

BEYOND DISINFORMATION

Much has been said about the marriage of disinformation and political agendas. Beyond fake news, however, disinformation operators have another, perhaps more ominous strategic intent: to create an environment of social tension within which “populist” authoritarians can thrive. We take a deep dive into the Philippine context, looking at the vitriolic spiral that set the stage for the rise—and continued popularity—of President Rodrigo Roa Duterte, the calcification of this culture that has pushed an already beleaguered political opposition’s back against the wall, and the possibility of a way forward through a renewed focus on commonalities and mindfulness with regards to political language and tone.

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Ask a hundred voting age Filipinos whether they are satisfied with the performance of President Rodrigo Roa Duterte and, if the latest surveys hold true, 85 of them will say yes.¹ More than three years into the President's term of six, and despite a long menu of issues and allegations hounding his administration ranging from misogyny,² to incompetence, to corruption,³ and to "selling (the country) out,"⁴ his ratings have remained stratospherically high—among the highest since polls began operating in the country.

He has harnessed this popular support to drive an agenda that, detractors say, makes little sense from a nation-building perspective: waging a murderous "drug war"⁵; allowing plunderers,⁶ rapists,⁷ and drug lords⁸ out of jail; signing laws that have raised the prices of basic commodities⁹ and choked the lifeblood out of integral sectors such as agriculture.¹⁰

Over the same stretch, he has pressed his administration's heel on the throat of a weakened opposition. Leila de Lima, an incumbent senator who is also both a globally renowned human rights advocate¹¹ and historical nemesis¹² of the president, has been accused of being involved in drug trafficking. She has languished in jail for two and a half years on the strength of testimonies by convicted drug lords, and despite the fact that not a single gram of illegal substances has been produced as evidence against her. Vice President Leni Robredo—who leads a Liberal Party that

¹ "8 Out of 10 Pinoys Approve of, Trust Duterte: Pulse Asia," *ABS-CBN*, 17 July 2019, <https://news.abs-cbn.com/news/07/17/19/8-out-of-10-pinoys-approve-trust-duterte-pulse-asia>

² Pia Ranada, "Not Just a Joke: The Social Cost of Duterte's Rape Remarks," *Rappler*, 16 September 2019, <https://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/in-depth/211438-duterte-rape-remarks-social-cost-not-just-jokes>.

³ Antonio Montalvan II, "The Corrupt Rodrigo Duterte," *Inquirer Opinion*, 17 December 2018, <https://opinion.inquirer.net/123409/the-corrupt-rodrigo-duterte>

⁴ Andreo Calonzo, "Duterte Seen as 'Selling out' to China, Says Deputy," *Al Jazeera*, 13 August 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/ajimpact/duterte-selling-china-deputy-190813103344609.html>

⁵ Sheila Coronel and Mariel Padilla, "The Uncounted Dead of Duterte's Drug War," *The Atlantic*, 19 August 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2019/08/philippines-dead-rodrigo-duterte-drug-war/595978/>

⁶ "Bong Revilla Walks Free after Plunder Acquittal," *ABS-CBN*, 9 December 2018, <https://news.abs-cbn.com/news/12/07/18/bong-revilla-walks-free-after-plunder-acquittal>

⁷ "Gordon: BuCor Officials 'Connived' to Allow Rapist-Killer Sanchez's Early Release," *ABS-CBN*, 31 August 2019, <https://news.abs-cbn.com/news/08/31/19/gordon-bucor-officials-connived-to-allow-rapist-killer-sanchezs-early-release>

⁸ "Kerwin Espinosa, Peter Lim, 20 Others Cleared of Drug Charges," *ABS-CBN*, 12 March 2018, <https://news.abs-cbn.com/news/03/12/18/kerwin-espinosa-peter-lim-20-others-cleared-of-drug-charges>

⁹ Pia Ranada, "Duterte Signs 1st Tax Reform Package into Law," *Rappler*, 12 March 2018, <https://www.rappler.com/nation/191729-rodrigo-duterte-signs-tax-reform-law>

¹⁰ Dharel Placido, "Pangilinan: Farmers Worse off after Signing of Rice Tariffication Law," *ABS-CBN*, 13 August 2019, <https://news.abs-cbn.com/business/08/13/19/pangilinan-farmers-worse-off-after-signing-of-rice-tariffication-law>

¹¹ Cathrine Gonzales, "De Lima 2nd Filipino to Receive 'Prize for Freedom' Award after Cory Aquino," *Inquirer*, 26 July 2018, <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1014640/de-lima-2nd-filipino-to-receive-prize-for-freedom-award-after-cory-aquino>

¹² "Duterte vs De Lima: A Battle over Death, Drugs, Reputation," *ABS-CBN*, 24 February 2017, <https://news.abs-cbn.com/news/02/24/17/duterte-vs-de-lima-a-battle-over-death-drugs-reputation>

stands in opposition to President Duterte—has, along with dozens of other critics, been slapped with sedition charges.¹³ Despite, or due to, all this, of the eight opposition senatorial candidates who ran in the midterm elections last May, not one won a seat—not even Mar Roxas, who topped the 2004 senatorial race and placed second to Duterte in the 2016 presidential elections; and not even Bam Aquino, a reelectionist senator who shares a surname with two previous presidents (he is nephew-in-law to democracy icon Corazon Aquino, and cousin to Benigno S. Aquino III, who immediately preceded Duterte). Both Roxas and Aquino, in more normal times and based on pedigree and the strength of their track records, should have easily won two of the twelve seats up for grabs.

“Over the same stretch, [Duterte] has pressed his administration’s heel on the throat of a weakened opposition.”

The times, however, are far from normal. Over the next few thousand words, we will try to look at the phenomenon of President Duterte’s popularity: how perceptions were (and continue to be) managed, and why no allegation, however well-founded, seems able to erode the public’s affection for their president.

Online Media and Political Discourse

Approaching the topic in today’s communications milieu will, of course, require some reflection on social media and its role not only in President Duterte’s rise to popularity, but in shaping public discourse in the country. Years before the former mayor even displayed any public indication of running for the presidency, some shifts in the way messages were being deployed were already noticeable. The 2010 elections opened up social media as a new front in Philippine campaign warfare, but even after President Benigno S. Aquino III (or PNoy, as he preferred to be called, taking from his folksy nickname “Noynoy”) had been sworn into office, social media continued to be a prominent platform for issues to be discussed in the public sphere. No longer did political analysis remain the sole domain of the usual pundits and media persons; anyone with an internet connection acquired the power to broadcast their thoughts and sentiments.

The prominence of online media in the Philippines has also brought to the fore another observation: the speed with which frustrations are articulated and can

¹³ “Robredo, 35 Others Summoned over Sedition Case,” *The Philippine Star*, 26 July 2019, <https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2019/07/26/1938073/robredo-35-others-summoned-over-sedition-case>

coagulate far outpaces the capacity of existing systems to address them. Publics in developing countries log in to Pinterest and pin pegs for their future apartments; they read listicles on Buzzfeed and ask why they can't afford them. They read about advanced public transport and about how digitized or automated everything is in the first world and compare it with their own. In a country such as the Philippines, where decades of mismanagement entrenched the dysfunction, efforts towards reform, however massive, are measured only by their tangible results, which can never keep up and are decried as incremental. Social media has made it evident: an incrementalist viewpoint, in communications at least, will not do. A government that wishes to remain relevant must always exhibit a sense of urgency.

Beyond this, however—beyond the democratization of how public opinion was shaped, beyond the access to information that fueled anti-establishment sentiment—one might have also noticed some undercurrents in social media long before the 2016 campaign season started. Especially on Facebook, user accounts of dubious authenticity began to proliferate, acquiring intensity and volume through hyperactivity in comments sections. Political posts began to colonize groups and pages inhabiting the lifestyle space—fan pages of popular musicians and bands, hobbyist communities such as those about martial arts, and humor pages, for example. The Aquino legacy—unblemished by corruption and long established by the martyrdom of Benigno, Jr. and the bloodless revolution led by his wife Corazon that toppled the Marcos dictatorship—came under heavy attack by blogs and online personalities, which portrayed the family as elitist, oligarchic, and feudal in its mentality. These same spaces would peddle new narratives that challenged the national memory on Marcos, pillory the incumbent Aquino and his administration allies, or, in general, affirm what seemed to be a prevailing sentiment of disillusionment with establishment institutions, all with little concern for facts.

Studies have already been conducted on the phenomenon, with perhaps the most important being Jonathan Ong and Jason Cabañes' "Architects of Networked Disinformation: Behind the Scenes of Troll Accounts and Fake News Production in the Philippines".¹⁴ In it, they revealed an entire industry of political operators, handlers, and content generators, and how "laptop screens across the world are used to manipulate public debate, hijack mainstream media agenda, and influence political outcomes." Whether such structures were already well-established during the middle years of the PNoy administration remains to be studied. In any case, that administration perhaps remained too grounded on the traditional ways of media, or, one might claim, too focused on traditional governance communications and issues management, to pay much heed to

¹⁴ Jonathan Ong and Jason Cabañes, "Architects of Networked Disinformation: Behind the Scenes of Troll Accounts and Fake News Production in the Philippines," *Newton Tech4Dev Network*, 9 February 2018, <https://newtontechfordev.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/ARCHITECTS-OF-NETWORKED-DISINFORMATION-FULL-REPORT.pdf>

the signs of the online onslaught that was to come.

Much has already been said about the marriage of disinformation and certain political agendas in the Philippines. One might try to divine the strategic intent of the entire fake news apparatus: to spread lies that erode the trust and credibility of personalities that operators consider opposed to their agenda. Beyond this, however, looking at the tonality and the manner in which lies were spread, one will also notice another, perhaps more ominous intent: to polarize the public, to draw lines based on affiliation in the political sand, to make enemies out of countrymen, and to blind the public to the commonalities that bind them as citizens.

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Authoritarians Thrive on Social Tension

What has become increasingly evident is that disinformation is not only being spread but distributed in a manner that is frustrating and vitriolic, designed to elicit equally vitriolic responses from the frustrated. Trolls normalize aggressive language, with real-life supporters relishing in this newfound normalization. Threats of rape and violence and phrases that people would very seldom use in their day-to-day lives, for example, become part of the online lexicon. Ring leaders—those who have come out in the public eye and have huge followings—disguise their disinformation as mere insinuation, claiming deniability for the lies that they post by ending with questions (What do you think, friend? Do you believe this?).¹⁵ The subjects of attacks and their followers grit their teeth and respond angrily, the followers of the attackers feel belittled for believing the stories, and the feeling of tribal belongingness becomes entrenched on either side. It would seem, at this point, that the only people willing to listen to one’s views are those whose political loyalties were aligned with theirs in the first place.

A spiral of hate and dismissiveness is created. Openness, a search for the common ground, and logic go out the window; the discursive process evolves so that it puts

¹⁵ For just one example of this rhetorical instrument: “Mocha Blogger,” *Facebook*, 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/Mochablogger/posts/ano-sa-tingin-ninyo-mga-kadds-ginagamit-lang-ba-nito-ang-pangalan-ni-tatay/10156511726406522/>

primacy not on what is being said, but on who is saying it: have they said anything before that hurt me? Which side are they on? Every argument then becomes little more than a scaffold to prop up the initial impulse: if they are on the other side, then nothing they say can convince me. This is the trap laid by the originators of disinformation, and anyone with a social media account will attest to how difficult it is to avoid.

There is little doubt that Duterte was the primary beneficiary of this polarizing environment. There is evidence that his 2016 campaign took on such a character not as a byproduct of his personality and the instincts it awoke in his supporters, but by design: notorious data mining and strategy company Cambridge Analytica's Alexander Nix dined with Duterte's communications advisers in 2015,¹⁶ and CA whistleblower Christopher Wylie has gone on record to say that the Philippines became the company's "petri dish." Summarizing his thoughts, the preamble to his interview cited "questionable rule of law, high social media usage, and corrupt politicians" as among the conditions that "made countries like the Philippines a perfect place to test (CA's) techniques and technology."¹⁷

It would not be a stretch to say that, even while in power, the Duterte administration continues to refer to their campaign playbook. At least a handful of his most prominent campaign bloggers landed prime positions either as consultants¹⁸ or officials¹⁹ of government. It is telling that, as one of the country's many tropical storms raged, a former blogger that was appointed Assistant Secretary for Communications chose this moment to attack²⁰ the oppositionist Vice President Robredo—when the former blogger could just as easily have used her platform to call for those in hazard zones to evacuate to safer ground, or to implore the public to exercise communal responsibility and donate to those affected by the disaster. Old habits, it appears, die hard—especially if they still serve a function.

And what is that function? The vitriol, dismissiveness, and polarization, once calcified, create a public debate environment that pushes the merits of a policy

¹⁶ Raissa Robles, "Cambridge Analytica Boss Dined with Duterte Campaign Staff in 2015," *South China Morning Post*, 12 April 2018, <https://www.scmp.com/news/asia/southeast-asia/article/2140782/cambridge-analytica-boss-alexander-nix-dined-two-rodrigo>

¹⁷ Paige Oceaño, "Exclusive: PH Was Cambridge Analytica's 'Petri Dish' – Whistle-Blower Christopher Wylie," *Rappler*, 11 September 2019, <https://www.rappler.com/technology/social-media/239606-cambridge-analytica-philippines-online-propaganda-christopher-wylie>

¹⁸ Patero Esmaquel II, "Thinking Pinoy Didn't Tell Senate He Won Consultancy at BCDA," *Rappler*, 13 October 2017, <https://www.rappler.com/nation/184375-thinking-pinoy-rj-nieto-consultancy-bcda-senate-hearing-fake-news>

¹⁹ Rappler Research Team, "EXCLUSIVE: Russian Disinformation System Influences PH Social Media," *Rappler*, 1 February 2019, <https://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/investigative/221470-russian-disinformation-system-influences-philippine-social-media>

²⁰ VJ Bacungan, "Mocha Uson: 'Call Us, Vice President Leni,'" *CNN*, 31 December 2016, <http://nine.cnnphilippines.com/news/2016/12/30/Mocha-Uson-Call-us-Vice-President-Leni.html>

position to the side. Policies and decisions that could never stand up to the scrutiny of authentic political debate acquire public support based solely on who said it. Whatever the argument, for example, against the proliferation of drugs and the need to curb it in the interest of public safety, it is difficult to believe that a state policy of summary murder—euphemistically called “collateral damage”²¹ against the lives of innocents—would have garnered too much support under a more level-headed political environment. The way that government spokespersons dismiss criticism of their actions has, too, acquired a certain brazenness.²² As one prominent communicator privately said: “Authoritarians thrive on social tension.”

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What we have, then, is not populism in the sense of a leadership that believes in the wisdom of the populace. What we have is a national leadership that has learned to manipulate and harness the baser emotions of that populace to propel its non-populist²³ agenda forward.

Commonalities, Mindfulness, and Empathy

What can be done amidst such entrenched political polarities? Evidently, having the “courage to constantly draw the line,” as Vice Presidential Spokesperson Barry Gutierrez once said, might be enough to inspire those on one side to remain steadfast, but has done little to diffuse the polarization. As an aforementioned “petri dish” for the strategy, it is not easy to find best practices elsewhere in the world. At least one analogous example, however, can be seen in the Turkish opposition’s “radical love” paradigm, which enjoyed some recent, reasonable success in the country’s last

²¹ Oliver Holmes, “Duterte Says Children Killed in Philippines Drug War Are ‘Collateral Damage’,” *The Guardian*, 17 October 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/oct/17/duterte-says-children-killed-in-philippines-drug-war-are-collateral-damage>

²² Azer Parrocha, “Panelo Won’t Resign over Sanchez Issue,” *Philippine News Agency*, 28 August 2019, <https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1078971>

²³ Mayvelin U. Caraballo, “PH Income Inequality Rising – ADB Report,” *The Manila Times*, 30 March 2017, <https://www.manilatimes.net/2017/03/30/business/ph-income-inequality-rising-adb-report/319981/>; “#AngMahalNa: Additional Fees, Price Increases Burden Filipinos,” *Rappler*, 20 July 2018, <https://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/iq/207553-additional-fees-price-increases-burden-filipinos>; Jodesz Gavilan, “PH Drug War Killings Reach ‘Threshold of Crimes against Humanity’ – Report,” *Rappler*, 20 July 2018, <https://www.rappler.com/nation/234852-drug-war-killings-philippines-threshold-crimes-against-humanity-amnesty-international-report>

elections.²⁴ To paraphrase and distill its most powerful imperatives, the paradigm involves finding commonalities that go beyond political affiliation, speaking in a language that is inclusionary and down-to-earth, and exhibiting respect and empathy even for those who follow or support the leader one believes to be despotic.²⁵

Even without an administration intent on annihilating those who stand opposed to it, one can imagine how long it might take to erode the polarities that have calcified. A quick scan of one's Facebook feed will yield similar venom, the same angry, belittling tone, the same shrill linguistic habits across the political spectrum and across a variety of issues. Again, old habits die hard, and an opposition that has had to fight not only for its life but for the continued relevance of values that, until recently, seemed universal—such as freedom and human rights—can hardly be faulted for exhibiting anger and frustration. It is also worth noting that the body politic that elected President Duterte and continues to hold him in high esteem is the same body politic that elected both Aquino's. Commonalities can be manipulated by despots in the same way that these can be harnessed by those who believe they are doing good. As much as responding to hate with hate is a trap, so is approaching the situation using the same default good versus evil metanarrative. If indeed this “radical love” holds the key, can the Philippine opposition internalize such complexities, revise this culture, and do it fast enough to mount a challenge to the administration candidate in the 2022 presidential elections?

This remains to be seen. Ask a hundred voting age Filipinos, however, whether they are optimistic that their quality of life will improve in the future and, if the latest surveys hold true, 46 of them will say yes.²⁶ What they are actually optimistic about, perhaps, might differ from one person to another. But it is secondary to that which binds those hundred people in common. They are all Filipinos.

²⁴ Carlotta Gall, “How a Message of Unity and Mistakes by Erdogan Tipped the Istanbul Election,” *The New York Times*, 26 June 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/26/world/europe/istanbul-mayor-imamoglu-erdogan.html>

²⁵ “Book of Radical Love,” *Republican People's Party*, 11 April 2019, <http://dijitalmecmua.chp.org.tr/CHPRadikal%20SevgiKitabiEng.pdf>

²⁶ “36 Pct of Filipinos Say Their Lives Improved, Optimism on Quality of Life, Economy Lower but Still ‘Excellent’: SWS,” *ABS-CBN*, 25 July 2019, <https://news.abs-cbn.com/business/07/25/19/36-pct-of-filipinos-say-their-lives-improved-optimism-on-quality-of-life-economy-lower-but-still-excellent-sws>