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# **Philippine Elections 2022: The Dictator’s Son and the Discourse around Disinformation**

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Social media was central to Ferdinand “Bongbong” Marcos Jr.’s electoral success, but not in the sense that his campaign had somehow unlocked their hidden features for technological brainwashing. Unfortunately, some pundits looking for quick rationalizations for his landslide victory in the May 2022 polls repeated much of the same explanatory devices from 2016. Many pundits had then attributed the wave of “surprise” populist victories of Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines, Brexit in the United Kingdom and Donald Trump in the United States to what were hyped to be election-determining factors of social media-fuelled disinformation, troll and bot armies, and Russian influence operations.

Critical scholars have since advanced more holistic analyses in recent years, including the powerful critique from Global South researchers that emphasized the diverse interlocking factors that shape contemporary digital political culture. Many have pointed out that the warlike operations of political fandoms and attention-hacking techniques of media manipulators have flourished due to the longer histories of charismatic leadership and patronage politics, inter-elite competition and factionalism, and the entrepreneurialism of partisan media outfits.<sup>1</sup> As such, it was disheartening that the key questions raised in liberal spaces about Marcos Jr.’s presidential

win reverted back to the reductive discourses of 2016, asking questions such as “Are opinion polls even trustworthy?”<sup>2</sup> and “Did Filipinos vote with free will, or were they insidiously manipulated on social media?”<sup>3</sup>

Discourses about social media disinformation exerting outsized influence and causing a “behaviour modification” in voters are not only reductive; they are also downright dangerous. Insofar as such discourses blame the less-educated, the poor and the younger generation for their gullibility as audiences of disinformation and for their responsibility as the primary producers of disinformation, such expressions have only exacerbated the social divisions that populist leaders have stoked to their advantage. Worse, when progressive politicians, social movement organizers, journalists and academics scapegoat “online trolls” as the newest version of the historically problematic “dumb voter” (“*bobotante*”) trope,<sup>4</sup> they affirm the populist publics’ perception of the progressive movement as elitist, hypocritical and detached from everyday realities. When finger-pointing is too focused on external or technological villains, we might miss asking the much tougher questions of how to penalize the local creative economies churning out attack memes for profit, or how progressives might develop more satisfying narratives that directly speak to the populist publics’ grievances.

If progressives want to truly address the deeper structural issues relating to social media-fuelled disinformation *and* rebuild the movement for a future beyond the second Marcos presidency, then we need to get the discourse about disinformation right this time around. If we continue to perceive that the problem with social media is in how it serves as the tools of top-down mind control of the “*bobotante*”, and thus channel our energies to hunting down the stereotypical lower-income-class Marcos or Duterte troll, then we risk advancing solutions that do more harm than good and alienate the communities historically excluded from social reform. If we mischaracterize the disinformation crisis, then we risk letting off the political and economic elites who are the chief disinformation architects commissioning, designing and profiting from these toxic campaigns.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, liberal politicians’ own legal proposals that claim to address “fake news” have fixated on unmasking anonymous accounts rather than going after the ambitious masterminds behind these networks.<sup>6</sup>

Moving forward, what we need are strategic policy advocacies, sincere efforts at grassroots listening and persuasive narratives addressing communities’ fears and anxieties. Clearly, based on

our investments in the Philippines’ disinformation mitigation space in the past six years, the liberal weapons of fact-checking and historical accuracy are insufficient when engaging with the interconnected problem of a corrupt information ecosystem and the publics’ willing (rather than “brainwashed”) embrace of authoritarian fantasies. Platform accountability advocacies that spotlight Facebook—and recently, TikTok—for “ruining democracy” are just not enough. While such efforts connect the country’s issues with broader global coalitions lobbying for platform accountability, these need to be complemented with local accountability initiatives that curb proudly Pinoy disinformation-for-hire operations.

The Philippines’ pro-democracy movement needs to take stock of what has worked and what has not in the disinformation mitigation space. I argue that we need to move towards creating more dynamic spaces for experimental collaboration for listening projects, critical digital literacy programmes and narrative-building alongside journalistic fact-checking and academic research. We should also hold space for community healing and worker well-being for those bravely—and precariously—on the frontlines of fighting disinformation. This requires a truly inclusive “whole-of-society” approach,<sup>7</sup> where people work together rather than in parallel or in competition with each other.<sup>8</sup>

### **Marcos’ Media Strategy**

Marcos’ presidential victory was not inevitable. The expedient power-brokering between the elite families of Marcos and Duterte, facilitated by former President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, focused on these families’ powerful yet volatile political machineries, consolidated their various regional voting blocs and aligned themselves to the insidious populist message that they were against the “liberal elite” class.<sup>9</sup>

For this election cycle, Marcos’ two-tiered campaign on mainstream and social media was strategic, but not particularly exceptional. On mainstream media, Marcos played it painfully safe by refusing to answer tough questions from journalists, avoiding direct confrontations in live television debates and reverting to hollow slogans of national unity and positivity. In contrast to Duterte, whose unpredictable and uncouth expressions were covered as “media events” and dominated national—even global—conversations during the 2016 campaign, Marcos limited journalists’ access to those likely to portray him in a positive light. His favoured partisan media

outfits—composed of a new television channel along with older print publications and online news sites—had gradually acquired mainstream legitimacy under the Duterte administration yet lacked regulatory oversight for their own “fake news”, in the same way that social media influencers have none.<sup>10</sup>

On social media, Marcos’ campaign was more creative and confrontational. Here, he finally reaped the rewards from his long-term project of rebranding the family from being perpetrators of corrupt dictatorship to glamorous and misunderstood public figures. This rebranding predated social media, and their comeback trail was paved slowly through re-glamourizations granted by lifestyle magazines, fashion brand endorsements and arts and culture events.

Therefore, the function of social media in their rebranding should not be understood in a kind of determinist or originating capacity, but in their unique capacity to enable fervent fan participation in Marcos family mythmaking, folklore and disinformation campaigning. Marcos-commissioned professional videos and glossy magazine photos, archived on social media, were the ingredients for later amateur fan and influencer TikTok collages, YouTube reaction videos, conspiracy theory deep dives and meme war ammunition for the aggressive social media campaign complementing the bland mainstream media campaign.

Following this two-tier strategy, Bongbong and his sister Senator Imee Marcos’ official YouTube channels adopted influencer vernaculars of relatability and authenticity to craft contrasting and complementary personas: the former a generically bland family man, and the latter snarkier, unpredictable and fiercely charismatic. While Bongbong refused to attack directly, Imee Marcos’ official YouTube channel deployed her real-talk auntie persona fluent in gay humour (“*maldita*”) to satirize her brother’s presidential rival head-on.<sup>11</sup> Imee’s satirical representation of Vice President Leni Robredo as the elitist yet bumbling “Len-Len” in a series of skits evaded dominant disinformation interventions of fact-checking and platform takedowns; these also set the talking points<sup>12</sup> for her fans to spin off for their own tweets and TikTok videos.

Many historians, journalists and artist-activists have rightfully focused their efforts on correcting the historical distortions peddled by the Marcos family, that Ferdinand Marcos Sr.’s dictatorship was the golden age of Philippine society instead of a dark period of human rights

abuse and government corruption. While the corrections are important, these could have been complemented with the development of counter-narratives.

It is important that we understand “Marcos historical revisionism” not simply in terms of the perpetration of falsehoods; this is also a communicative performance that they are misunderstood victims in Filipino history. Framed in this way, the Marcos family story could thus relate with anyone’s social and economic experiences of victimhood. Behind the varied revisionist expressions of martial law is a consistent “deep story”,<sup>13</sup> in which the Marcos family are supposedly the real victims of “elite” establishment politicians, academics, journalists and even the activists who were tortured during the dictatorship. This false victimhood performance is an artfully compelling story that appeals to the anxious, the young and the disenfranchised. Thus, the dominant disinformation intervention of the fact-check runs into an obstacle: fact-checking can only correct individual claims of falsehoods,<sup>14</sup> but could not respond to the melodramatic “deep story” that an all-powerful coalition of “liberal elites” has victimized the family which once brought honour and glory to a beleaguered nation.<sup>15</sup>

### **Preventing Activist Burnout through Compassionate Coalitions**

It is important that progressive coalitions continue to invest in more thoughtful efforts at disinformation mitigation, counter-narrative development and digital literacy. Beyond the usual lobbying for platform takedowns and name-and-shame campaigns against bloggers, progressive groups should anticipate how our information ecosystem will become further stratified between those supportive of Marcos and those who are not.

The Philippines is likely to follow countries such as India and Thailand with wildly polarized information environments, where television channels, social media influencers, and also academic institutions, thinktanks, polling agencies, political pundits, and all corners of knowledge production, affirm the identities and belief systems of their political camp of choice.<sup>16</sup> To counter this, what liberals need is more public education about the processes and methods of knowledge production. We cannot take for granted that publics should trust traditional liberal institutions, but actively make a case about the values that inform our hard work.

Though Marcos Jr. is unlikely to enforce the direct censorship of mainstream and social media, legal intimidation and online harassment will doubtless be used to silence criticism. Marcos

Jr. himself could villainize social media platforms for being “biased” in their financial support for local journalists and fact-checkers that he would label as unpatriotic “fake news” generators—in a rhetoric similar to that of Trump and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

In this context, academic writing, political criticism and progressive coalition-building will be hugely challenging. An existential crisis for liberal democratic institutions will trigger feelings of defensiveness, defeat and burnout among its frontline workers. As interviews with communications workers in Filipino human rights organizations by my colleagues and myself have revealed, it is common for the passion and creativity of activists to fizzle out due to a lack of financial and mental health resources, as well as infighting within a sector where organizations must compete to survive.<sup>17</sup> In this light, we also need gentleness and grace in extending compassion to communities we serve, the colleagues we work with and to our own selves.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See Paula Chakravartty and Srirupa Roy, “Mediatized Populisms: Inter-Asian Lineages”, *International Journal of Communication* 11 (2017): 4073–92; Jose Mari Hall Lanuza and Cleve V. Arguelles, “Media System Incentives for Disinformation: Exploring the Relationships between Institutional Design and Disinformation Vulnerability”, in *Disinformation in the Global South*, edited by Herman Wasserman and Dani Madrid-Morales (Hoboken, New Jersey: Wiley-Blackwell, 2022); David Nemer, “The Human Infrastructure of Fake News in Brazil”, Social Science Research Council, 6 July 2021, <https://items.ssrc.org/extremism-online/the-human-infrastructure-of-fake-news-in-brazil/>; Sahana Udupa, “Nationalism in the Digital Age: Fun as a Metappractice of Extreme Speech”, *International Journal of Communication* 13 (2019): 3143–63.

<sup>2</sup> Questions about the validity of opinion polls and the electoral process were controversial points of debate throughout the election season. Both Marcos supporters and liberals had their own versions of conspiracies about electoral fraud. Some analysts supportive of Vice President Leni Robredo also criticized the supposed “flawed methodology” and “bias” of reputable polling agency Pulse Asia, and advanced rival datasets based on sentiment analysis and Google Trends predicting a much closer race between Marcos and Robredo. Although Pulse Asia Director Ronald Holmes had to publicly defend his organization against smear attacks dubbing it “False Asia”, the final election results vindicated Pulse Asia’s methods. See, for example, “On the Campaign Trail with John Nery: Social Data Versus Surveys”, *Rappler*, 4 May 2022, <https://www.rappler.com/nation/elections/on-the-campaign-trail-john-ner-y-social-data-versus-surveys/>; and Krixia Subingbing, “Surveys Under Scrutiny; Pulse Asia Stands By Method”, *Inquirer.net*, 5 May 2022, <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1592530/surveys-under-scrutiny-pulse-asia-stands-by-method>.

<sup>3</sup> The liberal assumption that some voters are brainwashed, while not new, continued to be amplified, though expressed with new variations. See, for example, “Maria Ressa Discusses Role

of Disinformation in Philippine Elections”, *Rappler*, 10 May 2022, <https://twitter.com/rapplerdotcom/status/1523885779784663040>.

<sup>4</sup> See Cleve V. Arguelles, “We Are Rodrigo Duterte: Dimensions of the Philippine Populist Publics’ Vote”, *Asian Politics & Policy* 11, no. 3 (2019): 417–37; Nicole Curato, “Politics of Anxiety, Politics of Hope: Penal Populism and Duterte’s Rise to Power”, *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, 35, no. 3 (2016): 91–109.

<sup>5</sup> Jonathan C. Ong and Jason V. Cabanes, *Architects of Networked Disinformation: Behind the Scenes of Troll Accounts and Fake News Production in the Philippines* (Newton Tech4Dev Network: 2018), [https://scholarworks.umass.edu/communication\\_faculty\\_pubs/74/](https://scholarworks.umass.edu/communication_faculty_pubs/74/).

<sup>6</sup> Jonathan C. Ong and Jason V. Cabanes, “When Disinformation Studies Meets Production Studies: Social Identities and Moral Justifications in the Political Trolling Industry”, *International Journal of Communication* 13 (2019): 5771–90.

<sup>7</sup> See Joan Donovan, Brian Friedberg, Gabrielle Lim, Nicole Leaver, Jennifer Nilsen, and Emily Dreyfuss, “Mitigating Medical Misinformation: A Whole of Society Approach to Countering Spam, Scams and Hoaxes”, Media Manipulation Casebook, Harvard Kennedy School Shorenstein Center, 24 March 2021, <https://mediamanipulation.org/research/mitigating-medical-misinformation-whole-society-approach-countering-spam-scams-and-hoaxes>.

<sup>8</sup> Jonathan C. Ong, “Building Comprehensive Approaches to Combating Disinformation in Illiberal Settings: Insights from the Philippines”, Global Insights, National Endowment for Democracy, December 2021, <https://www.ned.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Combating-Disinformation-in-Illiberal-Settings-Insights-from-the-Philippines-Jonathan-Corpus-Ong.pdf>.

<sup>9</sup> Julio Teehankee, “Why Eleksyon 2022 is ‘Political Multiverse of Madness’ According to Political Scientist”, *GMA News*, 6 May 2022, <https://www.gmanetwork.com/news/topstories/nation/830888/why-eleksyon-2022-is-political-multiverse-of-madness-according-to-political-scientist/story/>.

<sup>10</sup> Just as critical disinformation scholars in the United States have spotlighted the role of mainstream media such as Fox News in amplifying and legitimizing conspiracies and disinformation, the Philippines should reflect on what strategic policy interventions are needed to curtail propaganda coming from increasingly partisan broadcast and print outlets. See Daniel Kreiss, Joshua O. Barker and Shannon Zenner, “Trump Gave Them Hope: Studying the Strangers in Their Own Land”, *Political Communication* 34, no. 3 (2017): 470–78.

<sup>11</sup> Jauhn Etienne Villaruel, “Real Talk: The ‘Destabilizing’ Charisma of Imee Marcos”, ABS-CBN News, 30 June 2022, <https://news.abs-cbn.com/spotlight/06/30/22/the-destabilizing-charisma-of-imee-marcos>.

<sup>12</sup> Manila Standard Showbiz, “Imee Marcos Soars High on TikTok”, *Manila Standard*, 19 May 2022, <https://manilastandard.net/showbitz/314229554/imee-marcos-soars-high-on-tiktok.html>.

<sup>13</sup> See Arlie R. Hochschild, *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right* (London and New York: New Press, 2016).



<sup>14</sup> Critical disinformation scholars such as Joan Donovan, Alice Marwick and Whitney Philipps rightly warn that journalistic reports and fact-checks of disinformation influencers, in certain contexts, could inadvertently platform violent extremist positions and further popularize influencers with fringe beliefs. They caution journalists to practice “strategic silence”, especially in contexts where online groups see disinformation or crisis events as opportunities for recruitment and radicalization. See, for example, Miranda Katz, “How the Media Helped Legitimize Extremism”, *Wired*, 25 May 2018, <https://www.wired.com/story/study-media-and-extremism/>.

<sup>15</sup> For deliberative democracy, Nicole Curato, addressing the deep stories of populist publics, begins with listening projects. She proposes the deliberative forum methodology to begin this initiative. See Jonathan C. Ong and Nicole Curato, “Multistakeholder Dialogue on Electoral Disinformation”, (with Bianca Franco) *Internews*, December 2021, [https://internews.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Internews\\_Multistakeholder-Dialogue-Electoral-Disinformation\\_December\\_2021.pdf](https://internews.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Internews_Multistakeholder-Dialogue-Electoral-Disinformation_December_2021.pdf).

<sup>16</sup> Duncan McCargo, “Thailand’s Urbanized Villagers and Political Polarization”, *Critical Asian Studies* 49, no. 3 (2017): 365–78.

<sup>17</sup> Jonathan C. Ong, Jeremy Tintiangko and Rossine Fallorina, “Human Rights in Survival Mode: Rebuilding Trust and Supporting Digital Workers in the Philippines”, Media Manipulation Casebook, Harvard Kennedy School Shorenstein Center, 2021, <https://mediamanipulation.org/research/human-rights-survival-mode-rebuilding-trust-and-supporting-digital-workers-philippines>.