

The Plastic Pandemic:

Has COVID-19 Shifted the Media Discourse on Plastics in Southeast Asia?

June 2021

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Executive summary

Southeast Asia has seen the problem of plastic waste grow in urgency as fast-paced urbanization, a reliance on single-use plastic products, and continued plastic production have made plastic a convenient choice for its population of over 650 million people. The region is also a major contributor to plastic pollution in oceans: according to a 2017 report by the Ocean Conservancy and the McKinsey Center for Business and Environment, only five countries produce all of the world's plastic waste harming marine life. China is one of them, and the remaining four are in Southeast Asia: Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, and Vietnam. World Bank data from April 2021 shows that only 25 percent of the material value of plastic in Malaysia, Philippines, and Thailand is recycled and recovered.

Plastic does not only impact marine biodiversity; it also contributes to climate change. Over 99 percent of plastics, after all, are made from chemicals sourced from fossil fuels, resulting in greenhouse gas emissions at every phase of their lifecycle. A report by the Center for International Environmental Law (CIEL) shows that greenhouse gas emissions from plastics impede the Paris Agreement's goal to cap the global temperature increase at 1.5 degrees Celsius. According to CIEL data, if plastic production continues at its current pace, by 2030, annual emissions from plastic production and incineration could reach 1.34 billion tons — an amount that is equivalent to emissions produced by 300 new 500-megawatt coal-fired power plants. By 2050, emissions could increase to over 2.75 billion metric tons per year.

The World Economic Forum has sounded a similar warning: as of 2019, 4 to 8 percent of annual global oil consumption is associated with plastics. If the world's dependence on plastics stays the course, 20 percent of oil consumption will be traced back to plastics by 2050.



Considering that climate change is one of the threats to long-term stability in Southeast Asia, there is a need to address the plastics problem with renewed urgency. While local governments in the region have implemented plastic bans in the last few years, the COVID-19 pandemic and its demand for personal protective equipment – which are often made from plastic – have reversed much of the progress on curbing plastic use.

These realities, however, have not been explicitly depicted by the media in the region. This study, which is a partnership between Climate Tracker and Break Free from Plastic, aimed to assess media coverage of plastics in Southeast Asia before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. Below is an overview of the report's main findings:

- **Plastics were negatively framed across all Southeast Asian countries studied.**
 - In Malaysia and Indonesia, over 90 percent of articles analyzed framed plastics negatively.
 - In Vietnam and the Philippines, 100 percent of articles in the sample depicted plastics as a problem.
- **The COVID-19 pandemic did not lead to either increased media coverage of plastics or a significant change in the discourse.**
 - In the vast majority of the 750 articles published across Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Vietnam, and the Philippines that were analyzed, plastics were not at all discussed in the context of the pandemic.
 - For example, in Vietnam, only 3 percent of sampled articles mentioned COVID-19.
- **When COVID-19 was mentioned, it was mostly depicted as a factor that increased the amount of plastic waste.**
 - In the case of Thailand, plastics were framed as necessary for health reasons during the pandemic.

- **The detrimental environmental impact of plastics stood out as a main theme in Vietnam and the Philippines.**
 - This trend was less pronounced in Malaysia and Indonesia, where specific impacts were less likely to be mentioned in the articles sampled.
 - In Thailand, the social impact was highlighted as most articles focused on how plastic-related policies will change people's behavior.
- **While most articles mentioned specific policies, these were mostly simple hard-news stories that reiterated official statements and overlooked the ramifications of these regulations.**
 - Among articles that featured a deeper dive into policies, the focus was on either the lack of comprehensive policies to combat plastic pollution (Thailand and Vietnam) or the inadequate implementation of existing laws (Philippines).
- **In-depth investigations or longform pieces were few and far between, partly because of the mobility restrictions posed by the pandemic.**
 - Journalists' competing responsibilities also made on-the-ground reporting more challenging.
- **Journalists in Thailand and Vietnam lamented the lack of local experts on the issue.**
 - They were reluctant to rely on international sources since these reports often focused on the global outlook instead of country-specific trends.
- **The Philippines is an outlier in that environmental nonprofits figured most prominently as primary sources in the articles analyzed.**
 - This could be attributed to a relatively strong space for civil society to thrive in the country and these groups' accessibility to journalists.
 - Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, and Vietnam relied mostly on government sources.

- **Since media coverage focused on reducing plastic consumption instead of production, there was a heavy focus on individual responsibility and little scrutiny of plastic producers.**
 - Articles had a tendency to emphasize citizens' culpability in exacerbating plastic pollution, while corporate initiatives to address plastic waste were featured with little, if any, questioning.
 - In Malaysia, Indonesia, Vietnam, and the Philippines, business representatives were seen as either less accessible or less able to provide substantive answers to journalists.
 - Filipino journalists raised the issue of the potential loss of advertising revenues as an impediment to conducting more critical reporting on the subject.
- **Plastics were rarely, if at all, discussed in the context of climate change.**
 - Articles on plastics, which largely focused on their impact on marine life, were presented as divorced from the larger issue of climate change.

Table of contents

Executive summary	1
Table of contents	5
Methodology	7
Regional media coverage trends	8
Malaysia	16
Introduction	16
Dominant narrative frames	17
Plastic pollution framed as the national humiliation of Malaysia	17
Single-use plastics issues centered on government initiatives	18
Plastic pollution is never the government's responsibility	20
Companies promoted their zero single-use plastic initiatives	21
Journalists' perspectives on media coverage of plastics	22
Conclusion	25
Indonesia	26
Introduction	26
Dominant narrative frames	27
Government plan on plastic excise duty depicted positively	27
Regional policy on single-use plastic ban is framed favorably	28
COVID-19 pandemic might increase plastic waste generation	29
Traditional bags are a good alternative to single-use plastic bags	30
Regional news outlets highlighted local initiatives	31
Journalists' perspectives on media coverage of plastics	33
Conclusion	35
Thailand	36
Introduction	36
Dominant narrative frames	37
Marine plastic pollution is a threat to human health and ocean life	37
Plastic pollution results from the lack of cohesive plastic-related laws and policies	39
Plastic bag ban criticized as a paternalistic policy	41
Business sector represented as leaders of green initiatives	43
COVID-19 has revealed that single-use plastic is necessary but needs to be managed	44
Journalists' perspectives on media coverage of plastics	45
Conclusion	48

Vietnam	49
Introduction	49
Dominant narrative frames	50
Strong emphasis on government initiatives in media coverage	50
Plastics framed as a threat to the planet, especially marine life and human health	51
Increase in plastic waste depicted as a result of poor public awareness	52
COVID-19 pandemic seen as a contributor to an increase in plastic waste	53
Plastic-related policies framed as lacking teeth	54
Going green framed as good business	55
Journalists' perspectives on media coverage of plastics	56
Conclusion	58
Philippines	59
Introduction	59
Dominant narrative frames	60
Plastic pollution framed as a threat to marine life	60
RA 9003 depicted as a languishing law whose implementation has been neglected	62
Single-use plastic represented as individuals' responsibility	63
Plastic producers given space to promote their initiatives without much scrutiny	65
Plastic pollution framed as an injustice toward the poor	67
Journalists' perspectives on media coverage of plastics	68
Conclusion	73
Final remarks	74
Annex: List of media outlets	76
Malaysia	76
Indonesia	76
Thailand	76
Vietnam	76
Philippines	77
About the authors	78



Methodology

The study was conducted over a period of two months and involved five researchers from Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, Vietnam, and the Philippines. The researchers, who conducted a combination of article sampling, content analysis, framing analysis, and interviews, analyzed articles published from March 2019 to February 2021 in news outlets from their respective countries.

1. Sampling

Each researcher sampled 150 articles about single-use plastics from six news outlets in their country: three mainstream news publications, including one online outlet, two regional outlets, and one niche or specialized publication. They searched for relevant keywords (specified in the next section) in both English and, where relevant, their local languages. For a full list of all news outlets sampled, see the **Annex**.

2. Content analysis

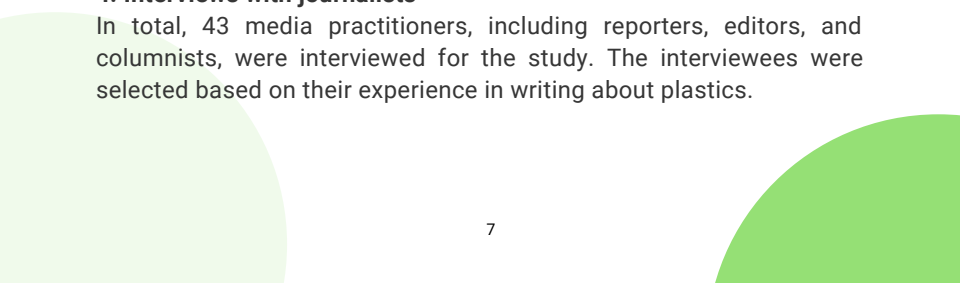
Researchers used a standardized coding method developed with their input to analyze the articles they sampled. The coding template had 20 parameters classified according to five categories: article type, content focus, broader framing, technical literacy, and sourcing.

3. Framing analysis

Researchers then extracted the most prominent narrative frames through a more in-depth framing analysis. This involved close reading and identifying the discursive strategies employed by these articles.

4. Interviews with journalists

In total, 43 media practitioners, including reporters, editors, and columnists, were interviewed for the study. The interviewees were selected based on their experience in writing about plastics.



Regional media coverage trends

A content analysis of the 750 articles sampled through keywords such as “plastic,” “single-use plastic,” “plastic ban,” and “sachet” both in English and, where relevant, local languages, revealed the following regional trends.

Plastics were framed almost completely negatively across the region (see Figure 1). In Vietnam and the Philippines, 100 percent of articles in the sample depicted plastics as a problem that had to be addressed.

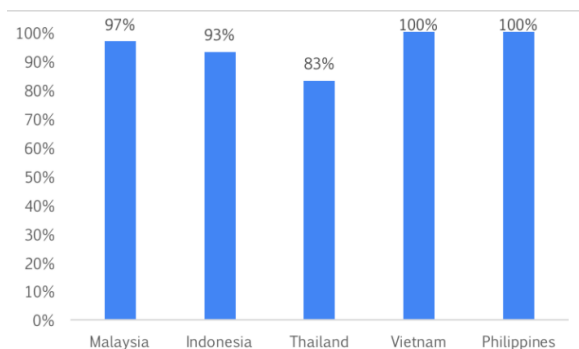


Figure 1: Percentage of articles that framed plastics negatively

The COVID-19 pandemic — a health crisis that has been accompanied by a surge in the use of plastics — did not necessarily mark a striking shift toward increased coverage of plastic waste (see Figure 2). For example, more stories about plastics were published in the last 10 months of 2019 than the entirety of 2020 in Vietnam, the Philippines, and Malaysia. Only Indonesia saw significantly more stories about plastics published in 2020.

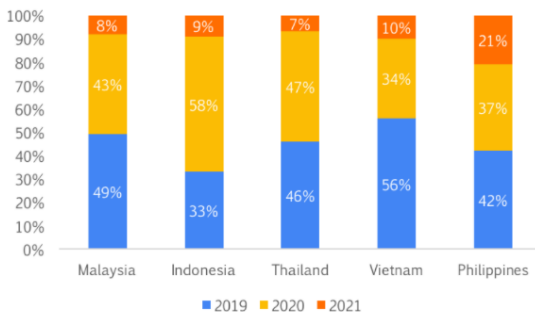


Figure 2: Publication years

The pandemic was not explicitly mentioned in most of these stories (see Figure 3). In the case of Vietnam, the lack of discussion of plastics in the context of the pandemic could be attributed to its relatively successful efforts to contain COVID-19.

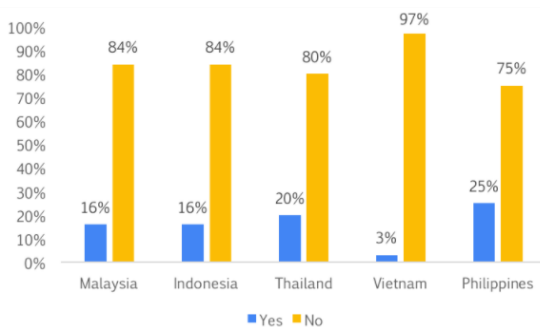


Figure 3: Was COVID-19 mentioned in the story?

The bulk of the stories, however, mentioned specific plastic-related policies (see Figure 4). A sizable majority of these articles were hard-news stories (see Figure 5).

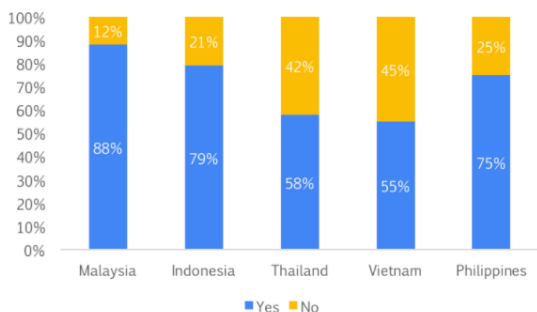


Figure 4: Does the article mention a specific policy?

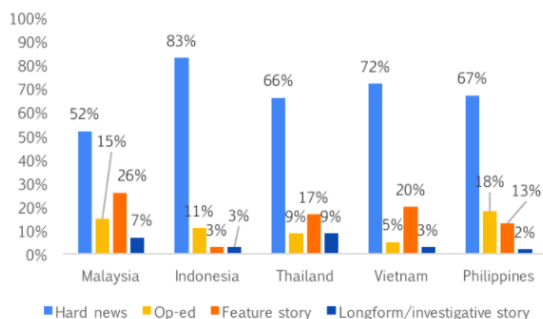


Figure 5: Story types

Since most stories in the sample were simple, straightforward news articles, it is unsurprising that most of them had fewer than three primary sources quoted or cited and were marked as “simple” in terms of complexity (Figure 6). Articles that had three to four sources were coded as “moderate” while the rest, which had five or more sources, were labeled “complex.”

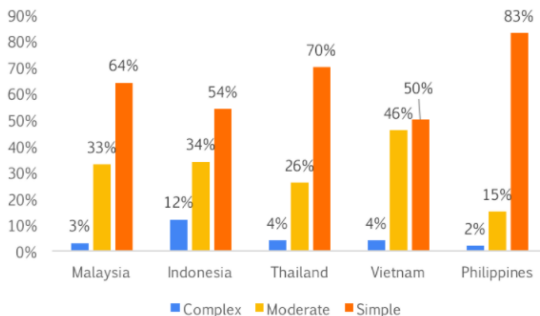


Figure 6: Story complexity

In Malaysia and Indonesia, local government figures were the most common primary sources (see Figures 7 and 8). Meanwhile, in Thailand and Vietnam, reporters frequently turned to national governments for stories about plastic waste (see Figures 9 and 10). The Philippines is an outlier in that environmental nonprofits figured most prominently as go-to sources in media coverage of plastics (see Figure 11). Nonprofits' visibility in the Philippines could be an indicator of these groups' comparably strong presence in the country and their relative accessibility to Filipino journalists covering this topic.

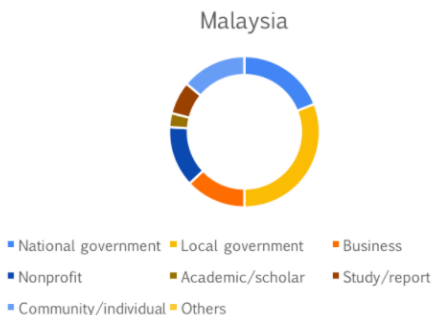


Figure 7: Primary sources in Malaysian media coverage of plastics



Figure 8: Primary sources in Indonesian media coverage of plastics

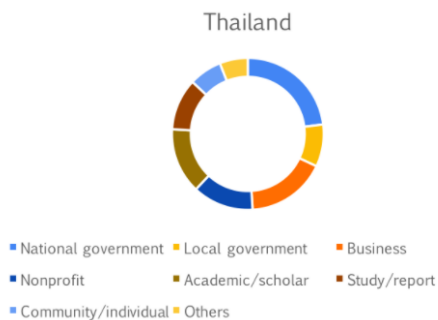


Figure 9: Primary sources in Thai media coverage of plastics

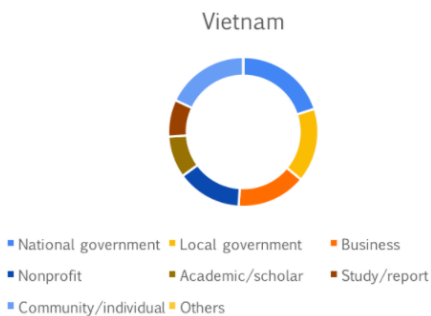


Figure 10: Primary sources in Vietnamese media coverage of plastics

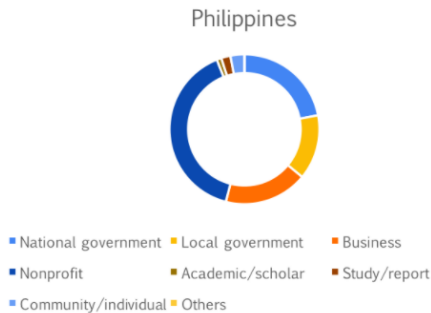


Figure 11: Primary sources in Filipino media coverage of plastics

The detrimental environmental impact of plastics stood out as a main theme in Vietnam and the Philippines (see Figures 12 and 13). In Malaysia and Indonesia, this trend was less pronounced (see Figures 14 and 15). Lastly, articles in Thailand highlighted the social impact (see Figure 16), as most articles focused on how plastic-related policies will change people's behavior.

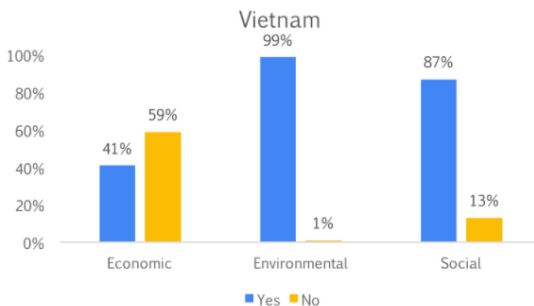


Figure 12: Impact discussion in Vietnamese media coverage of plastics

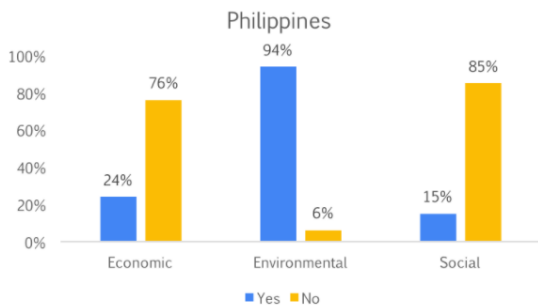


Figure 13: Impact discussion in Filipino media coverage of plastics

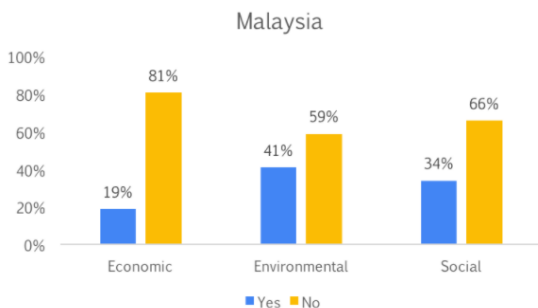


Figure 14: Impact discussion in Malaysian media coverage of plastics

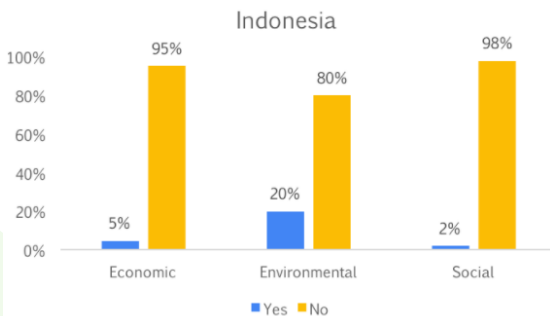


Figure 15: Impact discussion in Indonesian media coverage of plastics

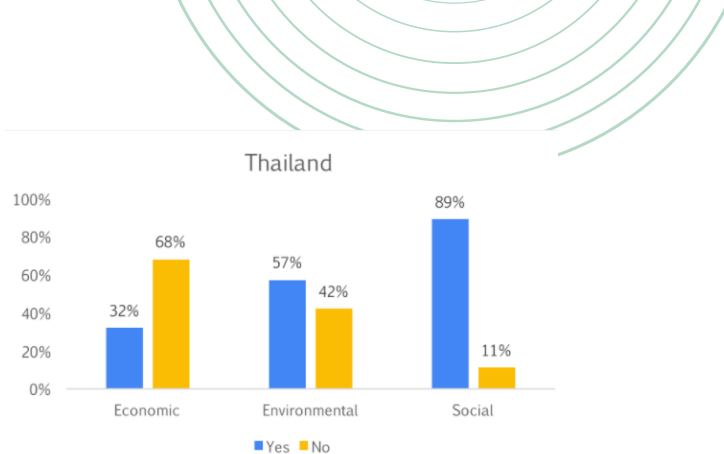


Figure 16: Impact discussion in Thai media coverage of plastics

The following sections give country-specific insights on the dominant narrative frames employed by reporters in each of the five Southeast Asian countries as well as journalists' perspectives on covering this multifaceted issue.

Malaysia

by Yvonne Tan

Introduction

Malaysia has been ranked 8th among the top 10 countries with mismanaged plastic waste in the world. In Asia, the percentage of plastic in solid waste generated in Malaysia is second only to the Philippines. It is also estimated that Malaysia, a global plastic exporter, has produced 0.94 million tons of mismanaged plastic waste, of which 0.14 to 0.37 million tons may have been washed into the oceans. Besides that, since 2017, Malaysia has been the world's largest importer of plastic waste.

In response to these challenges, the government of Malaysia has launched the Roadmap Towards Zero Single-Use Plastic 2018–2030 in response to the worsening plastic pollution in the country. It is divided into three phases, with several end goals including the creation of a circular economy roadmap for single-use plastics, a federal pollution levy on plastic manufacturers, and fees on single-use plastic items and eco-friendly alternatives.

In order to analyze media depiction of the single-use plastics issue in Malaysia prior to and during the pandemic, this study looks into 150 articles published from March 2019 to February 2021 from the six news outlets mentioned below. The sampling excluded wire stories and sponsored content.

- Free Malaysia Today, an online news outlet;
- New Straits Times, a mainstream print newspaper and its online counterpart, *nst.com.my*;
- Malay Mail, a general-audience print newspaper and its online counterpart, *malaymail.com*;

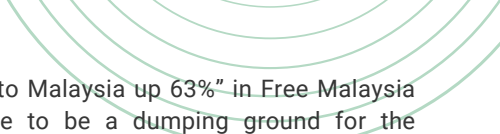
- The Borneo Post, a regional print newspaper and its online counterpart, *theborneopost.com*, focused exclusively on East Malaysia;
- New Sarawak Tribune, a regional print newspaper and its online counterpart, *newsarawaktribune.com.my*, focused exclusively on Sarawak, the northwestern part of Borneo; and
- The Edge, a business-focused print and digital newspaper.

Dominant narrative frames

Plastic pollution framed as the national humiliation of Malaysia

A substantial number of the articles on single-use plastics dealt with the import of the world's plastic waste into Malaysia. Since China banned the import of plastic waste in 2018, Malaysia has become the alternative destination. Many of the sampled articles across Malaysian news sites framed the increasing imports of the world's plastic waste as a point of national emergency. Some of the articles explicitly stated that Malaysia is on its way to become the world's rubbish dump. Others remarked that Malaysia is not the world's "rubbish dump," like "Malaysia says not world's 'dumpster' as it returns plastic waste" in the *New Straits Times*; and "Malaysia cannot be the world's rubbish dump, says minister" and "Stop Malaysia being the world's top plastic dumping site" in *Malay Mail*.

The language of nationalism is used to label local importers as "traitors" to the country for allowing the import of contaminated plastic waste from elsewhere into Malaysia. Articles like "Minister ships back 450 metric tonnes of plastic waste, brands Malaysian importers 'traitors'" and "Climate change minister declares war on plastic waste smugglers after container-loads found in Klang" in *Malay Mail* stressed the seriousness of the situation. These articles placed the blame on developed countries and highlighted the environmental hypocrisy of specific nations in articles such as "Masing: United States 'most despicable' for dumping plastic waste in Sarawak" in *The Borneo Post*

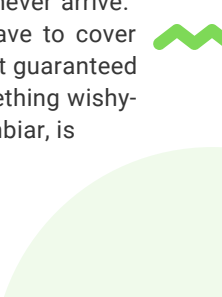


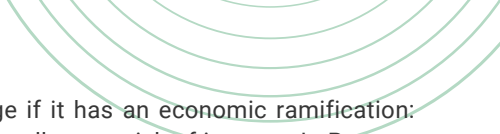
and “UK export of plastic waste to Malaysia up 63%” in *Free Malaysia Today*. “Malaysia won’t continue to be a dumping ground for the developed nations and those responsible for destroying our ecosystem with these illegal activities are traitors,” said Yeo Bee Yin, former Minister of Science, Technology and Innovation (MESTECC) who was regularly quoted throughout articles about the plastic import waste issue. United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) vice-president Mohamed Khaled Nordin was also another frequently quoted source on the matter. There is also mention of exercising the Basel Convention, an international treaty meant to reduce the movements of hazardous waste between nations, as well as enforcing the Environmental Quality Act 1974 to specifically curb the imports of single-use plastic waste.

Single-use plastics issues centered on government initiatives

As the overwhelming majority of primary sources being local and national government representatives, most of the articles covered official press conferences and statements. Hence, the primary focus is on initiatives, rules and regulations enacted by the government, such as finest on traders who defied the plastic straw ban. There was little discussion on economic, social, or environmental impact, let alone an interrogation of such policies. Although there were some attempts by nonprofit or nongovernmental organizations and business representatives to critique policies on single-use plastics, they remained the exception.

Predeep Nambiar from *Free Malaysia Today* explained why this is so. Journalists in Malaysia “generally have a tough time getting word from officialdom [...] There are no right-to-information laws at the national level and official stats via email may take some time or never arrive.” Sylvia Looi from *Malay Mail* echoed this sentiment: “I have to cover events of politicians just to get a response. That also is not guaranteed as they may just reply with ‘no comment’ or give you something wishy-washy.” The issue of single-use plastics, according to Nambiar, is





more relevant for media coverage if it has an economic ramification: “If it involves money, there is generally an uptick of interest. In Penang, where I am based, the state government raised the price of plastic bags from RM0.20 [\$0.029] to RM1 [\$0.24] on peak shopping days from January 1st 2021.”

Considering the lack of transparency over official policies, it is difficult to unveil their wider significance and consequences. Media coverage of single-use plastics also continues to be couched in terms of commercial relevance rather than climate implications, resulting in the overwhelming coverage of rules and regulations surrounding plastic bans.

Local government representatives were in charge of enforcing single-use plastic bans in their respective states. Hence, fines and biodegradable alternatives were the main initiatives of state governments when it comes to fighting single-use plastics. Many states were reluctant to call for complete bans, and instead advocated for “Say No to Plastic” Campaigns or fees with the onus on the consumer to reject single-use plastic items.

Regarding the issue of imported plastic waste, which is under the purview of the national government, there was also significant news coverage on dealing with its consequences. These include banning illegal plastic recycling factories, centralizing recycling plastic waste and exploring waste-to-energy (WTE) incinerators and processed engineered fuel (PEF) as a form of waste management. These topics typically had quotes from Zuraida Kamaruddin, Minister of Housing and Local Government, as the primary source. The articles mention that dealing with plastic waste is problematic as it comes under the jurisdiction of many ministries, which makes the plastic problem more difficult to deal with.



Plastic pollution is never the government's responsibility

News coverage often framed plastic pollution as the public's responsibility. Local government representatives expressed disappointment in the public in regional newspapers for littering. One of these officials is Assistant Minister of Tourism, Arts and Culture Datuk Lee Kim Shin, who stated in the article "Stop throwing rubbish indiscriminately" in *The Borneo Post* that "residents here must stop throwing rubbish indiscriminately and learn to appreciate the environment." Similarly, Miri City Councilor Karambir Singh wrote the op-ed "Do we have the will to ban single-use plastics?" in *New Sarawak Tribune*: "plastic wastes are everywhere but there is no specific law to resolve the growing catastrophe."

Thus, articles often stress awareness-raising among the public as a solution to reducing single-use plastic waste. Community-led beach clean-ups were a popular initiative, as seen in an article titled "350.63kg rubbish collected in beach combing program" in *The Borneo Post*. Such efforts deter further explanation of policies and problems at hand.

The government and manufacturers are also rarely held liable for single-use plastic mismanagement. Writing as a reader, Wong Ee Lynn in "Campaigns alone won't win war against plastic waste" in *Free Malaysia Today* criticized this approach: "the onus is on consumers to give up straws and single-use plastics and find their own alternatives [...] The existing government campaigns have no effect on plastics manufacturers' production levels or profit margins. Plastic manufacturers love these types of 'awareness' and 'voluntary reduction' campaigns because there is no obligation on them to reduce production."

Malaysia's media coverage of single-use plastics typically featured national or government officials who had a tendency to deflect



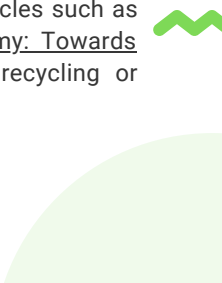
responsibility from their institutions. This led to little coverage of the extent of single-use plastic pollution in the country. It also resulted in journalists defaulting to using global reports for environmental figures rather than country-specific data. In addition, there is limited coverage on the perspectives of those impacted by the effects of single-use plastic waste mismanagement.

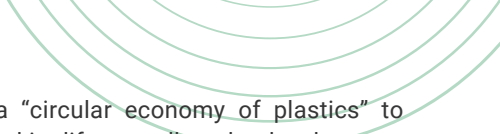
Companies promoted their zero single-use plastic initiatives

The articles analyzed allotted space for companies to promote their environmental campaigns, which usually deal with phasing out single-use plastics from their products or services. Be it multinational companies or local businesses, their resourcefulness is highlighted without much investigation. Therefore, articles overlooked the fact that such campaigns rarely drastically change these businesses' production models. Stories on banning plastic straws and bags from business premises were common while others encouraged recycling their single-use plastic products.

A *The Edge* reporter who wishes to remain anonymous noted that there is little committed interest in phasing out single-use plastics and minimizing their environmental impacts: "While some of them might diversify into green products, I think non-green products remain their bread-and-butter. So, why would they want to be too self-critical?"

Recycling or renewable energy industry companies were also prominently featured for their potential in providing a solution to the problem of imported plastic waste. In articles like "Tex Cycle sees money to be made in UK waste" and "Cover Story: From trash to ash" in *The Edge*, corporations featured the approach to single-use plastics as a source of energy to generate power. Other *The Edge* articles such as "Designing the afterlife of plastics" and "Circular economy: Towards zero" highlighted companies that were committed to recycling or phasing out single-use plastics.





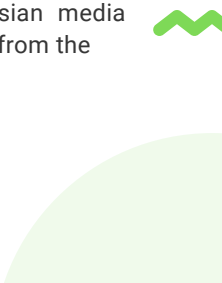
They stressed the creation of a “circular economy of plastics” to create “value” in plastic and extend its life as well as the development of the package-free businesses market as the solutions to the growing plastic pollution problem.

Journalists’ perspectives on media coverage of plastics

Journalists in Malaysia have a difficult time accessing information from national and government officials in general, let alone on the topic of single-use plastics. Teh Athira Yusof from New Straits Times elaborates: “The topic of single-use plastic has been discussed in the media quite often. Perhaps what made it hard to be extensively covered is that those who are at the policy-making level have few answers or none at all. In addition, the companies responsible for producing the products [...] local companies and manufacturers are hard to reach.”

Another issue that makes reporting on this topic challenging is the fact that Malaysia still lacks freedom-of-information laws at the national level. Only Selangor and Penang states have this legal provision. In fact, the federal level has also enacted restrictions through the 1972 Official Secrets Act, which prohibits disclosure of official information by government employees. As Mohd. Azizuddin Mohd Sani’s research has stated, “Ministers and Chief Ministers of State have total control of the government documents and can hold them secret as long as they want.” Hence, the government has no obligation to communicate information about legislation and can legally ignore journalists’ information requests.

Repurposed statements at press conferences are therefore one of the few ways to get an answer from officials. For Malaysian media outlets, such are enough to serve as an “acknowledgment from the





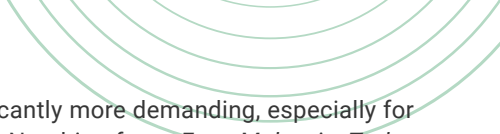
authorities [that] something is recognized as an issue and significant action has been made,” according to Teh Athira Yusof from *New Straits Times*. Sylvia Looi from *Malay Mail* mentioned, however, that if a topic puts the government in a bad light, “it will be difficult for journalists to get comments.” According to Looi, officials tend to “avoid the media at all costs” as “no one wants to be the bad guy.” As a result, most articles tend to be simple hard-news stories.

There was general consensus among the journalists interviewed that it was easy to reach NGOs and environmental groups. Although most reporters mentioned the difficulty of reaching plastic manufacturers, some did not have a hard time doing so, especially if companies were going to simply discuss their activities.

The journalists interviewed mentioned that they typically do get support from their editors and newsrooms on single-use plastics issues or sustainability topics in general. *New Sarawak Tribune* dedicates a day to environmental themes coverage.

Meanwhile, at *The Edge*, journalists simply have to ensure that they have a clear business angle when writing on single-use plastics, usually reporting under the environmental, social and corporate governance (ESG) framework. This is, however, easier said than done. A reporter from *The Edge* mentioned that he must address specific concerns such as the business outlook, financial results, and dividend expectations in stories about the environment, therefore making it less appealing for business journalists to cover these issues. Still, the journalist believed that this inclination is changing with increased mainstream interest in ESG.

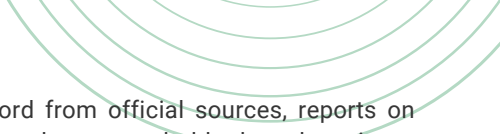




Reporting from the field is significantly more demanding, especially for on-the-scene reporters. Predeep Nambiar from *Free Malaysia Today* spoke about the obstacles of covering illegal plastic recycling factories in Sungai Petani, where residents have witnessed a spike in respiratory illnesses due to illegal incineration of plastic waste and chemical dumping into rivers. Echoing the difficulty of accessing official information, he said: “The local governments in Kedah are not too keen on telling us about these factories’ legal status, and companies’ records don’t reflect the true shareholding of these factories.” Journalists’ safety is another concern. “There was one time in 2019 when I went to a recycling factory that was burning plastic waste openly and causing significant pollution in the larger Sungai Petani area. We were chased off by a group of burly men who later tailed us for nearly 10 km in their pick-up truck. We suspect this would happen in other factories, as well.” The possibility of putting oneself in danger combined with the lack of information from governmental institutions explains why there are so few longform investigative stories about plastic waste published in Malaysian media outlets.

Greenpeace Malaysia Campaigner Heng Kiah Chun also speaks of the dangers of doing field investigations with local communities. He recounted that, during one site visit with the media, their cars were followed. Heng has also seen industry owners claiming that “they had contacts in the local authorities” when threatening local community activists for investigating these issues further. Fieldwork, however, remains an important source of reporting, particularly when investigating the effects of illegal plastic recycling factories on communities. According to Heng, this is particularly important considering that “requesting official data from the government is not that easy.”





As journalists struggle to get word from official sources, reports on single-use plastic pollution tend to be put on hold when there is no reply from national and local government sources, given their recognition in the newsroom. Thus, reports on single-use plastics continue to be dependent on the government agenda, which as of now is centered on the repatriation of illegal plastic waste and the implementation of single-use plastic bans. Both topics receive interest not for their environmental or social ramifications, but rather due to national pride and their financial relevance, respectively.

Conclusion

Single-use plastics in Malaysia have received much interest from media outlets since 2019, especially with the sudden increase of imported plastic waste. The surge of interest, however, has not been rooted in climate urgency concerns but rather in concerns about national image and financial relevance. Coverage of the adverse effects of single-use plastics pollution on the country's communities is rarely featured, with only generalized reasonings on why single-use plastics are undesirable on a global scale. Even the COVID-19 pandemic did not noticeably shift the discourse on plastic waste in general.

Government and national officials were the main source consulted in the majority of articles on single-use plastics. Articles highlighted the government agenda with little, if any, examination of vague policies and initiatives. With no freedom-of-information laws on the federal level, journalists face a difficult task. This is especially the case in newsrooms that place emphasis on the authorities' statements.



Indonesia

by Ariel Adimahavira

Introduction

In Indonesia, 1.29 million tons of plastic waste end up in the sea every year. The country, after all, is the second largest plastic waste contributor to the world's oceans after China. The Indonesian government, however, has promptly responded to address this problem. The national government has issued regulations to reduce plastic waste, including plastic that leaks into the ocean, while local authorities have issued regulations to limit the use of single-use plastic in each region. These synchronized efforts have resulted in significant plastic waste reduction. The COVID-19 pandemic, however, has threatened to reverse this momentum as the prevalent use of plastics – whether for personal protective equipment or deliveries – has led to an increase in plastic waste.

This study aims to explore how Indonesian media has covered the topic of single-use plastics from March 2019 to February 2021. This report also studies how the pandemic has changed the media coverage. The news outlets sampled are:

- Kompas, which is one of the oldest Indonesian daily newspapers with the highest readership in the country;
- The Jakarta Post, a daily English-language newspaper in Indonesia;
- Antara News, a state-owned news agency that provides news to many domestic media organizations;
- Kalimantan Post, an independent media outlet in South Kalimantan with coverage of Kalimantan region;
- Bali Post, which is the largest daily newspaper in Denpasar City, the capital city of Bali province, and is one of the newspapers with the largest circulation in Bali; and

- *Mongabay Indonesia*, the Indonesian subsidiary of *Mongabay.com* that covers environment topics in Indonesia.

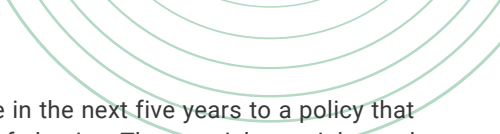
Dominant narrative frames

Government plan on plastic excise duty depicted positively

On behalf of the national government, the Indonesian Ministry of Finance is currently planning to impose excise duties on plastic products. The objective is to reduce plastic consumption, especially the use of bags made from resin or non-recyclable materials. In addition, the government plans to set lower rates for recyclable plastics. Responding to this plastic excise duty plan, Indonesian media framed the plan in a positive light.

"Plastic Excise Imposition Plan is Positive" from *Kompas* and "It's necessary': Greenpeace lauds government's plan to tax plastics" from *The Jakarta Post* quoted a Greenpeace Indonesia representative who said that the excise duty is necessary and can control plastic consumption. Indonesian Minister of Finance Sri Mulyani Indrawati, featured in one of the articles, said that the plan will reduce plastic consumption by up to 50 percent. Sri Mulyani Indrawati added that the excise will force plastic producers to transform themselves into producers of environmentally friendly goods.

A *Jakarta Post* opinion piece on the plastic excise duty plan also framed it approvingly. It argued that the excise duty can suppress the unhealthy dependence of Indonesian customers on plastic products. Indonesia, according to this piece, is at the crossroads on whether to prioritize economic growth by banning only plastic bags, or to protect the environment by banning all plastic products. The piece commended the government for proposing an excise duty on plastic bags as a first step to create awareness. The article also envisioned



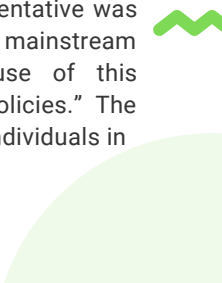
that the plan will hopefully evolve in the next five years to a policy that discourages the use of all kinds of plastics. These articles mainly used national government and NGO representatives as their sources. Thus, articles discussing the plastic excise duty plan lacked perspectives from business representatives and plastic producers, who will be significantly affected by the excise duty.

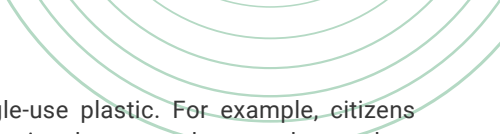
Regional policy on single-use plastic ban is framed favorably

In Indonesia, two provinces and 55 cities and regencies have implemented policies that either limit or completely ban single-use plastics. Despite long debates, especially in the Bali and Jakarta provinces, these policies have proven to be effective at reducing plastic waste. Indonesian news outlets framed these policies as favorable.

A *Kompas* article titled "Regional Regulations Effectively Reduce Plastic Waste" shared some regional governments' success stories in reducing plastic waste through a single-use plastic ban. Sources included a local government representative from Bogor – a city south of Jakarta that has reduced its daily 47 tons of plastic waste sent to landfill to 38 tons. The piece argued that the success of regional regulations could inspire other parts of Indonesia to realize the country's goal of reducing marine waste by 70 percent by 2025. These local government regulations, according to the article, "can be a catalyst for the community and private sector in solving the plastic waste problem."

A *Jakarta Post* article titled "Jakartans hail single-use plastic bag ban" also framed the gubernatorial plastic-ban policy positively. On the implementation of the policy, Tiza Mafira, an NGO representative was quoted saying: "This is no longer a trend, but part of the mainstream movement. The central government should make use of this momentum and make other cities implement similar policies." The article's author Andi Muhammad Ibnu Aqil observed that individuals in





Jakarta have reduced their single-use plastic. For example, citizens increasingly bring reusable shopping bags to shop at the market. "West Tebet Market traders feel the benefits of the plastic bag ban" written by Laily Rahmawati for ANTARA News highlighted the individuals' support for the policy, especially vendors in traditional markets in Jakarta. Rahmawati wrote that the ban benefited these vendors since they could set aside money they would otherwise spend in plastic bags for customers' items.

COVID-19 pandemic might increase plastic waste generation

Indonesia is the Southeast Asian country hit the hardest by the COVID-19 pandemic. Beyond affecting people's health, the pandemic has also had an impact on plastic waste generation.

Andi Muhammad Ibnu Aqil also wrote "Jakarta's trash output down during COVID-19 but environmentalists warn of possible increase" for *Jakarta Post*. Aqil wrote about environmentalists' warning about how plastic waste could increase due to people working from home and ordering food deliveries. The perspective of people who are working from home featured at the top of the article and thus shaped the narrative of the story.

A *Kompas* article titled "Demand for plastic packaging drops during the pandemic" gave a similar warning. The piece quoted a plastic industry representative who claimed that, while the average demand for plastic packaging had fallen during the pandemic, the demand for plastic packaging for staple goods and frozen food has increased. This story also pointed out that, in the United States, the general public's anxiety about the surface transmission of COVID-19 has led to an increase in single-use plastics. This could have been intended as a warning about a similar dynamic in Indonesia.



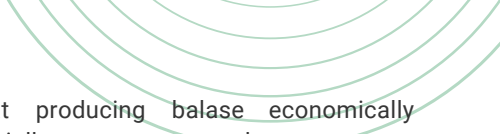
Traditional bags are a good alternative to single-use plastic bags

In Indonesia, almost all regions have their respective traditional bags or containers. These come in different shapes and are made from materials such as wood bark, plant fiber, rattan, and bamboo. All news outlets in the sample depicted this traditional bag as an adequate alternative to the usual plastic option.

For example, a *Mongabay Indonesia* article presented besek baskets — made from woven bamboo — as a substitute for plastic bags. The article emphasises the use of besek baskets while celebrating Eid al-Adha, a Muslim holiday that entails slaughtering an animal to commemorate the sacrifice that prophet Ibrahim was willing to make for Allah. Plastic bags are used as containers of this sacrificial meat, thus contributing significant plastic waste. “Assuming that there are 500 in each city, millions of plastic bags can be used and disposed in one day,” the article quoted a source saying. *Besek* not only has less damaging impacts, but its use also supports local culture, according to the article.

Lusia Arumingtyas, the author of the *Mongabay Indonesia* piece, explained that she wrote it because of her own curiosity about how people in the past — when plastic was not available — wrapped sacrificial meat to celebrate this holiday. “Plastic exists because of the demand from society, but unfortunately the waste is badly managed,” she said. “But in the time before plastic, people did well by using what was around them. In the abundance of bamboo, people made *besek* as a container or used teak leaf to wrap the meat.”

In Buton Selatan regency, the traditional bag is *balase*, which is a woven coconut leaf bag that can also serve as a sustainable substitute for plastic bags. A *Mongabay Indonesia* article quoted a local



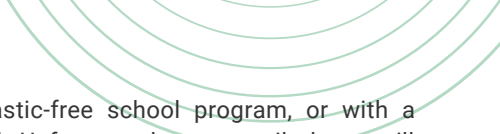
craftsman who affirmed that producing balase economically empowers old people, especially women, as they are very knowledgeable in balase weaving. *Kalimantan Post* had a particularly extensive coverage of these local substitutes (see [here](#) and [here](#)). *Bakul purun*, a woven bag made from grass fiber, is the Kalimantan counterpart of *besek* and *balase*. In 2020, 9,000 *bakul purun* were distributed to traditional markets in Kalimantan to reduce the use of single-use plastic bags.

When Sunarti, the editor-in-chief of *Kalimantan Post*, was asked about the media coverage of *bakul purun* in her news outlet, she said: “The goal is to convey that when we use *bakul purun*, which exists only in South Kalimantan, we empower local small and medium-sized enterprises,” she affirmed. “In the past, *bakul purun* was out of favor. But since the implementation of the [single-use plastic ban] policy, people have started to buy and use *bakul purun*,” Sunarti added.

Regional news outlets highlighted local initiatives

The plastic-related coverage of the two regional news outlets included in this study – *Kalimantan Post* and *Bali Post* – mostly focused on the regional success in handling plastic waste. The outlets featured school initiatives, community innovations, and local government regulations.

A *Kalimantan Post* article featured Yayasan Rahim Bumi, a local foundation in Hulu Sungai Utara Regency, conducting training to utilize purun grass as a straw. This training aimed to use *purun* grass as a more sustainable alternative to single-use plastic straws. The initiative also taught people how to care for the peatlands where *purun* grass grows. Another article featured SMPN 2 Banjarbaru, a junior high school in Banjarbaru in South Kalimantan, and its successful “plastic-free school” pilot program. “The efforts to combat plastic can begin



with programs such as the plastic-free school program, or with a plastic bag ban in modern retail. Unfortunately, non-retail shops still provide free plastic bags,” Rakhmadi Kurniawan, the article’s author, said.

In the *Bali Post*, half of the sampled articles reported the region’s success in reducing plastic waste. One article featured a program where plastic waste could be exchanged for rice. The program encouraged locals to collect plastic waste around them and hand it to a committee in exchange for rice. In Banjar Banda, a town in Bali, community participation resulted in 1.7 tons of rice given to local plastic waste collectors. Another article highlights a skate park in Ubud where, every weekend, visitors have the option of entering the park with 10 plastic bottles instead of paying the entrance fee. On a bigger scale, an article about the “war against plastic waste” campaign launched by Klungkung Regency in Bali shows the ways in which Klungkung encourages communities to sort household waste to sell it to plastic co-operatives.

But the *Bali Post* also went beyond reporting on these community initiatives. “We collaborated with the mayor of the city to make a plastic waste collection competition,” said I Wayan Dira Arsana, the editor-in-chief of *Bali Post*. “We challenged elementary and high school pupils to collect plastic waste in their area. The school with the most plastic waste collected won. Many schools joined and the pupils responded positively,” I Wayan Dira Arsana added.

Overall, framing from the sampled regional news outlets shows that community, school, and municipal or city governments have their unique methods to combat plastic waste.



Journalists' perspectives on media coverage of plastics

"There is a standard and stylebook for the news outlet's articles to ensure all journalists write in the same standards," according to Hanni Sofia of *ANTARA News*. However, while there are quality standards that apply to any story, journalists in Indonesia approach plastic pollution stories from various angles.

In writing about this topic, Aqil of *The Jakarta Post* aims to "give context first." In turn, Lusia Arumingtyas, a journalist at *Mongabay Indonesia*, favors a humanistic approach. This means featuring ordinary people's perspectives, such as traditional markets' vendors and buyers, who the readers can easily connect to. Pradipta Pandu, a journalist from *Kompas*, claims that writers need to provide the environmental, economic, and social impact of single-use plastics to gain the readers' attention. This approach is similar to Rakhmadi Kurniawan's of *Kalimantan Post*, who places the focus on the dangers of plastic waste for the community.

In some cases, there is a close collaboration between the media and the local government. According to *Bali Post*'s editor-in-chief I Wayan Dira Arsana, their stories on single-use plastics are a product of both the newsroom's agenda-setting and their partnership with government authorities. "We have articles from our agenda-setting and from our coordination with the Bali provincial government, since limiting single-use plastic use is a government's initiative. There are also articles from NGOs where the focus is [on] single-use plastic or plastic-free Bali."

The impact of these articles on readers is also varied. For *Kompas*, the most widely read articles about single-use plastics discuss the negative impacts of plastic waste. Meanwhile, in *Bali Post*, articles about the plastic ban implementation in traditional markets are the readers' favorites based on page views.



Indonesian journalists also face different challenges while reporting on single-use plastics. For example, editor-in-chief of *Kalimantan Post* Sunarti said that private companies criticized the outlet for covering the topic. Despite disapproval, *Kalimantan Post* still reports on these issues. “We have the responsibility to protect the environment. If it is not us [journalists], who else will?” said Sunarti. *The Jakarta Post* grapples with the same problem. Compared to government officials or civil society organizations, business and private associations representatives are harder to contact as sources when asked about this topic. They usually either do not respond or just provide vague answers.

Indonesian journalists used to write about single-use plastics based on government and nonprofit organizations’ press conferences. However, during the pandemic, webinars became their go-to sources. Online sessions, however, cannot replace on-the-ground reporting – which the pandemic has made virtually impossible. “The *Kompas* editorial board has not provided much space for journalists to gather data fully from the field,” said Pradipta Pandu, one of the journalists covering environmental topics for *Kompas*.

Despite these challenges, the journalists interviewed have a favorable outlook on media coverage of plastic pollution. I Wayan Dira Arsana of *Bali Post*, when asked about the current state of single-use plastic reporting in Indonesia, replied, “We appreciate how the press has participated in preserving the environment through their own media.” According to Laily Rahmawati from *ANTARA News*, reporting on this issue is a form of public service. She believes that the plastic ban is a crucial policy that will benefit society and the environment.





Conclusion

Whether at the national or local level, Indonesian news outlets extensively covered government policies on single-use plastics. Media coverage of these policies was overwhelmingly positive. While regional and community initiatives were featured to a lesser extent, they also received favorable coverage. Although the COVID-19 pandemic did not lead to a clear shift in the discourse on single-use plastics, it did prompt a discussion about the increase in plastic waste generation. This was portrayed in the media as a result of increased home-office work and online purchases. The pandemic has also hampered the reporting process, as journalists have limited mobility due to COVID-19 restrictions.

Thailand

by Kadesiree Thossaphonpaisan

Introduction

The years 2018 and 2019 were significant for single-use plastic stories in Thailand. The tragedy of a sea-cow dying of ingesting plastics and Thai scientist Dr. Thon Thamrongnawasawat's finding of microplastics (tiny plastic particles that result from the breakdown of bigger pieces of plastic) in Thai mackerel fish resulted in a noticeable increase in stories about plastic waste in 2019 and early 2020.

The Thai government responded to these events by collaborating with department stores on the disposable bag ban campaign called "Every Day Say No to Plastic Bags." Launched on 1 January 2020, the initiative aims to drive the country closer to becoming a plastic-waste-free society. This effort contributes to hasten the implementation of the 2018-2030 Thai roadmap for plastic waste management.

The COVID-19 pandemic, however, has changed behaviors around plastic packaging use and online shopping in Thailand. According to the Thailand Environment Institute (TEI), plastic litter increased by 15 percent during the first COVID-19 wave in January 2020. In addition, TEI estimates that just one order from food delivery services produces at least seven garbage items.

This study aims to understand how policies and issues related to single-use plastic were covered in Thai media outlets from March 2019 to February 2021. To achieve this aim, 150 articles from the following six news outlets listed were examined:

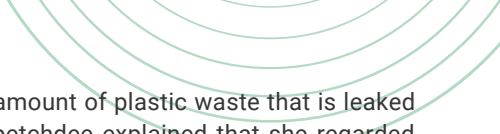
- *The Standard*, a mainstream digital media outlet;
- *Bangkok Biz*, a traditional daily newspaper with a focus on business and economic news as well as its online counterpart;
- *Thairath*, the oldest and best-selling daily newspaper in Thai and its online site. *Thairath* is published in Bangkok and distributed nationwide;
- *Chiangmai News*, a regional online news outlet headquartered in Chiang Mai, a northern province in Thailand;
- *Songkhla Focus*, a privately-owned regional news outlet based in southern Thailand; and
- *GreenNews*, a digital news outlet with a specific focus on environmental issues, founded by the Thai Society of Environmental Journalists.

Dominant narrative frames

Marine plastic pollution is a threat to human health and ocean life

The year 2019 saw the starting point of nationwide plastic discussions, largely due to tragedies involving marine animals ingesting plastics. The content analysis shows that all 69 articles published in that year framed single-use plastic negatively. For example, two *Songkhla Focus* articles featured the Prince of Songkla University and Songkhla Provincial Governor encouraging local people to sort their waste with a music video. Meanwhile, *Thairath* published two pieces on the anniversary of a whale that died from consuming plastic waste, urging individuals to avoid single-use plastic. The articles also demanded the government to expedite its plastic waste management roadmap implementation.

Eight data journalism articles showed that Thailand produces a lot of plastic litter and that much of this waste cannot be recycled. For instance, a *GreenNews* long-form story written by Nichakorn Sripetchdee referred to the 2018 Global Risks Report. The article cited the figures related to plastic pollution, such as the number of plastic

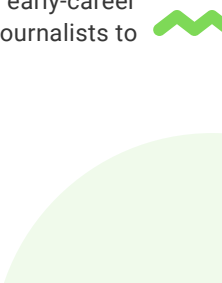


bags produced per year and the amount of plastic waste that is leaked into the sea. In an interview, Sripetchdee explained that she regarded plastic pollution as a transboundary issue and she wanted readers to be aware of this through global statistics. On a similar note, *The Standard* produced a set of infographics to visualize the types of garbage in the sea as well as marine animals that have died due to plastic waste.

In addition, *Bangkok Biz* published an investigative story about the tragedy of ocean life, citing more than five NGOs and scholars as sources. The article disclosed global data on plastic pollution from Surfers Against Sewage as well as local data showing that only 63 percent of Thailand's local administrations had sufficient capacity to manage waste. The story's author blamed plastic pollution on a throwaway culture. Besides, the article linked plastic problems with GDP that the country will get from the sea which has been exploited by the fishing industry.

Some journalists substantiated their stories using scientific sources. For example, a July 2020 story from GreenNews quoted a Burapha University aquatic science professor who argued: "microplastic is hydrophobic, which [means it] cannot be dissolved by water, and can enter our body."

Nevertheless, the number of stories citing scientific studies is still low: just over 10 percent of all sampled articles used scientific research as primary sources. *GreenNews's* former editor Pratch Rujiwanarom explained that access to reports depends on journalists' networks. For example, a *GreenNews* journalist used to be part of Chulalongkorn University's Chula Zero Waste project as a student, which enables her to reach out to academics. Similarly, Anuchit Kraiwijit, an early-career journalist from *The Standard*, said that he relied on senior journalists to find relevant studies for infographics (see here).



Plastic pollution results from the lack of cohesive plastic-related laws and policies

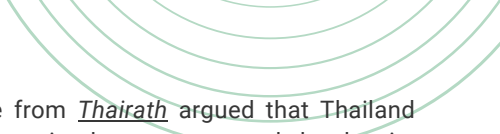
Overall, at least 16 of 150 stories utilized the policy and legal frame. Academic and nongovernmental organizations such as Greenpeace Thailand and Ecological Alert and Recovery - Thailand (EARTH) shaped this angle. These articles discussed the inconsistency of Thailand's plastic waste management roadmap.

For example, a *Thairath* op-ed criticized the 2019 Factory Act and the announcement of the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) no. 4/2016. The NCPO announcement was issued by the military junta to allow waste-to-energy plants in special economic zones, explaining that this would lead to national economic development. According to the article, the laws, however, are not in line with the government's plastic waste management roadmap and the plastic bag ban. The article questioned the government's commitment to plastic waste reduction, as well as investigated the plans to import plastic waste for the national recycling industry. For instance, a paragraph in the story read: "How does the Natural Resource and Environment Minister ensure that the disposable bag ban campaign will be successful if plastic litter from China is imported to the Southeast Asian region?"

Another legal restriction included in the articles analyzed Section 8 in the 2005 Notifications of the Ministry of Health No. 295. Two articles published in January 2021 in *Thairath* and *GreenNews* highlighted the problems associated with Recycled PET* (rPET) bottles. The articles emphasized that the law does not allow the use of any packaging made from used plastics to contain food, except fruits that need to be peeled before eating. Moreover, the stories discussed the availability of a PET recycling facility and the support from the business sector and NGOs in using rPET packaging to contain food and beverage.



*PET (polyethylene terephthalate) is a plastic widely used in food packaging and beverage products.

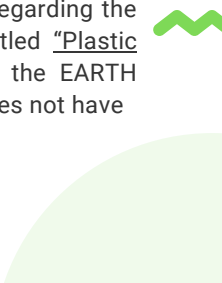


Similarly, a January op-ed piece from *Thairath* argued that Thailand must amend the laws to enable a circular economy and develop its plastic recycling industry. The President of the Resources Management for Sustainability Foundation (3R) was quoted supporting the article's main idea: "Recycling plastics and turning them into food packaging will not only support a circular economy but also improve waste sorting at the consumer level."

NGOs and academics were the most frequently quoted sources in these narratives. While the comments from these sources are largely similar, they were quoted by news outlets on different occasions. For example, a February 2021 report from *The Standard* published Greenpeace Thailand's criticism of a cabinet resolution on the national plastic waste management roadmap. Pichamon Rakrod, head of Greenpeace Thailand's campaign against plastic waste, was quoted as saying: "The roadmap failed to address CO2 emissions from waste-to-energy plants that burn plastic waste. The burning of 0.79 million tons of plastic waste will emit 22.83 million tons of CO2."

Likewise, a *GreenNews* article discussed a sustainable solution to plastic pollution after COVID-19. Dr. Sujitra Vassanadumrongdee from Chulalongkorn University's Environmental Research Institute was quoted as recommending that the new law should emphasize the concept of "extended producer responsibility." Extended producer responsibility aims for producers to reduce pollution from the production until the end of the products' lifetime, as well as to minimize waste from their factories.

Another NGO representative who significantly shaped the plastic debate in the media is Penchom Saetang, the director of EARTH. She was mentioned in *Thairath*, *Bangkok Biz*, and *GreenNews* regarding the Factory Act 2019. For instance, a *Bangkok Biz* article titled "Plastic waste crisis in Thailand" allotted half of the story for the EARTH Director's comments. Saetang claimed that the country does not have



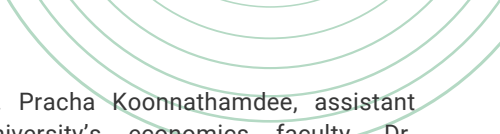
enough environmental laws and measures to ensure that factories will be responsible for the environmental impacts of plastic waste. Moreover, the current national laws allow factories to import waste, worsening Thailand's plastic crisis.

Plastic bag ban criticized as a paternalistic policy

In the sample, 27 articles discussed whether the plastic bag ban is truly effective in reducing plastic litter and changing consumers' behavior. The articles highlighted that the policy burdens individuals to curb plastic use by buying tote bags or spunbond bags that may be inaccessible to those in lower economic classes.

Opinion pieces employing this frame drew from economists' perspectives to criticize the plastic ban. For example, an op-ed piece from *The Standard* written by Nattavudh Powdthavee, an economist from Warwick Business School, criticized the campaign as a paternalistic policy. Powdthavee cited research that found that New York's ban on disposable bags led to sales of garbage bags skyrocketing. This was because those who used to reuse their shopping bags began purchasing trash bags to pick up dog feces or to line their garbage bins. Powdthavee advised that a policy pricing store plastic bags at 2-Baht [\$0.03] can make citizens gradually improve their behavior.

A *Bangkok Biz* op-ed article written by Dr. Chatrchai Tuongratanaphan, an expert on retail trade, argued that the plastic bags ban would cause 450 plastic bag factories to close. The article also cited research from Denmark's Ministry of Environment and Food, which found that cloth bags are the least environmentally-friendly. Dr. Chatrchai Tuongratanaphan's second op-ed proposed that individuals reuse plastic bags and that the government both improve the waste management system and impose tax measures, which include an import tariff on plastic raw materials for plastic producers.

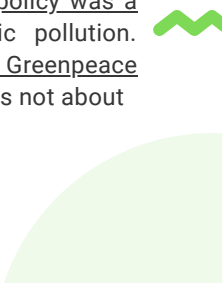


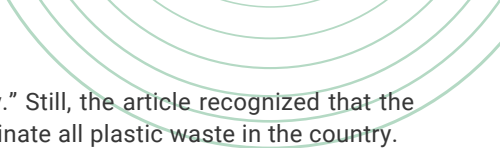
A GreenNews story quoted Dr. Pracha Koonnathamdee, assistant professor at Thammasat University's economics faculty. Dr. Koonnathamdee was quoted as saying that stores should provide substitute bags, such as cassava-based bioplastic bags, to facilitate consumers to change their behavior. Nevertheless, the second half of this piece discussed the environmental impact of oxo-degradable bags – bags made from plastics that are often falsely marketed as biodegradable – and their potential contribution to microplastic pollution.

Firsthand experiences were cited extensively in this particular narrative frame. For example, a *Thairath* story reported negative views from local merchandisers and customers in a fresh produce market. The article concluded that the plastic bag ban campaign only benefits convenience stores and malls, as those businesses avoid the cost of buying plastic bags that they previously provided to customers. Additionally, an article from *GreenNews* published in December 2019 interviewed five individuals from different backgrounds about their position regarding the plastic bag ban.

In the news outlets sampled, officials also criticized how the plastic ban campaign placed the onus on individuals to change their behavior. For example, a *Chiangmai News* article cited a local politician from an opposition party as stating that, although she agreed with reducing plastic bag usage, the campaign placed the blame on people instead of businesses. According to this official, the government should regulate big businesses and department stores instead since they use more resources than individual merchandisers in fresh markets.

Certain stories, however, depicted the plastic bag ban in a positive light. For instance, a *Thairath* columnist stated that the policy was a good starting point for the country to reduce plastic pollution. Similarly, a feature story from *The Standard* quoted Greenpeace Thailand's Pichamon Rakrod as saying that the campaign is not about





quitting plastic bags “cold turkey.” Still, the article recognized that the bag ban policy alone cannot eliminate all plastic waste in the country.

Most of the journalists interviewed noted that, when reporting, they try to detail campaign updates as well as perspectives from all stakeholders to examine how it would impact different groups of people. Parppim Pimmaratr, an independent writer who has written plastic-related stories for years, said that she encourages customers “to reduce single-use plastic.” However, Pimmaratr also affirmed that “both government and the private sector must facilitate plastic reduction, in order not to push the burden on individuals.”

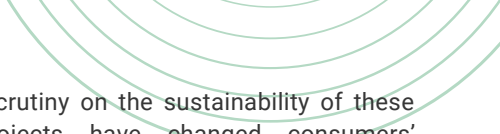
Business sector represented as leaders of green initiatives

Business sources were portrayed by media outlets as concerned about both their profits and environmental impact. Twenty-five stories promoted the private sector’s initiatives or its efforts to collaborate across sectors to build a so-called “green economy.”

For example, the Green Road initiative, which involves building roads using plastic waste, was covered in national, regional, and specialized outlets. Both *Bangkok Biz* and *GreenNews* reported a collaboration among the government, plastic producers, and Chiang Mai University to turn plastic waste into asphaltic concrete. The companies were depicted as facilitators for local waste sorting and collection.

Meanwhile, a *Bangkok Biz* article reported that single-use plastic cutlery in franchise restaurants would be converted into materials for leg prostheses. This initiative also aims to create jobs by collaborating with a local nonprofit that hires homeless people to collect and sort waste from their restaurants.





However, this study found no scrutiny on the sustainability of these initiatives; whether these projects have changed consumers' behaviors; and how they addressed implementation challenges. Most of these stories were also explicitly labeled as advertorial content.

Therefore, this narrative frame argues that plastic is not the culprit. Two stories published in the business section of *The Standard* are illustrative. The first argues that "plastics themselves are not the culprit, the problem is how people consume and manage waste," and cites a National Geographic article on the problem of throwaway culture and the possibility of a circular economy. Another article argues that "single-use plastic" is a "new term" coined to campaign for a plastic ban. The story quoted Thai Plastic Institute expert Mayuree Phaklamjeak's definition of "single-use plastics."

COVID-19 has revealed that single-use plastic is necessary but needs to be managed

Since Thailand reported its first COVID-19 case in late January 2020, the number of stories discussing the country's plastic reduction roadmap declined. However, the release of plastic waste data by the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment's Pollution Control Department in April 2020 brought the issue back to the media. These stories focused on the rise of plastic waste as a result of the increase in delivery services during the pandemic.

For example, a *Thairath* report discussed the growth of delivery businesses during the pandemic and linked it to the increase in plastic litter, particularly takeaway food plastic packaging, which saw a 62 percent increase in April 2020. The article recommended that the government implement a better waste management system and encouraged citizens to sort their plastic waste.



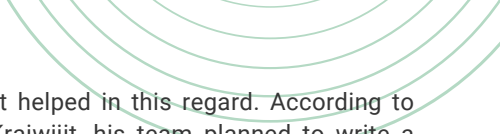
Mainstream publications claimed that plastic is still necessary during the pandemic, but emphasized that proper plastic waste management can address plastic pollution. A *Thairath* story that was labeled as advertorial content even went as far as likening single-use plastics to a hero for their medical use. On a similar note, a *Bangkok Biz* article stated in its introduction that “COVID-19 has revealed that plastic is still necessary for our daily life.”

GreenNews stories noted that recycling — while not the most sustainable way to end plastic waste — is still better than just letting plastic accumulate. For instance, a *GreenNews* article quoted the chief adviser of the Research and Innovation for Sustainability Center as saying: “The sustainable solution to tackle single-use plastic is to stop using it. But if it is impossible to do so, we [the business sector] need to think of how to manage plastics properly.” Another story about a recycling project cited engineering professor Varoon Varayanond affirming that “recycling is just a part of the solution to end waste.”

A *GreenNews* article written by Nicha Wechpanich was a rare example of covering the long-term human health effects of single-use plastic litter. The story argued that the idea that single-use plastics will save people from the pandemic is a myth. In an interview, Wechpanich said that she got the idea for the story from wondering about how food plastic packaging in state quarantine areas had been managed — an angle that was not discussed in the media otherwise.

Journalists’ perspectives on media coverage of plastics

Reporting on plastics in Thailand tends to lack continuity as there is no attempt to follow up on existing policies and campaigns. Most articles focus on introducing new initiatives and say little about the results of past or existing efforts.

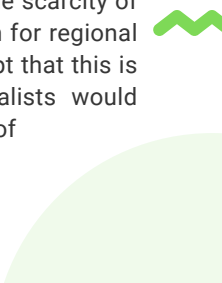


The COVID-19 pandemic has not helped in this regard. According to *The Standard* reporter Anuchit Kraiwijit, his team planned to write a series of follow-up stories on the plastic bag ban campaign launched in 2020. The pandemic, however, put a halt to that plan. He noted that for mainstream outlets, it is more difficult to keep writing about this issue since their editorial teams need to cover major events that readers would pay more attention to. This is not the case in *GreenNews*, an outlet with a focus on environmental issues, where journalists could continue pitching and reporting plastic stories during a pandemic.

Journalists interviewed generally considered plastics a transnational environmental story that has an impact on human health and marine life. The majority of plastic articles published during the period studied, however, prominently featured the government and the business sector as primary sources. As seen in the content analysis, there is a lack of individual and community voices. At the same time, a number of academic and nonprofit sources often appear in the media. For instance, Varoon Varayanond, Chulalongkorn University's engineering professor, was quoted in 12 articles, and Greenpeace Thailand's Pichamon Rakrod was mentioned in 10 stories.

GreenNews's Nicha Wechpanich admitted that she tends to interview the same experts due to the lack of sources who can provide a critical perspective. While Wechpanich sometimes uses international sources in order to make her story more interesting, she lamented that plastic-related reports often do not include the Thai context. "Some international plastic-related research does not include Thailand as a case study so it is not attractive to our Thai readers," she said.

According to Phuwasit Suksai, editor of *Songkhla Focus*, the scarcity of scientific perspectives in plastic articles is also a problem for regional outlets. "In respect to the scientific aspect, I have to accept that this is the weakness of my publication," he said. "Our journalists would interview sources in local universities, such as the faculty of



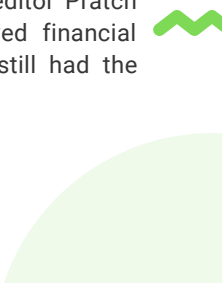


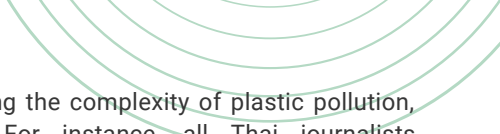
environmental management of the Prince of Songkla University, to encourage people to sort waste, but did not deep dive into scientific angles.”

Pratch Rujiwanarom, formerly of *GreenNews*, offered his own perspective on the lack of scientific sources in Thai media coverage of plastic pollution. “Some publications dissolved the environmental news desk, so journalists from other sections cover plastic stories and highlight other angles instead,” he said. Reaching out to sources also depends largely on a journalist’s own network. “*Greennews* is the publication that usually works with NGOs and academia; hence, it is not too difficult for us to find scientific sources.”

Half of the journalists interviewed mentioned the lack of publicly available government data to enrich their reporting. Since there is no data available on the Ministry of National Resources and Environment’s website, reporters often need to contact an operator who transfers their phone calls for them to get to speak to key informants.

Outlets also have varying approaches to advertorial content. While mainstream publications *The Standard* and *Thairath* explicitly labeled such stories, *GreenNews* listed them under the Public Relations (PR) section. Other media outlets conveyed little or no information about sponsored content. Interviewed journalists navigated these challenges in different ways. When Anuchit Kraiwijit from *The Standard* was tasked with attending events organized by companies, he would take it upon himself to explicitly inform readers that statistics used were from companies. He also added that he still felt independent from these companies and considered these events an opportunity to gather data and meet new contacts. Likewise, *GreenNews*’s former editor Pratch Rujiwanarom said that, although the publication received financial support from a chemical and packaging company, he still had the freedom to select PR news to be published on the website.





When it comes to communicating the complexity of plastic pollution, journalists prioritize readers. For instance, all Thai journalists interviewed said that they usually get article ideas from social media. *Songkhla Focus* is especially responsive to readers' feedback: the publication reported on topics suggested by readers.

Meanwhile, Anuchit Kraiwijit from *The Standard* tries to present plastic data in several formats, including infographics and short clips, as some readers may not have the time to read a long story. Likewise, freelance writer Parppim Pimmaratr takes a reader-centric approach: "Consumers have an intention to reduce litter, but this poses a burden on some people. I do not blame consumers in my stories — instead, I propose innovative solutions that facilitate them to do so."

Conclusion

The majority of the articles sampled from Thai news outlets highlighted that single-use plastics are harmful to human health and the ecosystem. COVID-19 has slightly shifted this discourse, as articles published during the pandemic emphasized that plastics are necessary during a health crisis. Nevertheless, several stories also highlighted the need for a better waste management system to minimize their damaging impact.

Reporting on plastics in Thailand, however, lacks a big-picture approach that requires multiple perspectives. Most journalists working for mainstream publications rely on social media discussions to determine the story they will work on or prioritize national government and business representatives as sources. The dissolution of the environmental news sections in some publications has also meant that attention on this important issue has dwindled.



Vietnam

by Đỗ Thùy Trang

Introduction

Vietnam produces about 13 million tonnes of waste each year and is one of the five rapidly growing economies in Asia, besides China, Indonesia, Philippines, and Thailand. Together, these five countries are responsible for more marine plastic waste leakage than the rest of the world combined. As a result, Vietnam has made ambitious political commitments to manage and reduce plastic waste, including ocean plastic waste. For example, Resolution No. 36-NQ /TW of October 22, 2018 set the goal of preventing, controlling, and significantly reducing pollution of the marine environment.

To examine the Vietnamese media coverage of the impact of single-use plastics, this analysis covers 150 articles published from March 2019 to February 2021 from the six news outlets below.

- VN Express, a press agency under the Ministry of Science and Technology, which is also Vietnam's most-read news website;
- Lao Dong Newspaper, a press agency under Vietnam General Confederation of Labor that is also one of the oldest and most influential newspapers in the current Vietnamese media system;
- Tuoi Tre Newspaper, a publication of the Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Union of Ho Chi Minh City. This daily outlet, which is written in Vietnamese, is the largest newspaper in the country;
- Da Nang Online, a Vietnamese Communist Party newspaper published from Da Nang City in central Vietnam;
- Quang Ninh Newspaper, a press agency under the Provincial Party Committee of Quang Nam, a province along the northeastern coast of Vietnam; and

- Natural Resources and Environment Newspaper, an online and print news outlet that focuses mostly on environmental issues, published in Vietnamese only. Its press agency is under the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment.

Dominant narrative frames

Strong emphasis on government initiatives in media coverage

In 2019, then Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc instructed ministers, heads of ministerial-level agencies, government agencies, and People's Committees of provinces and cities to issue policies to reduce, classify, collect, reuse, and recycle plastic waste. This required all government levels to take the lead in reducing plastic waste and single-use plastic use. The plan aims to eliminate disposable plastic products in Vietnam by 2025.

Nine stories from *VN Express* reiterated the commitment from state agencies and businesses to reduce plastic waste. Five other articles published in *Tuoi Tre Newspaper* and *Lao Dong Newspaper* also described other localities' plans. Notably, these descriptive articles contain little to no data or research to demonstrate how such activities might reduce plastic use.

Seven out of 11 reporters and contributors interviewed from *Tuoi Tre Newspaper*, *Lao Dong Newspaper*, and *VN Express* admitted that the most frequently seen topics on media publications were based on press releases and reports.

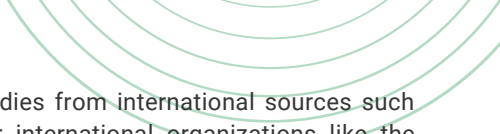
"Governments, institutions, and large companies like banks and state enterprises often publish reports on their websites. These provide information about plastic use and ways to reduce it," said Nguyen Ha Trang from *Tuoi Tre Newspaper*. Since these statements are easily accessible, they are a convenient go-to source for reporters.

Plastics framed as a threat to the planet, especially marine life and human health

Vietnamese media outlets described the use of plastic products as a direct contributor to marine pollution, with potential impacts on human health and livelihoods. A *VN Express* article "Mekong nations to address choking plastic pollution" cited a study published in the *Environmental Science & Technology* journal, showing that the Mekong is one of the 10 rivers that collectively carry 88 percent to 95 percent of plastics to the world's oceans. The article claimed that without adequate policies and regulations, the plastic pollution of the Mekong river would affect about 641 million people across 10 countries.

In *Tuoi Tre Newspaper's* article "Vietnam's pearl island Phu Quoc faces severe trash crisis," plastic pollution was depicted as a destruction of the island's pristine beauty. The article also described plastic pollution as a cause of the decline in tourism as well as a threat to public health. In another article in *Lao Dong Newspaper*, fishermen in Nha Trang claimed that "plastic waste grows more than fish in the sea." The article emphasizes the impacts of "white pollution" (plastic pollution) on the livelihood of local fishermen in recent years. In addition, two articles from *Natural Resources and Environment Newspaper* went further to claim that single-use plastics would kill the planet and the whole ecosystem, such as marine life and immigrant birds.

Meanwhile, the article "Ocean plastic waste could triple by 2040" published by *Natural Resources and Environment Newspaper* presented findings from The Pew Charitable Trusts – an independent public policy nonprofit in the US. The article argued that if companies and governments fail to reduce plastic production, the amount of plastic waste flowing into the oceans and killing marine life will triple in the next 20 years.



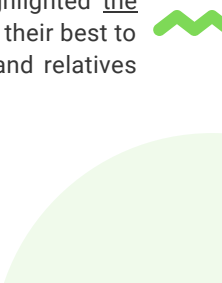
Journalists in Vietnam favor studies from international sources such as newspapers, conferences, or international organizations like the United Nations. According to Dam Thi Hoai Anh, a *Lao Dong Newspaper* reporter, this is due to the shortage of plastic specialists in Vietnam. Similarly, Nguyen Ha Trang, who writes for the tourist section of *Tuoi Tre Newspaper*, noted: “There are specialized seminars and conferences where journalists can meet local scientists. However, these events are rare.”

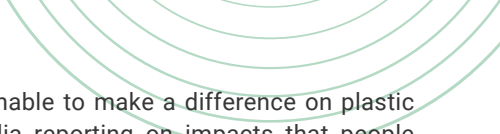
One investigative story in *Lao Dong Newspaper* reported that 500 households in Lam Ha Ward in Hai Phong were “tortured” by the smell emanating from a nearby plastic recycling factory. Another piece highlighted a case of illegal dumping of toxic e-waste mixed with untreated plastic waste in Yen Thinh village in Vinh Phuc province. These substances, when burned together, could produce hazardous gases harmful to people’s health. These two stories utilized various sources – local authorities, business representatives, and local people – to make more persuasive claims.

Increase in plastic waste depicted as a result of poor public awareness

Public reluctance to behavior change was a common theme among the articles analyzed for this report. According to this frame, national efforts to reduce plastic use were hampered by individuals’ evasion of the plastic tax and consumption of “convenient” single-use plastic bags.

Four stories published in *Tuoi Tre Newspaper* warned that the lack of awareness among local residents was part of the problem. An opinion piece published in the same publication, meanwhile, highlighted the sense of helplessness felt by some. While they were trying their best to live sustainably, they expressed frustration with friends and relatives who refused to give up plastic bags or sort their garbage.





The sense that individuals are unable to make a difference on plastic waste can also stem from media reporting on impacts that people perceive too great to influence. “It’s hard to change the perception of a large group of Vietnamese. They think they know everything about the plastic problem, but they don’t care about plastic straws stuck in some turtles’ noses, or ecosystems suffering from plastic waste,” said Hoang Thi Linh, a *Tuoi Tre Newspaper* reporter.

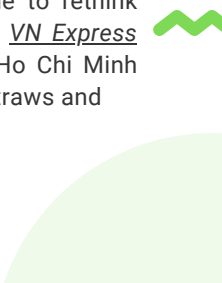
In some cases, the focus on individual action was framed positively. One example is a feature article in *Quang Ninh Newspaper*: the story presented Tien An village as a successful case study, as over 8,000 villagers learned to collect and handle pesticide packaging in a more eco-friendly manner. Since the current incineration technology is unable to manage plastic waste without polluting the environment, the villagers must voluntarily stop discarding pesticide shells, mostly made from plastic, into the environment.

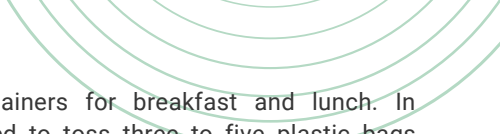
An article in *Da Nang Online* also emphasized that in order for Da Nang to become a green city, authorities at all levels must regularly promote environmental protection and educational programs to call for changes in citizens’ habits. This involves the use of single-use plastic products, including non-biodegradable plastic bags.

COVID-19 pandemic seen as a contributor to an increase in plastic waste

Only five out of 150 articles in the Vietnam sample mentioned the COVID-19 pandemic. However, these stories depicted the pandemic as a contributor to the significant rise in plastic waste.

Arguably, the pandemic provided some people with time to rethink their impact on the environment. An opinion piece from VN Express calculated that, on a daily basis, an ordinary worker in Ho Chi Minh used and discarded around two plastic cups, two plastic straws and





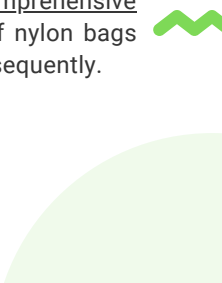
two styrofoam or plastic containers for breakfast and lunch. In addition, workers were estimated to toss three to five plastic bags daily for carrying food and drinks. In addition to the absence of strict regulations on sorting and treating plastic waste, this piece portrayed the habit of using disposable plastics as a major reason for plastic pollution in Vietnam. Forced to stay at home, the author reflected on how transforming individual habits could fight the impact of single-use plastic on the environment.

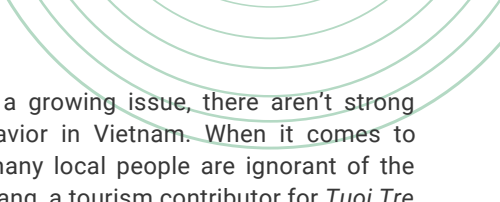
According to the *Tuoi Tre Newspaper* article published during the pandemic "Plastic waste has increased significantly, it is necessary to join hands to reduce it now," up to 75 percent of people living in Ho Chi Minh and Hanoi habitually buy food and supplies online. The proliferation of packaging from these deliveries has contributed to a significant increase in the amount of plastic waste. *Lao Dong Newspaper* also noted that, during the COVID-19 pandemic, consumers have relied on delivery services, thus contributing to the increase of single-use foam boxes and nylon bags.

Plastic-related policies framed as lacking teeth

When it comes to plastic waste management in Vietnam, local authorities are responsible for waste segregation and only higher authorities can impose fines for plastic waste mismanagement. Some articles in the sample pointed out that there is a need for more comprehensive policies and regulations about plastic waste.

For example, articles from the *Natural Resources and Environment Newspaper* highlighted that the current legal tools for marine plastic pollution were not effective enough for local governments to regulate plastic pollution. These stories recommended a comprehensive solution for controlling the production and distribution of nylon bags initially and other types of single-use plastic products subsequently.





“Despite plastic pollution being a growing issue, there aren’t strong policies to shape people’s behavior in Vietnam. When it comes to awareness and self-discipline, many local people are ignorant of the plastic issue,” said Nguyen Ha Trang, a tourism contributor for *Tuoi Tre Newspaper*.

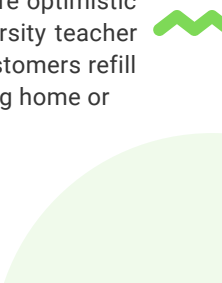
Going green framed as good business

Articles across different publications featured various initiatives to demonstrate that a green approach can be profitable.

For example, *Quang Ninh Newspaper* depicted the “turn trash into money” model implemented by the Ha Trung Ward’s Women’s Union as an effective solution. The model reduces plastic waste while providing jobs for local women. Meanwhile, *Tuoi Tre Newspaper* featured a Ho Chi Minh youngsters’ initiative that offered eco-friendly socks in exchange for plastic bottles as well as coffee chains promoting the use of eco-friendly products. Based on just a few examples, the *Tuoi Tre Newspaper* stories drew the conclusion that shops and restaurants had already jumped on the no-plastic bandwagon.

The reality, however, is far from simple. Nguyen Thi Xuan, who works for *Tuoi Tre Newspaper*, said that the main challenge of writing about businesses’ efforts to reduce their plastic use is the lack of data. “There is rarely any specific data about plastic consumption: from suppliers to distribution agencies, from big restaurants and coffee chains to small shops,” she noted. “Without the businesses’ statistics to support the stories, readers can hardly fathom the real impact of these plastic-reduction actions.”

Three articles published in *Lao Dong Newspaper* had a more optimistic approach to similar initiatives. One story features a university teacher who created “Refill Đây” – a business model that helps customers refill their own reusable containers with products without leaving home or





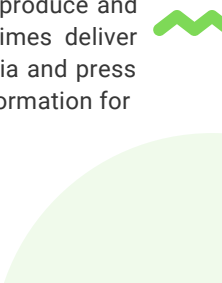
work. Another story presents a woman in Long An province who, after seeing the image of a turtle in Costa Rica with a plastic straw stuck in its nose, came up with the idea of creating a grass straw business. Lastly, a small business called Galaxy Biotech introduced the "breathing bag," an alternative to the traditional plastic bag made of industrial tapioca starch. All three initiatives were winners of the 2020 Ending Plastic Pollution Innovation Challenge (EPPIC), a competition for countries in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) that aims to tackle the problem of plastic pollution.

Dam Thi Hoai Anh, a reporter for *Lao Dong Newspaper* and the author of the three aforementioned articles, prioritizes stories about individuals' initiatives and personal struggles in her feature articles. She believes that these stories deliver more effective messages about plastic waste than straight news about governmental campaigns. "My message is very simple: encouraging people to think and live greener, starting from small changes in their lifestyle," she said.

Journalists' perspectives on media coverage of plastics

In Vietnam, all newspapers are owned and regulated by the state or belong to an organization of the government. The Vietnamese Communist Party, which is in charge of all media output in Vietnam, acts as the central media authority. In addition, the Vietnamese Communist Party promotes its political agenda and reinforces social and political ideologies through journalism. This could be a reason why national and local government representatives are the most common primary sources and the majority of articles mention at least one government policy.

But the internet has made it easy for ordinary citizens to produce and disseminate their own stories. Social media can sometimes deliver and distribute the news much faster than the central media and press agencies. Thus, the internet provides useful sources of information for

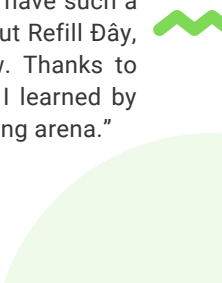




journalists. For example, Dam Thi Hoai Anh from *Lao Dong Newspaper* finds plastic-reduction events on Facebook. Attending events such as the EPPIC also allows her to approach those working hard to fight plastic pollution in Vietnam and beyond. “These people are nice and open. Once I got to know a few people, they introduced me to a larger group of like-minded people, a community,” she said.

Investigative stories about plastic pollution caused by factories, however, should not mostly rely on information found on social media. According to *VN Express* reporter Nguyen Ngoc Diep, getting opinions from government agencies and companies is a complex task. Reporters must send a recommendation letter from the newspaper’s editorial office to the agency or company they want to talk to for a story. After a few days, reporters might be scheduled for an interview with a representative. However, requests can be delayed or ignored in order to avoid an interview.

Mainstream news outlets such as *VN Express*, *Lao Dong Newspaper*, and *Tuoi Tre Newspaper* frequently organize brief, general training sessions for reporters to help them hone their professional skills. However, “there are hardly any plastic-relevant training programs for professional reporters and journalists,” said Hoang Thi Linh, a reporter for *Tuoi Tre Newspaper*. Similarly, according to Nguyen Phuong Thao, a culture section contributor for *Lao Dong Newspaper*, very few reporters have the technical expertise to discuss the impact of single-use plastics in-depth. Despite the lack of specialized sessions focusing on plastics, however, Nguyen Phuong Thao believes that reporters can develop a comprehensive understanding of these issues independently. Dam Thi Hoai Anh, a reporter for *Lao Dong Newspaper*, agrees: “*Lao Dong Newspaper* does not provide specialized training on plastic-waste reporting and I don’t think it is necessary to have such a thing,” she said. “For example, when I wrote an article about Refill Đây, I contacted the business representative for an interview. Thanks to that, I met more people with interesting recycling ideas. I learned by talking to the people who are directly working in the recycling arena.”





Conclusion

In Vietnam, where all news outlets are state-owned, the media serves as an effective medium for communicating state policy. The announcement of the national 2019-2021 anti-plastic campaign, in particular, has led to considerable interest in curbing plastic use. This focus on small-scale solutions, however, belies the fact that the issue is a systemic one.

Because of their nature, Vietnamese outlets favor government sources in their news coverage. Thus, perspectives from academic researchers, local communities and NGOs are mostly missing in the sample. Still, niche publications such as the *Natural Resources and Environment Newspaper* covered plastic pollution with a more ambitious and critical approach than other news publications.

While news outlets provide general training sessions for reporters, no specialized sessions focus on single-use plastics. Vietnamese journalists, however, generally believe that they are usually able to provide interesting and informative news to their readers even without these training sessions.



Philippines

by Anna Patricia Valerio

Introduction

Plastics are ubiquitous in the Philippines. They have become synonymous with the sachet economy that makes myriad consumer products — shampoo, toothpaste, and detergent, to name a few — sold in smaller packs easily accessible to low- and middle-income Filipinos. Data from the Global Alliance for Incinerator Alternatives (GAIA) shows that Filipinos use around 60 billion sachets annually — which according to *Reuters* is enough to cover 130,000 football fields.

The COVID-19 pandemic, however, has made plastics a household staple for Filipinos of all economic classes. Concerns about the risk of surface transmission of the virus — especially at the onset of the pandemic — prompted ordinary citizens and businesses to resort to single-use plastics to stay safe. For instance, the Philippines is the only country that requires the use of plastic face shields — despite the general consensus that COVID-19 is spread primarily through airborne transmission and that face shields do not work against it.

Before the pandemic, the national government already set laudable targets to curb the mismanagement of plastics. For example, the Philippine Development Plan 2017-2022 specified a waste diversion rate (the amount of waste diverted from landfills to recycling) goal of 80 percent by 2022. In 2019, the National Economic and Development Authority published the Philippine Action Plan for Sustainable Consumption and Production (PAP4SCP) with technical assistance from the Asian Development Bank. The plan aims to establish a coherent framework for resource conservation, waste management, and sustainable business.

The achievement of most of these goals, however, is largely contingent on the implementation of Republic Act No. 9003 (RA 9003) or the Ecological Solid Waste Management Act of 2000. According to environmental groups in the Philippines, this 20-year-old law has languished due to an inadequate political will and conflicting policies of government agencies overseeing waste and resource management.

To examine how local media has depicted the impact of single-use plastics before and during the pandemic, this analysis covers 150 articles published from March 2019 to February 2021 from the six news outlets below. In order to highlight how local media has approached this issue, wire service stories and marketing content were excluded from the sample

- *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, a mainstream print newspaper and its online counterpart, Inquirer.net;
- *The Philippine Star*, a general-audience print newspaper and its online arm, Philstar.com;
- CNNPhilippines.com, an online news outlet that complements the CNN Philippines TV channel;
- SunStar, a newspaper based in Cebu City that publishes regional news around the Philippines;
- MindaNews, a regional online newspaper focused exclusively on Mindanao; and
- BusinessMirror, a business-focused print and digital newspaper.

Dominant narrative frames

Plastic pollution framed as a threat to marine life

Before the pandemic, media outlets in the Philippines framed the need to curb plastic use largely in terms of environmental damage, particularly to marine life. As the Philippines is an archipelago, the country was depicted as a contributor to the plastic waste that



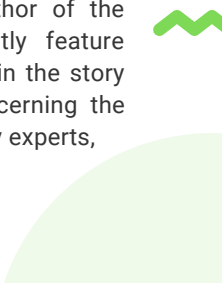
eventually ended up in bodies of water. Nonprofit representatives and individual perspectives were the dominant sources in these kinds of stories.

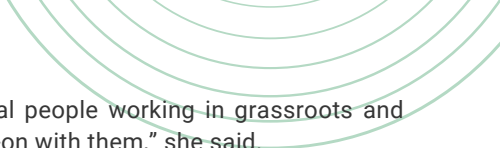
“As a nation of islands, and with so many places in the country without the resources for adequate solid waste management, it’s so easy for the plastic to run off to the sea,” said Jim Simon, president of the international ocean conservation group Oceana. Simon’s quote appeared in a story titled “Ocean conservation group pushes ban on single-use plastics.” published in August 2019 by the *Philippine Daily Inquirer*.

With 0.75 million metric tonnes of non-recycled plastics, the Philippines is the third largest contributor to the plastics ending up in the ocean every year. According to the World Bank, in the Philippines, over 75 percent of the material value of recyclable plastic is lost. In other words, more than 75 percent of recyclable plastic – or \$6 billion annually – is discarded instead of recovered and recycled. The bulk of these non-recycled plastics either ends up in sanitary landfills and dump sites or contaminates the environment across the country.

An October 2019 feature published by *CNNPhilippines.com* illustrated this with a quote from a fisherman in the story “We catch plastic, not fish or crab.” The article builds from the *National Geographic* documentary *ACTIVATE: The Global Citizen Movement* and discusses plastic pollution in the country. The article quoted a Greenpeace representative on the role that companies like Procter & Gamble (P&G) – the co-presenter of the documentary – play in the continued individual consumption of plastic.

According to reporter Elizabeth Deyro, who is the author of the *CNNPhilippines.com* article, her decision to prominently feature individual perspectives and environmental organizations in the story was a deliberate one. “When dealing with matters concerning the environment, it always helps to consult the experts. And by experts,





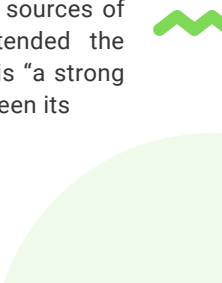
we always should mean the local people working in grassroots and the organizations working hands-on with them,” she said.

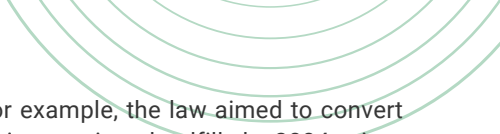
RA 9003 depicted as a languishing law whose implementation has been neglected

Articles that discussed RA 9003 or the Ecological Solid Waste Management Act in detail often underscored its inadequate implementation. Through the RA 9003, the National Solid Waste Management Commission was created and tasked to prepare a list of non-environmentally acceptable products (NEAPs) within a year from the law taking effect. While the Ecological Solid Waste Management Act was passed in 2000 and took effect in 2001, it took two decades for the National Solid Waste Management Commission to publish the NEAPs list that became the basis of several plastic bans around the country.

Criticism of the sluggish execution of RA 9003 did not come exclusively from environmental organizations. For example, the February 2021 *Philstar.com* article [“Philippines may soon prohibit use of plastic straws, stirrers; groups seek wider ban”](#) quoted Benny Antiporda, Department of Environment and Natural Resources undersecretary for solid waste management and local government units, saying that while the list was “a big leap,” it was nevertheless “long overdue.”

An earlier *The Philippine Star* article — a November 2019 opinion piece titled [“The solution to plastic waste: Partnerships”](#) — served as a recap of the SEA of Solutions, an annual event convened by the United Nations Environment Programme and the Coordinating Body on the Seas of East Asia that focuses on addressing the sources of plastic pollution. The author of the article, who attended the conference as a moderator, acknowledged that RA 9003 is “a strong law by international standards” but lamented the gap between its





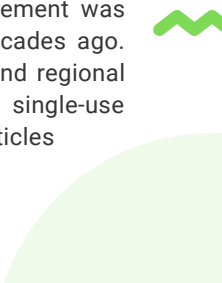
intention and implementation. For example, the law aimed to convert all open dumpsites in the country into sanitary landfills by 2004 — just three years after it took effect. Data from the government as of 2018 showed, however, that there were still at least 425 illegal dumpsites operating in the Philippines.

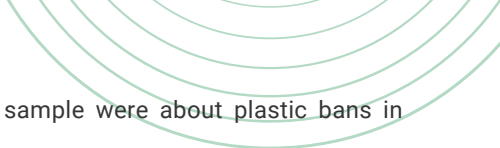
But others did not mince words in their appraisal of RA 9003. Sonia Mendoza, chairperson of the Mother Earth Foundation, was featured in a November 2020 *BusinessMirror* story about her work. “The implementation of this 19-year-old law is pathetic,” she said. Mendoza added that only 30 percent of the Philippines’ over 42,000 barangays (villages) have their own material recovery facilities, which include solid waste transfer stations, composting facilities, drop-off centers, and recycling facilities for residents. The establishment of these facilities for all barangays in the Philippines is one of the objectives of RA 9003.

An opinion piece published in March 2019 on *The Philippine Star* “We’re so plastic” — a cheeky reference to how Filipinos refer to double-dealers — adopted an accusatory tone in framing the problem of lagging implementation of laws. “Sadly it seems that any and all laws submitted ... have either disappeared, buried in the cemetery of unwelcomed bills or efficiently discarded by members of Congress who are either in the plastics business, support corporations heavily invested or engaged in sachet packaging or single-use plastics,” the column read. The author, who is a broadcast journalist, did not back up this claim with supporting facts.

Single-use plastic represented as individuals’ responsibility

The RA 9003’s decentralized approach to waste management was hailed as progressive when the law was passed two decades ago. Because of this, media coverage of plastics in national and regional publications alike has focused on local governments’ single-use plastics regulations. For instance, nearly all of the news articles



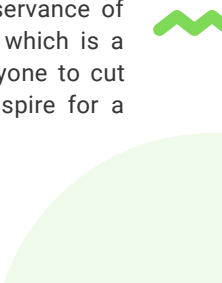


published by *MindaNews* in the sample were about plastic bans in different parts of Mindanao.

In reporting on these local plastic bans, most journalists tended to overlook the economic underpinnings of plastic production. Instead, articles zeroed in on the penalties that potential individual violators would incur. The omission of a larger economic discussion reflects the conviction that reducing plastic use relies on individual responsibility rather than systemic change.

This framing is evident in a December 2019 *SunStar* story that quoted a World Wildlife Fund (WWF) official who claimed that it was “necessary to cut unnecessary plastic production and consumption.” The story, however, failed to include recommendations for plastic producers and instead focused on consumers’ responsibility to curb plastic waste. Indeed, the WWF representative’s quote was followed by: “One key to solving plastic pollution is change in lifestyle.” The emphasis on individual action is also present in a February 2020 *SunStar* article about the Davao plastic ban. Mark Peñalver, the executive director of the Davao-based environmental nonprofit Interface Development Interventions for Sustainability, was quoted in the story: “This [ban] may cause inconvenience and/or entail some sacrifices; but let’s think of it as our contribution to better our beloved Davao.”

National officials themselves adopted this approach to plastic waste. In 2019, *Inquirer.net* published “Palace: Cut down on plastics use for Earth Hour.” The article discussed Earth Hour, a WWF global campaign encouraging people to switch off their lights for one hour every last Saturday of March. In the piece, presidential spokesperson Salvador Panelo was quoted as saying: “This year’s observance of Earth Hour focuses on the issue of single-use plastics, which is a major problem in the country. We therefore call on everyone to cut down the rampant use of plastics as we continue to aspire for a clean, safe, and healthy environment.”



Plastic producers given space to promote their initiatives without much scrutiny

A minority of articles highlighted the role of corporations in the growing problem of plastic waste. For example, articles published in 2020 in *BusinessMirror* and *Philippine Daily Inquirer* quoted a source who claimed that “corporations have managed to evade the responsibility for sachet plastic waste” and named companies as the top waste polluters, respectively. However, the prevalent media narrative is to portray companies as players that are doing their part to reduce their plastic footprint.

Reporting on plastic reduction projects led by multinational corporations such as Nestlé and Unilever as well as local conglomerates like San Miguel – which all received favorable coverage – relied exclusively on comments provided by these companies’ representatives.

A June 2019 *BusinessMirror* article titled “Nestlé PHL launches 1st residual waste-recovery program in ‘plastic city’” and a September 2020 *CNNPhilippines.com* article headlined “Global brand Nestlé achieves ‘plastic neutrality’ goal in PH” directly quoted only Kais Marzouki, chairman and chief executive officer of Nestlé Philippines. Both articles, which are bylined, discussed the company’s efforts to become plastic-neutral and recover plastic waste equivalent to the amount of plastic it has used in the packaging of its products. The main difference between the two is that the *BusinessMirror* article indirectly quotes a local government official on the fact that Nestlé was named one of the top plastic polluters by environmental groups. Unlike the *CNNPhilippines.com* article, this remark makes the story read like a news article rather than a thinly veiled press release.

Business sources’ statements against measures to control plastic waste also sometimes went unchallenged. For example, a December 2019 *BusinessMirror* article discussed how the excise tax on single-

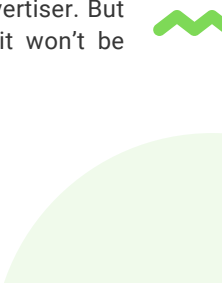


use plastics could hurt the economy. The article featured William Go, president of the Philippine Plastics Industry Association, saying that “plastic has become a punching bag” and that “the most undesirable [item] is paper.” Instead of following up with an overview of the environmental impact of plastic versus paper products, the article moved on to quote another private-sector representative.

“I think journalists should also seek accountability from big corporations and the government,” said Gaea Cabico, an online writer for *Philstar.com*. “What are these corporations doing to take responsibility for the impacts of their products? For the government side, what are the policy steps that should be taken and are these interventions aligned with the recommendations of scientists and environmental groups?”

But this may be easier said than done. A reporter who works for a mainstream news publication and wishes to remain anonymous noted the small number of stories that criticize corporations’ role in plastic pollution in media coverage. According to this reporter, this scarcity may be attributed to the concerns of profit-driven publications about the adverse impact that these articles may have on their advertising revenues. Given that news reporters in the Philippines work on multiple assignments a day, pursuing a story that has low chances of being published can feel like a futile endeavor.

“Even though most of us claim that editorial decisions are not affected by advertising and marketing, knowing that [a company is] your publication’s advertiser makes one hesitate to report about it. The chances of it [the story] getting published are quite slim,” the reporter said. “My editors haven’t explicitly asked me not to write about a particular issue because this so-and-so is our advertiser. But as a reporter you have that inkling: ‘Even if I write it, it won’t be published because this company is an advertiser.’”



Plastic pollution framed as an injustice toward the poor

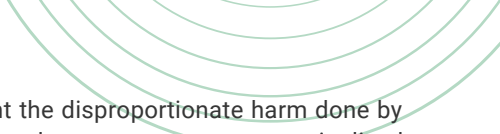
The impact of plastic pollution on marginalized communities was a minor theme that emerged from the analysis of articles published during the period studied. These articles relied heavily on studies conducted by environmental groups as sources. In addition, they went beyond the usual discussion of plastic pollution as an environmental issue solely affecting marine life.

For example, an opinion piece published in October 2020 on *SunStar* puts forward the argument that "the plastic crisis is an environmental justice issue." The article is authored by Marian Ledesma, who is the zero waste campaigner for Greenpeace Southeast Asia. Ledesma noted the irony of blaming low-income groups for plastic consumption when their homes' proximity to plastic production facilities and waste sites makes them particularly vulnerable to the effects of plastic pollution.

"It's sad to see those most at risk being linked to the large volumes of sachets and single-use plastics. This narrative perpetuated by companies shifts the responsibility for plastic waste to people instead of the corporations and manufacturers producing single-use plastic," Ledesma wrote in the article.

When asked about the process of writing her piece, Ledesma noted that the challenge was that the potential effects of plastic waste on the livelihoods and health of poor communities are not as well-known as its impacts on biodiversity. "We're still establishing that lifecycle perspective in order for people to view the plastic crisis with a systemic and an environmental justice lens," Ledesma said.

This more socially oriented framing, however, is not limited to opinion pieces. In the February 2021 *Philstar.com* article "Ditch harmful single-use products and systems, green groups urge," the author cited a paper authored by 188 environmental organizations around the



world. The organizations highlight the disproportionate harm done by plastic production and disposal processes to marginalized communities. In addition, the paper calls for “transformational change to our production, consumption and end-of-use systems to enable a truly circular economy.”

Gaea Cabico of *Philstar.com*, who is the author of the article, also found the tendency to make poor people convenient scapegoats for the increase in plastic waste problematic. “The most marginalized communities will be the most affected by our continued use of plastic,” she said. “I think that, as we report on these [issues], we don’t need to blame the people who use sachets. We need to consider the economic inequalities that force people to depend on sachets.”

Still, perhaps the popular notion about low-income individuals’ dependence on plastics may even be overstated. A *BusinessMirror* story published in January 2020 cited a GAIA survey that found that seven out of 10 Filipinos would support a single-use plastic ban. The percentage of those who expressed that plastics must be regulated is highest among the poorest segment of the population (73 percent). “The results of the survey put into question the common excuse from the big companies that sachets are pro-poor,” GAIA Philippines executive director Froilan Grate was quoted as saying.

Journalists’ perspectives on media coverage of plastics

According to Jhesset Enano, a reporter for the *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, while her publication prioritizes stories about the environment, not all Filipino newsrooms have a designated reporter to cover topics such as plastic pollution.





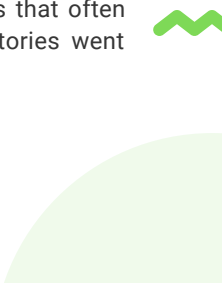
“Even if they do have one, they usually cover the DENR [Department of Environment and Natural Resources]. The traditional practice is that it’s a geographical assignment of beats,” she said. “So since the DENR is located along Elliptical [Road], a reporter is also assigned to other offices in the Quezon City Circle. You have the Department of Agriculture, the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources, and the Department of Agrarian Reform.”

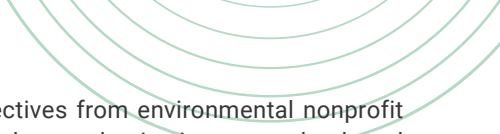
Working on various issues and having to submit several stories in a day — the norm for Filipino news reporters — could mean that stories about the environment are put on the back burner, unless a reporter is particularly interested in covering a certain story.

“When a reporter is assigned to do that many tasks and cover that many issues, it’s a challenge for us to keep a close focus on these kinds of issues and actually do other stories that go beyond the usual narrative. I’d like to think I also make the effort to do so,” said Enano, who has been reporting on environmental issues even before she was officially assigned to her current beat.

In general, environmental nonprofits have been the most accessible sources, making it easier for journalists to substantiate their reporting with these groups’ findings and statements. “In the Philippines, we have a very strong network of civil society organizations. And they’re usually very vocal,” said Enano. “Pre-pandemic, they held events very frequently — press briefings, conferences, even roundtables with the media.”

An analysis of the articles published in Filipino news outlets shows that the most common news angle is the announcement of a local plastic ban, which was used by reporters to write articles that often reshaped statements from local officials. While some stories went beyond the usual restatement of an announcement by





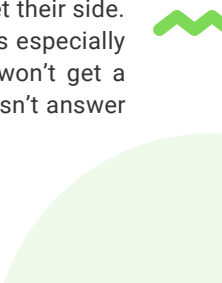
supplementing them with perspectives from environmental nonprofit groups, articles that explored single-use plastics in greater depth and detail were relatively rare.

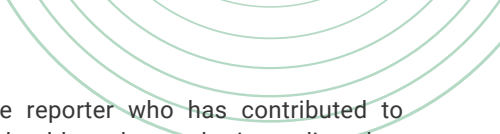
The COVID-19 pandemic has made reporting even more complicated. Gaea Cabico of *Philstar.com*, for example, pointed out that the movement restrictions imposed by the pandemic have made it difficult for journalists like her who would like to investigate how communities are being affected by these plastic bans. She admitted that she herself relied heavily on publications and statements for most of her own reporting on this issue.

Before the pandemic, reporters could easily walk into officials' offices to ask for an interview, said Enano. Since the lockdown started in March 2020, however, getting officials on the record has become more complicated. "I also don't want to harass them because we're all going through a pandemic," said Enano. "These are some of the realities you have to factor in that in the pre-pandemic time did not exist."

Reporters working for regional publications have been facing the same challenge. "It was difficult to get the side of the author of this ordinance," Antonio Colina, a reporter for *MindaNews*, said about working on his stories about the plastic ban in Davao City.

But the lack of access can also mean being unable to obtain useful responses from sources — in this case, company representatives. A reporter working for a mainstream news outlet who has requested anonymity discussed the difficulties of working on stories that expose corporate responsibility for plastic pollution. "If I mention the company, there should be tremendous effort in trying to get their side. In my experience, it's so hard to get the side of companies especially in these kinds of issues," the reporter said. "Either you won't get a statement or [you'll get] a motherhood statement that doesn't answer your questions."



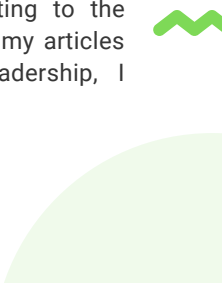


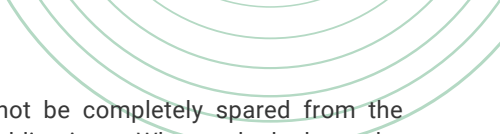
For Elizabeth Deyro, a freelance reporter who has contributed to *CNNPhilippines.com*, the blame should not be on the journalists, but on the dynamics of profit-driven publications that rely heavily on advertising to operate. “There’s also a tendency to serve as a mouthpiece for certain companies, not limited to the issue of plastic pollution, and often not the fault of the journalist but rather the standards of commercial media today,” she said.

This could partly explain why, unlike news articles in more mainstream publications, opinion pieces published in regional outlets in the sample were more likely to explicitly state that plastic pollution is primarily a production problem.

“While people need to assess their consumption patterns, the greatest blame should be pinned on corporations,” said *MindaNews* associate editor Horacio Marcos Mordeno about his March 2019 opinion piece “Recycling is good but ...” “It’s lamentable that by focusing more on telling people to seriously practice recycling as a way to address the garbage problem caused by plastics, the bigger picture has been overlooked.”

The leeway that longtime, in-house opinion writers get and the separation of news from the opinion section may enable them to write about a variety of topics that are generally beyond the purview of advertising-sensitive sections. Amado de Jesus, principal architect of A.P de Jesus & Associates-Green Architecture and vice chairman of the Philippine Green Building Initiative, has been writing for the *Philippine Daily Inquirer* for almost 20 years. “The [*Philippine Daily Inquirer*] never told me what to write about,” he said. The only instruction he has received, he added, is to ensure that his writing is accessible. “[My editor at the time I started contributing to the *Philippine Daily Inquirer*] had one important request: that my articles be addressed to non-technical people for wider readership, I presume.”





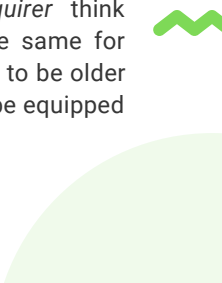
Still, even opinion pieces may not be completely spared from the influence of corporations on publications. When asked about the process of pitching guest pieces to media outlets, Marian Ledesma of Greenpeace Southeast Asia noted that while Filipino media in general is open to receiving these articles, it “hasn’t been receptive to reactivities or statements on corporations,” she said. “We suspect this is because of ad revenues being affected.”

According to Mordeno, nonprofits can help address this problem. “Environment groups can help in this regard through a capability building program for media,” he said.

Increasing awareness about the impact generated by plastics throughout their lifecycle – from production to distribution and dumping – could be a start. “This will help deepen the discussion because they [journalists] will be able to find a way to address the technicalities. I also think real and genuine solutions, not false solutions, to the plastics crisis must also be reported and communicated regularly,” said Angeli Cantillana, communications campaigner for Greenpeace Southeast Asia. “And we are always open to collaborating with the media organizations to talk about these.”

Indeed, equipping journalists – reporters and editors alike – with the necessary background and skills that will help them cover these issues more thoroughly would benefit not only media coverage of these issues, but also public awareness about the plastics problem.

“It would be great if there would be opportunities for editors to expand their skills so they’d also be our partners,” said Enano, adding that reporters already get several opportunities for training. “I’m thankful that my editors at the [*Philippine Daily*] *Inquirer* think environmental reporting is important, but I can’t say the same for others. Editors are cooped up in the newsroom. They tend to be older [and] their perspectives can be outdated. So they need to be equipped with new knowledge.”





Conclusion

Before the pandemic, the main focus of Philippine media coverage on plastics was the proliferation of local plastic bans. These articles often relied on restatements of official releases and detailed the penalties that potential violators would incur. Reducing plastic pollution was therefore presented as a responsibility that citizens themselves needed to manage, while companies' role in the continued production of plastics was largely overlooked.

The COVID-19 pandemic did not significantly shift the course of this narrative, but it did bring about logistical difficulties that made reporting on this issue even more challenging. The robust presence of environmental nonprofits in the Philippines, however, ensured that the systemic side of the plastics problem was still addressed in media coverage. These articles exposed corporations' culpability and depicted plastic pollution as an environmental justice issue that disproportionately affects the poor.

While the nature of advertising-reliant publications tends to prevent reporters from focusing on how plastic producers have aggravated the problem of plastic pollution, there is space for organizations and advocates to work with journalists looking to cover these issues more accurately and effectively.



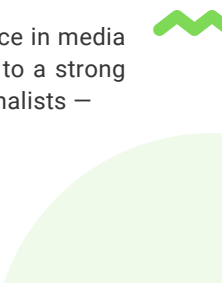
Final remarks

Across the Southeast Asian countries studied in this report, plastics were largely negatively framed in media coverage. In Vietnam and the Philippines — where the detrimental environmental impact of plastics stood out as a main theme — 100 percent of the articles sampled framed plastics negatively. Media coverage in all countries tended to focus on government initiatives, relying on official statements and data. The mobility restrictions imposed by the pandemic further entrenched this kind of reporting as journalists could not meet their sources in person.

But the pandemic did not lead to either increased media coverage of plastics or a significant change in the discourse. When the pandemic was mentioned in an article, it was either in passing or mostly depicted as a factor that increased the amount of plastic waste. A slight shift, however, could be seen in Thailand, where plastics were framed as necessary for health reasons. The depiction of plastics as essential during the pandemic stems from persistent concerns about the risks of surface transmission of the virus, which has since been proven to be primarily spread through the air.

Since media coverage focused on reducing plastic consumption instead of production before and during the pandemic, there was a heavy focus on individual responsibility and little scrutiny of plastic producers across all countries. Articles had a tendency to highlight citizens' culpability in exacerbating plastic pollution, while business initiatives to address plastic waste were featured with little, if any, questioning.

Environmental nonprofits were the dominant primary source in media coverage about plastics in the Philippines — a testament to a strong civil society and these groups' accessibility to Filipino journalists —





but the potential loss of advertising revenues for news outlets was raised by reporters and contributors as an impediment to publishing more critical journalism on the subject. For Malaysian and Indonesian journalists, business representatives were either less accessible or less able to provide substantive answers for their reporting. Journalists in Thailand and Vietnam, meanwhile, lamented the lack of local experts on plastic pollution who could discuss country-specific trends.

There is little, if any, discussion on how plastics are linked to climate change across all Southeast Asian countries. This absence of a bigger picture in reporting about plastics could stem from low awareness about their lifecycle aspect as well as the continued emphasis on the impact of plastic waste on marine biodiversity as the primary issue.

Annex: List of media outlets

Malaysia

Free Malaysia Today
New Straits Times
Malay Mail
The Borneo Post
New Sarawak Tribune
The Edge

Indonesia

Kompas
The Jakarta Post
Antara News
Kalimantan Post
Bali Post
Mongabay Indonesia

Thailand

The Standard
Bangkok Biz
Thairath
Chiang Mai News
Songkhla Focus
GreenNews

Vietnam

VN Express
Lao Dong Newspaper
Tuoi Tre Newspaper
Da Nang Online
Quang Ninh Newspaper
Natural Resources and Environment Newspaper



Philippines

Philippine Daily Inquirer and Inquirer.net

The Philippine Star and Philstar.com

CNNPhilippines.com

SunStar

MindaNews

BusinessMirror



About the authors



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Yvonne Tan is a writer and researcher who is passionate about climate change and socio-political issues within Southeast Asia. She has worked in public policy research institutes like the United Nations University - International Institute for Global Health (UNU-IIGH) and Research Triangle Institute. She has bylines in *Malaysiakini*, *Malaysia Now*, and *Malaysian Insight*.



Indonesia: Ariel Adimahavira

Ariel Adimahavira is currently working for the National Secretariat for Marine Debris Handling of Indonesia. He holds a bachelor's degree in forestry from Universitas Gadjah Mada. Ariel is passionate about climate change and circular economy and is ever curious about how the latter can mitigate climate change.



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Kadesiree Thossaphonpaisan is currently an independent researcher and journalist. She has been working in the field of media and human rights in the Mekong region for five years. She is passionate about data journalism, digital social movements, and using digital technologies to improve human rights work and increase civic participation.



Vietnam: Đỗ Thuỳ Trang

Đỗ Thuỳ Trang is a reporter from *Vietnam Law Newspaper*, a press agency under the Ministry of Justice. She has been writing about culture, tourism, and environment in Vietnam since 2017. She graduated with a bachelor's degree in legislative law from Hanoi Law University in 2021 and a bachelor's degree in psychology from Drexel University in 2016.



Philippines: Anna Patricia Valerio

Anna Patricia Valerio is Climate Tracker's Research Manager. She has nine years of experience as an analyst, writer, and editor. In 2020 she finished an MA in Public Policy at the Central European University and the Institut Barcelona d'Estudis Internacionals. This year, she was selected as a Policy Leader Fellow by the European University Institute.