



BBC Debunking Ivermectin and Its Corresponding YouTube Comments through the Lens of *Inter Mirifica*: Recommendations for Journalism Education in the Philippines

Brian Bantugan, PhD¹, Fr. Norman Melchor Pena, SSP, DC. PhD^{1,2}, and Nenita Brocoy³

¹Faculty, St. Paul University Manila

²Faculty, St. Paul Seminary Foundation

³Graduate Student, St. Paul University Manila

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ABSTRACT

This metasynthesis paper explored the interplay between mainstream media framing and online public discourse during a public health crisis, using a specific BBC News report on *ivermectin* as a case study. The research synthesizes findings from two qualitative studies to address the problem of how journalistic practices influence public perception and lead to the stigmatization of and resistance to specific health interventions. The first study, "Ethical Implications of the Stigmatization of Ivermectin by a Selected BBC News Report on YouTube," analyzed the report's content and concluded that its framing, use of selective sourcing, and oversimplified narrative contributed to the stigmatization of ivermectin as "fraudulent" and "socially harmful" (Bantugan et al., 2024a). The second study, "From Ridicule to Resistance: Online Public Discourses Surrounding Ivermectin on a Selected BBC News Video on YouTube," examined the audience comments on the same video, revealing a highly polarized public response characterized by stigmatization and backlash (Bantugan, 2024b). Our metasynthesis reveals a cyclical relationship where journalistic framing provides the initial narrative, which is then amplified, contested, and re-contextualized by the audience in online forums. The findings highlight how rhetorical strategies such as humor, sarcasm, and conspiratorial thinking are used by the public to either reinforce or challenge the media's message. The combined analysis, viewed through the ethical framework of *Inter Mirifica*, underscores the critical need for a more ethical and nuanced approach to health journalism that acknowledges complexity and fosters an informed public discourse, rather than normalizing a dualistic "science versus misinformation" paradigm. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of the dynamics between traditional media and online publics during times of heightened societal disruption and distrust and scientific uncertainty directed towards significant recommendations for Journalism Education in the Philippines.

Keywords: Ivermectin, media framing, public discourse, metasynthesis, health communication

INTRODUCTION

The role of media in shaping public perception during health crises has become increasingly complex with the rise of digital platforms and decentralized information dissemination. During the COVID-19 pandemic, mainstream news organizations often served as primary sources of information, but their reporting was frequently met with skepticism and backlash online. This paper presents a metasynthesis of two qualitative studies that examine the interplay between a specific mainstream media report and its online audience response. The studies focus on the BBC News YouTube video titled "The false science around Ivermectin – BBC News" (October 7, 2021).

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

The relationship between media, public discourse, and ethical responsibility has become increasingly complex

in the digital age, especially in the context of public health crises. Mainstream media outlets play a decisive role in shaping how people interpret unfolding events, yet their framing choices can also contribute to polarization, stigmatization, and declining trust in journalism. At the same time, online platforms provide audiences with spaces to resist, reinterpret, and even challenge dominant narratives, creating feedback loops that further complicate media influence. The Catholic Church's decree *Inter Mirifica* (1963) offers a valuable analytical lens for examining these dynamics, as it emphasizes both the power of communication to serve the common good and the moral responsibilities tied to its use. By integrating insights from Framing Theory and theological reflections on media, the literature demonstrates not only the enduring relevance of *Inter Mirifica* but also the urgent need to examine how journalistic practices influence digital discourse and contribute to the stigmatization of health interventions.

Framing Theory and Media in Public Health Crises

The literature on media's role in public health crises highlights the critical influence of framing on public perception, trust, and discourse. Framing Theory suggests that media organizations selectively emphasize particular aspects of an issue, shaping how audiences understand and evaluate it (Tsfati, Meyers, & Peri, 2022). This act of selection is not neutral; it can foster stigmatization by defining what is deemed legitimate knowledge while marginalizing alternative perspectives (Sidharthan, 2024). During the COVID-19 pandemic, mainstream media often reduced complex scientific debates to a dichotomy of "science" versus "misinformation," thereby polarizing audiences and simplifying nuanced discussions (Slovic, 1987). This binary framing not only undermined public trust in scientific institutions but also fueled skepticism toward journalism itself, reinforcing perceptions of bias and control (Tsfati & Cappella, 2003).

Online Public Discourse and Media Skepticism

The dynamics of online platforms such as YouTube further complicate the relationship between media framing and public trust. Unlike traditional media, online forums enable audiences to actively engage with journalistic content by questioning narratives, contesting authority, and co-constructing meaning through comments, counter-arguments, and debates (Vraga & Bode, 2021). These interactions form a feedback loop in which journalistic framing provokes public response, and public response in turn reshapes discourse. This cycle intensifies both polarization and skepticism, revealing how media framing has consequences beyond shaping perception—it directly influences the quality and trajectory of online public discourse.

Historical Foundations and Ecclesial Context of *Inter Mirifica*

In many instances in its history the Church considered media as an enemy, a disease which radically moved people further from the traditional Christian conceptions and values and consequently restructured the shape of belief. Immediate responses to the media were counter attacks set within the Church's own ecclesiological mind-frame (Pena, 1995). *Mirari Vos*, the encyclical letter published by Pope Gregory XVI on 15 August 1832, exemplified one such counterattack as quoted by R. White (1987: 26):

Here belongs that vile and never sufficiently execrated and detestable freedom of the press for the diffusion of all sorts of writings, a freedom which, with so much insistence, they dare to demand and promote. We are horrified contemplating what monstrosities of doctrine, or better what monstrosities of error are everywhere disseminated in a great multitude...small certainly in size but enormous in their malice.

Similar counter attacks failed as more and more people were drawn to the instruments of communication. Kuhns (1969:16-18) cites the counter attitude as the root of the 'anatomy of failure' of the Church with the instruments of communication. He observes:

What follows is a day-after-day traumatic encounter between someone who tries to communicate... yet who cannot use his [sic] own experience of the media as an inroad to the consciousness [of those with whom it wished to communicate] ...The Church has failed to recognize the intrinsic ways in which the media are affecting the experimental quality of Christian lives.



Vatican II's conciliar document *Inter Mirifica* (IM), a relatively short statement on communication, with 24 articles promulgated by Pope Paul VI in 1963, recognized mass communication as a powerful force that could advance the mission of the Church when responsibly managed, while also warning against misuse that distorts truth or manipulates public opinion (ACI Stampa/EWTN Vatican, 2023). In the Decree, Church leaders attempted to formulate the doctrines regarding media. Two principal claims were made: (1) that the use of the media should respect people's right to information; and (2) that these media be placed at the service of the Gospel and the common good. Overall, it provides a moral-theological framework for evaluating media influence anchored on truth and moral outlook, communion, and Church mission (Pena, 1995).

Inter Mirifica started with the establishment of a Secretariat for the Instruments of Social Communication on 5 June 1960 (K. Schmidthüs, 1967). Members of the Secretariat prepared the initial schema and submitted it to the Council Fathers on 21 November 1962. Opening the discussion, Cardinal Fernando Cento mentioned that, "the subject was not a theological one and so asked the Church leaders to pass it without a great deal of argument" (Schmidthüs: 90). This was not to happen. Opinions of the Fathers varied, and objections were aired relating to the power of the instruments of communication and the danger that the Church might concentrate too much upon itself and neglect the wider community. Similarly, some Fathers emphasized the instruments of communication being at the service of God's Truth rather than the Church solely and noted the role of lay people in the instruments of communication which had not been adequately acknowledged. Finally, some Fathers thought it more appropriate to address the instruments of communication in an instruction or a papal paraconciliar document rather than a conciliar document.

Most concerns having been aired, the schema was approved in substance on 26 November with calls to have its more than one hundred paragraphs pruned, for all the basic doctrinal principles and general pastoral directives to be recapitulated, and for all practical items to be embodied in a pastoral instruction that would be published later as *Communio et Progressio* (1971). It expanded the foundations laid by *Inter Mirifica* by affirming journalistic freedom, promoting media literacy, and emphasizing the independence and accountability of media institutions. Taken together, these texts establish a communicative ethic rooted in responsibility, transparency, and service to the common good (Vatican II documents, 1971).

Digital Culture, Health Communication, and Media Ethics

Zsupan-Jerome (2014) observes that communication has shifted from traditional mass media to a participatory digital culture, where individuals with mobile devices and social media accounts can influence conversations once dominated by professionals. She relates this change to *Inter Mirifica* (1963) and *Communio et Progressio* (1971), which presented Christ as the "Perfect Communicator" and urged ministers to develop communication skills. The Church's philosophy of communication has adapted to the information age, yet local churches often struggle to employ these tools effectively for evangelization. This tension is evident in the BBC Ivermectin debate, where both official institutions and ordinary users sought to shape public opinion in digital spaces.

Perlis, Lunz Trujillo, Green, Simonson, and Baum (2023) found that individuals with low trust in medical experts and a reliance on alternative news were more likely to adopt unproven COVID-19 treatments. Their study shows that misinformation not only generates uncertainty but also drives people toward high-risk choices with harmful consequences. This dynamic was evident in the BBC Ivermectin case, where some audiences viewed the reports as one-sided and turned to alternative references they considered more trustworthy.

Siesmundo (2024) contributes a perspective grounded in Catholic teaching. He argues that fake news undermines journalistic credibility, intensifies political conflict, and weakens society's moral foundation. Drawing on *Inter Mirifica* (1963), he stresses that communication must uphold truth, justice, and solidarity. His work suggests that journalism in the Philippines should rest not only on technical competence but also on moral responsibility, with reporting framed as a service to the common good.

UNESCO (2022) illustrates this principle through training programs for Filipino journalists on ethical reporting during elections and public health crises. These initiatives emphasized the balance of accuracy and sensitivity, consistent with *Inter Mirifica*'s call for truth and fairness. In the context of the ivermectin case, such training reflects an effort to strengthen ethical practices and avoid biased reporting that undermines public trust.

Retrospective Assessments and Contemporary Relevance

Scholarly reassessments underscore the enduring significance of *Inter Mirifica*. Guitián (2011) situated the decree within the wider context of Vatican II, highlighting both its historical limitations and its prophetic vision for media ethics. More recent commemorations, such as conferences organized around its 60th anniversary, emphasized its applicability in the age of digital media, where new challenges of disinformation, polarization, and audience fragmentation mirror earlier concerns but with amplified global reach (EWTN Vatican Bureau, 2023). These reassessments demonstrate that the decree remains a vital reference point for analyzing media practices in shifting technological and social landscapes.

Theological and Communicative Perspectives

Theological reflections on *Inter Mirifica* highlight the dual nature of communication as both mediated and incarnational. Radwan and Johnston (n.d.) argue that while the decree acknowledges media's potential for long-distance influence, Catholic theology emphasizes incarnational communication—rooted in personal presence, truth, and love. Radwan and Mahon (2019) trace how papal communication has evolved from Vatican Radio and *L'Osservatore Romano* to digital platforms, embodying both mediated reach and personal immediacy. This theological tension resonates with contemporary debates about whether mediated communication fosters authentic dialogue or merely amplifies frames and narratives detached from lived human experience. Here, rather than divergence between authentic dialogue and amplified frames and detached narratives, Pena (2014) makes the call for a trinomial convergence from *homo sapiens* (person of reason), to *homo technologicus* (person of technology), to *homo dei* (person of God). He recalls McLuhan's concept of medium in 1964 "the medium is the message" which Pravettoni in 2002 rephrased as "the medium is now who we are, our current perceptions of reality and of time". What Pena highlights is merging of the dual nature of communication embodied in the person who is both medium and incarnated, following Christ who according to *Communio et Progressio* is, "the Perfect Communicator".

Applications in Pastoral and Media Practice

The decree's pastoral influence has extended into both traditional and digital contexts. Iswarahadi (2013) demonstrates how *Inter Mirifica* inspired evangelization strategies that integrated media into catechesis, while Fagbamigbe (2021) applies its principles to the ethical challenges of social media. These applications reaffirm the document's insistence that communication is not simply technical but moral, demanding responsibility, accuracy, and respect for human dignity.

The variance between the Church (considered by many people working in the media as 'instinctively authoritarian') and the people working in the media (often seen by the Church as always 'rejoicing in sowing seeds of discord') is still present although with a lesser intensity (McDonagh, 1994). There is now shift away from a mentality that always sees the instruments of communication as evil to one that has begun to see in the instruments of communication a potentiality for good. What is realized is that 'the Church must communicate its message to the culture in which it lives' and that it is 'guilty before the Lord if [it] did not utilise these powerful means of communication that human skill is rendering more perfect'. More fruits will be gained by negotiating with the media instead of fighting it. Continually the Church is discovering what it needs to know about the media to negotiate its use in fulfilling its witness before the world (Pena, 1995).

Research Gap: Media Framing, Online Discourse, and Stigmatization

While substantial research has explored media framing in health crises and theological reflections on communication, there remains a gap in integrating these two perspectives to examine how journalistic practices both influence and interact with online discourse. Specifically, few studies have used *Inter Mirifica* as an analytical lens to evaluate how mainstream media framing contributes to the stigmatization of health interventions while simultaneously shaping public engagement in digital environments. Addressing this gap allows for a richer interdisciplinary analysis that combines Framing Theory with ethical and theological critiques of media. A study that investigates the interplay between journalistic framing, online audience response, and the



stigmatization of contested health interventions would not only advance media studies but also highlight the continued relevance of *Inter Mirifica* in guiding responsible communication in the digital age.

Study Framework

This metasynthesis is guided by the ethical principles outlined in the Second Vatican Council's decree, *Inter Mirifica* (1963). The decree posits that communication is not a morally neutral act and must serve the "common good."

Theoretical Framework. The theoretical foundation is derived directly from *Inter Mirifica*, which asserts that the "press, movies, radio, television and the like" are a "human achievement which, if properly used, can be laid at the service of mankind" but if used improperly, can be "incredibly detrimental" (Vatican Council II, 1963, para. 2). The decree outlines a moral order that should guide the production and use of media. This framework shifts the focus from media effects to the **moral obligations of both communicators and the public**. Communicators have a duty to provide information that is "true and complete, within the bounds of justice and charity," while the public has a duty to "make a proper choice" to consume media that is morally good and to avoid that which causes "spiritual harm" (Vatican Council II, 1963, para. 5, 9).

Conceptual Framework. The conceptual framework illustrates the moral dynamics of communication as articulated by *Inter Mirifica*. The framework posits that the **Moral Obligations of Communicators** (the BBC) should be the foundation of their **Media Content**. This content is then received and interpreted by an active audience (prosumers) with their own **Moral Obligations as active Receivers** (the public commenters). The resulting **Online Public Discourse** reflects whether these moral duties are being upheld or violated. This process forms a feedback loop where the moral choices of each party influence the overall quality and nature of the public debate.

Operational Framework. This framework defines how the variables are operationalized and measured within the context of the two studies, guided by the principles of *Inter Mirifica* (see Matrix 1).

Matrix 1

Operational Framework

Component	Research Question	Operationalization (Data Points)
Moral Obligations of Communicators	1. How did the BBC News report frame the issue of ivermectin, and what journalistic practices were employed to construct this narrative?	Moral Fulfillment: Did the BBC report provide information that was "true and complete, within the bounds of justice and charity"? Analysis of selective sourcing, oversimplified narratives, and the overall tone.
Moral Obligations of Receivers	2. What were the primary public attitudes and responses to this framing, as evidenced by the comments on the video?	Moral Fulfillment: Did the public commenters "make a proper choice" by favoring morally good presentations and avoiding those that cause "spiritual harm"? Analysis of comments for signs of stigmatization and backlash as moral failures, decadence, and decay
Rhetorical & Linguistic Strategies	3. How did the rhetorical and linguistic strategies of both the news report and the commenters contribute to or contest the stigmatization of ivermectin and its users?	Moral Quality of Rhetoric: Analysis of the rhetorical devices used by both the BBC (expert testimony, labeling) and the public (sarcasm, anecdotes) to determine if they align with the principles of truth and moral outlook, justice, and charity.

The operational framework demonstrates how the study constructs are defined, described, and interpreted through the lens of *Inter Mirifica*. The first component focuses on the moral obligations of communicators, asking how the BBC News report framed the issue of Ivermectin and what journalistic practices were used to construct this narrative. This is operationalized through an analysis of whether the report fulfilled its moral duty to provide information that was “true and complete, within the bounds of justice and charity.” Specific data points include the selection of sources, the tendency toward oversimplification, and the tone employed in the framing. The second component addresses the moral obligations of receivers, which considers how the public responded to this framing through their comments on the video. Here, the framework evaluates whether commenters made a “proper choice” by supporting morally good presentations and avoiding those that could cause “spiritual harm.” This is operationalized by examining the presence of stigmatization, backlash, or resistance in the online discourse. Finally, the framework includes the analysis of rhetorical and linguistic strategies employed by both the BBC and the commenters, with attention to whether these strategies foster or contest stigmatization. The BBC’s reliance on expert testimony and labeling is compared with the public’s use of sarcasm, personal anecdotes, and counter-narratives. The moral quality of these rhetorical choices is assessed against the principles of truth, justice, and charity outlined in *Inter Mirifica*. Taken together, the framework provides a structured means of evaluating both media production and audience reception within an ethical and communicative perspective.

Statement of the Problem

This metasynthesis paper addresses the problem of how mainstream media framing and journalistic practices influence online public discourse and contribute to the stigmatization of specific health interventions. By analyzing a BBC News video on ivermectin and its corresponding viewer comments, this study aims to answer the following specific research questions:

1. How and in what ways are the two papers complementary?
2. How did the BBC News report frame the issue of ivermectin, and what journalistic practices were employed to construct this narrative?
3. What were the primary public attitudes and responses to this framing, as evidenced by the comments on the video?
4. How did the rhetorical and linguistic strategies of both the news report and the commenters contribute to or contest the stigmatization of ivermectin and its users?
5. What can be recommended towards the improvement of journalism education in the Philippines?

METHODOLOGY

This metasynthesis utilized a qualitative, interpretive research paradigm to integrate the findings of two independent, but related, qualitative studies. The studies selected for synthesis focused on the same subject matter: the BBC News report on ivermectin and its corresponding YouTube comments. Both studies employed qualitative textual analysis as their primary research method. The first study (Bantugan et al., 2024a) analyzed the verbal components of the news report, including the narrator's script, expert commentary, and rhetorical devices. The second study (Bantugan, 2024b) employed a similar methodology to thematically analyze 500 viewer comments on the same video.

The process of metasynthesis involved a comparative analysis of the results from both papers. Key themes and findings from each study were identified and categorized, including journalistic framing, public perception, stigmatization, audience response, backlash, and rhetorical strategies. The integration of these themes allowed for the identification of a cyclical relationship where journalistic choices influenced audience response, which in turn reinforced the media's power and created a feedback loop of polarization. This approach allowed for a deeper understanding of the phenomenon beyond what a single study could provide.

Consensual Meta-Synthesis in a Peer-Review Process: A Collaborative Approach

In a consensual meta-synthesis involving a peer-review process, the contributions of co-researchers were integral to refining and strengthening the main researcher's work. This process allowed for the integration of diverse perspectives through the collaborative synthesis of findings, feedback, and interpretations. By involving co-researchers in the peer-review process, the main researcher benefited from constructive critiques, leading to a more comprehensive and ethically sound manuscript. The co-researchers' role was to provide feedback and suggest areas for improvement, while the main researcher synthesized these inputs to create the final manuscript. This collaborative process was not only an ethical responsibility but also an effective way to enhance the quality and rigor of qualitative research.

Process of Consensual Meta-Synthesis in Peer-Review

Initial Submission and Study Overview: The main researcher submitted their work, which included a comprehensive analysis of the data and preliminary findings. This submission served as the base document for the peer-review process, where co-researchers were tasked with reviewing and evaluating the content, interpretations, and conclusions. The study typically involved a specific research question or thematic focus, which was analyzed and synthesized by the main researcher. Co-researchers were selected based on their expertise and familiarity with the research topic to provide valuable and relevant feedback.

Independent Review and Feedback: Each co-researcher independently reviewed the main researcher's work, focusing on various aspects of the research such as data analysis, theme identification, framing, and overall coherence. Co-researchers were encouraged to critically assess the study's interpretation of the data and its alignment with the research objectives. They were also asked to evaluate the ethical implications of the study, particularly in how the findings were framed and presented, to ensure that the work adhered to ethical standards such as truthfulness, transparency, and justice (Vatican Council II, 1963). This independent review ensured that each co-researcher provided their unique insights without the influence of others' perspectives.

Synthesis of Feedback into the Final Manuscript: After receiving feedback from co-researchers, the main researcher synthesized all inputs into the final manuscript. This synthesis involved incorporating the suggestions and critiques offered by the co-researchers, addressing any gaps or weaknesses identified during the review process, and refining the manuscript to reflect the collective understanding reached through consensus. The main researcher was responsible for ensuring that the final manuscript maintained coherence and aligned with the original research objectives while integrating the valuable feedback from the peer-review process (Patton, 2002). In doing so, the main researcher adhered to the moral obligations outlined in *Inter Mirifica*, ensuring that the final product was truthful, complete, and just.

Benefits of a Consensual Meta-Synthesis Peer-Review Process

The consensual meta-synthesis peer-review process offered several key benefits. First, it enhanced the quality and rigor of the research by incorporating diverse perspectives and expertise. Co-researchers' feedback helped identify potential biases, gaps in reasoning, and areas for improvement that the main researcher may not have recognized. This collaborative approach also ensured that the work adhered to ethical standards, as the feedback process included an explicit focus on truthfulness, transparency, and fairness, aligning with the ethical framework of *Inter Mirifica* (Vatican Council II, 1963).

Second, this process promoted a culture of accountability, where the main researcher was encouraged to critically engage with their own work and the feedback provided by others. The main researcher was responsible for synthesizing the feedback into a final manuscript that reflected consensus, ensuring that the research remained true to its original objectives while addressing the concerns raised by co-researchers.

Lastly, the collaborative nature of the process fostered a sense of shared ownership and responsibility for the research findings. By working together to produce the final manuscript, the main researcher and co-researchers contributed equally to the research process, reinforcing the idea that research is a collective endeavor that requires open communication, mutual respect, and ethical responsibility.

RESULTS

The results of this metasynthesis are presented in a manner that directly corresponds to the research questions and the operational framework, viewed through the ethical lens of *Inter Mirifica*.

Complementarity of the Two Papers: Framing and Stigmatization of Ivermectin

The two studies highlight the significant role that media framing plays in the stigmatization of Ivermectin. In Study 1 (Bantugan et al.), the BBC's YouTube report framed Ivermectin as fraudulent and dangerous, emphasizing its association with misinformation networks and scientific unreliability. This framing was reinforced by the report's selective omission of verifiable evidence and the reliance on a single expert voice, Dr. Sheldrick. The BBC report's failure to present a balanced and transparent view contributed to the stigmatization of Ivermectin as an unsafe treatment. On the other hand, Study 2 (Bantugan) analyzed public responses to the BBC video, revealing a polarized discourse in the YouTube comments. Many viewers ridiculed Ivermectin, calling it a "horse dewormer," while others actively resisted the stigmatization by promoting counter-narratives and defending Ivermectin through personal anecdotes and global success stories. This study shows how the media's framing of Ivermectin sparked a feedback loop, where public perception was shaped by both the stigmatizing report and the resulting resistance to it. Together, the studies illustrate how Ivermectin's stigmatization is not merely a result of media framing but a process that is contested and reinforced in public discourse.

Public Perception and Trust in Sources

The issue of public trust in sources is another area where the two studies complement each other. In Study 1, the BBC's report, by selectively framing the issue and failing to provide verifiable sources, diminished the credibility of the information. The reliance on a single expert voice, Dr. Sheldrick, further limited the transparency of the report, undermining its trustworthiness. Study 2 complements this by showing how viewers in the comment section expressed significant distrust of the BBC. Many commenters accused the media outlet of bias and manipulation, questioning the credibility of the information presented, particularly due to alleged corporate or political influence. This public distrust, in turn, fueled resistance to the narrative presented by the BBC. Both studies demonstrate how the failure to provide transparent, well-sourced information not only contributes to the stigmatization of Ivermectin but also strengthens public skepticism towards the media and the sources they rely on.

Moral and Cognitive Stigma

Both studies also emphasize the role of moral and cognitive stigma in shaping public opinion about Ivermectin. In Study 1, the BBC report morally stigmatized Ivermectin users by portraying them as part of a dangerous misinformation network. This framing suggested that Ivermectin supporters were not just misinformed but morally irresponsible. Study 2 echoes this moral judgment, with many viewer comments labeling Ivermectin users as gullible or complicit in spreading misinformation. However, some viewers pushed back against this moral stigmatization, defending Ivermectin and its supporters' motives, illustrating a divide between the mainstream media's portrayal and the counter-narratives presented by the public. The overlap in both studies reveals a cyclical dynamic, where the moral framing by the media contributes to the stigmatization of Ivermectin, but this is met with resistance that seeks to reframe the narrative and challenge the moral judgments made by the media.

Together, the two studies provide a comprehensive understanding of how media framing, public perception, and trust intersect to influence the stigmatization of Ivermectin. The BBC's selective framing of Ivermectin as fraudulent and dangerous, coupled with the omission of verifiable sources, contributed to its stigmatization. However, this media narrative was met with resistance in public discourse, with viewers questioning the credibility of the BBC and defending Ivermectin. This cyclical process highlights the power of media framing in shaping public opinion, while also underscoring the importance of transparency, balanced reporting, and the inclusion of diverse voices in health communication. Through this lens, the two studies illustrate how

stigmatization is not only a media-driven process but one that is contested and challenged by the public in dynamic ways.

Moral Obligations of Communicators (The BBC Report)

The BBC News report, despite its stated purpose of combating misinformation, did not fully adhere to the moral obligations of communicators as outlined in *Inter Mirifica*. The decree states that news should be "true and complete, within the bounds of justice and charity" (Vatican Council II, 1963, para. 5). However, the report's use of **selective sourcing**, such as including Dr. Carl Sheldrick's statement that Ivermectin users believe "conspiracy theories that the government is lying to them" (Bantugan et al., 2024a), was a clear omission of charitable and complete reporting. By oversimplifying the issue and presenting a one-sided narrative, the report failed to acknowledge the complexity of the debate. This approach, rather than serving the common good through a balanced presentation, contributed to the stigmatization of a group, which is a violation of the principle of justice and charity.

Moral Obligations of Receivers (Public Attitudes and Responses)

The public's highly polarized response, characterized by **stigmatization** and **backlash**, demonstrates a breakdown of the moral duties of media receivers. The decree advises the public to "fully favor those presentations that are outstanding for their moral goodness" and to avoid those that "may be a cause or occasion of spiritual harm to themselves" (Vatican Council II, 1963, para. 9). The comments that engaged in **stigmatization**, such as "These people are so far down the rabbit hole, they're using horse paste to try and cure a virus" (Bantugan, 2024b), failed this moral obligation. This ridicule and moral judgment are neither charitable nor do they serve the common good. Similarly, the **backlash**, or resistance, expressed through accusations of media bias and the promotion of counter-narratives, while a reaction to the BBC's incomplete reporting, also failed the moral duty of fostering a respectful discourse. This polarization is a symptom of both communicators and receivers failing to uphold their moral responsibilities.

Moral Quality of Rhetorical Strategies

The rhetorical strategies employed by both the BBC and the public can be evaluated for their moral quality. The BBC's use of **expert testimony** and a "science versus misinformation" framework, while a persuasive technique, can be seen as a moral failure when it is used to oversimplify and exclude dissenting voices, thereby failing the duty of providing "complete" information. The public's use of **sarcasm and humor** to ridicule others and the reliance on **anecdotal evidence** ("I used Ivermectin for my family, and we got better. End of story" [Bantugan, 2024b]) rather than reasoned argument, also fails the moral standard of using media to foster a unified, charitable society. These strategies, instead of leading to a constructive debate, only reinforced the existing polarization and distrust.

One can relate here the article of Paul Walton, "Does media merely mediate?", highlighting that media do more than just mediate. They possess the capacity and power to form – "to intervene, to transform and translate our very tastes and desires" (1992, p.181). Along with what the media shares as good news are the regretful traces of the bad – ivermectin, murder, robbery, rape, shooting, etc. – which highlight information sensationalism and increase of chequebook journalism that reflects mostly owner interest and demands.

DISCUSSION

How *Inter Mirifica*'s Ethical Framework Illuminates the BBC Case

The synthesis of the two studies, analyzed through the ethical lens of *Inter Mirifica*, reveals a profound ethical crisis in contemporary health communication. The BBC's report, by failing to meet its moral obligations as outlined in *Inter Mirifica*—specifically the duty to provide "true and complete" information with "justice and charity"—contributed to the very polarization it sought to critique. The report's lack of nuance and selective framing deepened the divide between the media and its audience, exacerbating the very issues of mistrust and misinformation it aimed to address. Instead of fostering an informed public discourse, the BBC's portrayal of

Ivermectin as fraudulent and dangerous disregarded the complexity of the situation, which in turn fueled a public backlash. Viewers, feeling morally and intellectually dismissed, actively resisted the narrative, often through ridicule or the promotion of counter-narratives. This resistance, however, also violated the moral obligations of information receivers, as it sometimes included disparaging or inflammatory rhetoric that failed to serve the common good.

This ethical breakdown is compounded by the participatory nature of today's digital culture. Ordinary users, empowered by digital platforms, can amplify alternative narratives and directly challenge institutional authority (Zsupan-Jerome, 2014). In the context of health communication, this dynamic is especially dangerous, as widespread mistrust of experts—exacerbated by the failure of the media to provide transparent and balanced information—leads audiences to embrace high-risk alternatives, such as unproven COVID-19 treatments (Perlis et al., 2023). In this environment, misinformation thrives not only due to scientific uncertainty but also because digital platforms empower users to contest official accounts in ways that deepen societal polarization.

Through the *Inter Mirifica* framework, it becomes clear that a more ethically responsible approach to health journalism would involve acknowledging the complexity of health issues, presenting diverse perspectives, and fostering critical literacy. This approach would prioritize providing information in a manner that respects the dignity of all parties, rather than simplifying complex issues and stigmatizing those with dissenting views. Ethical journalism, as called for in *Inter Mirifica*, should be framed as a moral responsibility that goes beyond mere technical tasks. This aligns with the efforts of UNESCO (2022), which promotes training programs for Filipino journalists, focusing on ethical reporting during elections and health crises, helping practitioners balance accuracy with sensitivity.

The online discourse surrounding Ivermectin, as seen in the second study, becomes a microcosm of a larger societal debate where competing truths and a variety of rhetorical strategies—ranging from ridicule to reasoned argument—are employed to influence public opinion. This metasynthesis demonstrates that the media is not a neutral messenger of information; rather, it plays an active role in shaping public understanding and meaning during a crisis. The public's online response is not a passive acceptance of media narratives but an active, often confrontational, process of meaning-making. In this environment, trust in the media must be continuously earned, as audiences critically engage with and challenge the authority of mainstream journalism.

This analysis underscores the need for a reformed approach to journalism education—one that integrates ethical training with digital literacy. As *Inter Mirifica* advocates for communication that serves the common good, educators must prepare journalists to navigate a participatory culture, where authority is contested, and the truth is not merely asserted but demonstrated with care, transparency, and respect.

Inter Mirifica's Ethical Framework and Its Implications for Journalism

The synthesis of the two studies, analyzed through the ethical lens of *Inter Mirifica*, highlights a profound ethical crisis in contemporary health communication. The findings from the studies underscore how the BBC's reporting on Ivermectin fails to meet the moral obligations outlined in *Inter Mirifica*, particularly the duty of communicators to provide "true and complete" information with "justice and charity" (Vatican Council II, 1963, para. 5). The BBC's selective framing, which presented Ivermectin as fraudulent and dangerous without offering a balanced perspective or citing verifiable sources, contributed significantly to the stigmatization of Ivermectin. This oversimplified narrative deepened the divide between the media and its audience, creating a cycle of polarization that exacerbated the very issues of misinformation and mistrust that the report sought to address. By failing to acknowledge the complexity of the issue and offering a one-sided account, the BBC report did not foster an informed public discourse but instead fueled a public backlash. Viewers, feeling intellectually and morally dismissed, resisted the media narrative, often using ridicule and counter-narratives to push back against the stigmatization. However, this resistance also violated the moral obligations of information receivers, as it sometimes involved disparaging rhetoric that undermined constructive dialogue and failed to serve the common good.

The Participatory Nature of Digital Culture. The ethical breakdown highlighted in the studies is intensified by the participatory nature of today's digital culture, which allows ordinary users to amplify alternative narratives

and directly challenge institutional authority (Zsupan-Jerome, 2014). In the case of health communication, this phenomenon is particularly dangerous. The failure of the media to provide transparent and balanced information, coupled with widespread mistrust of experts, creates an environment in which audiences are more likely to embrace high-risk alternatives, such as unproven COVID-19 treatments (Perlis et al., 2023). This participatory culture empowers users to contest official narratives, which can deepen societal polarization and contribute to the spread of misinformation. The *Inter Mirifica* framework thus reveals the ethical responsibility of communicators to ensure that their reports are not only accurate but also nuanced, transparent, and sensitive to the complexities of health issues.

Ethical Responsibilities in Health Journalism. The findings from the two studies suggest that a more ethically responsible approach to health journalism would involve acknowledging complexity, presenting diverse perspectives, and fostering critical literacy among audiences. As *Inter Mirifica* emphasizes, journalists should uphold the duty to communicate in ways that respect the dignity of all parties, instead of simplifying complex issues and stigmatizing those with differing views. Ethical journalism, as envisioned in *Inter Mirifica*, should be seen as a moral responsibility that goes beyond technical tasks, such as merely reporting facts, to include a broader ethical obligation to serve the common good through balanced and fair reporting. This view aligns with the efforts of UNESCO (2022), which advocates for training programs for Filipino journalists focused on ethical reporting during health crises and elections, helping journalists navigate sensitive issues with accuracy and empathy. Such an approach would allow health journalism to better serve its role in promoting public trust and informed decision-making.

The Dynamics of Online Discourse and the Media's Role. The online discourse surrounding Ivermectin, as illustrated in **Study 2**, serves as a microcosm of a larger societal debate. In this debate, competing truths are presented, and a variety of rhetorical strategies—ranging from ridicule to reasoned argument—are used to influence public opinion. This demonstrates that the media is not a neutral arbiter of information but plays an active role in shaping public understanding during a crisis. As the studies show, the public's response to media reports on Ivermectin is not passive; instead, it is an active and often confrontational process of meaning-making that challenges the authority of mainstream journalism. This dynamic underscores the importance of earning public trust continuously and highlights the ethical responsibility of journalists to engage with the public in a transparent, accountable, and respectful manner.

The Need for Ethical Journalism Education. These findings emphasize the urgent need for a reformed approach to journalism education that integrates ethical training with digital literacy. As *Inter Mirifica* calls for communication that serves the common good, educators must prepare journalists to navigate a participatory culture where authority is contested and where trust in the media must be continually earned. By equipping communicators with the skills to engage ethically with digital platforms, journalists can help foster a more informed and respectful public discourse, one that acknowledges complexity, promotes critical thinking, and prioritizes transparency and fairness. Such an approach would not only improve health journalism but also restore the ethical foundations of media practice in an increasingly polarized world.

Addressing Moral Lapses in the BBC–Public Interaction through Journalism Education

The moral lapses observed in the BBC–public interaction, such as selective sourcing and online ridicule, highlight critical ethical issues that can be addressed in journalism education to ensure more responsible and effective media practices. The following lessons can be incorporated into journalism curricula to address these issues:

1. Lesson on Balanced Framing: Addressing Selective Sourcing

Issue Identified: In the BBC report, selective sourcing contributed to an imbalanced presentation of Ivermectin, with reliance on a single expert voice (Dr. Sheldrick) and a lack of verifiable evidence. This oversimplified the issue and contributed to the stigmatization of Ivermectin, fueling public distrust and skepticism.

Educational Response: Journalism education must emphasize the importance of balanced framing in health and science reporting. Journalists should be trained to include a variety of credible sources, particularly in

controversial issues, and avoid presenting a one-sided narrative. The principle of **inclusivity**—incorporating multiple perspectives—should be emphasized, ensuring that all voices are heard and the full complexity of an issue is presented. Students should learn how to critically evaluate sources and integrate diverse viewpoints to create more accurate and ethical narratives. Additionally, students can be trained to **verify information** and cross-check sources to ensure the credibility of the information they present.

Practical Training: Incorporating exercises that require students to analyze news reports and identify gaps in sourcing or framing can help them practice recognizing bias and learn how to balance narratives more effectively.

2. Lesson on Rhetorical Ethics: Combating Online Ridicule

Issue Identified: The public's response, particularly through online comments, often included ridicule and moral judgment, undermining constructive dialogue and contributing to polarization. This behavior was not only disrespectful but also failed to serve the common good, as it hindered productive conversation and reinforced division.

Educational Response: Journalism education must place a strong emphasis on **rhetorical ethics**—the ethical use of language and persuasion. Journalists should be trained in using language that fosters respectful debate and avoids demeaning or inflammatory rhetoric. They must be taught how to engage with audiences in a way that encourages **civility** and **constructive criticism**, especially when dealing with sensitive or controversial topics. Training in **ethical persuasion** is also critical, helping students understand the power of language and the responsibility that comes with influencing public opinion. Journalism educators should highlight the risks of online ridicule and teach students how to respond to dissent or criticism in a manner that promotes open, respectful, and thoughtful discourse.

Practical Training: Role-playing exercises and debates can be used to train students in addressing opposing viewpoints with respect and professionalism, while avoiding personal attacks or ridicule. Analyzing real-life examples of online discourse, both positive and negative, can help students understand how rhetoric can either contribute to or detract from healthy public dialogue.

3. Lesson on Transparency and Accountability: Upholding Moral Obligations

Issue Identified: The BBC's report did not uphold the moral obligations outlined in *Inter Mirifica*, particularly the duty to provide "true and complete" information. This lack of transparency and incomplete reporting contributed to the public's mistrust and the stigmatization of Ivermectin.

Educational Response: Journalism students must be taught the **moral obligations of communicators**, especially the responsibility to provide truthful, transparent, and complete information. This includes a commitment to **acknowledge complexity**, as well as to **verify and cite sources** properly. The principles of **justice and charity** in *Inter Mirifica*—which emphasize fairness, truth, and respect for the audience—should guide how journalists handle contentious issues, ensuring they do not oversimplify or distort information to fit a particular agenda.

Practical Training: Assignments focused on fact-checking, sourcing transparency, and ethical reporting techniques should be incorporated into the curriculum. Journalism students should be trained to **build trust with their audience** by demonstrating a commitment to accountability and a willingness to address potential errors or omissions in their reporting.

4. Lesson on Public Trust and Media Literacy: Bridging the Gap Between Journalists and Audiences

Issue Identified: The public's backlash against the BBC report, fueled by accusations of bias and manipulation, demonstrates the erosion of trust between journalists and their audiences. Mistrust in the media often leads to resistance and the amplification of misinformation, particularly in digital spaces.

Educational Response: Journalism education must include **media literacy** training, both for journalists and for the public. Journalists must be equipped with skills to engage audiences critically, helping them understand how information is constructed and encouraging audiences to think critically about the media they consume. Additionally, media professionals should be taught how to **actively listen** to public concerns and **address mistrust** by fostering open and transparent communication. Journalists must be seen not as gatekeepers of truth but as facilitators of informed public dialogue.

Practical Training: Including **media literacy** exercises in the curriculum—such as teaching students how to evaluate the credibility of sources, discern bias, and understand the implications of media framing—will empower future journalists to engage more effectively with their audiences. Workshops on community engagement and dialogue-building can also be useful in helping journalists bridge the gap between themselves and their readers or viewers.

5. Lesson on the Ethical Use of Digital Platforms

Issue Identified: The participatory nature of digital platforms amplifies both alternative narratives and misinformation. This dynamic fosters a polarized environment in which misinformation can spread quickly, and public resistance to official narratives is often amplified.

Educational Response: Journalism education must address the ethical implications of **digital platforms** and teach students how to navigate the complexities of online communication. This includes understanding how information spreads in digital spaces, the role of algorithms in amplifying certain narratives, and the responsibility of journalists to ensure the ethical dissemination of information online. Students should also be trained to **use digital platforms ethically**, recognizing the potential harm of sensationalized or misleading content.

Practical Training: Practical assignments focusing on ethical reporting in the digital age—such as analyzing the spread of misinformation on social media or designing ethical digital campaigns—can help students develop skills necessary to navigate and engage responsibly with digital platforms.

The moral lapses observed in the BBC–public interaction can be effectively addressed through comprehensive journalism education that emphasizes **balanced framing, rhetorical ethics, transparency, public trust, and ethical use of digital platforms**. By integrating these lessons into the curriculum, educators can equip future journalists with the tools necessary to fulfill their moral obligations to provide truthful, complete, and ethically sound reporting that serves the common good. This approach will not only address the issues seen in the BBC–public case but also contribute to a more informed, respectful, and ethically responsible media environment.

Recommendations toward the Improvement of Journalism Education in the Philippines

Drawing on the challenges identified in health reporting and online discourse—and grounded in the ethical framework of *Inter Mirifica*—the recommendations below aim to strengthen journalism education within the Philippine bachelor's degree curriculum.

Assert media progress as an evolving reality. Ethics must be treated as a central pillar in journalism curricula, merging universal standards with culturally pertinent frameworks like *Inter Mirifica*. Journalism education in the Philippines already mandates ethics through CHED's outcomes-based approach (CHED Memorandum Order No. 041-17, 2017). However, ethics training must extend beyond abstract principles, preparing students to understand how communication functions in a participatory digital culture. As Zsupan-Jerome (2014) observes, ordinary users equipped with digital tools can now influence conversations once controlled by professionals, creating new challenges for authority, credibility, and trust. Case-based teaching—for example, analyzing the BBC ivermectin report—can help students critically evaluate framing, sourcing, and narrative completeness in contexts where audiences actively contest media authority.

Address mistrust of experts. Perlis, Lunz Trujillo, Green, Simonson, and Baum (2023) show that mistrust of experts drives some audiences toward unproven treatments, underscoring how weakened credibility directly impacts public health choices. Journalism education must therefore train students to anticipate and respond to



skepticism, presenting evidence in ways that build trust rather than deepen division. Modules on health and science communication, coupled with audience research exercises, can equip future journalists to bridge gaps between institutional expertise and public perception.

Consider truth, justice, and charity as moral anchors. As Siesmundo (2024) emphasizes, communication should remain grounded in truth, justice, and solidarity, framing reporting not only as a technical task but also as a moral responsibility. Journalism education must integrate this theological-philosophical orientation into practice, encouraging students to view their work as a service to the common good.

Strengthen professional formation through ethical training. UNESCO (2022) highlights how training programs for Filipino journalists during elections and health crises have focused on balancing accuracy with sensitivity. Journalism curricula should adopt similar approaches, equipping students to avoid biased framing and to manage contentious issues without eroding trust. Simulations, newsroom practicums, and partnerships with professional organizations can reinforce ethical habits as lived practices rather than abstract ideals.

Emphasize nuanced framing and inclusive narratives. Rather than upholding neutrality as passive objectivity, curricula must teach students to frame complex debates with nuance and inclusivity. Conditional binaries such as “science vs. misinformation” undermine trust and marginalize perspectives. Integrating coursework on framing theory and discourse analysis will help students understand how narrative choices can either stigmatize or foster constructive dialogue.

Build audience-centered education. With journalism increasingly unfolding in digital spaces, students must be equipped to engage actively with audiences. Embedding digital ethnography and comment analysis in the curriculum prepares journalists to anticipate public reactions, recognize stigmatization, and adapt strategies for respectful discourse. This aligns with UNESCO’s (2022) call for media education that emphasizes both technical and ethical literacy.

Integrate interdisciplinary approaches to health and science communication. Health reporting cannot be siloed within journalism alone. Curricula should include science, medicine, and ethics modules to ensure accurate and socially aware reporting. This responds directly to Perlis et al.’s (2023) finding that public health risks emerge when expertise is distrusted or misrepresented.

Cultivate rhetorical responsibility and constructive storytelling. Beyond persuasive writing, students must learn rhetorical responsibility—how humor, labeling, or simplification shape public perception. Practical workshops can foreground accuracy, fairness, empathy, and moral clarity in storytelling, ensuring that rhetorical strategies foster understanding rather than polarization.

Promote media education and social responsibility. Journalism education must extend beyond producing ethical journalists to fostering media-literate citizens. As Zsupan-Jerome (2014) notes, the digital environment amplifies both opportunities for participation and risks of misinformation. Courses should therefore prepare graduates not only to produce responsible journalism but also to promote media and information literacy among the wider public.

Taken together, these recommendations call for a curriculum that balances technical mastery with ethical discernment, digital adaptability, interdisciplinary insight, rhetorical awareness, and civic responsibility. This approach aligns with CHED mandates while reflecting the deeper moral commitments of *Inter Mirifica*, preparing graduates for responsible and constructive journalism in an age of participatory culture, expert mistrust, and digital complexity.

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