Jesuit voice” deserves to be reckoned with by the expansion of the Order's networking and collaboration, including partnerships with lay people from various nations, religions and cultures. Such collaborations are essential in the Jesuits’ contribution in mass media.

*America: The Jesuit Review*(n.d) is part of the bigger platform called America Media established by John Wynne, S.J. in 1909. The persona is the editor of the eminent authoritative *Catholic Encyclopaedia*. To date, the media has developed and managed several products like America Press, Catholic Book Club, The Jesuit Post, etc. The following is what the media says about authorship:

Our contributors are the principal figures in the American church; the decision-makers and opinion leaders who lead the ecclesial and civic debate about religion, society, politics and the arts. Those with something to say to the American church say it in America: popes and presidents; Nobel laureates; Pulitzer Prize winners; world-renowned scholars; and distinguished men and women of letters. (“America: The Jesuit Review”)

As it is, in terms of eloquence and expertise in communication, the Jesuits excel. It is claimed that having employed rhetoric and the ancient art of persuasion, the Jesuits have managed to run the modern art of communication since the sixteen centuries to date (Gannett & Brereton, 2015). Authors like Michael J. O'Loughlin, for example, is the media's national correspondent who also hosts the America podcast "Plague: Untold Stories of AIDS and the Catholic Church." Gerard O'Connell is America's Vatican correspondent who closely keeps track of what happens in the Vatican. On January 13, 2021, for example, O'Connell reported that 84-year Pope Francis received the COVID-19 vaccine, quoting the Holy See thus "I believe that everyone should receive the vaccine; it is an ethical option because your health, your life is at stake and also you are putting at stake the life of others." (O'Connell, 2021)

It would seem here that by examining the production of the texts, the media attempts to send hopeful messages to its readers despite the prolonged pandemic that is beyond every one's expectation. Coupled with the media's reputation as shown by its longest existence in the U.S., skilled contributors, and reporting quality, the message of hope for a better post-pandemic world is the ideology kept by the Jesuits, i.e. finding God in all things (see, e.g. Odean, 2017; "Spirituality: Finding God in All Things," n.d.; "The Jesuits: a history from Ignatius to the present," 2015). The Jesuits believe in the Ignatian spiritual path, that is, God is active in the real world. Thus, finding God in all things means reaching out instead of side-stepping the imperfect realities. Brought into a broader human context, the Jesuits' task is therefore to pursue social justice, peace, and dialogue in this flawed world.

### 3.3 The Pope as moral references

Born as Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio, this former Cardinal of Argentina was the first Pope who came from the Society of Jesus. After his election on 13 of March 2013, Pope Francis has made important reforms on Catholic Church today to answer the need of the modern time. It is worth noting that *America: The Jesuit Review* (n.d) provides a special column for in-depth coverage of Pope Francis. This special topic page contains more news about the Pope for interested readers who look for further stories snowballed from the main page. Suffice it to say that *America: The Jesuit Review* (n.d) looks up to Pope Francis as its chief moral guidance. The news articles studied here show that the media highlights every single event when the Pope addressed diverse people like medical front liners, the unemployed, women and children, as well as world leaders to help and support each other.

Thematic analysis alone shows that during the three-month-publication, news articles about COVID-19 reveal quite intense engagements with the Pope's call for more human fraternity and global solidarity. It is worth mentioning in passing here that later on in October 2020 Pope Francis released the new Encyclical Letter called *Fratelli Tutti* which can be seen as a diagnosis of social ills right now. For the Pope, social ills are worse than any illnesses, hence interfaith dialogue, encounter and collaboration with people from different backgrounds is the answer. The Pope's meeting with Grand Imam Ahmad Al-Tayyeb in Abu Dhabi and subsequent fraternity between the two religious leaders is a good sign of time (Catalano, 2021; Setyawan, 2019; Nothwehr O.S.F., 2018). The Pope argues that the global citizens' failure to cooperate in solidarity with each other has contributed to the world's slow recovery from COVID-19. It is to this papal pursuit of harmony and justice that becomes the moral compass used by the media studied in reporting the global pandemic.

## 4. Conclusion

This study has shown that first, rhetorical style is substantial in *America: The Jesuit Review*(n.d) . Of the most characteristic and striking features of the media is the use of engagement markers in the form of direct quotations from high authorities like the Pope, cardinals, bishops, and country leaders to illuminate meanings and strengthen the intended messages. Secondly, comforting rather than disheartening is the mode used in the reporting. The perspective taken by the media is hopeful, i.e. braving the pandemic. This exceptional situation has been proven to have led people to live a deeper, reflective life. Lastly, Pope Francis as the head of the Catholic Church is the moral reference in his call for faith, hope, and compassion during the prolonged pandemic. The media's coverage of his words, thoughts, and actions helps Catholic readers to adhere to how the Pope navigates through this difficult time.

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