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From disinformation campaigns to influence operations: new campaign tactics and legacy media bypass in the Philippines

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From disinformation campaigns to influence operations: new campaign tactics and legacy media bypass in the Philippines

How has persistent disinformation affected political campaign strategies in the Philippines? Building on literature on political campaigns and marketing (Kreiss, 2018; McGregor, 2020; Penney, 2017; Rossini & Stromer-Galley, 2020; Rossini et al., 2021, Starbird, 2021; Wilson & Starbird, 2020), we discuss the operations and consequences of social media-driven political campaigns in national elections. We argue that longitudinal disinformation campaigns have created hyperpartisan information systems, where politicians' campaigns "preach to the choir" and avoid difficult questions from journalists and critics. Hyperpartisan information systems allow political camps to evade cross-examinations by veteran journalists on legacy media and sustain their ambiguous influence operations online. We show these by analyzing two aspects of the Marcos campaign in the 2022 Philippine presidential elections: their selective interview and debate choices with allied political influencers and partisan media outlets, and their movie and video satire collaborations with a famous online content creator and movie director. Taking off from our existing research on influence operations in the 2022 Philippine elections, we show that new strategies relying on political influencers have contributed to a splintered mainstream media and parallel public spheres. We argue that political campaigns have become increasingly difficult to hold accountable as a consequence of this shift. We outline the ways in which this presents an easily exploitable template for succeeding political campaigns in highly personalistic political systems.

Keywords: disinformation, influence operations, Philippine elections, political campaigns, political influencers, legacy media

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Introduction

When longitudinal disinformation and influence operations become the norm, intense disinformation and influence operations already shape parallel - yet uneven - public spheres. This is due to the complex and strategically networked efforts at political “world-building and storytelling” utilizing a “media-information-fantasy complex” (Ong et al., 2022, p. 8). This complex then enables illiberal actors to rely more on this complex, making legacy media bypass standard operating procedures for illiberal politicians. This does not mean that traditional media is now fully excluded from official political communication. Rather, politicians collaborate with new media actors and expose publics to hyperpartisan channels with controlled interactivity to disseminate polarizing discourse, while still allowing filtered positive messages to flow through traditional media. This potentially creates a galvanized public only partially informed, averse to more comprehensive coverages and truth claims made outside their information ecosystem.

Building on extensive scholarly work tackling the use of social media platforms in political campaigning (McGregor 2020; Kreiss and McGregor 2019; Kreiss 2018; Kreiss and McGregor 2017; Kreiss 2012), the emergence of more personalistic and entertainment-like political marketing campaigns (Penney 2022; Losh 2022; Stromer-Galley 2019; Penney 2017), and the utility of disinformation in political campaigns (Rossini & Stromer-Galley, 2020; Rossini et al., 2021, Starbird, 2021; Wilson & Starbird, 2020), we argue in this chapter that longitudinal disinformation campaigns in the Philippines have created conditions for hyperpartisan information ecosystems. Longitudinal disinformation campaigns end up prioritizing informal and partisan channels for crucial political communication while bypassing and consequently delegitimizing legacy media, thereby encouraging the emergence of hyperpartisan information ecosystems. We historicize mediated political campaigning in the Philippines to show how sustained disinformation online entrenches particular narratives that can be readily tapped in more controlled political communication channels that eschew journalistic standards and elude platform and government regulations.

The evolution of mediated political campaigns in the Philippines

Clientelism fostered a more personalistic political system in the Philippines. Together with a weak party system defined less by ideological differences and more by clan affiliations, this made traditional political campaigning more reliant on “guns, goons, and gold” targeting traditional voter mass bases determined by geographic location and personal relations (Teehankee, 2006). But the rise of mediated campaigning also saw a shift from traditional voter mass bases to market votes from a more segmented and targeted electorate. This required

importing media techniques from marketing to campaigning, and allowed a shift in propaganda focus from the politician to the voter as audience-consumer (Scammell 1995). Traditional command votes driven by violence and direct patronage became secondary to market votes driven by political marketing and political branding (Teehankee, 2006) both through television and short messaging services (SMS).

Television emphasized entertainment and, by extension, the celebrification of politics (Pertierra, 2012) had led to the increase in public personalities and celebrities-turned-politicians (David & Atun, 2015) and the increased use of celebrity promotions for political campaigns (Abinales & Amoroso, 2005). Due to the political and electoral system favoring personality politics over programmatic campaigns (Hutchcroft, 2019) the Philippines saw a parallel arrangement of campaign advertising in the form of purchased news coverage (Rood, 2002; Hofileña, 2004) to the point of overspending. Even elections as recent as 2010 netted PhP2 million a day, just on television ads alone (de los Reyes 2010). Simply put, television was a kingmaker. On the other hand, SMS was hailed as an anti-corruption tool that enabled voter mobilization and more inclusive campaigning. Known as the texting capital of the world (Yujuico, 2012; Uy-Tioco, 2013), the Philippines saw SMS-driven mass mobilizations such as EDSA Dos, or the second People Power Movement in 2001 that felled the Estrada administration (Rheingold, 2008). Mobile phones, email, Friendster, and text messaging were also crucial tools for electoral success, as in the case of GABRIELA Women's Party in the 2007 partylist elections (Karan et al., 2009) when they ranked fourth out of 93 partylists representing marginalized sectors.

New media and internet campaigning also transformed Philippine political campaigning as Internet usage increased. While not used as extensively then, electoral candidates already made use of more sophisticated websites compared to non-election stakeholders during the 2004 elections (Mirandilla 2007). However, these websites were confined to static online information hubs, underutilizing affordances for interactivity and networking (Teehankee 2010; Mirandilla-Santos 2009). In contrast, social media had played an increasingly dynamic role in Philippine political campaigning since the 2010 elections. Similar to the successful online Obama campaign in 2008, these social media campaigns were more aware of virality and interactivity. Despite not yet being central to campaigns, some politicians adopted social media campaigning practices early. For instance, among the 12 elected senators during the 2013 elections, seven had active Facebook pages before 2012, four started their Facebook pages in 2012, and one started in 2013 before the May elections.

The role of social media became more central in 2016, with focus shifting from the public to the politicians. Scholars agree that social media had a more decisive role in how election campaigns played out in 2016 (Sinpeng, Gueorguiev, and Arugay 2020; Tapsell 2020; Curato 2016; McCargo, 2016) not only because of higher social media usage among politicians and voters alike, but also because social media manipulation was used by politicians and political

parties during the campaign period (Alba 2018; Bradshaw & Howard, 2017). In their ethnographic study of workers behind digital campaigns, Ong & Cabañes (2018) found that there was a thriving disinformation-for-hire industry in the Philippines relying on a cabal of advertising and public relations executives - what Ong & Cabañes call disinformation architects - who in turn employ mega-influencers for promotional labor and community-level fake account operators for amplifying and signal-scrambling to help shape online discourse. These evolved to micro-targeted campaigns using micro- and nano-influencers during the 2019 midterm elections (Ong, Tapsell, and Curato 2019), creating more insidious ways to seed campaign messages. Relying on contrived authenticity and more organic relationships with followers in tight-knit communities as opposed to broadcasted disinformation from mega-influencers in the previous electoral cycle, these more discreet campaigns can only be uniquely maximized on social media.

Beyond the elections, disinformation was also continuously used for consolidation of political power and for shutting down critical voices similar to rightwing populist attacks in the US, Brazil, and Turkey. In the Philippines these operations were so lucrative (Silverman et al., 2020) that they functioned as an open secret and continued up to the 2019 midterm elections (Bradshaw & Howard, 2019; Mahtani & Cabato, 2019), with disinformation innovations (Ong, Tapsell, and Curato 2019) and new work models of disinformation operations (Ong & Cabañes, 2019) emerging from high demand. This allowed disinformation operations to fly under the radar and make it more difficult for platforms and regulators alike to determine both the reach and the sources of disinformation online.

Historicizing political campaigns in the Philippines allows us to see the evolution of campaign frameworks and their changing relation to media. The primacy of traditional media in political campaigning is gradually giving way to social media, just as networked disinformation is becoming more central to political campaigns. While disinformation operations find ways to increase reach and evade detection, legal frameworks and regulatory approaches lag behind (Silverman, 2019). Thus, while the problems brought by social media's increasingly central role in political campaigning are well-known, solutions have not been abundant, and disinformation has continued to play a role in the 2022 Philippine elections.

Disinformation in contemporary Philippine political campaigning

Political communication scholars generally agree that politicians “are campaigning all the time” (Lange 2004, p. 217). This is consistent with the idea of permanent campaigning (Joathan & Lilleker, 2020; Dommett et al., 2023), or the continuous enactment of campaign-like actions in non-electoral periods to establish a positive image for future electoral success. In recent years, we have observed permanent political campaigning reliant on disinformation online in the

Philippines. The case of former president Rodrigo Duterte's social media campaign adviser Nic Gabunada is instructive here. Gabunada had a network of 800 Facebook pages and groups for pro-Duterte political troll work (Tapsell, 2020). Gabunada's Twinmark Media Enterprises created 220 Facebook pages, seventy-three accounts, and twenty-nine Instagram accounts for "coordinated inauthentic behavior" (Gleicher, 2019), Meta's jargon for the networked use of multiple accounts to artificially boost content, manipulate online sentiments, or engage in actions that violate community standards. All were banned by Meta in 2019. These pages consistently amplified hyperpartisan and disinformational content, and the social media influencers at the forefront were rewarded with government appointments as Duterte's administration capitalized on a less accountable and more viral "social media army" (Tapsell, 2020, p. 6). The use of influencers in Philippine campaigning can be seen as precursors to practices in other countries like the United States, such as when Michael Bloomberg paid influencers to use memes to campaign for him (Donovan 2020) during the 2020 United States presidential election.

However, we observed that electoral losers also relied on it to gain some ground for the next campaign season. In 2016 Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos Jr. lost a controversial and tightly contested vice presidential race against the Liberal Party candidate Maria Leonor "Leni" Robredo. While the entire electoral protest proceedings only concluded in February 2021 - almost 5 years after the elections - as early as May 2016 Marcos' camp had already floated the idea of electoral fraud (Pasion, 2017) and being cheated out of the vice presidency through social media. This narrative was sustained across more established online platforms like Facebook and YouTube, as well as new and emergent platforms like TikTok (Lanuza et al., 2021). There was also abundant content aimed at whitewashing the Marcos family's role during Martial Law on TikTok (Cabato & Mahtani, 2022; Mendoza 2022). Marcos Jr. capitalized on these long-entrenched narratives (Ong et al. 2022) to win the presidency in 2022. Looking at the broader picture, what we see is a longitudinal exposure to disinformation which has enabled changes to both the media system and the conduct of political campaigning in contemporary Philippines.

Bypassing legacy media

Unlike mainstream Global North references to influence operations as foreign interference in online electoral conversations, we define influence operations as "strategic communications that aim to hack attention, mobilize audiences, and influence electoral outcomes" (Ong et al., 2022, p. 10). This broader frame of influence operations is enabled by chronic exposure to longitudinal disinformation. Much of the disinformation narratives mobilized in the 2022 Philippine elections have been either recycled narratives from at least 2016, or offshoots from those narratives. Considering the evolutions of mediated political campaigning content, influence operations tend to be more accommodating of campaign practices that do not necessarily outrightly deceive or disinform, but nonetheless exploit the same

regulatory and institutional weaknesses, social anxieties, and popularized disinformative frames from the past six years. This includes engaging in meme wars (Dreyfuss, Friedberg, and Donovan 2022), relying on thirst-trap influencers (Ong, Tapsell, and Curato 2019), and even creating historical distortionist movies. Particularly for the 2022 elections, this has also involved politicians themselves campaigning in influencer-like ways.

Since influence operations allow disinformation actors to evade regulation and continue manipulative activities online, politicians find some platforms more conducive to these kinds of political marketing while more traditional media outlets with unaligned logics fall out of favor. We argue that this has, in turn, led to what we call legacy media bypass. This bypass involves politicians performing an extension of strategic curation (Thorson & Wells, 2015) to not only use multiple social media platforms for strategic communication (Kreiss, 2012; Stromer-Galley, 2019; Jackson et al., 2020) but to actively exclude other traditional media platforms that offer less control on political messaging. Thus, whereas in previous election cycles media manipulation centered around misleading and potentially harmful content, media manipulation now pertains to the active selective treatment of media outlets, creating an information ecosystem less prone to editorial corrections and more conducive to sustained hyperpartisan influence operations. Bypassing legacy media becomes possible with new social media platforms, and becomes more attractive for politicians due to controlled interactivity and message filtering.

Legacy media in the Philippines has traditionally been characterized as free (Almario, 1972) and as public watchdogs (Lanuza & Arguelles, 2022), but longitudinal disinformation has made it so that politicians prefer to campaign in new partisan media networks and gain more audience shares at the expense of traditional networks, as online platforms serve to become more central information sources for voters. However, this conveniently decenters journalistic coverage - seen as the most important role of media during campaigns (Lange 2004) - in the political communication process.

We see this bypass as one of the natural extensions of entertainment journalism and its spillover into political campaigning. Penney's work on entertainment journalism as political communication (2022) provides a great synthesis of the academic conversation on this phenomenon, where the rise and use of digital audience metrics has reshaped the production of news to be attuned more towards market awareness than issue importance (Schudson, 1999; McChesney, 2013). Thus, the production of online political content has shifted to cater more to entertainment metrics. This frame fits well with the celebrified and personalistic mode of Philippine politics. There is an incentive to resort to controlled interactivity (Stromer-Galley, 2019). Since content is determined by attention now, politicians and their campaign teams are incentivized to create more attention-grabbing content and capitalize more on avenues where they have greater creative control over this content. This new dimension of controlled interactivity in Philippine politics further reduces the democratic nature of campaigning in the

age of social media since the promise of dialogue and public scrutiny are more aggressively replaced by targeted marketing and messaging. In the next section we explore the channels politicians rely on for controlled interactivity, and how they exploit longitudinal disinformation exposure to conduct gray-area influence operations.

Leveraging alternative platforms

Looking at Philippine campaign periods as a period of intentional excess (Aguilar, 2005), permanent campaigning means politicians have been treated brands since before the rise of social media. Due to social media affordances, this brand logic translates well to new online spaces . Certain aspects of informalization to communicate contrived authenticity and publicize the private, enable the performance of spontaneity (Manning et al., 2017), and even enact calibrated amateurism (Abidin, 2017) all translate to relatability and positive regard. While influencing comes from marketing and sales logics, extending this to the electoral context establishes popularity and relatability as an important, if not superior basis for gathering votes (Ong et al., 2019).

Viewed from this perspective, we explore how Marcos Jr. employs innovative influence operations and analyze these as drivers of three components of legacy media bypass: heightened controlled interactivity, unaccountable preferential media treatment, and the reliance on long-term influence operations. Marcos Jr.'s social media presence is an attempt at strategic communications that favor his preferred narratives, frames, and moments. Marcos Jr.'s social media presence on YouTube and TikTok, his primary channels of non-textual political communication, scaffold how his primary channels of campaign messages anchored on electoral fraud and whitewashing the Marcoses' legacy have shifted away from traditional media and into select social media outlets. His choices for political interviews and debates online and in select television channels demonstrate controlled interactivity not only with audiences, but more importantly with journalists and fact-checkers. Finally, the movie *Maid in Malacanang*, a fictional retelling the Marcoses' last days in power, demonstrates how film and popular culture extend influence operations hinged on longitudinal disinformation to mass media, with the help of online personalities and formerly fringe public figures. We briefly explore each below and outline how each contributes to legacy media bypass.

The first component of legacy media bypass is a more aggressive version of controlled interactivity. The use of personal social media accounts for political campaigning and direct public communication creates a particular brand of controlled interactivity that not only lets the politicians engage in targeted campaigning, but also allows them to ignore editorial checking. What is lost in this scheme of controlled interactivity is the ability of audiences to hear opposing views or to receive more balanced information intended to be more serious and informative than casual and entertaining. This can be seen in Marcos Jr.'s YouTube channel, which was started in

2009 and currently has 2.74 million subscribers. This account only began regularly posting content since January 2018. The bulk of his video uploads can be found under the playlist “The BBM Vlog,” with 239 videos as of the time of writing. These videos’ title format is similar to average vlogger videos. The brand of the videos is BBM VLOG, followed by the video number and a catchy title or the theme of the video. The brand is spelled in all capital letters - a tactic employed by vloggers to catch audience attention - and the titles are a mix of formal casual and informal language.

In one video, the title is simply “*Ang Init!!*” (lit. It’s so hot!!) and talks about the coming of El Nino in the Philippines this summer season. The video itself starts with Marcos Jr. exclaiming the title while laughing, with an overlay of flame graphics. There is also an intro card labeled PBBMVLOG (trans. President Bongbong Marcos) at the beginning. The video proceeds to talk about climate change and its various adverse effects to the Philippines, followed by his administration’s programs aimed at addressing them. The video itself is a mix of talking head shots, landscape collages, images related to energy and power, and an ending card overlaying his photo with the Philippine flag in the background. Some videos adopt influencer culture vernacular like top lists and quizzes, such as the one where he sits with his sons and answers “Who’s Most Likely” questions in line with popular video trends. There are also videos where he does challenges or gives seemingly-educational content on a diverse array of topics like the election system in the Philippines, interspersed with content that promote him and his family, such as answering personal questions about his father, former dictator Ferdinand Marcos. All of the videos range from one minute to less than twelve minutes, with the average video lasting around five to six minutes.

Indeed, the control afforded to Marcos Jr. ensures that only favorable information gets released, and audiences only need to tune into this channel and not others, losing out on journalistic standards in the process. The form is also more accessible and colloquial, which both simplifies content and erases nuance and context. These are held up by the subtext of free and accessible media – detractors can choose to stay away or talk about it in their own space, but supporters should have the option to access these contents. This hands-off view has allowed Marcos Jr. to not only continue to control the narrative, but also control the channels where his narrative is broadcasted.

The second component of legacy media bypass is unaccountable preferential media treatment. During the campaign period Marcos Jr. skipped most televised debates organized by media networks and the Association of Philippine Broadcasters. Citing various reasons such as media bias, the reduction of debates to petty fighting among candidates, repetitive questions about his family’s controversies, and the preference for interviews as opposed to debates (Mercado, 2022A; Mercado, 2022B), this ability to choose message outlets enabled the Marcos

camp to go where they can dictate the topics: online interviews with celebrities and influencers – not active and practicing journalists. The only presidential debates Marcos attended were two debates organized by the newly-established partisan network Sonshine Media Network International (SMNI), owned by Duterte ally and Marcos supporter Apollo Quiboloy. Whereas traditionally politicians would appear in more media outlets for more media visibility, social media and influence operations have instead flipped the script and made the politicians directly accessible to the people, on the politician's terms and conditions. Again what is lost is editorial checking, and in effect what is broadcasted is left unscrutinized by credible fact-checkers and researchers in real time. Under such circumstances politicians can recycle one-sided truth-claims and have it pass off as opinion or individual position instead of mis/disinformation. Since these claims are already long-present online and are now encountered in a more credible format, even mere allusions to it function the same way as the actual mis/disinformation itself.

The third component of legacy media bypass is the reliance on long-term influence work framed as exposing information suppressed by mainstream media. During and after the 2022 elections, these took the form of satire and fiction in video form. When influence operations crossed over from social media to mainstream media, it enabled more aggressive forms of influence operations to take place. One example is the Marcos-propaganda 2022 movie *Maid in Malacañang* directed by Darryl Yap, an online video creator famous for crass and humorous videos with exaggerated acting and profanity-laced screaming matches. While there were claims that the movie earned PhP 650 million globally (Santiago, 2022), there were also reports of mass distributions of free tickets in the Philippines (Galvez, 2022; Rubio, 2022). This movie was followed by the 2023 movie *Martyr or Murderer*, tackling Marcos Sr.'s alleged involvement in the assassination of former Philippine senator and Martial Law critic Ninoy Aquino. These movies function as aggressive attempts to rehabilitate the Marcos family name (Castillo, 2022) beyond the less-regulated online world. Movies are more prone to regulations but the combination of longitudinal disinformation, influence operations, and the political victory of the Marcoses allow these movies to prosper offline, showing how long-term propaganda work formerly found in niche corners of social media can eventually cross over to more mainstream avenues. This functions similarly to invisible pre-election rigging methods, employed months in advance and create technically-legal advantages for electoral victories (Klaas & Cheeseman, 2019). Simply put, in the Philippines where permanent campaigning is the norm and weak regulations are exploited, official campaign seasons are treated not as the period to plant seeds of influence, but as the harvesting period for influence work already done in advance.

Using influencer vernaculars allowed Marcos Jr. to bring together decades' worth of historical revisionist work into an alternative information ecosystem built on how *they* perceived the political world, in effect creating a parallel public sphere where they enact false victimhood performances and mobilize disinformative narratives that benefit their family image. Furthermore, the active exclusion of legacy media in this feedback loop ensures that editorial checks do not interfere with the flow of political campaign messaging. If journalists and fact-

checkers broadcast any corrections on mainstream media outlets, Marcos Jr. and other supportive political influencers can simply dispute these corrections within their own information ecosystem and it will still reach their target audiences. As a result, political campaigns are now more difficult to hold accountable, and legacy media have new hurdles in enacting their watchdog role.

Conclusion

In this chapter we offer an overview of new political campaign strategies used in the 2022 Philippine elections. Similar to how disinformation operations tested in the Philippines were later on used in other countries like the United States, we offer this chapter as a cautionary tale. There are already potential starting points for such practices in the Global North, such as the use of 8chan and Truth Social for rightwing propaganda. If usual responses have resulted in disinformation innovations, then we need more creative, bottom-up solutions to address disinformation in political campaigning.

Mainstream responses to influence operations fail to see and address the effects of legacy media bypass, instead doubling down on fact-checking and media literacy even when studies show that rather than exposure, audience engagement with the content drive disinformation and influence operations consumption more (Robertson et al., 2023). Global North responses that focus on state and platform regulations cannot be easily applied to the Philippines, where regulators themselves benefit from the disinformation-for-hire industry. Moreover, platform-determinist views shield from accountability political leaders who are at fault for real democratic deficits and social anxieties that actually make influence work feasible. We invite academics, policymakers, and other stakeholders to closely examine our experiences and devise responses that instead look to foster greater transparency and accountability in political campaigning processes as well as highly unregulated advertising and public relations industries complicit in these operations.

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