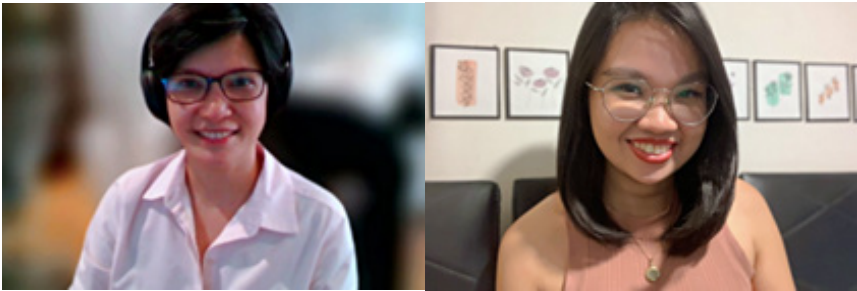


INTERVIEW

Research in Political Communication as a Response to Societal Issues: An Interview with Dr. Clarissa David of the Ateneo School of Government

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The post-truth information age marked by the proliferation of fake news and alternative facts continues to challenge the bounds of democratic participation. It is tragic but necessary to admit that we now live in a time where information can be distorted and weaponized for political propaganda, where facts need to be defended and effectively narrativized to be given attention and value by various publics. The reality of this epochal shift from objectivity to subjectivity—which puts primacy on personal sentiments over objective evidence—amplifies the need to teach, conduct, and communicate research in a more creative and engaging manner.

As an educator, researcher, and practitioner of communication, Dr. Clarissa David has significantly contributed to academic and public discourse as her numerous publications on political attitudes, new media, civic engagement, and the like center on dissecting and addressing contemporary issues in Philippine society. Currently, Dr. David is a faculty member of the Ateneo School of Government, where she also teaches Leadership and Strategic Communication. She earned her Bachelor of Arts in Communication at the Ateneo de Manila

University, and obtained her Master of Arts and Doctor of Philosophy in Communication from the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania.

Early interests and influences: Dr. David on the events that led to her becoming a political communication scholar

The academe has always been home to Dr. David, even as a kid. Raised by two educators in a college town where children her age were also sons and daughters of teachers and scholars, she attributed her early interest in research to the environment she grew up in.

DR. DAVID: An important aspect of my background is lumaki ako sa UP Los Baños. Both of my parents were academics—my mom was an economist, while my dad was a statistician in UP Los Baños. That’s how we found ourselves in that college town, in our hometown. Everybody you connect with in your community is basically an academic. Para sa akin, it was almost automatic na pagkatapos mong mag-undergrad, dapat mag-Master’s ka tapos mag-PhD ka.

I developed an interest in social science research in high school because I had a really, really excellent high school Economics teacher. We called her Ms. Sana who is Dr. Sana now. She was a teacher in UP Rural High School then, but I think she’s in UP Manila now. I remember that she was really dynamic, and I enjoyed the course. I found interest in doing research from there. But I also had a real interest in being a newscaster. From there I decided that I wanted to study Communications.

Despite being unfamiliar with the specific details of the various types of Communication programs in different universities in the country, she found herself applying in each of them, from BS Development Communication in UP Los Baños to BA Communication in Ateneo, until she resolved to pursue the latter. She described the Communication program of Ateneo as production-oriented since it focused on broadcasting, advertising, film, and other industry-centric disciplines. Nevertheless, she wound up writing a thesis related to politics and public opinion in her senior year.

DR. DAVID: My undergraduate thesis was already political comm, now that I think about it. The objective of my research was to understand why people voted for celebrities in 1997. I was interested in studying that in 1997. And now that I think about it, it's kind of strange na ganoon pala kaaga ang interest ko in political comm.

Ang case study ko was Parañaque City Mayor Joey Marquez, at that time. He was a basketball player. He had a sitcom, "Palibhasa Lalaki". Then became mayor of Parañaque City. I was trying to understand why people voted for him, and why he was so revered as a mayor. As an undergrad, I would go to Parañaque, sa mga kantokanto 'don, and I would do man-on-the-street interviews to ask them who they voted for, and why they voted for him, and why they like him. Tapos pumila ako sa office niya kasi ininterview ko siya doon sa Parañaque City Hall. I spent a few days in Parañaque, and then I wrote a thesis.

It was already very clear to me then that I had an interest in this. Why did people want to vote for celebrities? And now, 25 years later, I'm still writing about why people vote for celebrities.

When she recalled being enrolled as a part-time Master's student of the MA Communication Research program at the College of Mass Communication in U.P. Diliman, she mentioned enjoying the classes of Professors Betsy Enriquez and Elena Pernia. But while she was doing her coursework in UP Diliman, she was also applying to different schools in the States.

DR. DAVID: I applied to four or five different schools. I think I was able to do this, and it occurred to me to do it because...one, both my parents did their PhDs in the U.S., with scholarships, so for me it was a possibility. Kasi ganoon ang community in Los Baños. People were going to the U.S. for PhDs because they could find funding opportunities. I was aware it was possible. And then number two, I found out about Annenberg because of one of the most esteemed professors in U.P., Dr. Alfonso, who did a PhD in Annenberg many years ago. That's how I learned about the program. She wrote me a recommendation letter, and I got into that Master's program, and it just happened to be fully funded by the school itself.

While I was there, I had intended to study mostly health communication because at that time it was interesting to me, but then I found really good advisers in PolComm. Public Opinion

Polling in particular resonated with me. Quantitative work, survey work in particular, really resonated me, so I picked my classes along those lines. I had a really strong interest in methodologies and measurement.

From there, I just went straight to the PhD. Then I decided to come back in U.P., and now I'm in Ateneo.

Although she admitted that teaching was not something she gravitated towards, she eventually grew a fondness for it, albeit there were specific courses she preferred to handle.

DR. DAVID: During my time in UP, I was teaching mostly graduate students because undergrad classes have to be broad. The breadth of theory that you have to teach in a first year or second year comm course, Malaki ang required na ik-cover mo. I wanted to have opportunities to teach very specific things like survey and measurements. I wanted to teach methods courses, so I always ask for the methods courses, even the qualitative methods course.

I found that very interesting because students in class would pursue their own research. I would help them with the methods, so I learn from the students different things because they pursue different topics. I always wanted to teach new things.

Aside from teaching and doing research, Dr. David also worked for local and international institutions and agencies. In 2016, she served as the Director for Communications and Knowledge Management in the Philippine Competition Commission, where she oversaw all communications-related operations. These days she leads communication for four countries in the region for a multilateral institution. For her, the practice of communication in a government office is basically the application of what you know in theory, with ethicality at its core.

DR. DAVID: I think because political comm 'yung inaaral ko, I had a specific interest in government and similar institutions. It was always interesting for me to study how government agencies did comms. It's not just PR because commercial PR is about brands; it's about industry. In government agencies, you have a very different orientation. You have an obligation to the public, [you have to] disclose certain information. You have a principal who is a Chairman or Secretary, and then you have to run a bureaucracy that is a

communications office inside a public institution. It's a very different set of things.

At the end of the day, what it is is the practice of strategic communication because you have to be strategic in everything. It's a combination of media engagement, crisis communication, managing an office, production, messaging. All of those things are the practice of strategic comms. And in the end, it's a political process, I believe, because ultimately you are representing a government agency. It's a very different entity from corporate comms. Iba yung obligation mo to the public in the ethical practice of communication inside government agencies.

The nitty-gritty of it is really comms—writing speeches, writing press releases, understanding the nuances of production work for social media videos, growing your social media followers, responding to questions from the media—all of these are essentially part of PolComm.

Research as activism: Dr. David on what it means to do political communication and policy research

Despite having worn many hats over the years, Dr. David said she has always been most inclined to being a researcher, but she also recognized how value-adding her teaching and industry experiences have been to her work as a researcher.

DR. DAVID: If I could spend 100% of my time on just one thing, it would be research, and the whole process of it from conceptualization to instrument design, to framework, to writing, to editing it after review. Unfortunately, nobody would pay me enough just to do that, so the other jobs I needed to do. But it all feeds into the same thing, right?

Ultimately when you teach, you learn new things. It drives you to read more current things. On the practice side of things, [you realize that] it is very easy to recommend out of research, it's another thing to take a recommendation and actually execute it. So I have more respect now for the execution side of things. What it taught me is that when making recommendations, you always have to think about what is possible. Madaling mag-imagine ng recommendation

na first best-case scenario [...] pero in practice hindi 'yon madaling gawin.

What I learned from the practice side is to really have respect for the execution. The implementation of any policy reform recommendation is where the work is. Research is the fun part—we identify the problem and say this is what you should do. The doing part is the most difficult thing.

Dr. David emphasized that what made research enjoyable for her was the fact that it was a problem-solving endeavor that allowed her to understand and explain what was going on around her. She noted that her body of work involved not only political communication, but also research in education, research in health, and policy research outside of communication. When asked about her go-to scholars and primary inspirations in pursuing different projects, she highlighted the importance of knowing the specific aims and purpose of the research that had to be done.

DR. DAVID: For policy research, especially work for sectors like education and health, it's not academic. It's less about who the scholars are, and more about what is currently out there because a lot of the research there is institutional. The work I do there is more practical, and less theory-driven.

On the PolComm side is where I do more of the scholarly work. I think the nature of what we do is more about going back to the canon, more going back to the classics. Of course, we quote the same people over and over again [...] but I always find that I am influenced by the people who taught me.

Aside from her adviser Vincent Price, who was keen on survey and public opinion research, she also drew inspiration from the works of political communication scholars Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Michael Delli Carpini, who served as Deans of the Annenberg School for Communication when she was pursuing her graduate studies there. Dr. David also mentioned that since she had an interest in social psychology, she often went back to the works of her former professors Martin Fishbein and Joseph Capella.

DR. DAVID: What's fascinating is a lot of my peers in graduate school are now in different universities in the U.S., and they do different research in political communication, but when this disinformation

and misinformation thing happened to the world everybody in our different capacities was studying it. and we were landing on the same set of texts, on the same set of explanations because the theories that grounded our explanations were the same.

It's really interesting [to see what happens] when you go back to the people who taught and trained you.

When asked about her personal definition of political communication, Dr. David said it was too broad and complex of a discipline and practice to be confined to a single definition, so she explained its nature and scope instead.

DR. DAVID: It's big. I wouldn't hazard to define it. What it is, is an area of work.

Anything where you're dealing with the communication processes between citizens and government, including the press—all of the communication processes that need to work in order for democracy to work—that for me is the scope of political communication. You can attack it from the perspective of institutions or institutional relationships like what is the power balance between the state and the press, the legislature and the executive, and the individuals in them.

Or you could think about it more like my area had been, in a more psychological way. For me, my own work is very psychology-driven, social psych, kasi iyon ang itinuro sa 'kin. I was very interested in trying to explain how people make decisions for voting. How do they use information that they gather from journalism in their daily life, in their political decisions—not just in elections, but also in other political decisions whether they exercise their voice.

There are also purely humanistic things like rhetoric, right? That's still political communication—understanding political speeches, and how you [craft] a political speech that [evokes] emotion, how does a political speech make a mass movement. That's all politics.

Whenever you're dealing with instruments of the state and the institutions that are supposed to control the powers of the state—all of that plus individual agency of citizens—how they exercise it, how they use it, how you enable it, or how it's suppressed is all political. Anything that affects the citizens' ability to participate in political process is part of political communication.

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In 2015, Dr. David was recognized by the National Academy of Science and Technology (NAST) as one of the Seven Outstanding Young Scientists for her innumerable and notable contribution in the social sciences. While awards and recognitions were not something she aimed for, Dr. David expressed her gratitude to the U.P. College of Mass Communication for nominating her, which helped her and her work gain more visibility.

She described the work that she now does as collaborative and interdisciplinary. For her, “you need multidisciplinary solutions to practical problems,” and publication is only secondary to finding solutions to real problems that affect people.

DR. DAVID: I’m very big on doing interdisciplinary work, so I work with many different kinds of scholars outside of comms. I work with statisticians, economists, physicists, sociologists, psychologists. I think it’s really valuable to hear from different perspectives, to bring that to bear in practical problems because you need multidisciplinary solutions to practical problems. If that ends up being publishable, then good. But ideally, nakahanap tayo ng solusyon sa aktwal na problema.

A communication scholar alone cannot find a solution to a practical problem. You need to work with other people. I’d like to encourage more of that. If I can play a role in academia, and my role is to put them together in teams, and encourage more team-oriented practice of academic research that would really be good.

To strengthen the research culture in the Philippines, particularly in the field of communication, Dr. David found it relevant to go back to practicality of pursuing communication studies, especially amidst the information revolution. She explained that it is through communication specialists that the technical jargons of other fields could be made accessible, and could make meaning-making possible.

DR. DAVID: Right now, there is so much demand for communication professionals. There is such a high demand that we cannot produce them fast enough. CSOs need them. Multilaterals need us. Private sector and academia need us. Ang role ng comms is to translate their [referring to professionals in other fields] research to make it accessible to everybody else.

On the research side, everybody accepts that decisions need to be evidence-based. When you have evidence-based decisions,

ultimately it's better. How do you generate evidence? You have to do research. The research is the necessary step to get to evidence [...] Advertising is evidence-based. Marketing, PR, campaigning—it's all evidence-based. Even the private sector is research-driven. In the private sector actually it's quite mature. In the public sector, it is probably less so. I think as long as we think about it [referring to research] as creating evidence so that we know how to communicate effectively, then the research culture will follow.

When asked what she considered her best work was, Dr. David said that she was most proud of her research on extrajudicial killings, which she did with a consortium of researchers from U.P., Ateneo, and La Salle. For her, the project was advocacy work in the form of research.

DR. DAVID: What we did was we built a database of tokhang killings in 2016 up to 2019 yata [...] Ultimately it was a comms research task 'cause what we did was content analysis. We built a database almost exclusively from media content. We were looking at ABS-CBN, GMA, Inquirer, everything online, and trying to build a database of people who were killed in the drug war that were covered by the news.

Then we wrote papers out of it. They were not comms papers, but the process was very much media content analysis. Then the advocacy that came after was to preserve all these information for transitional justice purposes [...] Maybe 10 or 15 years down the line we can see justice for at least some of them, that they are not going to be nameless and faceless numbers.

According to Dr. David, what helped her handle sensitive topics that could potentially reveal personal stance and emotion was the nature of quantitative research being objective and evidence-based.

DR. DAVID: The fact that I do quantitative work makes it easier because you just count it up. The fact of the matter is 10,000 people are in our database. It doesn't matter which way you feel. The fact is 10,000 killings were covered by the news [...] It's frustrating on the advocacy side when it doesn't work, but ultimately, the choosing to do it is where the activism is.

It's easy to make the choice not to do this. I could have done something else. There's a lot of research to be done there. I can do

other things. But at some point, I decided I wanted to do things that were more immediately impactful.

Up close and personal: Dr. David on the challenges she encountered and her advice for young scholars

Dr. David considers herself fortunate enough to not have experienced gender-based discrimination in her years of practice. Nevertheless, she has observed that outside the academe, discrimination continues to exist, so she calls on fellow scholars to use their privilege and voice to address issues surrounding gender inequalities.

DR. DAVID: I've been so blessed to work in such liberal environments. I've lived in campuses all my life, which are bubbles of people at the frontier of gender rights. It was not something I had to deal with in my academic life. In my professional life I see it more. I'm not a victim of it. That might be because I entered practice later. Hindi ako bata pumasok. But I would also say that it's important that when I see it, I point it out.

I was surprised [to find] that when I dipped my toe outside of academia a lot of beliefs people have are still quite outdated [...] I think our responsibility as academics when we go outside of academia and see that things are still like this is to speak out about it.

Although not inherently discriminatory, there are some workplace policies Dr. David considers as disadvantageous to women, and therefore must be improved. To illustrate, she described her experience of giving birth and becoming a mother as a life-altering event that significantly changed her priorities and routines. She rationalized that unlike other women, she has been privileged enough to have a husband and parents who have been immensely supportive, which has given her lee way to continue to pursue her professional career.

In terms of long-term plans and other aspirations, Dr. David ironically sees herself spending her retirement years in the academe, still teaching, albeit in a setup that is more relaxed, more intimate, more encouraging.

DR. DAVID: Down the line, when I grow old, I would like to be a wise professor emeritus somewhere, having coffee, thinking about problems, writing my papers, and then talking to the young faculty

about what they're doing next. When I'm beyond 65, I'd like to be back in university life [...] because it's my identity.

I'd like to be in university to be able to work with young faculty who are keen on building a culture of research. It will happen. Personally, I no longer have publication goals for myself. I don't have to be the first author in publications. I should give that to somebody else and inspire them to do more work.

Thinking back to her early years as a scholar, she realized how much success in the field of research and academia largely depends on grit, how determination despite difficulty could lead to opportunities and breakthroughs. From these reflections, she derived a three-fold advice for young scholars.

DR. DAVID: Networking is important. It is important for all junior scholars and faculty to find good mentors, work with good mentors, and maintain mentoring relationships [...] A very important aspect of how academics mature is through mentoring. That's how you learn—talking to people, listening to people, asking questions, creating relationships.

The next important piece of advice is more on the doing level. Learn how to prioritize your time, and be strategic about what you do. I think 'yung early years, it's easy to get distracted by lots of things because everything is so interesting, but you can't do everything. You really have to pick, commit, and prioritize time. Thinking and writing require a lot of mental focus [...] The first thing to do is to say no to things you don't need to say yes to. That's really the most important thing. Just make sure you don't overcommit yourself, and make yourself so busy that you can't write.

[Finally,] find your voice. Find what it is what you want to be known for, or the area that you find most interesting, that you think can sustain your interest for years.

Clearly, building a research culture, at a time when facts must be justified and evidence must be aestheticized, is a herculean task. Nevertheless, communication scholars must persist and persevere harder now more than ever. Research is a career, but it is also a pursuit of truth; and right now, there are endless truths waiting to be discovered, told, heard.

About the Interviewer

MS. CHRISTINE JOY A. MAGPAYO is an Assistant Professor at the Department of Speech Communication and Theatre Arts, University of the Philippines Diliman, where she earned her BA and MA degrees in Speech Communication. She handles courses on public speaking, rhetoric, forms of public address, speech communication research methods, and undergraduate research and thesis.

She has published articles in *Youngblood Inquirer* and has written primary level textbooks distributed by Ephesians Publishing Inc. In 2019, she was selected as one of the writing fellows for the Barláya Writers' Workshop for Intermediate and Young Adult Literature organized by Adarna House. Her research interests include popular culture, children's literature, gender studies, and discursive practice. She has presented her works in local and international conferences. Through various talks and forums, she promotes her advocacies which include mental health awareness, gender equality, and youth empowerment.