



# Tracking Digital Disinformation in the 2019 Philippine Midterm Election

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**Cover image:** Photo taken Nov. 26, 2018, shows women using their smartphones in Manila. (Photo by Kyodo News via Getty Images)

# About the authors



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The report is designed by Liam Gammon. Infographics are designed by Kay Aranzanso.



# Executive summary

**This report presents the findings of our research about the role of digital disinformation in the 2019 Philippine midterm election.**

Based on interviews with digital campaign strategists and ‘fake news’ producers, content tracking of social media posts by candidates and digital influencers, and big data analysis of online conversations, we find that digital operations are becoming more prevalent, strategically obscured, and influential in shaping political conversations.

## 1 More prevalent

For the first time, digital operations are fully integrated in the overall campaign strategy. In previous elections, social media were peripheral to political campaigns, serving as supplements to the ‘air war’ of television and radio advertisements and ‘ground war’ of political machinery. Now, a significant chunk of the campaign war chest goes to social media. Politicians from the national to the *barangay* (village) level enlist digital workers for campaign operations, with operators ranging from the professional to the amateur to the ad hoc.

## 2 Strategically obscured

While the practices of the 2016 election of unleashing toxic incivilities continue, much of what we see in disinformation practices in 2019 are more insidious and camouflaged. Digital campaigning is increasingly multiplatform, extending beyond Facebook and Twitter to cover YouTube and Instagram. New strategies of micro-media manipulation aim to seed political messages to discrete groups of unsuspecting voters. We also observe the rise of a more diffused network of micro- and nano-influencers—the seemingly benign online celebrities targeting smaller, niche audiences—designed to fly under the radar and evade detection.

## 3 Influential in shaping political conversations

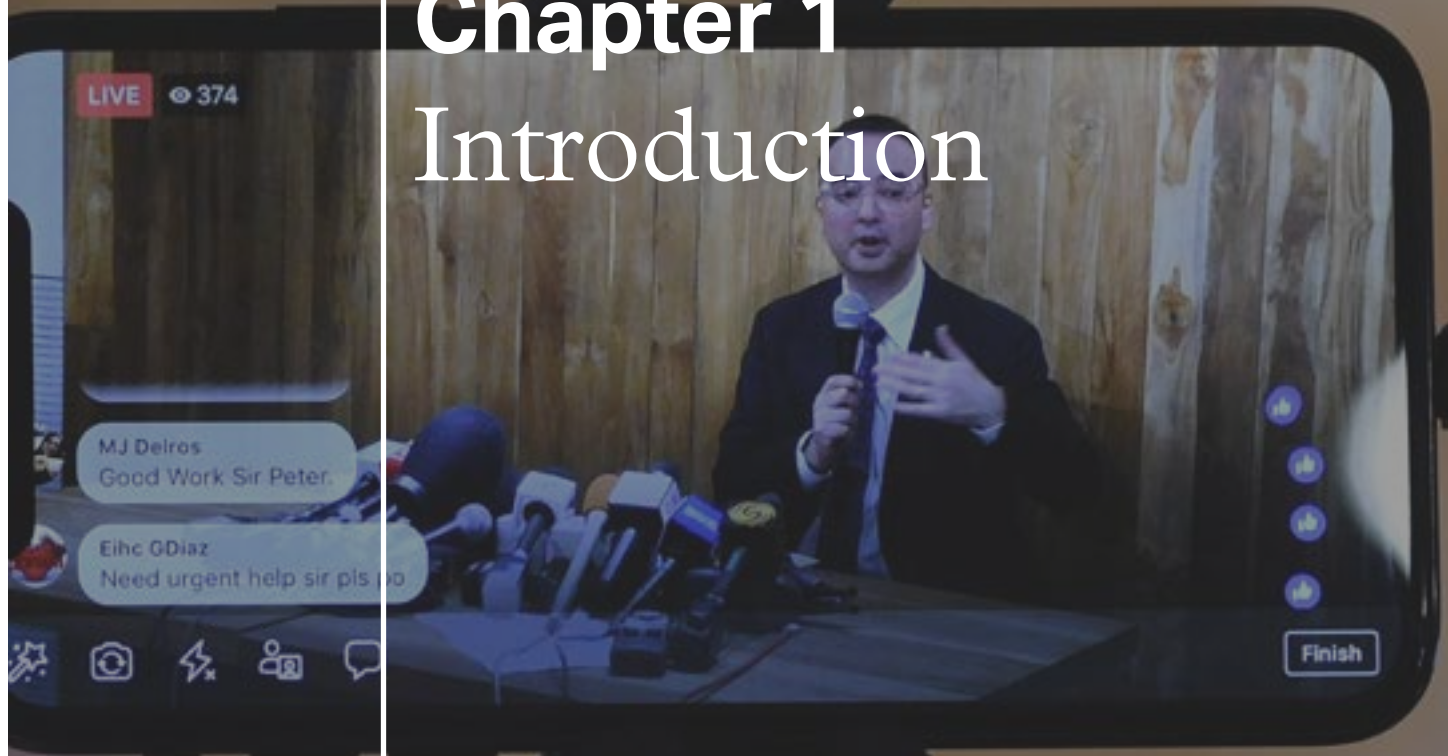
Social media do not singularly determine electoral outcomes. Where social media make a difference is their profound role in transforming the character of political conversations. Candidates now have opportunities to speak on a broader range of issues using vernaculars that reach out to communities in diverse platforms. The dark side of this trend is the emergence of hyper-partisan platforms, such as closed Facebook groups and imposter news channels on YouTube, that exploit citizens’ mistrust against the political establishment in exchange for clicks that can be monetised through advertisements.

These trends have serious consequences for democratic politics. At stake in the normalisation of disinformation are democratic principles of transparency, accountability and electoral integrity. The final section of our report puts forward recommendations that are befitting of the demands of today’s fast-paced and unpredictable communication landscape.

We argue that current regulatory experiments by public and private sectors have not caught up with disinformation innovations that render obsolete current frameworks of content policing. We argue for process regulation—where decision-making around campaign finance regulation, platform bans, and fact checks should be made more transparent and inclusive, involving academics, civil society, big tech companies, and government. Regulatory reform should be guided by bold ethical principles while handled with a legal soft touch so as not to compromise principles of free speech and tolerance.

# Chapter 1

## Introduction



Secretary of Foreign Affairs Peter Cayetano is seen on a mobile phone screen speaking during a press conference in Manila on August 7, 2018. TED ALJIBE/AFP/Getty Images

Commenting on social media's impact in the 2016 Philippine elections, a Facebook executive declared the Philippines as 'patient zero' in the 'global disinformation epidemic.'<sup>1</sup> With citizens spending ten hours and two minutes a day on social media—twice the global average and ranking first worldwide—the Philippines was among the first to witness Facebook's transformation from a platform to stay connected to become a platform to perpetuate divisions. As one of Duterte's chief social media campaigners shared in our interview, 'Facebook has become a very big business here.'

Social media are central to the story of President Rodrigo Duterte's spectacular rise to power. His populist rage tapped on deep-seated sentiments of frustrated citizens just as foul-mouthed influencers shared emotionally manipulative 'fake news' to organise and mobilise networks of supporters. The debate about the precise effect of social media campaigning remains fervent. Some argue that Duterte's 2016 victory and continued popularity are outcomes of a dark technological alchemy of paid trolls and state-sponsored propaganda, even to the shadowy spectre of foreign influence, with data analytics firm Cambridge Analytica alleged to have advised Duterte's political campaigners.<sup>2</sup>

Others, meanwhile, argue that social media might have no effect on voters at all based on the lack of statistical causation between the number of social media followers and eventual electoral victory. For instance, the Philippine Centre for Investigative Journalism's Social Media Audit downplayed Facebook's effects

## BOX 1

## Defining Disinformation

We define disinformation as intentionally misleading and strategically designed propaganda to secure political gains. Key to this definition is the intention to mislead which distinguishes disinformation from misinformation, or rumours spread by ordinary people.<sup>i</sup> In the Philippines, disinformation is also networked. It requires the distributed labour of savvy PR strategists knowledgeable of the political landscape as well as armies of project-based digital workers who translate strategy to the street with their mastery of popular vernaculars and gutter language.

Our report builds on the study *Architects of Networked Disinformation: Behind the Scenes of Troll Accounts and Fake News Production in the Philippines*<sup>ii</sup> which explored the work arrangements of the political trolling industry in the context of the 2016 presidential race. A key argument advanced in the study is that there is a 'disinformation interface'—a thin line that separates the emotionally manipulative propaganda that is professionally produced by digital operators actually paid out by a political client and expressions by political fans who

i See Wardle & Derakhshan 2017 for a typology of information disorders

ii Ong & Cabañes 2018

on the election by pointing to the failure of social media influencer Willie Ong to convert his large Facebook following to actual votes.<sup>3</sup> Another headline was the failure of notorious pro-Duterte blogger and so-called 'queen of fake news' Mocha Uson to win a party list seat in Congress.

While social media is increasingly part of the 'air war' or media spend of political candidates (in some cases up to 50 percent of their media budget), it is not the only or

1 Harbarth 2018

2 Ressa 2016

3 PCIJ 2019

primary way candidates can win elections. Traditional dirty tactics of paying out journalists or using local radio stations as propaganda machines continue to proliferate. The ‘ground war’ of organised rallies, money politics and vote buying, political dynasties and name recall, and co-option of security forces, amongst others, remain influential in shaping electoral outcomes.

Our research does not attempt to correlate social media strategies with electoral success. Rather, we examine the consequences social media campaigns have for shaping public conversations, debates, and deliberations that precede elections. While we argue that social media alone cannot swing a whole election, their effects are profound: they can bait and divert public attention, normalise public incivilities, and mobilise communities through hyper-emotional and partisan communication that makes listening across difference impossible.

In this report, we will present how these effects occur in subtle and insidious ways, away from the usual suspects of disinformation such as high-profile bloggers and mega-influencers, and through smaller and closed Facebook groups and micro-influencers roped in to seed political messages in a much more clever and undetectable manner. This trend, we argue, has grave implications for electoral integrity and creates challenges in enforcing democratic principles of transparency and accountability.

We offer three key messages in our report.

Our first message is how social media and disinformation have become more central and entrenched in the conduct of Philippine political campaigns. In **Chapter 2**, we explain how hiring digital media

professionals is now seen as essential component of campaigning from national down to local levels. This phenomenon is not limited to Manila but extends to urban centres in Visayas and Mindanao. We discuss how digital campaign operations maximised multiple social media platforms to reach out to diverse constituencies and at the same time unleashed competitive digital underground operations. Digital operators indeed observed Duterte’s shrewd investment in a distinct form of social media campaigning in 2016; hence in 2019, both official social media campaigning and underground digital operations have become more prevalent. This is practiced by both Duterte’s allies and the opposition, and even by politicians who previously decried the rise of disinformation practices, showing they felt they had to adapt, rather than continue to oppose, these new forms of digital campaigning.

The second key message is that disinformation producers are becoming more insidious and evasive. In **Chapter 3**, we describe how campaigners leverage social media platforms to reach discrete audiences and cultivate new intimacies consistent with politicians’ own brands. When politicians use Instagram and Twitter, they mean to reach younger millennial and Gen Z audiences where they are, and thus enshrine relatability rather than leadership experience as an important criterion for winning votes. Fluency in millennial-speak and influencer lifestyle culture is increasingly a political asset in the social media age. There is, however, a dark side to the use of different platforms to reach discrete audiences as we elaborate on new trends of micro-media manipulation in **Chapter 4**. For example, YouTube hosts impostor news channels with clickbait headlines and hyper-partisan



content, and while diverse micro-influencers on Instagram discreetly seed political propaganda in between ‘organic’ content.

We extend this analysis in **Chapter 5**, where we provide four case studies of disinformation narratives peddled by both administration and opposition politicians. We argue that the common failure of fact checks or investigative reports of ‘troll accounts’ is that they often neglect tracing the connection between a singular instance of ‘fake news’ to a broader project of undermining values in society, whether it is the legacies of liberal democracy or emerging power of China.<sup>4</sup> Our report examines the emotional foundations of different disinformation narratives and examine how these pose new dangers to Philippine democratic institutions and multicultural social relations. Through their repetition of seductive good-versus-evil frames, disinformation narratives aim to cement political and social divides such that basic principles for deliberative exchange are systematically refused.

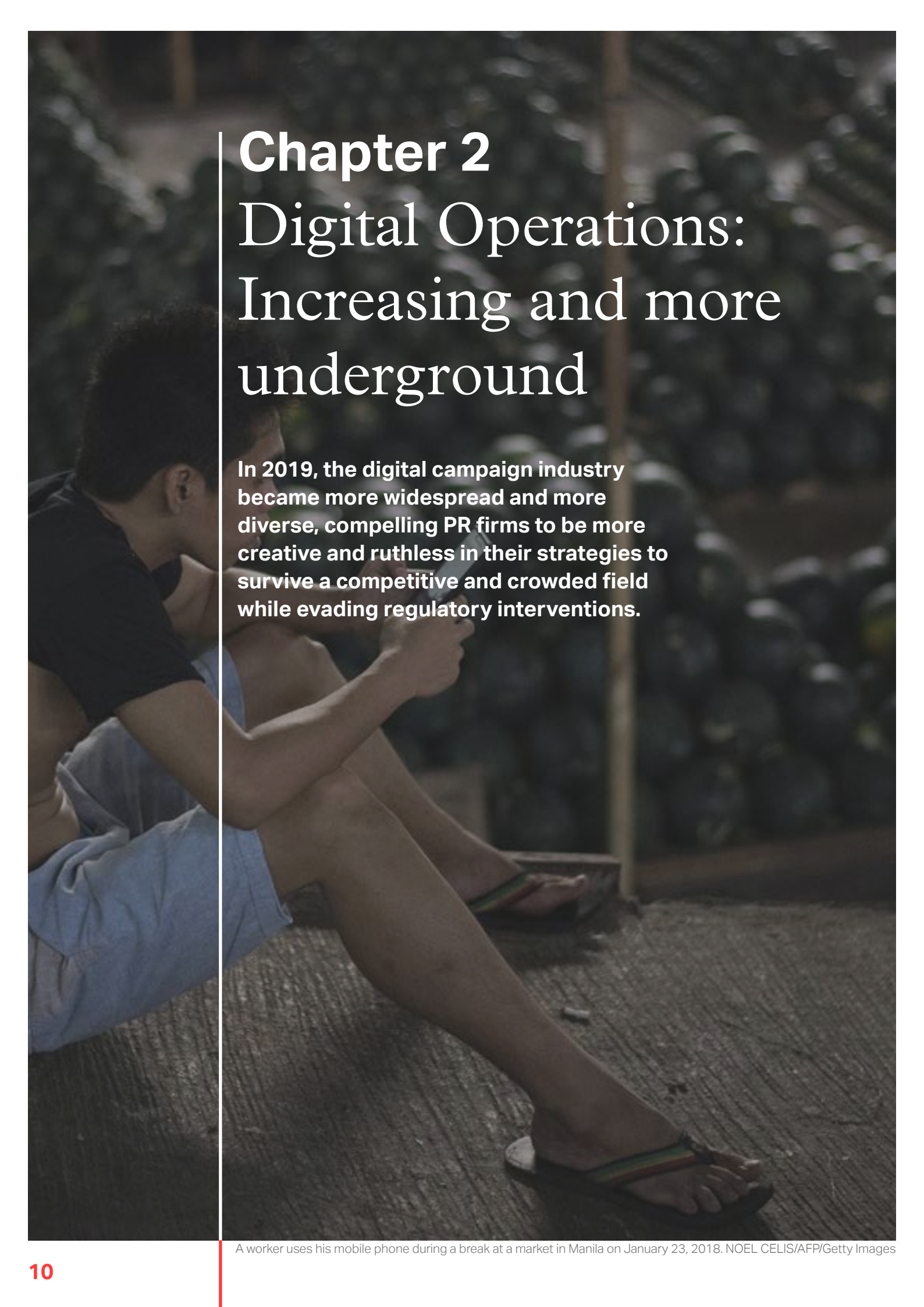
The third key argument is that existing regulatory interventions are not enough, especially given that the disinformation industry has become increasingly well-funded, sophisticated, and harder to detect. Many interventions focus on content regulation, going after easy targets such as mega-influencers peddling ‘fake news’ rather than the strategists who are the real chief architects of disinformation. We argue for process regulation where inclusive and deliberative bodies composed of civil society actors, tech companies, and government come together to ensure transparency in decision-making around social media

and campaign finance regulation. Process regulation, we argue, creates a political ecosystem that is more resilient to disinformation, one that upholds principles of transparency and accountability without compromising liberal principles of free speech and tolerance. ■

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4 Cabañes, Anderson & Ong 2019



A person is sitting on the ground, looking down at a mobile phone. The background is dark and out of focus, suggesting an outdoor setting at night or in low light. The person is wearing a dark shirt and light-colored shorts. The overall mood is quiet and focused.

## Chapter 2

# Digital Operations: Increasing and more underground

**In 2019, the digital campaign industry became more widespread and more diverse, compelling PR firms to be more creative and ruthless in their strategies to survive a competitive and crowded field while evading regulatory interventions.**

A worker uses his mobile phone during a break at a market in Manila on January 23, 2018. NOEL CELIS/AFP/Getty Images

Social media used to be peripheral to political campaigns in the Philippines. As late as 2016, its application was maximised by underfunded candidates who turned to Facebook as cheaper substitute to the more expensive air and ground machinery. Rodrigo Duterte's key campaign strategist claims in the 2016 presidential election, he had a budget of only PHP 10 million [USD 200,000] for social media campaigning, yet Duterte's team organised a vast array of supporters whose role was to campaign for Duterte and criticise his opponents on social media.

In large part due to Duterte's social media 'success,' the campaign landscape in the Philippines has changed in 2019. Based on our interviews with social media operators in Manila and urban centres in Visayas (Cebu) and Mindanao (Iligan), we find that for the first time, digital operations are considered central and fully integrated in the

overall campaign strategy and operations. As one campaign professional in Manila told us, 'you have to have organised [social media campaign] groups, and you also have to put out your own black propaganda material as well.'

In this chapter, we focus on the PR industry that provides a steady supply of digital workers doing above board and underground work for a candidate. Together, these players build a picture of a more diverse political campaign landscape. The Philippines now maintains a vast array of social media campaigners: from large, professional public relations companies who have been employed in election campaigns for decades and who charge as much as USD 100,000 for short-term projects to young, sole-trader, social-media savvy entrepreneurs who charge as little as USD 1,000 and indeed, everything else in between. Some operations at local levels are

## BOX 2

### Facebook Boosts

'I'd love to know how much Facebook is getting from the 2019 Philippine elections,' a digital media professional told us in an interview. He was hinting at the cost of 'boosting' Facebook pages—an advertising tool that allows a Facebook page to enter news feeds of potentially interested users.

This tool is especially relevant for local races. As one political operator puts it, 'We had to spend a lot for boost posts, sponsored posts, because we had to target a very specific area and the only way to reach [your] target is you have to spend for boost posts so you could demand that [the] message will only reach a certain area, a geographical area.' This means that Facebook has the power to reach local audiences which appeals to politicians running local campaigns. Rather than simply advertising in local newspapers or radio, it is Facebook ads which target users in a specific city location that is seen as an integral way to appeal to voters. These 'boosted' pages were not limited to official candidate pages but extend to alternative news pages which campaigners set up to promote negative content about their employer's opponent.

Boosted Facebook pages raises critical issues on campaign spending. Who pays for these advertisements? How does the money trail look like? What regulations are in place to cap spending on social media?

centralised and follow strict communication plans and content schedules, while others are ragtag operations who employ young digital workers often in highly precarious work arrangements.

As social media campaigns become more prevalent, the industry of digital political PR has become a more competitive and crowded field. ‘There are more practitioners now than in 2016,’ one veteran strategist told us in May 2019. ‘A lot of people hire [trolls],’ he added. ‘If you cannot organise, you hire.’ No political candidate has publicly admitted to hiring ‘trolls’ or fake account operators.<sup>5</sup> Yet this is clearly a growing practice.

## THE INDUSTRY

The digital campaigners we interviewed declared that they now get a more significant chunk of the campaign war chest, with some campaigns allocating up to fifty percent of their ‘air’ budget to social media.

Our campaign professionals offered various reasons why politicians invested more on social media in 2019. For some, social media is now an essential investment against black propaganda. Opposition politicians, including senators who publicly opposed the practice and even led senate hearings on ‘Fake News’ in 2017, are clearly ramping up their investment in digital black ops. In other words, politicians justify their investment in social media as a way of ‘fighting fire with fire.’

Pro-Duterte strategists believe they have

also changed online practices of everyday Filipinos, who now feel more emboldened to perform their membership to a political fandom in social media. One PR professional we interviewed who now holds a government position identifies Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) as a politically exuberant community they aim to organise:

“People are really involved, especially Overseas Filipino Workers; they are more involved in politics because of social media... they are all keyboard warriors. All Filipinos who support him [Duterte] create content or just comment or share or engage Duterte content ”

Strategists micro-target particular demographic groups either by managing hyper-partisan groups or channels with rabble-rousing political content or slipping in political propaganda in between ‘organic’ discussions of a particular target community. In Chapter 3, we discuss OFW closed groups on Facebook and their moderators’ particular strategies of rallying the base of highly active transnational political fans.

Targeted communities can also pertain to region. For instance, we discovered the strategic coordination of maintaining ‘local news’ pages and fan groups in Mindanao. Winning senatorial candidate and Duterte’s righthand man Bong Go, for example, had ‘keyboard warriors’ based in Mindanao who identified and countered blogs that spread ‘fake news’ that he was withdrawing his candidacy. These networks grew out of an active online community formed when Duterte ran in 2016.

## UNDERGROUND OPERATIONS

Social media campaigners have varied work arrangements with political candidates. Many digital campaigners are hired by the candidate to run above-board campaigns

<sup>5</sup> The advertising and PR model of a digital disinformation team often follows a work hierarchy composed of: (1) digital strategist, (2) digital influences, and (3) community-level fake account operators. These gigs are commissioned as short-term projects by political clients (who can be politicians themselves, their operators, or campaign donors). Noody is a full-time paid troll. See Chapter 3, Ong & Cabañes 2018.



and manage their official accounts. Meanwhile black ops campaigners were rarely directly hired by candidates, and sometimes were not even directly linked to the central campaign team. The black ops operation is located in an office sometimes not even in the same city, who reports to a PR company, who reports to the candidates' relative or close friend, who may or may not report to the central social media team who in turn may or may not report to the candidate. As one interviewee shared, this system is in place so the candidate has 'plausible deniability' about the use of disinformation networks. This is consistent with standard campaign practice in the Philippines where there is no accountability framework for political consultancy disclosures unlike some Western countries.<sup>6</sup>

6 Sharma 2019

The size of digital underground operations varies. Some 'teams' consisted of 20 people, others far less. The larger the operation, the more diverse and widespread the work. PR strategists often maintain strict message discipline in their campaigns by assigning a content plan for fake account operators to simply 'copy-paste.' Meanwhile digital influencers with more creative leeway insert innuendo and mudslinging into their campaign execution sometimes to the surprise of the chief strategists. Digital influencers balance the need to entertain their organic followers with 'authentic' content consistent with their brand while at the same time fulfilling the project brief.

While 'negative campaigning' was already widely employed in 2016, what is new in this election is the increased scale of these

### BOX 3

## Investigating Foreign Interference

Despite media coverage about 'foreign interference' on social media, our research found minimal evidence that foreign companies were involved in the Philippines midterms, and no evidence that foreign countries (e.g., Russia or China) were involved in executing digital campaigns.

One PR strategist shared with us that campaign donors from China contracted several Philippines-based PR firms for digital operations to promote a mayoral candidate in Manila. These campaign donors were invested in their ally's success to advance their own business interests and infrastructure projects. Foreign funding raises critical issues around campaign finance regulation and transparency: to what extent are politicians in the Philippines compelled to disclose foreign donations? How can we ensure that politicians remain accountable for the conduct and content of their digital promotions the same way that they are required to sign-off on TV, radio and print advertising materials? We return to these questions in Chapter 5.

We met two campaign professionals who outsourced social media fake account operations to workers in Saudi Arabia, India, Australia and the US. The Philippines campaigner who found the Saudi man through Facebook ads said he decided to hire him because he 'didn't know anyone locally' who would offer these services. India, like the Philippines, is also a hub for business process outsourcing in race-to-the-bottom work arrangements.<sup>iii</sup>

iii Casilli 2016

operations at local election campaigns. One respondent told us he worked for three different mayors in Metro Manila in the 2019 elections. In Cebu City, fake account operators were employed in the mayoral and gubernatorial campaigns and for party list groups. Respondents in provinces talked of being part of a local ‘team’ that wrote in local languages to support senate candidates in a specific area of the country, but that these ‘teams’ were replicated all over the country, and generally received instructions from a head office or ‘boss’ in Manila.

The anonymity of the production chain means fake account operators can be exploited in their work conditions. Without a formal contract, they can work long hours, often through the night (if on 24-hour shifts) and at relatively low pay (depending on the nature of project this can be a USD 20/day rate, or a USD 235/month salary). Some fake account operators were described as students who ‘need some pocket money’ and work in windowless rooms full of computers, or off an internet cafe. Many campaign professionals working on the 2019 elections still maintained their full-time jobs as executives in advertising and PR firms handling other brands. Anonymity also extends to professional PR firms want to keep their ‘negative campaign’ work hidden. As one respondent told us, ‘The ad agency really wanted to have a clean image, because they’re handling major brands like Coke and Unilever as well.’

### **SPECTRUM OF ETHICS**

Digital underground operators are aware of both the social stigma and regulatory efforts around ‘trolling’ yet the financial rewards make it worth all the risk. Our respondents expressed moral justifications that their work is not actually ‘trolling’

or ‘fake news.’ One PR strategist shared, ‘You know, there is a spectrum of ethics in this industry. Some hire bots, some create outright lies, and those are the ones that get caught. [But] our company is much more subtle and discreet.’ In her case, she saw nothing wrong with the two dozen ‘local news’ pages her firm maintained on Facebook used for micro-targeting local audiences and discreetly seeding political propaganda for her clients.

Another campaigner equated the moral with the legal aspect of political campaigns. When the election lawyer interpreted for them that the Commission on Elections’ (COMELEC) new rules around social media campaign finance can be read as mere guidelines rather than legal requirements, the campaigner found the perfect justification that their firm could continue their digital black ops campaigns and not declare these as official campaign spends.

### **CHALLENGES AHEAD**

The lesson we learned from interviewing campaign professionals in this research is that there is an aspect of permanent labour to political campaigns. Political strategists make use of pre-existing campaign infrastructure in the form of community groups, pages, and influencer relationships that could be activated during election season. Digital campaign strategists are always looking ahead to the next election and continue to experiment with tools of media manipulation. They capitalise on weak regulatory infrastructure around political campaign consultancies and industry self-regulatory mechanisms that enable them to produce black ops campaigns as supplementary gigs to more respectable corporate projects. ■





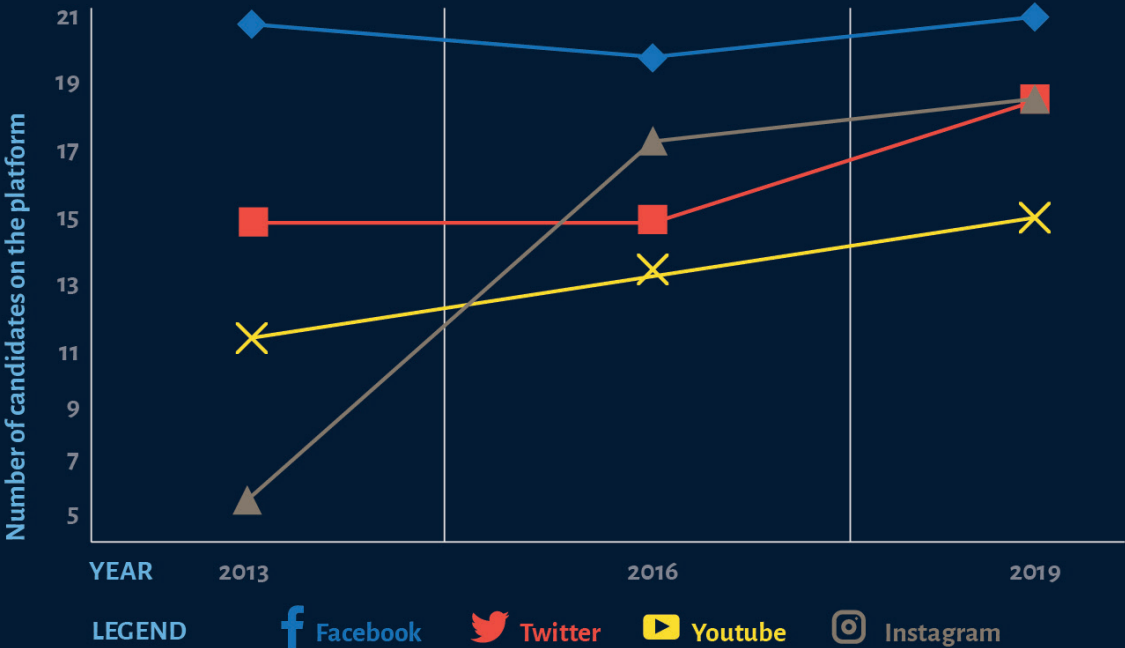
A pedestrian walks past campaign banners hanging from a wall during the mid-term election in Manila, on Monday, May 13, 2019. Veejay Villafranca/Bloomberg via Getty Images



# OFFICIAL CAMPAIGNS

We analyzed the top 20 senatorial candidates' social media profiles from beginning till end of the campaign season and observed diverse, creative, and quite positive (!) uses of social media.

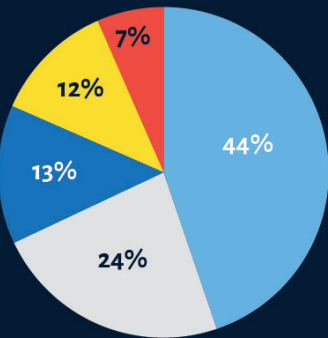
## 1 Instagram and YouTube are on the rise.



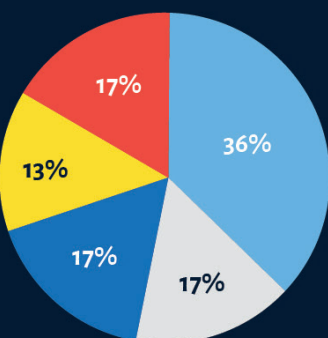
We compared the top 20 senators of the 2019 elections with the top 20 finishers in 2013 and 2016. While senatorial aspirants have already been present on Facebook and Twitter in 2013, their increased presence on Instagram and YouTube suggests these platforms are increasingly important in reaching particular voters.

## 2 Candidates had diverse and platform- specific content.

Percentage of Content of Posts on Instagram



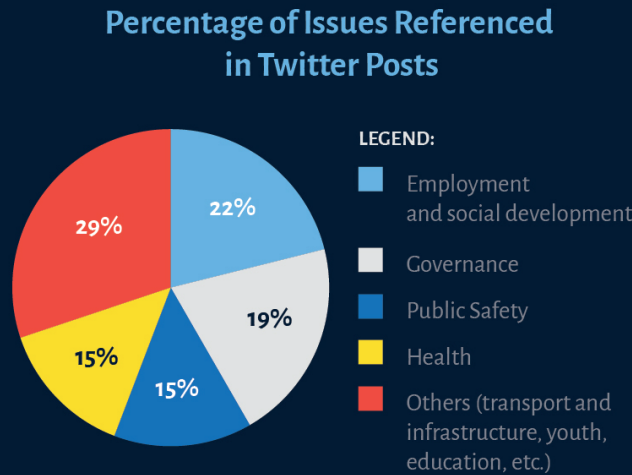
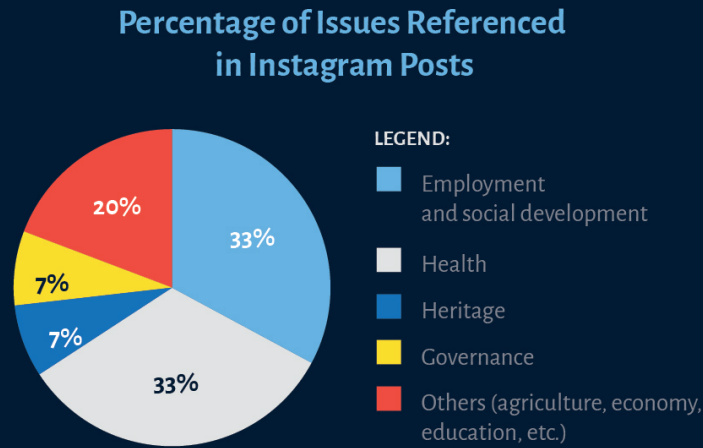
Percentage of Content of Posts on Twitter



- LEGEND:
- Official campaign trail (media/sortie appearance, etc.)
  - Lifestyle (everyday life, pop culture, sports, travel, etc.)
  - General greetings (expressions of sympathy, patriotism, etc.; celebration of special occasion)
  - Campaign advertisement
  - Others (public service track record, fact check, etc.)

The most common posts were candidates on the official campaign trail meeting with ordinary citizens. Another common genre is the lifestyle post where candidates share everyday life stories to cultivate intimacy and authenticity. Many candidates also posted general greetings marking national holidays and affirming values of nation and family. Some also reposted their campaign ads (i.e., tv ad and posters).

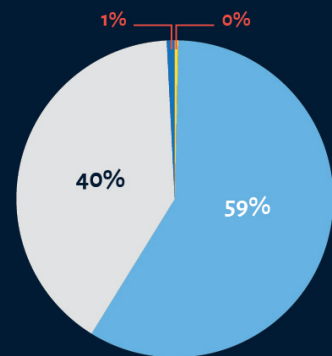
### 3 Employment/social development and health were the most frequent issues referenced.



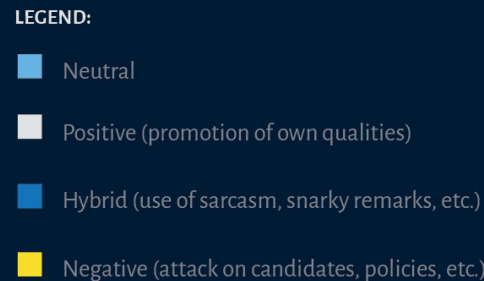
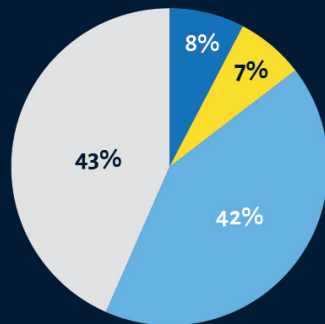
Health was especially advocated by Pia Cayetano and Doc Willie Ong. Opposition candidates attacked current state of governance and public safety under the Duterte administration.

### 4 Candidates actually conducted 'positive campaigns' — if you only examine their official profiles.

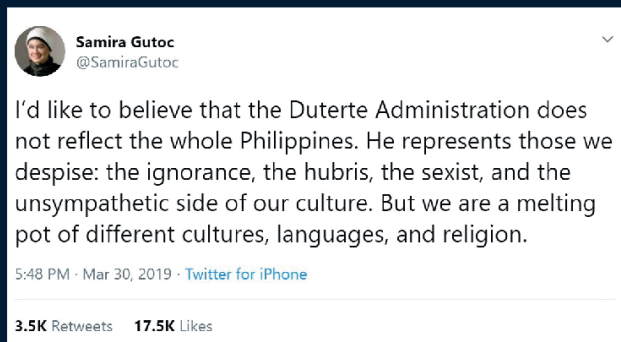
Tonality of Instagram Posts



Tonality of Twitter Posts



Example of positive campaign post



Example of negative (attack) campaign post

Duterte's 'angry populist' political style did not catch on in senators' above-ground official campaigns. Most candidates had a positive campaign tone building their own brand. Opposition candidates used more negative and hybrid (snarky) posts particularly on Twitter where they expressed disagreement on key policies of the administration.





# Chapter 3

## The Rise of Micro-Media Manipulation

**While some practices of the 2016 election still persist, much of what we saw in disinformation practices in 2019 were more insidious. New strategies of micro-targeting seeded specific political propaganda aimed at discrete groups of potential voters, enabling disinformation narratives to thrive in the underground without tripping up fact checkers and content moderators. Micro-influencers maintain their contrived authenticity by smoothly operating within organic communities.**

A customer, right, uses a tablet device at a service desk inside a Globe Telecom Inc. Iconic store in Manila, October. 23, 2017.. Veejay Villafranca/Bloomberg via Getty Images

In the 2019 elections, what the country came to know as ‘fake news’ mutated into more insidious forms that are strategically designed to fly under the radar and evade detection. Previously, notorious bloggers—or in industry lingo, influencers—churned out posts that whipped up a frenzy by rallying Duterte’s followers and triggering 24-hour outrage cycles among his opponents. Since then, fake news has evolved into undercover operations aimed at hacking attention and manipulating conversations at the level of small communities and private groups.

This trend further extends the principle of micro-targeting in corporate marketing to the realm of political marketing. Despite increased public awareness about influencers peddling ‘fake news,’ PR strategists who are the real ‘chief disinformation architects’ have been allowed to hide in plain sight and evolve their playbook in the shadows. They have simply enlisted more diverse micro-media manipulators to advance their schemes. This chapter provides a comprehensive account about the operations of micro-influencers during the 2019 campaign.

### THE PERSUASIVE POWER OF MICRO-INFLUENCERS

In corporate marketing, contemporary definitions of influencer differentiate among different tiers:

Tier	Number of followers
macro-influencers	500,000 +
mid-influencers	100,000-500,000
micro-influencers	10,000-100,000
nano-influencers	1,000 to 10,000

Each of these tiers of influencers fulfil particular functions. The broader reach of macro- and mid-influencers offer appealing opportunities to generate awareness through

brand ‘collaborations’ or sponsorships. Meanwhile, micro- and nano-influencers promise brands greater engagement and affinity. Precisely because of micro- and nano-influencers lack mainstream fame, they appear more authentic and trustworthy to their small yet intensely dedicated followers whom they can count on for likes, shares, and comments. In 2018, Forbes magazine dubbed micro-influencers as the ‘marketing force of the future.’<sup>7</sup>

The Philippines’ corporate marketing practice exemplifies this global trend. In the past five years, new digital influencer agencies and boutique PR firms have offered brands cost-efficient alternatives to expensive TV advertising by acting as intermediaries linking brands with precise combinations of mom bloggers, ‘thirst trap’ fitness influencers, travel vloggers, and funny meme accounts to generate buzz and drive sales. Brand collaborations are lucrative. In 2019, local influencer industry rates peg the rates of micro-influencer between PHP 20,000 to PHP 40,000 (USD 390 to 780) per post, and nano-influencers between PHP 5,000 and PHP 10,000 (USD 97 to 195). Given that many of the politicians’ digital campaigners come from the advertising and PR industries and have a track record of adapting tried-and-tested corporate marketing techniques, it was inevitable that this trend would carry over into political marketing.

Micro-influencers’ broader participation in the 2019 campaign capitalised on faddish life cycles in the burgeoning industry of political punditry. This is best exemplified by the quick rise and fall of macro-influencer Mocha Uson, branded as ‘queen of fake news’ by her critics, with 5 million



## MICRO-/NANO-INFLUENCERS

6FT

5FT

4FT



### Political Parody Accounts

**WHO:**

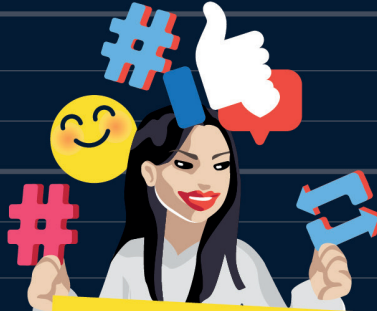
Accounts taking on the persona of politicians, government offices, or news pages that poke fun at the gaffes and excesses of their targets

**SPECIAL ABILITY:**

Uses emotionally-arousing and occasionally-vulgar language to rally followers

**PLATFORM:**

Facebook, Twitter



### Pop Culture Accounts

**WHO:**

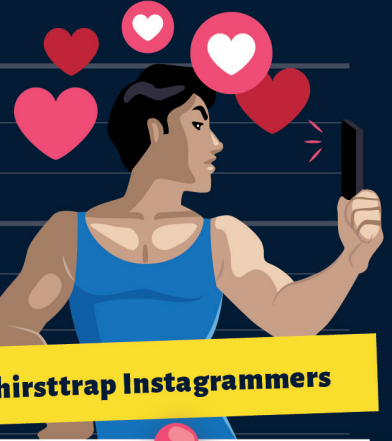
Fictional pop culture figures that comment on Filipino society at large

**SPECIAL ABILITY:**

in between inspirational quotes or humorous posts, slips in political propaganda and coordinates hashtag boosting

**PLATFORM:**

Facebook, Twitter



### Thirsttrap Instagrammers

**WHO:**

Hypersexual Instagram users flaunting their bodies for likes and followers

**SPECIAL ABILITY:**

in between flirtatious poses and lifestyle pictures, slips in political content

**PLATFORM:**

Instagram

Facebook followers. While Uson's popularity illustrates how rabble-rousing political punditry can be monetised and become profitable in recent years,<sup>8</sup> it also showed how macro-influencers are especially vulnerable to public scandal, regulators' surveillance, and the usual rhythms of celebrity backlash. In 2018, Uson's usual brand of contrived blunders crossed the line into tasteless sexual innuendo in one promotional video for federalism, forcing her to resign from a government position and attracting the kind of notoriety ripe for a backlash.<sup>9</sup>

Indeed, macro-influencers have already been placed in the spotlight and shamed in a high-profile senate investigation on 'fake news' that almost exclusively focused on the role of influencers, as opposed to exposing the advertising and PR strategists actually leading campaigns. Macro-influencers' visibility meant that their posts were subject to frequent criticism and even requests

for takedown or downvoting by Facebook and YouTube, as government officials, journalists, and academics decried their often provocative, occasionally hateful, 'extreme speech.'<sup>10</sup>

### WEAPONISING MICRO-INFLUENCERS

These social conditions and regulatory loopholes consequently opened up a space for micro-influencers to be enlisted by strategists in digital political campaigns aimed at small groups. What micro-influencers lack in broader reach, they gain in manoeuvrability and 'contrived authenticity.' 'Contrived authenticity' is the term media anthropologists use to describe internet celebrities whose carefully calculated posts seek to give an impression of raw aesthetic, spontaneity and therefore relatability. This makes it easier for them to infiltrate organic communities and evade public monitoring.

We list below three sets of disinformation innovations in micro-media manipulation.

8 Rappler 2011; Pazzibugan 2017

9 Ranada 2018

10 Abidin 2017

## 1. Micro- and Nano-influencers

Unlike celebrities or the aforementioned political bloggers with millions of social media followers and mainstream media visibility, these personalities cultivate more intimate and interactive relationships with their fans. When they post an election-related joke, tweet a hashtag, or share a candidate's video, their message comes across as spontaneous and sincere. Their 'authentic' exuberance for a political cause becomes an aspirational model for their followers' own political performance.

### a. Political parody accounts

Political parody micro-influencers can be either pro- or anti-administration. Pro-administration parody accounts (such as @Korinavirus and @AltPhilMedia) employ vulgar language when criticising 'establishment personalities' by attacking their qualities of being too elitist or lacking political will and leadership during times of crisis. Senatorial candidate and Liberal Party stalwart Mar Roxas is a favourite target of these parody accounts, poking

fun at his incompetent response in Typhoon Haiyan (local name: Yolanda) when he was the Secretary of Interior and Local Government. Meanwhile, anti-administration parody accounts—such as Malacañang Events and Catering Services and the Superficial Gazette of the Republic of the Philippines—use the language of satire and humour to challenge authority figures in the Duterte administration. Rhetorically, parody can be strategically used to poke fun at the excesses and shamelessness of those in power, although in the current political moment where populists are running governments, who is 'in power' is rather ambiguous.

As with other digital influencers, some parody accounts may begin as 'organic' and grow their followers by cultivating a sense of intimacy and authenticity. Monetisation opportunities arise upon achieving a level of fame or notoriety, and parody accounts can get roped in for paid projects promoting corporate brands or political clients.

Appendix 1 provides a sample of parody accounts that proliferated since 2016.

## ALTERNATIVE NEWS



### *b. Pinoy pop culture accounts*

Pop culture accounts slip in political propaganda in between humorous posts, inspirational quotes, and quotes about failed romances (hugot).

These accounts are occasionally enlisted in hashtag boosting. They coordinate the tweeting of a hashtag according to a schedule in an effort to game the Twitter trending rankings. This disinformation technique is called attention-hacking, where disinformation agents aim to engineer social media buzz influence mainstream media headlines and broader public conversation.<sup>11</sup> We previously observed this coordinated behaviour on Twitter for #NasaanAngPangulo (#WhereIsThePresident) during the Mamasapano Crisis in January 2015 which sought to shame President Benigno (Noy) Aquino for his absence in the aftermath of the death of 44 Special Action Force personnel in a botched operation. More recently, #IlibingNa (literally translated as #BuryNow) was a coordinated hashtag to amplify support for the burial of the late dictator Ferdinand Marcos in the Heroes' Cemetery in 2016.<sup>12</sup> The most successfully boosted hashtag by Pinoy pop culture accounts was the dictator's daughter, Imee Marcos' campaign slogan #IMEEsolusyon last January 21, 2019, when it ranked in the Top 10 Trending hashtags on Twitter.

The key task of anonymously operated Pinoy pop culture accounts is to maintain their authenticity as they grow their followers and gain both political and corporate paid endorsements. We observed that several, but not all, suspicious Pinoy

pop culture accounts that served as key nodes that amplified the hashtag have been taken down by Twitter since April.

Appendix 2 provides a sample of Pinoy pop culture micro-influencers.

### *c. Thirst trap Instagrammers*

Breaking from their usual content of shirtless, gym gains, and lifestyle selfies, this network of attractive young men posted official campaign material supporting the ninety-five-year-old senatorial candidate Juan Ponce Enrile and the Bisdak Party List on their Instagram grids.

While this practice is not directly promoting disinformation in the sense that they did not post any blatantly false claims, this practice nevertheless exploits a vulnerability in existing campaign regulation of digital PR and limits on campaign spending. None of the thirst trap Instagrammers captioned their posts with #paidad or formally declared 'sponsored ad' in their post. Like the Pinoy pop culture accounts, we observed that these influencers also deleted all the political posts from their grid, likely to evade public monitoring.

## **2. Alternative News**

'Alternative news' continued to proliferate and diversify on Facebook and YouTube in 2019. In 2016 one key disinformation innovation was the rise of imposter news websites that impersonate real mainstream media brands (e.g., T1ME.com impersonating TIME Magazine). This year we observed that 'alternative news' diversified across social media platforms.

Hyper-partisan news channels use the same strategy as the older imposter news websites while manufacturing more 'contrived authenticity.' These channels cater to groups with pre-existing political

<sup>11</sup> Marwick & Lewis 2017

<sup>12</sup> Ong & Cabañes 2018



predispositions and aim to affirm their followers' preferences and emotions. Meanwhile, thematic and local news pages try to appear nonpartisan by curating news with a particular focus, but occasionally slip in clients' political propaganda, such as their track record in office or their campaign promises.

#### a. *Hyper-partisan News Channels*

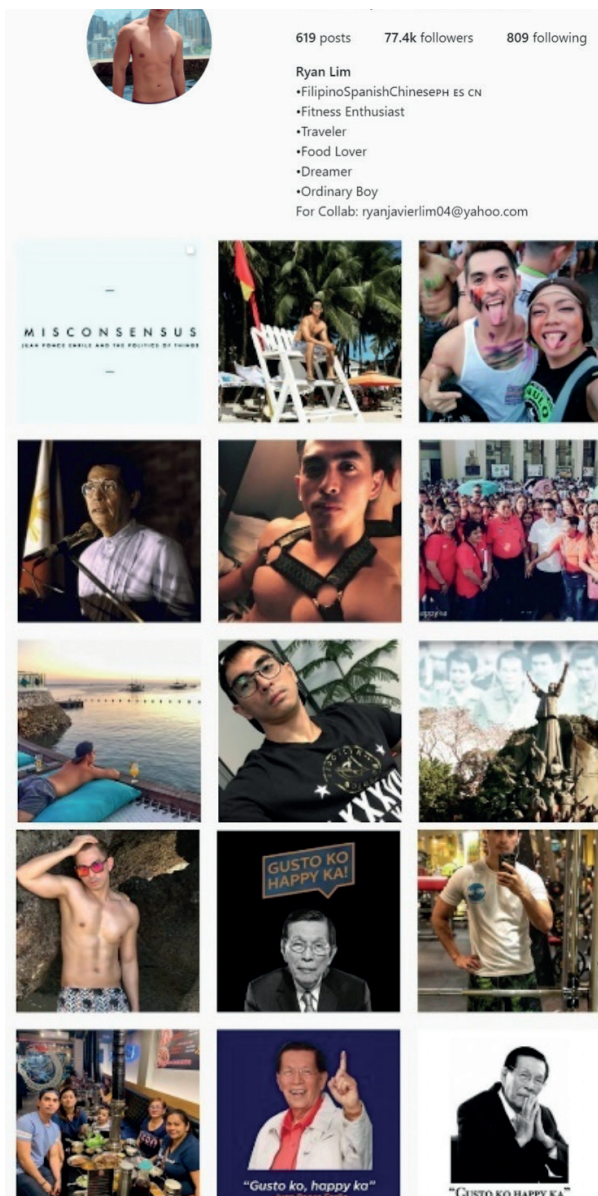
In the last three years, hyper-partisan news channels have expanded from Facebook to YouTube. Hyper-partisan YouTube channels have become hugely popular and undoubtedly profitable with their misleading and clickbait headlines that use emotionally

arousing language aimed at rallying and profiting from Duterte supporters.

The most successful of these channels is TOKHANG TV, ranked 45th in terms of YouTube views, with over 179 million views.<sup>13</sup> Named after the Philippine National Police's deadly anti-illegal drugs operation, TOKHANG TV ranks higher than some mainstream media channels such as UNTV News and Rescue (91st place) and INQUIRER.net (128th place).

Appendix 3 provides a list of examples of hyper-partisan news channels that have grown in the last three years.

13 SocialBlade n.d.



#### BOX 4

### Thirst trap Instagrammers

In between lifestyle posts, Instagram thirst trap influencers casually seed endorsements of political candidates. Take the case of Ryan Lim (<https://www.instagram.com/therealrjlim/>), a self-described fitness enthusiast, influencer, and traveller. With over 62,000 followers, his grid of mostly shirtless pictures is interrupted by several photos of senatorial candidate Juan Ponce Enrile.

We can surmise that the Enrile camp's strategy in enlisting thirst trap Instagrammers was to improve Enrile's appeal to young gay men and women on Instagram. However, this strategy suffered in its execution as the political posts look explicitly inauthentic and disconnected from the politician's own image or brand. A successful execution of this campaign would have been to present a personal connection with Enrile visually (such as through a selfie) and narratively (through a story of their shared values or principles).

Other thirst trap Instagrammers promoted party lists based in their province. This is a more successful execution of a micro-targeting strategy as the micro-influencer was able to personally relate the political group with his own personal story.

## BOX 5

## Thematic news and local news

TOKHANG TV is one among a growing network of YouTube channels—many created in 2016 and 2017—offering alternative news. The channel crafts thumbnails displaying titillating headlines, decontextualized photographs, and brand impersonations in order to bait curious readers when they encounter videos in a Facebook page or closed group. Similar to techniques of imposter websites in the 2016 elections, these channels latch onto the credibility of traditional news media while creating emotionally resonant content that fan the flames of existing political fandoms. Many channels highlight positive news about the Duterte administration and campaign engagements by administration-backed candidates.

During the election, TOKHANG TV spread hyper-partisan political news such as one headlined ‘Otso Diretso Napahiya sa Hong Kong’ (Otso Diretso Embarrassed in Hong Kong), referring to a supposedly embarrassing showing of opposition candidates in their Hong Kong sortie. Videos of the channel during the campaign had thumbnails packaged graphically as ‘breaking news,’ while (mis) using the logo of TV Patrol, the flagship TV newscast of leading news channel ABS-CBN (The word ‘tokhang’ is photoshopped to the logo, as in ‘TOKHANG TV Patrol’). This is a similar strategy of brand impersonations of the notorious imposter news websites in 2016.

Some videos are captioned with explicitly body-shaming, gay-shaming, or slut-shaming language often targeting opposition personalities but shrewdly avoid detection by YouTube’s content moderators. For example, the channel deliberately converts some letters into numbers when using explicit language. In the aftermath of the elections, the channel purged thousands of hyper-partisan videos, replacing much of its content spreading disinformation with lifestyle videos.

We find it important to highlight the role of YouTube in the disinformation landscape in the Philippines, where the debate has almost exclusively centred on Facebook. In the United States, research has alerted us to the alt-right’s ‘alternative influence network’ on YouTube that has ‘adopt[ed] the techniques of brand influencers to build audiences and ‘sell’ them on far-right ideology.’<sup>14</sup> It is important we further explore the role of YouTube and Google’s ad technology in not only disseminating but also financially incentivising hyper-partisan propaganda, historical revisionism, and conspiracy theories in the Philippines.

### *b. Thematic News and Local News*

While not particularly new for the 2019 elections, disinformation activities in

thematic news and local news Facebook pages further proliferated. We found more evidence of campaign propaganda and ‘attack memes’ seeded for local electoral races such as for city mayor or provincial governor.

Thematic news pages promise to curate nonpartisan news relating to a particular theme, such as graft and corruption or the election itself. While community conversation here is mostly organic, these pages have admins that occasionally seed positive campaign material in support of their candidate and negative posts aimed at rival candidates.

Box 5 presents an example of this news page. A list of thematic news page examples is in Appendix 4.

Meanwhile, local news pages that

<sup>14</sup> Lewis 2019



promise to curate city- or town-specific news continued to proliferate. Similar to thematic news pages, these pages slipped in the occasional political post supporting or attacking particular candidates during the election.

### 3. Closed Groups

The last innovation we want to highlight is the more prolific use of Facebook closed groups in spreading election-related disinformation. Facebook closed groups cater to diverse communities. Disinformation tactics here can either be explicitly political and hyper-partisan or discreetly seeding paid political propaganda.

Facebook itself makes the distinction between ‘pages’ and ‘open groups’ as public-facing platforms, and ‘closed groups’ as private platforms. Facebook monitors pages more closely for hate speech and inauthentic coordinative behaviours, while closed groups are granted more privacy. This means that Facebook’s cybersecurity team can take down a page or an entire network of pages, such as the hundred or so pages owned by the digital company Twinmark that violated community protocols for their coordinated posting of clickbait content.<sup>15</sup>

Closed groups are not subject to takedowns due to their privacy protections. Instead, there are group administrators or moderators who police the group and prevent potential spies from opposing political camps from gaining access. The moderators ban individual ‘bad actors’ within the closed groups when they are found violating the group’s rules of communication exchange. Identifying ‘bad actors’ is especially difficult when closed groups often operate as an echo chamber, or filter bubble, of zealous fans who affirm

each other’s beliefs. Moderators also actively promote ‘authenticity’ in these groups by encouraging visual displays of community and sociality. Moderators encourage members to post selfies of themselves during holidays to neutralise potential critiques of ‘fake’ interactions.

In our research, we found two illustrative examples of how closed groups are used to circulate disinformation: closed groups for OFWs and closed groups dedicated to conspiracy.

#### *a. OFW Closed Groups*

From our interviews with digital campaigners, we learned the importance of mobilising OFWs through closed groups. The 2016 Duterte campaign strategically built up an architecture for grassroots participation among OFW communities. OFWs within closed groups are ‘organic’ or ‘real fans’ but many follow the lead of micro- or nano-influencers acting as opinion leaders and directing conversation.

OFW closed groups vary in size and scale. They can cater to OFWs in particular countries or small towns, discussing a range of social issues. OFW closed groups followed the trend of Philippine social media more broadly by having more directly political content in recent years, and splintering off to hyper-partisan subgroups. In the United Kingdom for example, we observed that OFW groups in social media have become divided between pro- and anti-Duterte groups following political disagreements. A majority of OFW sites we observed are pro-Duterte.

Offline community leadership is often replicated in the leadership of Facebook closed groups. Some OFW community leaders become online micro-influencers through their highly engaging posts and

<sup>15</sup> De Guzman 2019

Facebook Live videos catering to important issues of OFW communities. For example, Jeanette Angel Aries who is a domestic helper in Hong Kong and previously affiliated with Raydio Filipino posted a video on her friend's experience with overseas voting. The video alleges that in lieu of a vote for administration-backed senatorial candidate JV Ejercito, the vote counting machine registered a vote for opposition candidate Chel Diokno, casting serious doubts on the credibility of overseas elections. The video has gained over 8,000 shares and 200,000 views.

Though these OFW micro-influencers are not directly paid by candidates or government offices, they are nevertheless compensated through social rewards such as a politician's video greeting. The Presidential Communications Operations Office occasionally mediates these rewards by recording short videos of Mocha Uson or an administration politician greeting the micro-influencer, which will be used as website content. The micro-influencer thus accrues social status by displaying their social proximity to political authorities and securing a potentially viral post in their content schedule.

#### *b. Conspiracy Closed Groups*

We observed that some closed groups dedicated to conspiracy theory can become cesspools of scientific and political falsehoods, and occasionally seed election-related propaganda. For example, the Filipino Flat Earth closed group while promising affirmation to believers in a conspiracy that experts suppress the truth of a flat earth also seeded various content with an obvious political slant. In between organic conversations and videos that sow mistrust of scientific experts and

mainstream media, we observed that the Flat Earth moderators also circulated pro-Duterte, pro-Marcos, anti-vaccine, and anti-opposition posts. With their feelings of anger and resentment against the scientific and media establishment, flat earth closed group members are especially responsive to political figures similarly promising 'change' or alternative leadership styles.

While we do not discount that most of the members of the Facebook group are real, the behaviour of the Filipino Flat Earth group admins is suspicious in their strategic anonymity and consistency when seeding anti-opposition and pro-administration political messages within the bubble of a conspiracy community.

### **CHALLENGES AHEAD**

Disinformation tactics are fast-evolving, creative, and increasingly undetectable. Even in the best of circumstances, regulation on content moderation, among others, can only do so much to anticipate innovations of digital underground operations designed precisely to circumvent existing rules. The challenge, therefore, is broader and more systemic. Avenues for reform need to take more seriously the enabling environment for disinformation to thrive, from the vulnerabilities of digital workers that drive them to join underground operations to the ethics of the advertising industry that allows unscrupulous practices unchecked. ■

# DISINFORMATION INNOVATIONS

## in the 2019 Philippine Midterm Elections

### MICRO-/NANO-INFLUENCERS

6FT

5FT

4FT



#### Political Parody Accounts

**WHO:**

Accounts taking on the persona of politicians, government offices, or news pages that poke fun at the gaffes and excesses of their targets

**SPECIAL ABILITY:**

Uses emotionally-arousing and occasionally-vulgar language to rally followers

**PLATFORM:**

Facebook, Twitter



#### Pop Culture Accounts

**WHO:**

Fictional pop culture figures that comment on Filipino society at large

**SPECIAL ABILITY:**

in between inspirational quotes or humorous posts, slips in political propaganda and coordinates hashtag boosting

**PLATFORM:**

Facebook, Twitter



#### Thirsttrap Instagrammers

**WHO:**

Hypersexual Instagram users flaunting their bodies for likes and followers

**SPECIAL ABILITY:**

in between flirtatious poses and lifestyle pictures, slips in political content

**PLATFORM:**

Instagram

### ALTERNATIVE NEWS

6FT

5FT

4FT



#### Hyper-partisan News

**WHAT:**

News pages/channels that have explicit political alignments catering to political fandoms

**SPECIAL ABILITY:**

Use emotions of anger and resentment to rally the base

**PLATFORM:**

Facebook and Youtube



#### Thematic/Local News

**WHAT:**

Platforms that curate news for specific topics or localities

**SPECIAL ABILITY:**

Neutral-sounding while occasionally sneaking in political propaganda

**PLATFORM:**

Facebook

### CLOSED GROUPS

6FT

5FT

4FT



#### E.g., OFW groups and Conspiracy groups

**WHAT:**

Private groups where members require approval from group moderators; usually organic communities based on common interests but vulnerable to infiltration by political operators

**PLATFORM:**

Facebook



# Chapter 4

## The Dominant Narratives of Disinformation

Unlike the positive narratives of candidates' official accounts, seeded messages by underground digital operators created dominant narratives of hyper-partisanship. The implications of these narratives are far-reaching, from sowing distrust against institutions of liberal democracy to the further simplification of complex issues as pro- or anti-Duterte.



Activists burn a mock Chinese flag with a map of the South China sea during a protest in front of the Chinese consulate in Manila on June 12, 2019. TED ALJIBE/AFP/Getty Images



The previous chapters focused on social media as technologies that offer new ways for politicians to reach voters. This chapter examines social media as content or message. Analysing social media content does not only mean creating a catalogue of recurring themes that appear on users' newsfeeds. It also means listening attentively to how seeded content tap into citizens' economic, social and cultural anxieties using emotionally manipulative language and visuals. 'Fake news' or disinformation does not occur in a vacuum. It is only by understanding the reasons why these narratives resonate to users can we imagine ways in which their persuasive power can be challenged.

We highlight four dominant disinformation narratives that both the administration and opposition politicians mobilizing during the 2019 campaign. We explain their consequences for future political conversations and conclude with provocations on how disinformation narratives can be addressed.

### **NARRATIVE 1: ANTI-ESTABLISHMENT**

Duterte's message of angry populism in 2016 pitted 'the people' against the 'establishment.' As a political outsider representing the voice of marginalised Filipinos living outside the bubble of 'Imperial Manila,' Duterte recast liberal reformist politicians led by former President Aquino as enemies of the people.

In the 2019 race, Duterte's angry populist narrative is reinforced in digital propaganda and weaponised to attack senatorial candidates that are associated with the 'establishment.' Constantly resurfacing in social media are twists on old news about

opposition senatorial aspirant Mar Roxas and the Liberal Party 'establishment' is that they are hypocritical, disconnected from the masses (*masa*), and weak-willed leaders.

The anti-establishment narrative extends to the Otso Diretso (Straight Eight) senatorial slate associated to the Liberal Party who were created and campaigned as a direct opposition to President Duterte. All Otso Diretso candidates were branded as the administration's 'enemies' and therefore 'enemies of the people'. This political attack on an entire party is not quite unique in this race. Six years ago, Aquino's senatorial slate was simply branded 'Team PNoy' which associates the President's handpicked candidates as morally superior than Vice President Jejomar Binay's opposition slate. What sets the 2016 and 2019 campaigns apart is how Duterte's angry populist message was translated into vulgar digital campaigns that invited his supporters to shut out all opposition candidates by 'flushing them down the toilet' ('*Otso diretso sa inodoro*'). None of Otso Diretso's candidates won a seat in the senate.

It is worth underscoring that this narrative is one pushed predominantly on the digital public sphere. In televised public debates, it is rare for administration-backed candidates to disparage candidates from the opposition. The tenor of campaigns in broadcast media was, for the most part, congenial and non-confrontational, except for a few heated exchanges in televised debates on China and drug war, and, of course Duterte's personal attacks against opposition candidates. Viewed this way, the anti-establishment narrative was perpetuated by underground, rather than aboveboard digital campaign teams.

## **NARRATIVE 2: HISTORICAL REVISIONISM**

We observed a resurgence of historical revisionist posts that romanticised the accomplishments of the late dictator President Ferdinand Marcos (1965-1986).

‘Positive’ versions of historical revisionist messaging capitalise on nostalgia for the ‘good old days’ in the Philippines. These posts downplay or outright dismiss the human rights abuses and blatant graft and corruption committed during Marcos’ martial law regime and instead play up his legacy of infrastructure. This narrative provides a foundation to prop up Duterte and his allies as his administration rallies support for its own ‘Build Build Build’ infrastructure program. From highways to hospitals, these posts present a menu of Marcos’ two-decade infrastructure record. As visual proof of Marcos’ still-tangible legacy, the posts equate good leadership with building imposing structures, while sidelining the costs of these projects, including the accumulation of national debt and the restriction of civil and political liberties.

‘Negative’ versions of historical revisionism would juxtapose exaggerations about Marcos’ accomplishments against exaggerated or false failures of the Aquino administrations (1986-1992 & 2010-2016) or other post-EDSA (1986-present) leaders. Examples are posts trumpeting Duterte’s order to clean up Manila Bay on January 2019. While there are different versions, the posts essentially point out Manila Bay’s ‘pristine’ condition during the Marcos years, its deterioration in succeeding administrations, and its revival during the Duterte administration. These underscore the supposed commonalities between Marcos and Duterte—decisive strongmen

who can make the impossible possible—while hitting past administrations for their inaction.

## **NARRATIVE 3: MISTRUST OF MAINSTREAM MEDIA**

Since 2016, Duterte’s angry populist rhetoric has pitted himself and the masses against the traditional guardians of truth and knowledge, accusing them of various conspiracies that deal harm to Filipinos. In the 2019 elections, state-sponsored propaganda, as reinforced by digital disinformation, continued to attack media and scientific institutions by accusing them of media bias and ties to foreign funders.

Journalists are often insinuated as working conspiratorially with opposition candidates to undermine the Duterte regime. The clear example of this is the state’s insinuation of an Oust Duterte Plot, which implicated news agencies such as Vera Files, the Philippine Centre for Investigative Journalism, and Rappler as conspiring with the political opposition and lawyer unions to discredit Duterte. The Oust Duterte Plot revelation came in the wake of the leak of an anonymous video by a man alias ‘Bikoy’—an alleged whistleblower on the Duterte family’s involvement in the drug trade.

News organisations were quick to defend themselves against the allegations, citing point-by-point falsehoods on details of the alleged plot. Opposition influencers meanwhile took it upon themselves to discredit Bikoy’s claims and resurface issues of undisclosed ties to foreign funding and questionable loyalties. The ‘Bikoy’ controversy was eventually used by Duterte supporters and administration to fan the flames of the conspiracy narrative and undermine trust of journalists.



Commuters use their smartphones while waiting for transport at a bus stand in Taguig city, Metro Manila, the Philippines, on Monday, Oct. 23, 2017. Veejay Villafranca/Bloomberg via Getty Images



#### **NARRATIVE 4: ANTI-CHINA EXTREME SPEECH**

The opposition mobilised an anti-China narrative to attract and mobilise supporters against Duterte with his increasingly cosy ties with the Chinese government. At times, online discourse slipped into racist expressions against Chinese people, posing threats to multicultural social relations.

Micro-influencer parody accounts stoked anti-Chinese sentiment through photoshopped satirical memes. For example, the Malacañang Catering Events and Services parody account regularly poked fun of Duterte and his close relationship with Xi Jinping, acknowledging how the country is an inch closer to being a province of China. Other accounts used more racist and crass language. The political parody account Pulitikanginamo regularly referred to Chinese people as ‘ching chong.’ In one occasion, the account misleadingly shared a photo of a Chinese toddler defecating in public though the incident did not actually occur in a Philippines mall. The account mobilised its followers to ‘fight together’ against the Chinese by sending in their own ‘ching chong memes and jokes.’ In April 2019, this same account shared a news article citing Chinese tourists as top ordinance violators in Boracay with racist captions calling the Chinese ‘dog eaters.’

Social media influencer accounts fan the flames of an angry narrative that Chinese workers are ‘invading’ the country and stealing jobs from working-class Filipinos. Economic analysts however stress the need to differentiate Chinese workers from Chinese tourists and investors, as they try to clarify that Chinese investors are also responsible for creating new jobs beneficial

to Filipino workers.<sup>16</sup> Even before the campaign period, some academics have already warned the opposition’s opinion leaders against racist expressions in popular tendencies of conflating (mainland) Chinese, the Chinese government, and Chinese-Filipinos.<sup>17</sup>

Opposition candidates tried to mobilise nationalist sentiments among voters in some of their campaign speeches citing China as the country’s common enemy. At a port in Zambales, Otso Diretso candidates reminded President Duterte of his unfulfilled campaign promise. For instance, party list congressman and senatorial candidate Gary Alejano warned the public, ‘Our challenge to [Duterte] is for him to make good on his promise to jetski [and defend] the West Philippine Sea. But no his jetski has just been unused. Stand up for the Filipino. Soon enough we’ll become a province of China’ (*‘Ang hamon natin, gawin niya yung pagsakay sa jetski sa West Philippine Sea, kaso nangalawang na ang jetski. Tayuan niya ang mga Pilipino. Di tatagal, magiging probinsya na tayo ng China’*).

Throughout the campaign, the opposition consistently stoked nationalist fervour and anti-China anger to mobilise their base. While there are good reasons to raise alarm over the administration’s policy on China, the worrisome aspect of this narrative is its tendency to mobilise racist rhetoric for political gains.

#### **CHALLENGES AHEAD**

Narratives are powerful in the ways they construct heroes and villains and mobilise communities into us-versus-them. Monitoring the narratives of disinformation that gained prominence in the 2019 race

16 Punongbayan 2019

17 Hau 2018



lends insight into some challenges liberal democracies face beyond the single instance of ‘fake news.’

First, while it is normal to experience specific events of fake news as shocking, disturbing, or distracting for the moment, we need to trace connecting threads that allow ‘fake news’ to make sense to a number of people. The resonance of ‘fake news,’ we find, is hinged on lingering scepticism the public has on institutions of liberal democracy, whether it is about the role of the political establishment, the legacies of ousting a strongman, or liberal institutions like the free press. Disinformation extends this lingering suspicion now that ‘fake news’ has become a part of stories Filipinos tell about their nation. The challenge, therefore, goes beyond ‘correcting’ a single incident of ‘fake news.’ Doing so assumes that people prefer accuracy over content that feels right. While the jury is still out there about the accuracy of fact checking,<sup>18</sup> what we learned tracking narratives of disinformation is how deeply embedded these stories are to anxieties, suspicions, and resentment citizens feel against institutions of liberal democracy. We do not discount the importance of calling out fake news. But we also recognise that belying false claims is not enough to break stories that affirm deeply rooted sentiments.

Second, we also find that the challenge with disinformation narratives can be traced to failures of listening. A campaign operator from Lanao del Norte recalled intensity of online conversations about the use of calamity funds during Typhoon Washi (local name: Sendong) in 2011. The failure of the Liberal Party, both local and national, to spot and consequently respond

to this narrative, allowed suspicion and mistrust to flourish online. That there is an anti-establishment narrative questioning the effectiveness and integrity of liberal elites did not come from belatedly seeded narratives, but were built on powerful yet disregarded narratives more than eight years ago. ■

18 Lazer et al. 2018

## Chapter 5

# Policy Responses to Disinformation:

# Towards a Process- Oriented Approach

Fighting disinformation demands bespoke solutions, not just blanket regulations. To mitigate potential harms against free speech, interventions should focus less on content regulation and more on process regulation. More inclusive oversight committees can ensure greater transparency and accountability in decision-making around campaign finance, platform bans, fact-checks, and industry regulation.

In 2016, the Philippines was unprepared to handle the bald-faced deception of imposter websites and the toxic vitriol unleashed by campaigners and social media influencers. In 2019, several interventions were tested to curb the spread of fake news during the election season. Despite national attention to a select group of notorious influencers tagged as the country's 'purveyors of fake news' in a Senate hearing, evidence suggests that regulatory experiments by public and private sectors have not caught up with disinformation innovations. The latest trends in micro-media manipulation mean that disinformation has only become harder to catch, and the chief architects of disinformation continue to reap financial rewards while rendering obsolete current frameworks of content policing. Clearly, disinformation is a systemic problem that cannot be eradicated by fact checks or high-publicity platform bans of individual 'bad actors'.

In this chapter we argue for a shift in regulatory interventions around social media from content regulation to process regulation. While content regulation often bristles against liberal principles of free speech particularly when universalising concepts such as 'hate speech' are applied to diverse cultural contexts,<sup>19</sup> process regulation upholds instead the virtues of transparency, accountability, and fairness in the conduct of political campaigns as well as the decision-making around social media regulation. We argue that regulatory reform should be guided by bold ethical principles but it should always be handled with a legal soft touch so as not to compromise liberal principles of free speech and tolerance.

## POLICY TRENDS

The Philippines' neighbouring countries offer cautionary tales rather than inspirational models for what social media regulation should look like. For a time, Malaysia's anti-fake news law gave its government powers to fine and imprison anyone who posts or shares news deemed wholly or even partially false. The heavy-handed legislation is set to be repealed by the new government in 2019 after it was widely criticised for its potential to stifle free speech and silence dissent.<sup>20</sup> More recently in May 2019, Singapore passed its own anti-fake news law granting its government the power to de-platform online users, take down content unilaterally, and snoop on private conversations even in encrypted messaging apps.<sup>21</sup> Thailand's election laws meanwhile overregulate social media advertising as a strategy to muffle opposition forces whose supporters are heavy users of social media platforms.

At the other end of spectrum lies India, which only started the monitoring of social media campaign spends in 2014. Their efforts for their 2019 election focused on enhancing self-regulation protocols, first by introducing an independent committee to pre-screen political ads in social media and second by bringing together local players in digital marketing and representatives of the big tech platforms to sign a 'Voluntary Code of Ethics' promising transparency and cooperation particularly in disclosures around social media advertising.<sup>22</sup>

We disagree with heavy-handed Malaysia or Singapore-style laws that grant government powers of social media censorship. The Duterte administration's

19 Pohjonen and Udapa 2017

20 Tapsell 2019

21 Wong 2019

22 Sharma 2019



pattern of silencing dissent and creating chilling effects on mainstream media through its arbitrary deployment of legal sanctions creates a worrying precedent for government control of social media spaces. India's laissez-faire regulatory approach is quite similar with the Philippines, and there is opportunity here for cross-country dialogue among researchers and policymakers.

### **A PROCESS-ORIENTED APPROACH TO POLITICAL CAMPAIGNING**

A process-oriented approach to political campaigns means we need to shine a light on the ways in which contemporary campaigns are funded, managed, and executed. This requires shifting regulatory impulses from banning or censoring to openness through disclosure.

The first step to take is to continue a public conversation about the scale of the issue, and how deep these incentives go within local industries. This discussion should be less about shaming personalities and more about understanding the vulnerabilities of the broader system of political campaigning. Advertising and PR industry leaders need to engage with the limitations of their self-regulatory boards, where practitioners take on political consultancies as 'open industry secrets' and where digital influencers are not penalised for failing to disclose paid collaborations. At the same time, the advertising and PR industry has existing frameworks for reviewing advertising materials for corporate brands that set some precedents for what a self-regulatory review board might look like for political ads.

The second step is to review possibilities for a broader legal framework that might encourage transparency and accountability

in political consultancies. Unlike certain countries in North America and Western Europe, political consultants in the Philippines (and countries like India) are not governed by legal provisions. In this light a legal framework for a Political Campaign Transparency Act might provide opportunities to create better checks-and-balances in political consultancy work arrangements, campaign finance disclosures, and campaign donations of 'outsourced' digital strategy. In Congress, a Bill that promises comprehensive reform to the Fair Elections Act was proposed by Representative Juan Miguel Zubiri in the last Congress; we look forward to the details of their proposal. This proposed Bill can certainly review frameworks set by the United States of America's 'Honest Ads Act' (2018), which also aims to protect the democratic process against media manipulation and foreign interference, particularly in the context of elections. This Act upholds transparency in requiring politicians to maintain records of all qualified digital communications, including the content of the communication, the cost of the advertising placement or PR contract, the description of the audience targeted by digital communications, and the campaign duration.

The third step is to review COMELEC's existing frameworks for campaign finance and social media regulation. COMELEC's attempts to create transparency and accountability in social media campaigning in 2019 is a step in the right direction. For the 2019 midterm election, COMELEC introduced new guidelines that increased the reportorial responsibilities of politicians to include social media spends in their Statement of Contributions and Expenditures (SOCE). However,



the current framework also has several vulnerabilities, particularly in its extensive focus on the reporting and monitoring of politicians' official social media accounts, and requirement of attaching receipts of transactions. As our study has shown, digital campaigns involve both official and underground operations. Facebook ads, influencer collaborations, and many political consultancies don't have formal documentation and fails the requirement. This loophole enables politicians to skirt responsibility to report on informal work arrangements. We encourage COMELEC to provide more detailed guidelines to politicians and revise SOCE forms to include the variety of digital campaign executions, including the mobilising of paid influencers, the maintenance of supplemental accounts, and their principles in micro-targeted advertising. The current framework also needs to be amended to oblige politicians to sign off on social media content just as they are obliged to approve TV, radio and print advertising content.

Finally, we encourage COMELEC to form intersectoral alliances with the academe, civil society, and industry in the monitoring of traditional and digital campaigns. The issue of precarious digital workers being lured to underground operations is a matter of labour rights, and so collaboration with labour groups could be explored to provide support to overworked and exploited digital workers who wish to report the perils of their jobs. Industry players could also begin developing collaborative strategies to develop a code of conduct or a broad framework for political advertising.

## A PROCESS-ORIENTED APPROACH TO FACT-CHECKS AND PLATFORM BANS

A process-oriented policy model establishes the necessary conditions for social media content moderation in the context of elections. Even prior to the stricter enforcement of community standards and ad policies, a process-oriented approach to election-related content moderation means developing transparent and context-sensitive systems of institutional cooperation between social media firms and local election commissions, fact checkers, and civil society watchdogs. This means creating inclusive oversight committees that can inform social media firms of local standards and concerns around 'harmful' and 'inauthentic' content without compromising free speech or falling into political partisanship. A process-oriented model means establishing transparency and feedback loops between social media firms and their local collaborators.

In the Philippines, a small group of journalists and academics have developed 'backchannel communication' with tech platforms such as Facebook to provide tips against online 'bad actors' and make a case for their de-platforming. While backchannel communication as a form of activist communication is strategic in the current landscape, this arrangement requires greater checks-and-balances to prevent political partisanship, maintain consistency in community standards, and ensure fairness in collaborative work relations.

There is a risk that non-transparent backchannel communication might evolve to unchecked partisanship among collaborators. Journalists' name-and-shame reporting on 'paid trolls' have previously adopted a problematic good-and-evil frame, such as when they report on influencers

supportive of the administration while heroising those of the opposition.<sup>23</sup> It is important that standards in de-platforming or downvoting are upheld to content and actors across the political spectrum.

This should also apply to the third-party fact-checking arrangements initiated by Facebook. Facebook has enlisted Rappler, Vera Files, and Agence France-Press as third-party fact checkers in the Philippines, where journalists are provided special access to the platform CrowdTangle to observe viral content, produce fact-check reports on their websites, and help Facebook determine which false content should be downvoted (but not banned) from the newsfeed. Oversight committees can help ensure fairness and transparency in decision-making around fact checks. The Philippines should avoid following the trend of India where ‘fake news busting’ have become ‘weaponized’ and hyper-partisan ‘following the patterns of political and ideological fissures.’<sup>24</sup> We propose collaborations among academics and civil society in fact checks that target disinformation across the political spectrum. These initiatives should also provide sense-making narratives that go beyond individual events of fake news to trace the ‘family resemblance’<sup>25</sup> of different false claims that peddle emotionally manipulative good-and-evil narratives.

We also encourage transparency in the processes that lead to platform bans and the publicity that come with these. Big tech’s publicity choices to announce some platform bans rather than others need require a level of transparency in order to neutralise criticisms of partisanship. It’s crucial that Google and YouTube are also

encouraged to join discussions around platform banning and content regulation. Our study has found that YouTube has become a cesspool of conspiracy theory and hyper-partisan news channels that use creative manoeuvres to avoid content policing. The Twinmark case also suggests that the Google ad sense model made their trending news portal websites very financially rewarding, yet Google is rarely held into account.

Moreover, ‘backchannel communication’ risks extractive work relations between big tech corporations and their collaborators. When academics and journalists share research and tips with social media companies, it is crucial that the feedback loop is closed for the sake of transparency and fairness. As social media companies stand accused as using civil society collaborations as PR stunts to rehabilitate their image in the light of their many data privacy scandals, they need to open up their decision-making processes for evaluation and audit by the people they aim to collaborate with.

The current process of sharing data with social media platforms about ‘bad actors’ can benefit from more diverse and inclusive oversight committees that represent diverse sectors and area specialties. The committee should seek to protect vulnerable communities from bullying while recognising emic categories of speech and the complex politics involved in labelling certain kinds of speech as one thing or another.<sup>26</sup>

## LIMITATIONS OF MEDIA LITERACY

Media literacy is often used as a scapegoat by industry when they are placed under the hot seat yet clearly want to avoid the difficult

23 Stuart-Santiago 2018

24 Sharma 2019

25 Chakravartty and Roy 2017

26 Pohjonen and Udapa 2017

conversations of regulation. Educators or ordinary people should not have to bear the burden of spearheading the fight against ‘fake news.’

Nevertheless, it is important that we continue educating the public, including through collaborative initiatives such as the Democracy and Disinformation caravan that has travelled the country to educate college students about digital literacy. However, we need to expand media literacy efforts to target older people as well as government policymakers themselves. Older people have been found to be more likely to share fake news than younger people according to a United States study.<sup>27</sup> Policymakers in particular should find ways to collaborate with academics and journalists in crafting bold new frameworks that emphasise transparency and accountability in social media regulation while safeguarding liberal principles of free speech and tolerance. ■

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27 Guess, Nagler & Tucker 2019

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# Appendix 1

## Examples of Political Parody Micro-/Nano-influencers

Many anti-administration parody accounts were created in the last few years. Listed below are some political parody micro-/nano-influencers and their dates of creation:

Political Parody Accounts on Facebook	No. of Followers*	Date Founded	Main Target(s)
Superficial Gazette of the Republic of the Philippines	115,307	September 12, 2016	Duterte and allies
Malacañang Events and Catering Services	96,822	December 16, 2017	Duterte and allies
Duterte Showbiz President	29,210	December 17, 2015	Duterte and allies
Nagkakaisang Filipino Laban sa mga Dilawan	17,067	July 12, 2018	Liberal Party
Mar Roxas X-Files	12,786	January 11, 2019	Mar Roxas, Liberal Party
Chaka Doll	12,199	July 16, 2016	Duterte and allies
Kapalpakan ni Duterte	11,822	February 21, 2018	Duterte and allies
Duterte VS. Duterte	9,702	June 3, 2016	Duterte
Imbentong Bongbong	8,981	May 24, 2016	Marcos family
Kontra Dilawan	3,416	February 25, 2018	Liberal Party, anti-administration personalities
Imee Magnanakaw	3,100	January 23, 2019	Imee Marcos

\*As of June 16, 2019

Political Parody Accounts on Twitter	No. of Followers*	Month and Year Joined	Main Target(s)
@MalacananEvents	18,200	December 2017	Duterte and allies
@SuperficialGZT	12,700	September 2016	Duterte and allies
@alt_BBM	6,763	August 2017	Duterte and allies
@PangulongMarcos	3,286	March 2017	Marcos family
@skywards2014	2,833	November 2016	Otso Diretso, Liberal Party
@Dbigbalbowski	2,820	May 2011	Otso Diretso, Liberal Party
@joketerte30	2,276	December 2016	Duterte and allies
@AltABSCBN	2,177	April 2018	Duterte and allies
@AltManang	1,614	April 2018	Imee Marcos and family; Duterte and allies
@Pinoykritiko	1,488	February 2009	Otso Diretso, Liberal Party
@YInodoro	307	Feb 2019	Otso Diretso, Liberal Party

\*As of June 16, 2019

## Appendix 2

### Pinoy Pop Culture Micro-Influencers

In this election, we observed the following Pinoy pop culture accounts boosting the following senatorial hashtags on Twitter throughout the campaign period. While many of these accounts have only recently found their way into discreetly seeded political endorsements, others such as @Senyora is a noteworthy trailblazer for having forged a formal and public collaboration with Senator Nancy Binay in her reelection bid. Senyora co-authored a self-help book with Binay promoting her anti-bullying advocacy.

Twitter Handle	Month and Year Founded	Politicians Endorsed	Hashtags Boosted
@imlolabashang	September 2012	Grace Poe, Sonny Angara, Imee Marcos	#TuloyPOEangAksyon, #AlagangAngara, #IMEEsolusyon
@PatamaDiary	April 2014	Grace Poe, Sonny Angara, Imee Marcos	#TuloyPOEangAksyon, #AlagangAngara, #IMEEsolusyon
@TheseDamnWords	February 2012	Grace Poe, Imee Marcos	#TuloyPOEangAksyon, #IMEEsolusyon
@AngTanongKoSayo	May 2013	Grace Poe, Imee Marcos	#TuloyPOEangAksyon, #IMEEsolusyon
@MillennialHumor	January 2014	Grace Poe	#TuloyPOEangAksyon
@Wordstagrammed	November 2018	Grace Poe	#TuloyPOEangAksyon
@NoteToInspire	October 2015	Grace Poe	#TuloyPOEangAksyon
@ReklamadoraAko	July 2017	Imee Marcos	#IMEEsolusyon
@clingyyyygf	November 2014	Imee Marcos	#IMEEsolusyon
@unseenhugots	April 2013	Imee Marcos	#IMEEsolusyon

## Appendix 3

### Hyper-partisan YouTube News Channels

Below is a list of examples of hyper-partisan news channels -- many of which were created during the Duterte presidency.

Channel Name	Date of Creation	Total Number of Views*	Ranking in Social-Blade as Top YouTuber (Views)*
TOKHANG TV	November 18, 2016	178,577,894	45
DUTERTE NEWS REPORT	September 18, 2015	59,127,243	-
The Young Observer	September 22, 2017	54,425,991	-
Duterte NEWS PORTAL	September 27, 2016	51,498,330	187
Noypi Viral	April 9, 2017	24,305,877	-
Nakatutok	November 6, 2012	22,410,782	-
Innovation PH	June 17, 2016	11,746,178	-
Pinas News	May 9, 2016	15,052,135	-
Ang Malayang Pilipino	February 22, 2017	9,784,179	-
Philippine Government Media	September 1, 2016	5,849,389	

\* As of April 2019

## Appendix 4

### Thematic News Pages

Below are examples of thematic news pages that discreetly seed political campaign content for certain politicians.

Thematic News Pages	Date created	Likes	Followers
MindaVote	February 27, 2015	551,958	573,371
Pinoy Trending	December 22, 2014	333,026	333,439
Expose Graft and Corruption in Government	August 13, 2013	84,776	83,083
Election Watch PH 2019	April 26, 2014	79,616	79,023
Voice of Millennials	March 13, 2018	65,325	66,374
No To Political Dynasties in the Philippines	July 6, 2014	52,509	51,274
Philippine News	June 26, 2017	16,021	16,158

Below is a list of local news page examples that we observed as promoting local (and national candidates) in Manila and Tacloban. For instance, ‘No to Manila Bay Reclamation,’ while officially claiming to be focused on the issue of reclamation projects in the city of Manila, steered its content towards the electoral contest between incumbent mayor Joseph Estrada and eventual victor Isko Moreno. In Region VIII, we observed how the local news page Tacloban City Updates pitted two rival regional party lists, Tingog and An-Waray, against each other. The page did not hide its support for Tingog and its’ first nominee Yedda Romualdez while simultaneously being vocal in its disdain against Bem Noel, first nominee of An-Waray. Other local news pages in Tacloban threw their support behind the Romualdez and Marcos clans while constantly criticizing Mar Roxas and other Liberal Party personalities.

Local News Pages	Date created	Likes	Followers
Bantay Manila	March 28, 2019	5,647	5,667
No to Manila Bay Reclamation	March 28, 2019	2,785	2,798
Pagmata na Leyte	November 18, 2018	13,547	13,652
Tacloban City Updates	November 14, 2013	11,106	11,091
Tacloban Bahala Kayo sa Buhay Niyo	February 12, 2018	1,910	2,064



# About the Digital Disinformation Tracker Project

The Digital Disinformation Tracker is conceived and implemented by Jonathan Corpus Ong (University of Massachusetts), Ross Tapsell (Australian National University) and Nicole Curato (University of Canberra).

The Digital Disinformation Tracker Team who contributed research for this report include: Rossine Fallorina (University of the Philippines Diliman), Samuel Cabbuag (University of the Philippines Diliman), Jose Mari Lanuza (University of the Philippines Manila), Pamela Combinido (University of Cambridge), Robbin Dagle (Ateneo de Manila University), Bianca Ysabelle Franco (Ateneo de Manila University), Septrin John Calamba (Mindanao State University-Iligan Institute of Technology), and Wayne Xu (University of Massachusetts). They are supported by student volunteers from UP Diliman and UP Manila.

The aims of the project are threefold:

1. To identify social media campaign trends in the 2019 Philippine elections
2. To catalogue digital disinformation technological innovations and narratives; and
3. To evaluate emerging regulatory interventions in the fight against ‘fake news’ in the context of elections.

The research team employed mixed methods of (1) qualitative online observation, (2) big data analysis, and (3) fieldwork and interviews with digital campaign strategists based in Manila, Cebu, and Iligan. Since January 2019, a team of academics and student volunteers tracked political posts, conversations, memes, and videos on social media from both ordinary people and politicians, with a particular focus on the senatorial races. We kept weekly diaries that chronicled the activity and tone of political propaganda, coordinative behaviours of suspicious accounts, such as flaming, seeding memes and narratives, or artificially trending hashtags. Our big data analysis consisted of collecting tweets from the official accounts of top 24 senators in the polls and visualizing them in real time to track virality, keywords, and network associations.

Some of our fieldwork and interviews conducted between May to June 2019 are built on long-term rapport with digital campaign strategists, conducted in the aftermath of the 2016 Philippine elections as reported in the study *Architects of Networked Disinformation*. This allowed us to track how digital campaign techniques in 2016 have evolved, as many of the pages, groups, and influencer accounts we had previously observed remained active. We also met new digital strategists in both Manila and Cebu who worked with different fake account operators and experimented with different disinformation techniques, enabling us to further understand the dynamics of digital campaigning for local electoral contests, and how this might differ from campaigns at the national level.

Consistent with ethics protocols for risky ethnographic research, we dis-identify information that might reveal the identities of digital strategists in this report. The overall aim of our project is not to name and shame any individual campaigner, social media influencer, or digital worker employed in a politician’s click army. Rather, our objective is to critique the broader industry practices and regulatory loopholes that have brought about the expansion of the political trolling industry, while industry leaders and the politicians who employ them continue to hide in plain sight.

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