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A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF COVID-19 HEADLINES IN ONLINE NEWS PORTAL: EDUCATION IN FOCUS

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to analyze the discursive or sensationalize features and ideologies of online news headlines about school status in the COVID-19 pandemic. This study revealed that online news headlines during the COVID-19 pandemic frequently employed sensationalizing techniques to capture attention. These methods significantly shape how readers perceive news and its underlying issues. Furthermore, this undertaking employed qualitative research using the critical discourse analysis approach. The corpora in this endeavor were taken from five famous news portals in the Philippines, namely, ABS-CBN, CNN Philippines, GMA, Interaksyon, and Rappler, particularly those headlines published in the years 2020-2022. The study revealed that media journalists utilized sensationalizing devices in the discourse of headlines, such as evaluative language, intensification and quantification, references to elite people, references to agents, and references to emotion. The study also unveiled the underlying ideologies that were manifested, which consist of government lack of efficiency, multifaceted challenges and impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on education, politicizing the pandemic, and commitment to quality education. Based on the findings, it is advised that media journalists strive for more balanced and accurate headlines, particularly during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic. It is important to avoid overusing sensationalizing techniques that may distort the reality of the situation. Moreover, it is essential to prompt media consumers to critically assess headlines and pursue the complete story before forming opinions. Educational programs on media literacy could aid readers in recognizing and understanding the impact of sensationalized headlines.

KEYWORDS: *critical discourse analysis, online news headlines, sensationalism, discursive devices, ideologies*

1.INTRODUCTION

With the advent of the internet, news spreads quicker online, where large portions of consumers can effortlessly get access to it. However, news editors at certain media sites summarize information by intentionally sensationalizing the headline in order to capture the attention of readers, often portraying issues in a negative light and leading people astray. Most writers employ discursive methods that may overstate the message of the headlines in order for the articles to be read. This type of sensationalized or deceptive headline frequently relies on exaggerating claims or leaving out important information to increase attention. Considering all this, in this digital era, even news headlines are subjected to being linguistically manipulated (Oetomo et al., 2019).

In India, a study analyzed news coverage during the COVID-19 pandemic and found that certain media outlets portrayed Muslims negatively, using terms that suggested they were responsible for spreading the virus. This biased representation led to increased Islamophobia, social division, and violence against the Muslim community. The study highlighted how media language shaped public opinion, reinforcing stereotypes and fueling mistrust during a health crisis (Yousuf & Taylor, 2023).

Moreover, in the Philippines, a study examined the biases in ABS-CBN's online news coverage of President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. The research found that headlines often used linguistic strategies, such as factive verbs, assertive verbs, and subjective intensifiers, to present news in a way that shaped readers' perceptions. For example, words like "confirms" and "claims" were selectively used to imply certainty or doubt, influencing how the audience interpreted the information. Additionally, the exclusion of inclusive language created a divide in how events were portrayed, subtly reinforcing particular viewpoints. The problem lies in the ability of such headlines to manipulate public opinion by steering narratives toward a specific angle, reducing the objectivity expected from media reporting (Villanueva, 2023). This study offers practical insights and guidance for educators, media professionals, and students alike. Media consumers can use it as a resource to better understand how media language influences public perceptions of education, particularly during critical times like the COVID-19 pandemic. For students, the findings highlight the importance of being critical readers who analyze news beyond the surface, fostering media literacy skills. Lastly, the ultimate goal is to foster more balanced and responsible media reporting, inspire further studies by providing a foundation for future studies on discourse analysis in education-related news, and encourage informed public discussions about the role of language in shaping educational discourse.

2.OBJECTIVES

The objective of this qualitative study, using a critical discourse analysis approach, was to examine the discursive devices and ideologies present in online news headlines about education during the COVID-19 pandemic, published between 2020 and 2024 from five prominent online news portals in the Philippines: ABSCBN, CNN Philippines, GMA, Interaksyon, and Rappler. Specifically, this study aimed to address the following research questions:

1. What are the discursive devices found in the headlines?

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2. What are the ideologies of media practitioners reflected in the headlines?

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design as outlined by Crossman (2020), emphasizing the non-numerical nature of data collection and interpretation to understand the significance of a key phenomenon. Specifically, the study utilized Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (1995) to examine news headlines from online news websites in the Philippines. The approach aimed to uncover the discursive devices and hidden ideologies used by media practitioners in their communication. By analyzing both spoken and written forms of discourse, the study aimed to provide a comprehensive and accurate description of the linguistic strategies employed, using direct and indirect data collection methods to gather information from online news sources.

3.2 Research Material/Participants

The researcher utilized the internet to access research materials, as it is publicly available and does not require permission. Hence, the study used 50+1 news headlines from five prominent news websites in the Philippines: ABS-CBN, CNN Philippines, GMA, Interaksyon, and Rappler. The corpora were collected and used in the study to provide a larger dataset for analyzing the use of discursive devices and uncovering concealed ideologies in online news headlines. Furthermore, the discourse analysis of news headlines published on these news portals between 2020 and 2022 was the main focus of the study.

3.3 Data Collection

In order to collect the data needed, as the researcher, I went through a number of steps to gather the essential information for this undertaking. First, to determine how and what steps would be necessary to complete the research, the researcher and adviser worked together before beginning the study. Additionally, there was no authorization letter since the data was acquired from online websites and posted for public viewing. In that sense, the publication allowed any viewer to download and use the data for research purposes. Hence, purposive sampling was employed to select the news headline data from ABS-CBN, CNN-Philippines, GMA, Interasyon, and Rappler that met the researchers' criteria for the inquiry to better comprehend the issues under study in academic forums. Lastly, the data collected was subject to interpretation and analysis, wherein the corpora were named H1 and followed until they reached H51. To give a vivid view of the research undertaken, relevant information was carefully presented and discussed in the following chapters.

3.4 Data Analysis

This study employed Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to analyze 50+1 news headlines from five prominent Philippine news websites. The research aimed to identify the discursive devices used in the headlines and uncover hidden ideologies. Data collection involved gathering headlines published between 2020 and 2022. The researcher processed and analyzed the data by identifying common patterns in the headlines that could answer the research questions. The analysis focused on categorizing the headlines according to discursive devices such as evaluative language, vocabulary, intensification, and emotional references, among others. To ensure the validity of the findings, peer debriefing was conducted by consulting experts who provided feedback on the analysis. This process helped refine the study and enhance the understanding of how media practitioners use language to shape public perception. The results were then summarized, and insights were drawn based on the analysis, providing a comprehensive understanding of the ideological implications of the headlines.

4.RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Discursive devices found in the headlines

Analysis revealed that discursive devices in online news headlines are evident. Out of the 50+1 gathered online news headlines, there are four prevalent discursive devices, which are: 1) evaluative language; 2) intensification and quantification; 3) reference to elite people; and 4) reference to agency. Discursive devices encompass linguistic tactics employed to convey significance, garner interest, and influence readers' understandings of news events. As presented in Table 1.1, the study unveiled the complete presentation of the discursive evaluative language embedded in online news headlines. Appreciation and Judgment as an evaluative language are used to either express positive and favorable opinions or a critical and negative assessment of something

Table 1
Evaluative Language

Appreciation and Judgement	COA flags "deficiencies" in DepEd's P8 Billion COVID-19 fund utilization - H1 COA: DepEd failed to maximize P4.5-B learning program budget amid COVID-19 pandemic - H11 CHED failed to buy P1 billion worth of laptops for Smart Campus program amid COVID-19 pandemic - H12 Late delivery of modules waste of funds – Alliance of Concerned Teachers - H19

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	Sana all: Robredo's initiative to help education sector in distance learning gains praises - H34
Emotive Impact	Villanueva flags viral private school module with "dirty names" in DepEd's budget hearing - H14 Private school students suffer learning losses due to pandemic: study - H10 DepEd launches war against online cheating - H18 DepEd 'disturbed' by stabbing of 13-year-old - H20 Pinoy parents fret over DepEd rule on optional face masks in classrooms - H35 No student left behind? During pandemic education only those who can afford - H42
Deontic Modality	DepEd to have 1.3M tablets, computers in 2020 as education sector shifts to COVID-19 new normal ¬- H2 DepEd vows to address Filipinos declining English proficiency - H3 Sara Duterte on wage hike for teachers: We'll dovetail from what Duterte admin did'- H5 P419 billion needed to address 167,000 classroom shortage – Pia Cayetano - H13 Marcos Government will not scrimp on education - H26
Interrogative	Teachers distance learning gadgets being taken back? DepEd denies claims for NCR - H16 Crisis in education? Pnoys fret over Philippines high learning poverty rate - H31 "Why insulted?" Module blunders, internet woes raised to counter DepEd's opposition on Education report - H40 Why COA flagged DepEd for P2.4 billion worth of laptops - H41 How the Marawi Siege and COVID-19 stacked the odds against Moro school children - H47

The findings of this research mirror Montgomery's (2019) conclusions, which revealed that sensational headlines often use language that emphasizes negativity, employing labels, stereotypes, and negative modifiers. This tactic, commonly employed in media, aims to attract attention by highlighting negativity, which is often deemed newsworthy. Negative evaluative language is evident when a stronger word is used in place of a neutral descriptor, such as substituting "murdered" for "killed" and "disaster" for "accident." These linguistic choices not only amplify the impact of the headline but also influence how the audience perceives events and elicit strong reactions from readers. Additionally, this study's results align with Obscura's (2019) findings that language is crucial in shaping the discourse of online news headlines. Writers often use expressive, "connotation-rich" vocabulary to capture attention, influence readers, and maintain readership. This strategic use of emotional or subjective language serves as a powerful tool for conveying attitudes, opinions, or judgments. Evaluative language, in particular, helps express the writer's perspective on a subject, reinforcing specific ideologies and engaging the audience effectively

Table 1.1
Intensification and Quantification

Discursive Devices	Sample Statements
Monetary Value	P419 billion needed to address 167,000 classroom shortage – Pia Cayetano - H14 COA flags "deficiencies" in DepEd's P8 Billion COVID-19 fund utilization - H1 DepEd to have 1.3M tablets, computers in 2020 as education sector shifts to COVID-19 new normal - H2

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	COA: DepEd failed to maximize P4.5-B learning program budget amid COVID-19 pandemic - H11 De Guzman-Bello to allot P1 trillion budget on education if elected - H27 Why COA flagged DepEd for P2.4 billion worth of 'outdated' laptops - H41
Numerical Quantity	Mental health crisis: 404 student suicides in in 2021-22 - H17 DOH: Some 3,900 youth got COVID-19 since start of in-person classes - H44 3 Zambales schools postpone in-person classes after teachers get COVID-19 - H46 Blame it on COVID-19: Over a dozen second graders in Zamboanga Sibugay can't identify letters - H49

These findings are similar to Franklin (2020) research on crime severity. He found that using strong language and numbers in news headlines significantly influences how people perceive the seriousness of crimes and attracts more readers. Journalists enhance the drama and urgency of their stories by using vivid descriptions and dramatic language. Adding specific numbers or statistics also makes headlines more informative and believable. When combined, news stories not only grab readers' attention by evoking strong emotions like fear, anger, or curiosity but also provide factual details that encourage readers to learn more by reading the full article. This strengthens the overall impact and seriousness of the news story.

Furthermore, the result of the study is in accordance to the claim of Metila (2019), that news headlines often present events from varying perspectives, and she observed that the headlines tend to exaggerate the violence and consequences of the events. This exaggeration is achieved through the use of vague quantifiers like "many of 25" and impactful language choices such as "carnage," which heightened the perceived impact of the event. This strategy taps into readers' natural curiosity, ultimately enhancing the headline's effectiveness in capturing and maintaining their interest.

Table 1.2
Reference to Elite People

Discursive Devices	Sample Statements
Political Figure	Sara Duterte on wage hike for teachers: "We'll dovetail from what Duterte admin did" - H5 Marcos says PH education sector 'failed' children, vows reforms - H8 P419 billion needed to address 167,000 classroom shortage—Pia Cayetano - H13 Pacquiao includes DepEd in list alleged corrupt agencies - H22 Estrada: Probe favored DepEd suppliers to see if they benefitted from 'split' contract - H23 Robredo says effort to ensure quality education during pandemic still lacking - H24 De Guzman Bello to allot P1 trillion budget on education if elected - H27 Duterte rejects opening of classes while Vico Sotto bares initiatives for education - H33

This study's findings align with those of Lewandowsky et al. (2020), who concluded that cues from influential figures in news headlines strongly shape public opinion and discussion. They emphasized that signals from respected individuals or

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institutions in society, such as political leaders or experts, not only convey authority but also influence how readers perceive and respond to information. This influence extends into mainstream media, where elites play a significant role in setting the agenda for public conversations. When elites are involved in news stories, it adds credibility and urgency, fostering trust and relevance in the headlines and encouraging readers to delve deeper into the content.

Table 1.3
Reference to Emotion

Discursive Devices	Sample Statements
Worry	Mental health crisis: 404 student suicides in 2021-22 - H17 Blame it on COVID-19: Over a dozen second graders in Zamboanga Sibugay can't identify letters - H49 Private school students suffer learning losses due to pandemic: study - H10 Pinoy parents fret over DepEd rule on optional face masks in classrooms - H35
Discontent	COA flags 'deficiencies' in DepEd's P8 billion COVID-19 fund utilization – H1 COA: DepEd failed to maximize P4.5-B learning program budget amid COVID-19 pandemic – H11 COA: CHED failed to buy P1 billion worth of laptops for Smart Campus program amid COVID-19 pandemic – H12 Late delivery of modules waste of funds' – Alliance of Concerned Teachers – H19

The result coincided with Molek-Kozakowska's (2013) critical discourse analysis of sensationalist headlines, which found that using "reference to emotion" is a way to make information more sensational. This technique highlights how readers feel and directs their attention, with the goal of connecting with readers personally and influencing their reactions. It is a strategy that often uses shared emotions and can be seen in phrases that evoke strong feelings. Thus, sensational headlines focus more on emotional impact than just presenting the facts, aiming to shape readers' perceptions and responses.

Table 1.4
Reference to Agency

Discursive Devices	Sample Statements
National Government Agency	DepEd to have 1.3M tablets, computers in 2020 as education sector shifts to COVID-19 new normal - H2 CHED urged to halt tuition, school fees hike amid inflation - H21 DBM explains 2023 budget cut for education, hike for agri sector - H25 DOH: Some 3,900-youth got COVID-19 since start of in-person classes - H44 DOTr vows sufficient transport for students by looking at 'compliance,' free rides - H37

This finding is in accordance to the claim of Iyengar (2019), that journalists often make headlines more sensational and engaging by framing news stories to assign blame for issues, which shapes how readers perceive cause and responsibility. Iyengar (2019) describes this technique as using active verbs, and employing vivid, dramatic descriptions to create sensational stories. In his study, "Television news and citizens' explanations of national affairs," Iyengar (2019) found that U.S. news media heavily influence public views on who is responsible for societal problems. For example, the way poverty is portrayed in the United States makes audiences blame individual welfare recipients for their situations rather than holding the government or systemic factors responsible.

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Table 2
Ideologies of Media Practitioners Reflected in the Headlines

Government's Lack of Efficiency	COA flags 'deficiencies' in DepEd's P8 Billion COVID-19 fund utilization - H1 COA: DepEd failed to maximize P4.5-B learning program budget amid COVID-19 pandemic - H11 COA: CHED failed to buy P1 billion worth of laptops for Smart Campus program amid COVID-19 pandemic - H12 P419 billion needed to address 167,000 classroom shortage – Pia Cayetano - H13 "Sana all":Robredo's initiative to help education sector in distance learning gains praises - H34 Teacher's lament purchasing own laptops after COA flags distance learning budget deficiencies - H38 Why COA flagged DepEd for P2.4 billion worth 'outdated' laptops - H41
Commitment to Quality Education	DepEd to have 1.3M tablets, computers in 2020 as education sector shifts to COVID-19 new normal - H2 DepEd vows to address Filipinos' declining English proficiency - H3 Marcos says PH education sector 'failed' children, vows reforms - H8 Marcos Government will not scrimp on education - H26 De Guzman, Bello to allot P1 trillion budget on education if elected - H27 DOTr vows sufficient transport for students by looking at 'compliance', free rides - H37
Multifaceted Challenges and Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Education	Pandemic exacerbates challenges in K to 12 programs as DepEd's subsidies fall short - H6 Private school students suffer learning losses due to pandemic: study - H10 Teachers' distance learning gadgets being taken back? DepEd denies claims for NCR - H16 Mental health crisis: 404 student suicides in 2021-22 - H17 Errors in module due to rushed preparations – DepEd officials - H30 Crisis in education? Pnoys fret over Philippines high learning poverty rate - H31 DepEd urge to proofread modules carefully after vulgar term gets printed on learning materials - H32 Pinoy parents fret over DepEd rule on optional face masks in classrooms - H34 "Why insulted?" Module blunders, internet woes raised to counter DepEd's opposition on Education report - H40 No students left behind? During pandemic, education only those who can afford' - H42 CHED: There's no going back, 'flexible learning will be new norm' - H43 DOH: Some 3,900-youth got COVID-19 since start of in-person classes - H44

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	3 Zambales schools postpone in-person classes after teachers get COVID-19 - H46 How the Marawi siege and COVID-19 stacked the odds against Moro school children - H47 Blame it on COVID-19: Over a dozen second graders in Zamboanga Sibugay can't identify letters - H49 Only fully vaccinated students can join face-to-face classes – CHED - H50 During pandemic, student climbs a mountain to send class requirement - H51 Teachers lament purchasing own laptops after COA flags distance learning budget deficiencies – H38

4.2 Ideologies of Media Practitioners Reflected in the Headlines

Government's Lack of Efficiency

The data showed that one of the ideologies extracted from the online news headlines pertains to the lack of efficiency of the government. In particular, this was evident as news articles frequently highlighted their online news headlines in a sensationalized and emotionalized way of reporting allegations of scandalous wrongdoings and the incapability of politicians and political institutions, or framing what politicians say as if what they say is a scandal and contains terms like "scandal" and "corrupt," among others. The consistent focus on these shortcomings illustrated a critique of the government's performance and its handling of the education sector during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The data showed similar findings to the study conducted by Jasper (2018) indicating that in politics, news coverage often involve portraying individuals or institutions negatively, casting them as villains in the public eye. This was supported by various studies that found blaming usually focuses on four main areas, with government inefficiency often leading to significant criticism. Firstly, moral transgressions like corruption and abuse of power are heavily criticized, which erodes trust in political representatives and democratic institutions (Thompson, 2000). Secondly, deceptive communication and dishonest acts are scrutinized for their potential to undermine public confidence in leadership.

Thirdly, the government's handling of social issues, policy implementation, and state management often results in criticism for incompetence and policy failures (Green & Jennings, 2017). Lastly, leaders are expected to show commitment and determination when facing challenges; any perceived indecisiveness or lack of resolve is viewed negatively (Bernheim & Bodoh-Creed, 2020). This blame game is clear in public discussions, where governments are held responsible for perceived failures, especially in leadership.

Commitment to Quality Education

The data showed another embedded ideology extracted from the online news headlines which pertains to commitment to education. This was evident as the articles frequently highlighted efforts and promises related to improving the education sector, such as increasing resources, addressing proficiency issues, and ensuring adequate support for students. These headlines reflected a strong focus on the dedication of various stakeholders to enhancing educational outcomes despite the challenges posed by the pandemic.

The result of the study is in accordance to the claim of Graham et al. (2021), that online news headlines about politicians and government efforts to ensure quality education during the COVID-19 pandemic captivate readers by exploring decision-making processes and adding drama through prominent political figures. With traditional schooling disrupted, readers are particularly interested in understanding how governments are addressing educational challenges. These headlines often highlight two perspectives. First, they reveal contrasts or conflicts in the government's approach to purposely adding intrigue, and second, they showcase hope and potential solutions through government initiatives.

Moreover, the data were similar to those in Wilson et al. (2022), showing that headlines frequently emphasized the government's promise to maintain educational standards during the pandemic. The study found that these headlines often used assertive language to reassure the public about the quality of education. However, despite these upbeat messages, there was a clear gap between the positive headlines and the real problems faced by the education system. The investigation revealed that while headlines were optimistic, they focused more on reassuring the public and less on addressing the ongoing issues and challenges in education.

Multifaceted challenges and impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on education

The data also showed another prevailing ideology evident from online news headlines that portrayed the extensive hurdles and disruptions encountered by the education system amid the pandemic. The headlines highlighted how the COVID-19 crisis created a wide range of challenges for students, teachers, and educational institutions, including learning losses, inadequate resources, and increased mental health issues. This depiction underscored the multifaceted impacts of the pandemic on

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education, illustrating how it affected every aspect of the learning environment and its stakeholders.

The result of the study showed similar findings to the study conducted by Ko et al.'s (2020), "A News Big Data Analysis of Issues in Higher Education in Korea Amid the COVID-19 Pandemic," which showed that government and college efforts to manage online education during the crisis were inadequate. Just like other sectors, education has faced significant challenges due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, Escandallo and Escandallo (2024) accounted that English major student faced different struggles in the implementation of blended learning due to the COVID-19. Students are struggling with their major subjects as limited resources are present due to face-to-face constraints.

The results align with Sasot et al.'s (2020) study of understanding discourse about class cancellations during the COVID-19 pandemic, which found that limited technology access was one of the major challenges. It was revealed that despite high internet usage in the Philippines, poor connections and a lack of access to technology remain significant problems. While low-tech solutions like freeware, Skype, Moodle, Google Classroom, Facebook, and narrated PowerPoints are used globally, they are often hard to access in the Philippines due to economic and technical challenges.

Politicizing the Pandemic

The data showed another prevailing theme extracted from the online news headlines that portrayed how the COVID-19 pandemic has been politicized. News coverage often highlighted accusations of corruption, mismanagement, and political blame among various figures and agencies, reflecting a focus on the political dimensions of the crisis. It is evident that online news headlines in the education sector during COVID-19 were politicized, as they frequently centered on the actions and criticisms of political leaders and the implications for government accountability.

Furthermore, the result mirrors Abbas's (2020) conclusion that news headlines during the COVID-19 pandemic were often manipulated for political and ideological reasons. These headlines frequently portrayed the government negatively, highlighting its failures in controlling the virus and providing medical supplies. This portrayal emphasized the government's slow response, causing strong reactions among the public, particularly feelings of anger and fear. Thus, these headlines fueled existing sentiments and shaped public opinion, increasing dissatisfaction and mistrust toward the government's actions and health mandates.

Moreover, Kolsto (2020) argues that the media is often influenced by political interests, shaping its response to various crises. Supporting this, in a recent study, Scott (2021) revealed that politicizing pandemics is not new and extends beyond COVID-19. His findings showed that pandemics like the 1918 flu, AIDS, and Ebola have been used to push political agendas. Governments, especially those in power, often engage in blame games, highlighting each other's failures and inefficiencies instead of focusing on effective responses. This shows the dangerous mix of public health and politics, where political goals can overshadow efforts to fight diseases and protect the public.

CONCLUSION

The study explored 51 published headlines spanning 2020-2022 from five of the most prominent online news portals in the Philippines, namely ABS-CBN, CNN Philippines, GMA, Interaksyon, and Rappler. The findings revealed that online news headlines frequently employed sensationalizing discursive devices, including evaluative language, intensification, quantification, and references to elite individuals and agencies. These linguistic strategies were used to capture readers' attention, shape public perception, and emphasize the gravity of issues.

Moreover, the diverse ideologies reflected in online news headlines highlighted the media's role in framing societal narratives and shaping public discourse. Key ideologies identified include critiques of government inefficiency, acknowledgment of the multifaceted challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic on education, calls for accountability in resource allocation, and the politicization of educational reforms. These ideologies underline the power of media headlines in influencing readers' perceptions and emotions, while also reflecting societal concerns about inequality, governance, and access to quality education during the pandemic. This research emphasizes the need for critical media literacy to help readers analyze headlines critically and engage with the complete story. It also calls for greater journalistic responsibility to ensure that headlines are accurate, balanced, and free from excessive sensationalism, fostering a more informed and discerning public.

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