SOCDEM ASIA *Quarterly*

Combatting Disinformation:
Active Citizenship and Progressive Politics in the Age of Fake News
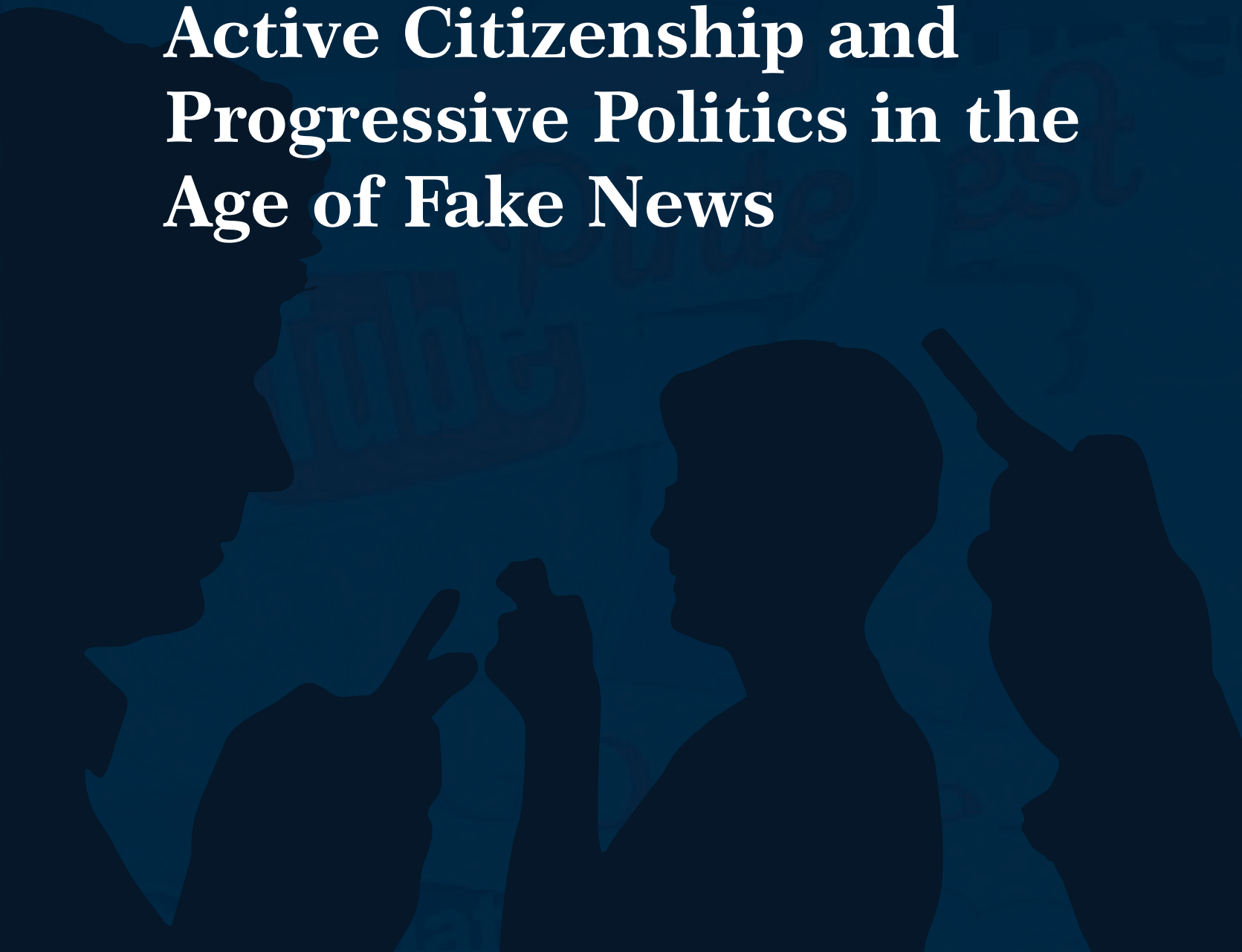
Editorial

When the World Wide Web was finally made public on 6 August 1991, most political pundits greeted this event with excitement enthusiasm, claiming that this new form of virtual technology will be an absolute boon for democracy. The free flow of information, they argued, will not only empower ordinary citizens, but would also undermine ossified bureaucracies and disrupt outmoded forms of administrative practices.

In fact, as late as 2003, communications professor Gary Selnow of the San Francisco State University was still insisting that the "internet can play a significant role in preparing people for the transition to democracy," since "it links people across borders (and) prepares people for an open and civil society."

Other scholars, however, have been more cautious, stating that communications technology can be a powerful political tool in the hands of skilled spinmeisters. Francis Fukuyama, for instance, once asserted that "communications technology itself is value-neutral," and that "they would have been used to great effects by Nazi propagandists like Leni Reifenstahl and Joseph Goebbels to promote fascist rather than democratic ideals."

These doubts were proven correct in March 2018, when it was revealed that British consultancy firm Cambridge Analytica had assisted Donald Trump's presidential campaign by harvesting personal data from more 87 million Facebook users without their consent. The same company was also involved in the 2016 Brexit referendum, using data to convince "persuadables" to vote for Leave. In both cases, social media was heavily used by Cambridge Analytica in its campaign of disinformation.

To fully understand this problem, the current issue of the *Socdem Asia Quarterly* devotes its pages on the issue of disinformation and its assault on democratic norms and values. It features two separate discussions by Marije Laffeber of the Party of European Socialists (PES) and Filipino columnist John Nery on the concept of disinformation. For Nery, disinformation is the "deliberate sharing of false information for largely political or commercial objectives." Laffeber, for her part, argue that the spread of fake news is facilitated by "hoax websites that spread hoax information."

The impact of disinformation is deeply felt in the Philippines, which is now witnessing the return of the Marcos family in national

politics. For historian Veronica Alporha, this "Marcosian comeback" is the direct consequence of historical revisionism, which is "further underscored and aggravated with the current landscape of information in the age of social media and the weaponization of the internet."

In neighboring Indonesia, social media posts were used to delegitimize recent protest demonstrations against legislative attempts to weaken the country's Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK). According to Andina Dwifatma of Atma Jaya University, the online world became a virtual battlefield as "buzzers" or paid influencers posted fake news items to discredit the protests, which would then be refuted by *tweeps* or "Twitter people."

India is also facing a similar problem, where the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has deliberately used social media to win in the 2014 and 2019 general elections. As Dr. D.K. Giri of the Association of Democratic Socialism (ADS), points out, the BJP has transformed the campaign "into a 'digital election' in addition to the traditional methods of leaflets, posters, house-to-house visits, etc." Journalist Kamal Dev Bhattarai also analyzed the spread of fake news in Nepal which, he argues, is due to the increasing use of smartphones in a country "where the overall literacy rate is low."

Each one of our contributors have proposed various ways of addressing disinformation. While there is much room for continuing debate, all our authors agree that efforts should be made to promote digital literacy by incorporating this theme in the curriculum for basic education. They also insist that we continue to use existing online spaces to promote social democratic values, while persisting in our organizing efforts in the real-world.

It is high time to combat disinformation. And as Mahatma Gandhi reminds us, "the truth never damages a cause that is just."

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From the Government's Image to Networked Street Protests

by Andina Dwifatma

There is an increasing number of people in Indonesia who have been using social media over the years. Indonesia even consistently ranks in the top five when it comes to countries who spend the most time on social media, from Facebook to Instagram, from Twitter to YouTube. However, for Indonesia's *netizens* (an informal word-play for 'inter*net* citi*zens*'), the time spent in these platforms are not only for sharing selfies or vacation photos, but also to voice their outrage and hope, to crowdsource information and logistics, and to criticize the established powers. Consequently, the government also sees social media as a powerful platform to convey any message or image that they wish people to see. This essay will outline the different usages of social media between the government and individuals in Indonesia, with several latest cases in the social-political sphere as illustrations.

Statistically, Indonesia sees a tremendous growth in the number of internet users in the last few decades. The number of Indonesians connected to the internet rose dramatically from around 500,000 in 1998 to 142 million in 2017 or 54.67% of the total population, according to the *Asosiasi Penyelenggara Jasa Internet Indonesia* (APJII, Indonesian Internet Service Provider Association). Indonesia is now ranked number six in the list of countries with the most internet users in the world, after China, the United States, India, Brazil, and Japan (Susilo 2018). With regards to social media usage, YouTube is still the most popular platform among Indonesian netizens with 88%, followed by WhatsApp (83%), Facebook (81%), Instagram (80%) and Twitter (52%). In terms of age groups, it is reported that people from age 18 to 24 years old are the most active in social media, both female and male (We Are Social 2019).

Jokowi, the (Social) Media Darling

Indonesian President Joko Widodo (hereafter referred as "Jokowi") is a political phenomenon for the country. He is the first President to come from outside the circle of oligarchs. In fact, he came from a modest family who earned their living from a small furniture business in Surakarta, Central Java. Jokowi started as Surakarta Mayor in 2005, then became Jakarta Governor in 2012, and later Indonesian President in 2014 and, again, in 2019. All throughout these years, social media played an amazingly important role in his political success.

The Jakarta gubernatorial election in 2012 was arguably a milestone for the close relationships between social media and politics in contemporary, post-*Reformasi* Indonesia. Jokowi, who was only popular as 'the clean Mayor from Surakarta' at that time, was paired with Basuki Tjahaja Purnama or

Ahok, a Chinese-Belitung Christian who also was not very popular among the Jakarta crowd. That was until a small marketing company called CAMEO adapted a song by UK's most popular boyband, One Direction, titled "What Makes You Beautiful" and turned it into a song that campaigned Jokowi-Ahok as a brand-new hope for changes that Jakarta so desperately needed, such as overcoming traffic jam and slow bureaucracy. The video clip was broadcasted on YouTube and gained 2.5 million views. Another video dubbed South Korean artist PSY's "Gangnam Style" song as "Jokowi Style", while another put Jokowi into the Angry Bird games where he throws tomatoes at corrupt politicians. Jokowi's love for heavy metal music also helped with the "pop culture" narrative. It is worth noting that all these creative campaigns were done by *prosumers*, i.e. producers and consumers, where audience played both the role as content creator and consumer (Tapsell 2015). The campaigns were done by regular

people instead of large production houses and/or communications strategist organizations. This supported the idea that Jokowi was part of the "common people" and not the elites. In 2014, a few days before the election, some Indonesian musicians and public figures tweeted with the hashtag #AkhirnyaPilihJokowi (#FinallyVoteForJokowi). These celebrities acted as key opinion leaders and apparently succeeded in helping Jokowi gained more votes as he won the election by 53.15%.

However, this kind of popularity on social media has taken a turn for the worse. Jokowi somehow put himself in a position so unassailable among his die-hard fans that he can do no wrong. Anytime someone tries to criticize Jokowi on social media, his supporters would bully the critic and accused him/her as a Jokowi-hater, government-hater, and/or a supporter of Prabowo Subianto (Jokowi's rival during both presidential elections). In an essay comparing Jokowi's to Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono's presidency in 2004 and 2009, *The Jakarta Post* Managing Editor Ary Hermawan said that SBY was way more fortunate because he was not protected by a make-believe safe bubble of aides and supporters who "do nothing but praise and justify his actions and, worse, frame any legitimate criticism as a personal attack or even a plot to unseat him" (Hermawan 2019).

This is particularly true now that Indonesia has several crises to address, from the raging land and forest fire in Kalimantan and Sumatra, the genocide in Papua, the revised Law on the *Komisi Pemberantasan Korupsi* (KPK, Corruption Eradication Commission) that seems to weaken the institution, to problematic new bills suggested by The House of Representatives, including the Criminal Code (KUHP) bill. The latter had sparked raging protests from students and civil society organizations because it undermines freedom of speech, interferes with the people's private lives, and can lead to massive criminalization.

There were at least two series of street protests on September 24 and 30, demanding that Jokowi postpone all the problematic bills and take necessary actions regarding the land and forest fires and KPK. However, until two days before his inauguration, which is when this article was written, Jokowi has not yet taken any particular action in addressing these demands. The plan to launch regulation in lieu of law (*Perpu*) for the KPK Law remains untouched.

During both protests, Jokowi's social media specialists whom Indonesian netizens playfully call "buzzers" (someone with more than 2,000 followers that are paid to tweet) were going the extra mile to defend the president's actions (Paramaditha 2013). Sadly, they did not do this by explaining Jokowi's decisions, but by vilifying the people's actions instead. On September 26, two days after the students' first massive street protest, Denny Siregar, a buzzer known to work closely with the President's team, tweeted from his account @Dennysiregar7 that an ambulance with a logo of the Jakarta Government got caught-in-the-act carrying rocks that were supposedly used to create more chaos on the streets. About an hour later, an official account of the National Police (@TMCPoldaMetro) tweeted the same with an identical image. The only problem: this was not true. It was a hoax. Both Denny Siregar and Polda Metro deleted their tweets but, of course, netizens were way quicker.

Figure 1. Denny Siregar and Polda Metro's tweets.

Another interesting case was a WhatsApp group chat uploaded by buzzers Eko Kuntadhi (@eko_kuntadhi) and Murtadha One (@OneMurtadha) on September 30. Both Eko and Murtadha captured a screenshot of conversations between students of *Sekolah Teknik Menengah* (STM, Industrial High School) who got mad because they did not receive any money for protesting on the streets. This was clearly an attempt to somehow delegitimize the students' protests, that they were not as heroic as people think, that they did it because somebody pays them. However, the group chat was proven to be false. It was also discovered that all the phone numbers involved in the group chat belonged to police officers, as tweeted by @thegrimaldy.

Figure 2. A Twitter user debunking false group chat uploaded by a government buzzer

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The Empowered Individuals

In both cases explained above, Indonesian *tweeps* ("Twitter peoples") were proven to be more effective investigators than any private detective or even the police themselves. They were so quick in capturing the screens, comparing the hours those tweets were sent, and finding the whimsicalities. Their curiosities were supported by resources like smartphones and internet connections, also the technical skills necessary, like screen-capturing social media sites and using third-party applications. In the case of the STM WhatsApp group chat, for example, *tweeps* copied and pasted the phone numbers to a caller-identification application called Truecaller to find out the phone number owners. Thousands of people then retweeted the information that, apparently, it was another attempt to delegitimize the students' protest.

These empowered individuals also utilized social media as platforms to crowdsource practically everything, from money to logistics to information, to support the street protests. As if to resist the idea that the street protests were not genuine, that somebody orchestrated it and paid the protestors, musician cum social activist Ananda Badudu started a KitaBisa.com page to gather donations. KitaBisa.com is a crowdfunding page where users can start a donation page for every social cause. At the end of the campaign period, Ananda gathered more than IDR175.6 million (US$2.2. million). Not stopping there, Ananda was present during the street protests to coordinate logistics like food, water, oxygen tanks, ambulances, etc., through his Twitter timeline. Three days later, at four in the morning, Ananda was arrested by the police on charges of transferring funds to students during the action. Ananda's arrest shocked the social media sphere and the hashtag

Figure 3. Ananda's tweets when he was taken by the police

Ananda Badudu @anandabadudu · 5h

Saya dijemput polda

410   3.8K   4.4K

Ananda Badudu @anandabadudu · 5h

Saya dijemput polda karena mentransfer sejumlah dana pada mahasiswa

1.3K   19K   18.5K

#BebaskanAnandaBadudu became a trending topic for the day with more than 15,000 tweets.

It might be misleading to call these actions "the power of social media." The networked protests did not happen because of technology, but because there is a "fundamental injustice of all societies, relentlessly confronted by human aspirations of justice" (Castells 2015). People were restless, worried that Jokowi, whom they once had their crazy-high hopes on, might be forgetting that he should have the public's best interests at heart. As naïve as it sounds, Jokowi's best assets should be the people, not the oligarchs. But, alas, Jokowi seems to take the whole situation in a wrong way. Somehow, it seems that he takes his supporters for granted. Instead of openly discussing some of the main issues with the public, he keeps using the same technique to "distract" people.

On September 21, Jokowi's official Twitter account (@jokowi) posted a video of him and his grandson Jan Ethes taking a walk and feeding animals in Istana Bogor. Under normal circumstances, this video would have gotten nice comments, especially on Jan Ethes' cuteness. However, the video was posted at the wrong time. Children and animals in Sumatra and Kalimantan could not breathe fresh air, and were literally dying due to the raging land and forest fires. People were angry at how inappropriate the video was and it was a very bad PR moment for Jokowi. If he keeps on ignoring this sense of injustice felt by the people, his presidency may be at risk.

With all this in mind, I would argue that social media regulations, like banning or limiting certain platforms, are unnecessary (except for data protection, but that is another issue). Technology, however, serves as tools and the internet is like a wild jungle that is

not to be tamed. Instead of regulating social media, the Indonesian government should put more efforts in digital literacy. It should be a nation-wide program, from universities to local communities, and maybe even a mandatory course in the education curriculum from elementary school. People should learn as early as possible how to distinguish misinformation/disinformation from facts, how to choose the right websites to get information, how to counter hoaxes in their WhatsApp groups, how to perform their role as civil society and watchdogs of the government and even the media, how to organize themselves should they need to protest, in short, how to take part in democracy.

Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely, said Lord Acton. There is no better time than now for the Indonesian people to keep learning on how to live in this newly-found democratic state, to make sure that the power stays with the people and not be corrupted by the elites. Social media platforms are there to help.

A luta continua!

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The Risks of Disinformation in the Age of Social Media

by Kamal Dev Bhattarai

Social media sites and apps has sprung up rapidly in the past decade and has drastically changed the ways of communication and human interaction. By now, it has almost replaced traditional means of communication on which we relied upon for decades. Before the development and use of social media, the means and medium of communication were limited in terms of flow, usage and geographical reach.

Nepal, a tiny South Asian country which has constitutionally embraced democratic norms and values, is catching up with the global trend and witnessing the free and fast expansion of social media and its usage. Now, it has become an important communication medium for state and other actors to reach out to the masses. Social media has permeated every aspect of our lives including politics, education and business. The reach of the internet is still largely limited in urban areas but its use is also increasing among people living in remote areas.

Fast-Spreading Social Media

Nepal which has a population of around 30 million people is witnessing the fast spread of social media. According to the latest data provided by Nepal Telecommunications, nearly half of Nepal's population accesses the internet via their smartphones. The number of mobile internet users has jumped to 14.65 million as of April 2019. Less than 30% of Nepalis had access to the internet in 2010. The competition among telecommunication companies to provide data package in cheap prices has largely benefited the common people where there is reach of broadband internet.

Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Instagram and Viber are among the popular social media sites in Nepal. According to Internet World Stats, an international website on internet usage data. There are 8.7 million Facebook users in Nepal as of December 2017. According to thesocialmediatoday, there are 9,500,000 Facebook users, 1,200,000 Instagram users, 2,300,000 Twitter users, 3,80,0000 YouTube users, and 5, 40,000 LinkedIn users in Nepal.

According to Nepal Media Survey conducted by Sharecast Initiative, a non-governmental organization, Facebook and its Messenger app are the most popular among Nepalis. The study showed that Facebook is also increasingly becoming the preferred source of news and information about local, national and international happenings. There are now more than 8 million Nepalis with Facebook accounts, and almost 88% of the 4,129 survey respondents said that they use Facebook, while 45% are on Facebook Messenger, according to the research.

It is evident that every sector of society is trying to adapt and tap the benefits of social media platforms. Political parties and politicians are using social media platforms to disseminate their news and information. They are asking their leaders and cadres to open social media accounts and remain active there. It has been a major tool for election campaigns and political parties are instructing their leaders and lawmakers to embrace social media.

Increasing Space and Influence

Government agencies are gradually embracing social media tools in order to reach out to common people and for the delivery of service. For example, government agencies are using social media platforms to inform people about possible flood, the level of water in the rivers, chances of wind and storm, and other health related issues. Entrepreneurs, in recent years, have increased their annual spending for digital marketing, slashing their budget for traditional media. The use of social media has increased in other areas as well. Social media has become an indispensable tool for colleges and universities to attract and engage students.

Social media use is not only confined in urban areas, but it has also reached the rural areas. Not just educated people, but even the uneducated are also gradually learning to use social media. In the rural areas too, less educated people have embraced social media because it has become an easy and chief medium of communication with family members who are living away from home. Interestingly, people in rural area may not know the internet but they know Facebook, and it is largely used with the purpose of sending messages.

In Nepal, the power of social media has already been witnessed on several occasions. Some events that took place in the last couple of years clearly demonstrated the growing power and use of social media. Last year, when a 14-year-old girl from Kanchanpur district was raped and subsequently murdered, a series of powerful protests erupted in Kathmandu and other major cities across the country. It was through social media that people spontaneously gathered for the protests. There are several instances of government backtracking from its decisions after strong backlash on social media.

Social media has also empowered the general public. Every individual can communicate their thoughts and opinions about any matter of public concern to a large mass through various social media platforms. More and more people are coming forward to express their views and opinions on government

policy and decisions. There are also instances of government bowing down to public pressure after heavy criticisms on social media. This clearly shows that social media has emerged as a tool to refine democracy by empowering the common people and making their voice heard in decision-making processes. At the same time, some people in power have started reacting to the voices on social media.

We cannot overlook the fact that there is a need to enhance the empowerment aspects of social media. For this, the primary steps should be aimed at creating digital awareness among ordinary citizens, especially in a country like Nepal where the overall literacy rate is low. Since fake news is rampant everywhere, there is a need to create awareness about fake news. For this, there is a need for wider debate and discussions on how social media could be utilized to create positive results in the daily life of common people.

Social Media is Killing Healthy Debate and Discussions

Despite having positive impacts on politics and in our daily lives, all is not well in social media. There has been an increasing tendency to capture social media by government agencies, political parties or unknown groups mobilized by parties and other interest groups, in order to spread fake news and misinformation to create a public opinion in favor of them and attack rival groups.

Social media can serve as the best platform for debate and discussions on contemporary and other issues. As eminent philosopher Jurgen Habermas has eloquently argued, democracy is ultimately about informed, rational and mutually respectful conversation. He has brought the concept of the public sphere in speaking of the role of the mass media in political life.

In general, the public sphere refers to the notional space which provides a more or less autonomous and open arena or forum for public debate. In this context, social media can effectively play the role of public sphere for debate and discussions, which are the lifelines of democracy.

In the context of Nepal, we cannot deny that social media, in some cases, has turned into a platform for hate speech, trolling and suppressing minority voices. People who are expressing opposing voices are under attack and instead of debate and discussions, there has been the tendency of personal attack and harassment.

Political parties have used social media as a weapon and utilize it as a platform for attacking dissent voices. For the same purpose, they spread misinformation and fake

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news in order to manipulate public opinion. The number of fake Facebook and Twitter accounts is high in Nepal, and purpose of such fake accounts is to attack rival factions and groups in a systematic and organized way. Various studies show that people easily believe whatever appears on social media, so it is easy for political groups to manipulate the public.

So, the level of interaction in social media is gradually shrinking in Nepal. Due to the growing tendency of personal attacks and harassments, many intellectual and academicians, who were active in social media in the past, are gradually becoming silent, and are no longer taking part in debates and discussions on pertinent issues because of systematic efforts to spread fake information.

In recent times, Twitter has become a convenient platform for people who want to promote intolerance and autocratic views. People are expressing their views without knowing the complexity and nuance of issues. There is the tendency of drawing the attention and showing their presence instead of engaging in debate and discussions. This is shrinking the space for debate and discussions on national issues.

Cadres of political parties are active in social media with the purpose of defending the position either of the ruling party or of the opposition. So social media's role as public sphere is shrinking and it has become a propaganda platform for many groups. People who express critical voices on issues are labeled as agent of foreign countries.

In Nepal, there are higher chances of spreading fake news and manufacturing public opinion in the same way due to lack of digital literacy. Thousands of people who are active in social media do not have sufficient knowledge about the distinction between

media and social media. Additionally, there is lack of sufficient knowledge about the differences between news items and social media posts by an individual.

That is why politicians, government agencies and other sectors see social media as a platform to manipulate public opinion. There are risks of people being manipulated by fake news and disinformation and public opinion would be formulated accordingly, which will ultimately affect democracy. The recent trend shows that people who want to spread propaganda and disinformation are likely to hijack the social media platforms in Nepal.

Regulation vs Control

Regulation and control of social media is a hot topic in Nepal but there are no discussions on its detail. Recently, some developed countries have come up with measures to make social media companies responsible for objectionable posts. However, in the context of Nepal, the discussions focus on individual people.

The government has come up with the Information Technology Act and if it is endorsed by Parliament, it would be mandatory for the social media companies to register in Nepal. The government authorities are of the view that if social media companies set up branches in Nepal, it would be easy for government to collect taxes and regulate their content.

The government's rationale is that as social media companies are taking billions of rupees from Nepal through advertisement, they have to pay taxes to the Nepali government. It argues that the presence of a social media company office in Nepal helps to curb the growing crimes that are happening through social media. As far as the issue of freedom of speech and expression is concerned, the

government has come up with objectionable provisions in the draft bill. The draft bill has proposed fines for objectionable social media posting. The bill has proposed a fine of up to NPR1.5 million ($13,215.86) and jail term of up to five years or both for posting or propagating such objectionable contents.

Section 94 (1) (b) of the bill stipulates that no one should write anything to promote caste discrimination or untouchability, disrespect labor, incite anybody to commit crime, promote acts undermining peace and security, publish or propagate illegal things or act or incite others to act against public decency and morality.

Though there are objections over the provisions of social media, due to the epidemic of false information and disinformation, politicians and people from various walks of life are in favor of controlling social media. This is because many politicians, government officials and businessmen have become victims of fake and objectionable social media posts. There is a need for regulation of social media but the

government's proposal aims to control media instead of merely regulating media.

There are floods of parody accounts of politicians and celebrities which have been used for false information. The number of retweets of posts from parody account clearly shows that many people are unaware about fake accounts. This is providing background for the government to control social media. However, there is a need for regulation of social media to ensure that it is not misused.

But in a country like Nepal where there has been systematic attempts to silence the media, the discourse on social media regulation could end up controlling social media. On the one hand, there are ill-intentioned drafts of laws government has come up with. But on the other hand, social media has turned into a space for hate speech and online harms are substantially increasing. In this context, there is a need for intensive discussions and debate on social media in Nepal. The Nepali government is citing Germany, Australia, France and other countries while talking about the regulation of social media.

Historical Revisionism in the Age of (Dis)information in the Philippines

by Veronica Alporha

The Philippines got out of an authoritarian hold 33 years ago after the late dictator Ferdinand Marcos was ousted by a peaceful EDSA[1] People Power movement in 1986. It was a moment of euphoric unity that witnessed the coalescence of a broad opposition composed of various classes, sectors, and ideological blocs. In the following decades however, the nation is to realize that not only was the promise of EDSA short-lived, its lessons were also easily forgotten. This is quite evident on how the most recent national elections witnessed a Marcosian comeback.

The late dictator's only son and namesake, Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos, Jr. was elected senator of the republic in 2010 and her sister Imee Marcos in 2019. In the same election where the populist candidate Rodrigo Duterte won as president, Marcos, Jr. almost clinched the vice presidency. Less than a year in the Duterte presidency, the dead dictator was given a hero's burial in the country's *Libingan ng Mga Bayani* (Heroes' Cemetery), 27 years after he died while in exile in Hawaii. The nation's intellectual and progressive sector was dumbfounded. One moment, the nation was exalting its glorious People Power, and the next, the remains of the despot who ushered the worst debt crisis the country's economic history and led the state which systematically tortured and murdered political dissenters was being buried alongside national heroes. Cleve Kevin Arguelles (2017) argues that Duterte's endeavor to discredit the memory of EDSA is part of his effort to expose the failure of the EDSA republic that his administration wishes to abandon. The consequence of this is to celebrate Marcos as the EDSA legacy's diametric opposite.

While most were surprised and outraged, some historians like Filomeno Aguilar, Jr. (2019) saw it as a moment of reflection. People seemed to forget that "in the midst of our euphoria some cried when Marcos fell from power" and that while multitudes of Filipinos gathered in EDSA in relentless protest in 1986, a bunch of hard-core Marcos loyalists gathered in Malacañan[2] to show their undying support for the Marcoses. Aguilar continues that the nation's intellectuals and historians "never imagined that the vanquished would reassert their own narrative" and that the historical revisionism that progressives decry was actually a "collective failure to revise and rewrite history after Marcos's downfall" (Aguilar 2019).

Historical revisionism or negationism is not new. It has been used by regimes to dodge accountability, justify ideologies, and legitimize their rule. The Nazis used pseudohistory in exacerbating hatred and fear toward Europe's Jewry. After the war, neo-Nazis and anti-Semites would attempt to alter history and outrightly deny that the Holocaust ever happened (Lipstadt 1993). Revisionism was not left out of the Marcosian playbook either. From fabricating mythologies that would hoist Ferdinand and Imelda as *Malakas* and *Maganda*,[3] to faking war medals, Marcos knew the importance of narratives in cementing the legitimacy of his authoritarian government. In February 1972, Marcos would write in his diary,

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I often wonder what I will be remembered in history for. Scholar? Military hero? Builder? The new constitution?... uniter of the variant and antagonistic elements of our people. He brought light to a dark country? Strong rallying point or a weak tyrant? (Rempel 1993)

Indeed, it is not so much of a stretch to say that the failure to embed the adverse effects of dictatorship in the country's collective memory was a huge contribution in the Marcoses' successful return to the limelight of national politics. These effects are further underscored and aggravated with the current landscape of information in the age of social media and the weaponization of the internet.

The Age of (Dis)information in the Philippines

The 2016 Philippine presidential election and the subsequent politics that resulted from it was one of the most polarizing and acrimonious phenomena in recent Philippine political history (Curato 2017). Few can deny that the polarizing characteristic of this particular election was the product of intensive use of online and social media platforms during the campaign. This is not to say that the 2016 election was the first election that witnessed a heavy use of the internet for electoral campaigning. However, unlike the previous elections, a specific campaign activity was underscored with unprecedented attention — political trolling.

Political trolling is an already established practice in political campaign since the 1990s and the early 2000s. In the Philippines and before the surge of social media's popularity, other media platforms like television and print facilitated trolling activities as standard campaign strategies. Meanwhile, online trolling is also not new and has been around as soon as internet use became widespread in

the 1990s. Trolls in the web engage in provocative online messaging to elicit a reaction from other users. At this period however, this online activity was still not done for political ends (Cabañes and Cornelio 2017). Online political trolling as a specific campaign practice is primarily characterized by deception, provocation, and futile online conversation. The online conduct of such activity contributed to the virulent impact that it had in the 2016 election for various reasons.

The success and yield of social media campaign in 2016 was not only the result of the growing popularity and pervasiveness of social media among the voting public. This level of success can be attributed to a well-funded, organized, and strategized network of disinformation, built and mechanized by chief architects hailing from public relation firms and performing professional consultancy work for politicians' electoral campaign (Ong and Cabañes 2018). Such architecture organizes and structures a unified political messaging dispersed through a choreographed and scripted online engagement performed at different levels.

At the top is the political client whose campaign and narrative are to be advanced in order to garner following and public support. His campaign objectives would then be planned and built by the chief architects who work in elite advertising and as campaign strategists. On the lower level are digital influencers who enjoy huge social media following. They can be anonymous influencers who manage popular social media accounts with pop culture content, which can range from humorous, inspirational and relatable themes. Likewise, these digital influencers can also be in the persona of key opinion leaders with engaged followers and fans. They may be commentators, celebrities or TV personalities who capitalize on their
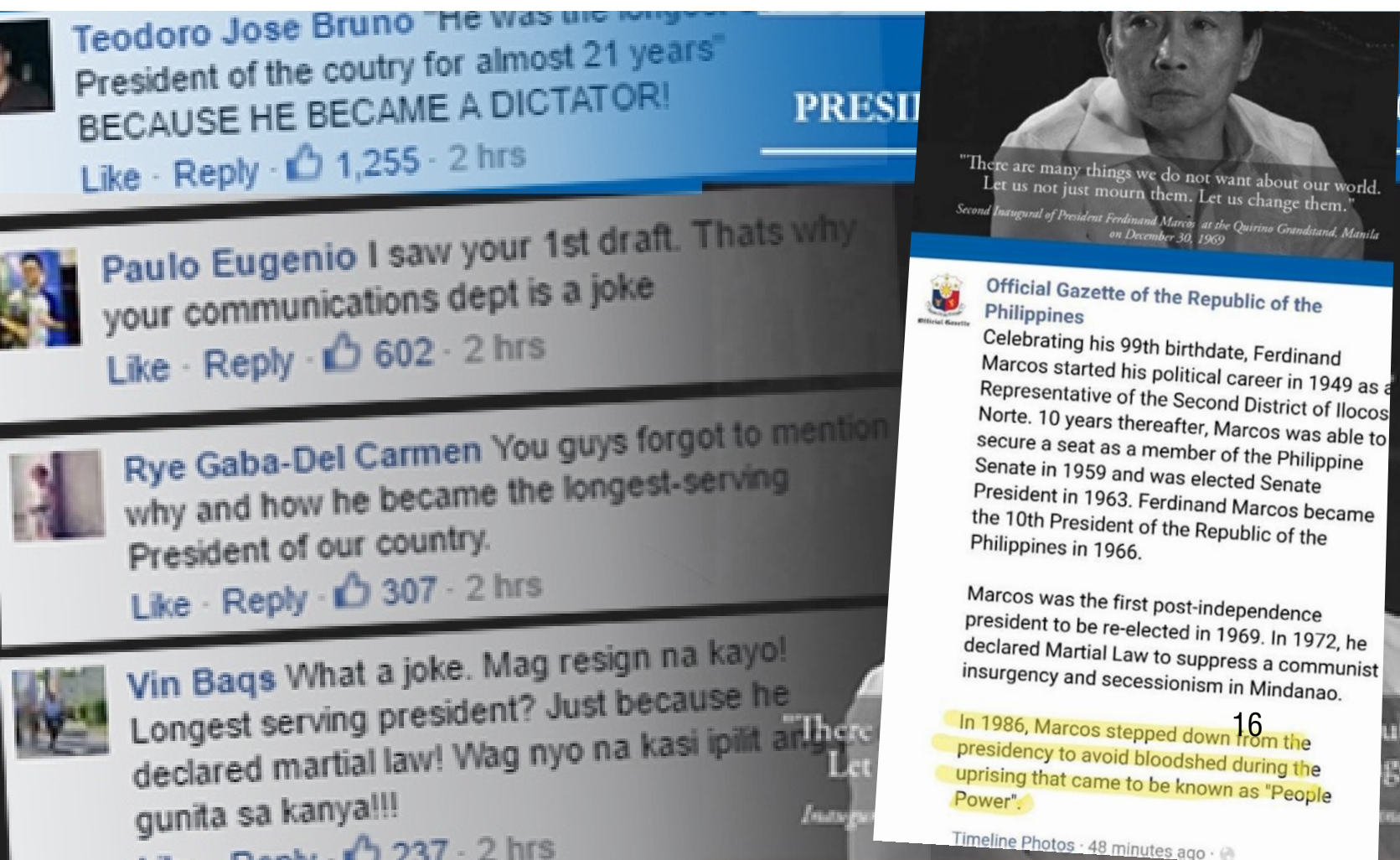
fame to have a sizeable social media following (Ong and Cabañes 2018). Both anonymous and digital influencers are useful in online political campaigns because their huge following serve as efficient springboards that can catapult political messages to online virality.

Below the digital influencers are the community-level fake account operators. These individuals typically belong to the precarious middle-class and are subcontracted by strategists in PR firms hired by the politician clientele. The main function of these fake account operators is to amplify the reach of the messages crafted by the chief architects and publicized by digital influencers. Such amplification creates an "illusion of engagement" in social media (Ong and Cabañes 2018).

Below these paid operators who manage fake accounts are the unpaid and voluntary grassroots intermediaries who also influence social media conversations through politicians'

fan pages, or as unpaid opinion leaders, and volunteer political organizers — real people who are convinced by the message created by the chief architects and dispersed by their paid digital influencers and amplifiers (Ong and Cabañes 2018). All of these information, narratives, and political messages unfold in a curated manner before the voting public whose opinions agents of disinformation aim to shape in favor of their respective campaign objectives.

Nevertheless, to say that the success of online political trolling is solely attributed to this meticulous architecture of disinformation is narrow and myopic. A more thorough analysis entails taking into account the other side of the coin. Public opinion does not simply respond to artificial and imagined engagement. The resonance of the message perpetrated by online political trolls emanate from deep-seated discontent that are not usually given attention by mainstream media and politicians (Cabañes and Cornelio 2017).

Teodoro Jose Bruno "He was the longest President of the coutry for almost 21 years" BECAUSE HE BECAME A DICTATOR!
Like · Reply · 👍 1,255 · 2 hrs

PRESI

Paulo Eugenio I saw your 1st draft. Thats why your communications dept is a joke
Like · Reply · 👍 602 · 2 hrs

Rye Gaba-Del Carmen You guys forgot to mention why and how he became the longest-serving President of our country.
Like · Reply · 👍 307 · 2 hrs

Vin Baqs What a joke. Mag resign na kayo! Longest serving president? Just because he declared martial law! Wag nyo na kasi ipilit ang gunita sa kanya!!!

"There are many things we do not want about our world. Let us not just mourn them. Let us change them."
Second Inaugural of President Ferdinand Marcos at the Quirino Grandstand, Manila on December 30, 1969

Official Gazette of the Republic of the Philippines
Celebrating his 99th birthdate, Ferdinand Marcos started his political career in 1949 as a Representative of the Second District of Ilocos Norte. 10 years thereafter, Marcos was able to secure a seat as a member of the Philippine Senate in 1959 and was elected Senate President in 1963. Ferdinand Marcos became the 10th President of the Republic of the Philippines in 1966.

Marcos was the first post-independence president to be re-elected in 1969. In 1972, he declared Martial Law to suppress a communist insurgency and secessionism in Mindanao.

In 1986, Marcos stepped down from the presidency to avoid bloodshed during the uprising that came to be known as "People Power".

Timeline Photos · 48 minutes ago ·

16

Spoken in utter crassness and gut language, the frustrations that have long been excluded in public discourse are now being utilized to discredit the predecessor of the current government, to delegitimize mainstream media who express criticism against their messages, and to discredit experts, intellectuals, and academics who attempt to inject reason in these virulent conversations. The strategy that taps at long-present but oft-ignored anxieties of the public while offering a fresh, simple, and compelling alternative, easily distinguishable from that of the Establishment, is standard populist game (Judis 2016). Nicole Curato (2017) cannot be more correct in her observation on how Duterte's campaign played on both anxiety and hope in order to create a compelling and resounding narrative for his bid for the presidency.

In other words, online political trolling thrived in the Philippines with the failed EDSA republic as its backdrop. While social media promised to be an arena for a more democratic political participation, where one can be part of an audience and can seek for an audience for his sentiments, its unregulated character experienced a backlash that people were too naïve to not foretell. The power vacuum left by the said unregulation was quickly and heavily filled by political actors who were clever enough to recognize that any unregulated platform is up for grabs for anyone to architect and manipulate in favor of the narrative and of the myth that he built around himself.

A Convenient Time for Historical Revisionist Propaganda

Where online political trolling that is identifiable with the intent to deceive, provoke, and initiate futile conversation thrive, revisionist history also finds an audience. In the same way that architects of disinformation choreograph political messaging in advancing the electoral bids of political candidates, propagandists also utilize social media to propagate alternative histories and historical negationism intended to erase accountability, justify state-perpetrated crimes, and blow up alleged achievements of the dictatorship. Marcosian propaganda, which used to have a rather limited space and platform prior to the growth of social media became ubiquitous. A simple Facebook search of "Ferdinand Marcos" would generate countless Facebook pages and public groups like *MARCOS LOYALIST, Pres. Ferdinand Marcos: The Greatest Philippine President, MARCOS PA RIN, Pres. Ferdinand Emmanuel E. Marcos, Marcos is a HERO, Ferdinand E. Marcos the Best President Ever, and Ferdinand Marcos The Legend*.

The number of followers and members for a lot of these Facebook pages and groups range from a few thousands to hundreds of thousands. A quick survey of the content of these pages would show that they are dedicated to (1) glorify the Marcosian past by magnifying its achievements and by spreading false historical facts, like Marcos being a war hero or the Philippines becoming Asia's biggest economy under his regime; (2) denying and justifying criminal charges and allegations against the Marcoses that include corruption and human rights violations; and (3) advancing the political bid of Bongbong and Imee Marcos.

For example, the most recent posts in the *MARCOS LOYALIST* Facebook page were all about the electoral protest of Bongbong Marcos against the elected Vice President Leni Robredo. In the *Pres. Ferdinand Marcos: The Greatest Philippine President* Facebook page, a somehow similar but more diverse content is discernible. Aside from Marcos-related content, the group also contained inspirational stories, religious messages, and other non-political content. In terms of Marcos-related posts, the page contained similar posts about Bongbong's electoral

protests, and revisionist historical posts that criticize and slander the Corazon Aquino administration that succeeded the dictatorship.

The *Pres. Ferdinand Emmanuel E. Marcos* is one of the most followed Marcosian Facebook page. It is liked by more than 800,000 accounts. The page's cover photo contained pictures of various infrastructures built by and credited to the dictator's regime. Like other pages, the content of this page is primarily concerned about Bongbong Marcos' vice presidential bid. Aside from the blown-up exposure of Marcosian infrastructures, the revisionist posts in this page also contain a skewed historical perspective on specific historical events.

One post talked about the January 26, 1970 student protest movement held during one of the dictator's State of the Nation Address. In this post, the page narrated how Marcos refused to resort to the use brute force like guns in dispersing the student protesters, and ordered the use of water cannons, instead. They used an excerpt to an alleged diary entry by Marcos to prove this. The diary entry supposedly claimed:

The Metrocom under Col. Ordoñez and Aguilar after reinforcement by one company of the PC under Gen. Raval arrived have pushed up to Mendiola near San Beda where the MPD were held in reserve. I hear shooting and I am told that the MPD have been firing in the air.

The rioters have been able to breach Gate 4 and I had difficulty to stop the guards from shooting the rioters down. Specially as when Gate 3 was threatened also. I received a call from Maj. Ramos for permission to fire and my answer was "PERMISSION GRANTED TO FIRE YOUR HOSES" (emphases and punctuations were of the post).

The Facebook post interpreted this as Marcos's benevolent engagement with protesters and juxtaposed it against the tragic Mendiola Massacre which happened in the early years of Cory Aquino's presidency. The post strategically left out the fact that that street encounters between the protesters and the police lasted for the whole night and that the January 26 protest went down in history as one of the most violent protests in the country. That night would be remembered as the "ugliest riot the Philippines has ever seen" (Ma. Guerrero 1970).

Preliminary observations of these pages reveal a few things. First, the content of these Marcosian pages respond to the political needs of the Marcos family, i.e. Bongbong winning in his electoral protest against Robredo, and Imee Marcos becoming a senator. Second, the historical revisionism that include skewing historical facts to a perspective that puts the dictatorship in a good light and fabricating historical data is done for two major reasons. First is to advance the narrative of Marcos being the greatest leader that the Philippines has ever had. Second is to demonstrate how the conspirators of his overthrow snatched the presidency from Marcos and put the country in a situation that is bereft of the progress and discipline that was apparent during the dictatorship. Aside from cleansing the legacy of Marcos in the popular consciousness and underscoring his imagined greatness, the logical conclusion of this revisionist propaganda is to create an authoritarian nostalgia that will make people fantasize and yearn for another Marcos in Malacañan.

The more important question, however, is why did this kind of revisionist history gain resonance to the public who consume this propaganda on social media? On the one hand, similar to the formula discussed in the preceding part of this essay, the virality may be partly attributed to a well-oiled network of disinformation which maintains the prominent social media presence of this kind of propaganda. On the other hand, the resonance may also root from the preexisting historical consciousness of the public and from the overall disillusionment with the EDSA republic that was borne out of the dictatorship's demise. When all of the promises of People Power dried up after five presidents, resentment flourishes. When people are resentful of the status quo, myths and fantasies of a glorious past and the possibility of going back to this past is opioid.

Pushing Back: Reasserting History in the Midst of Propaganda Mayhem

The academic consensus regarding the Marcosian legacy is clear. The Marcos dictatorship was a dark period in Philippine history. Yet, revisionist propaganda did not have a hard time in persuading people that Marcos was a great president and that the Marcos regime was a period of national glory. Aside from the present frustrations, the way the masses shrugged off legitimate historical conclusions about Martial Law is symptomatic of a greater failure — to break out of the academic ivory towers. The clear academic consensus was trapped in our echo chambers. Historians, academics, and intellectuals, in the comfort that they found with each other, ultimately neglected their task to make sure that the lessons of our authoritarian past translate to a creation of profound and meaningful democratic values for Filipinos.

While the Marcosian comeback that we witnessed in the past decade maybe referred to as political rehabilitation, some analysts would argue that there was no rehabilitation necessary because the Marcoses were never destroyed to begin with. Even at the dawn of the dictator's fall, they never lost the political power that they have built for themselves in their two decade-rule (UP Third World Studies Center 2012). If this is true, then this is another proof of the perennial failure of embedding the importance of democracy beyond the euphoria of EDSA People Power.

So, what is to be done? How do we reclaim the narrative of our authoritarian past and accentuate the history of our relentless struggle against it? How do you democratize historical knowledge?

First, there should be concerted efforts to clamor for the regulation of PR firms that organize the spread of trolls who spread disinformation, fake news, and false historical claims. Aside from this, Facebook as a corporation should take greater responsibility in fact checking the contents that is being spread through its platform, and in putting down fake and automated bot accounts whose function is to propagate deceit for the purpose of advancing specific political interests.

Lastly, there should be a relentless but discerning effort for productive engagement in social media. In its early years, social media provided a platform for a more democratic political discourse, until it was hijacked by those who have the resources to do control and manipulate conversation and manufacture impact and visibility. But as in any other struggle against gargantuan powers-that-be, the key is in persisting with the resistance. In the struggle against networked disinformation online, it is high time that intellectuals begin productive engagement with the public and win them over in sober conversations that use facts, legitimate stories, and relatable language in countering the fabricated ones fed to them by disinformation networks. Speaking truth to power does not only entail rebuttals against lies propagated by authorities, state elements, and the elite. It entails making the truth accessible and comprehensible to one and all.

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[1]EDSA is the popular acronym of Epifanio de los Santos Avenue, a 23.8-kilometer highway that serves as the main thoroughfare of Metro Manila. It was the site of the 1986 People Power Revolution that brought down the Marcos dictatorship – the editor.

[2]Malacañan Palace is the official residence of the President of the Philippines – the editor.

[3]In Philippine mythology, Malakas (Strong) and Maganda (Beautiful) are the first humans to appear on Earth – the editor.

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Throwing the Baby with the Bathwater!

by D.K. Giri

On August 13, the Government of India (GOI) asked Twitter to take down as many as eight handles which were peddling fake news and disinformation about the situation in the Kashmir Valley. At the time of writing, it was reported that four handles were suspended by Twitter. The action was initiated by the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology, GOI, on the report of a news channel that certain social media accounts were spreading rumors and misinformation to disrupt the peace and stability in Kashmir Valley. The Ministry of Law took the view that any misinformation or fake news that are aimed at undermining peace, harmony and security of the country will be disallowed. Such fake news falls beyond the "right to freedom of speech."

However, the Kashmir situation is extraordinary as Pakistan-sponsored terrorists and pro-Pakistani separatists have been disturbing the Valley, and on August 5, the GOI took a "bold and radical step" of defanging Article 370 that gave special status to Kashmir. The GOI, and great many Indians believed that Article 370, which was meant to be temporary in the first place, provided a window for separatists and anti-nationals to thrive at the behest of Pakistan, hence, it direly needed to be scrapped.

Let us talk of the impact of disinformation on the rest of India through fake news. Since social media is the "main medium" of fake news, then we should deal with it. India is a parliamentary democracy where all her citizens enjoy the right to "freedom of expression". This freedom is exercised increasingly mainly through social media. A slice of statistics on internet and mobile phone use would show the spread of social media across the country. As per the available information, there are 1.14 billion mobile

phone connections; around 800 million mobile users, 500 million internet users, 300 million smartphone users (which is growing by 18% where the global smartphone market grows at 3%); and 200 million WhatsApp users. Now, Indians use their smartphones for most of their work, transactions, information gathering and sharing, entertainment and so on. One will experience the ubiquitous use of smartphones — metro rail, buses, leisure parks, homes and even workplaces. One could confidently conclude that smartphones, thereby, social media, are indispensable as well as inseparable parts of lives of Indians.

Has the social media empowered ordinary individuals as opposed to established powers? Yes, indeed! One memorable episode testifies this hypothesis that common men and women can stand up for a cause, get-together through self-mobilization without established leadership or power to fight against injustices and atrocities.

In December 2012, a 23-year old woman sought a lift in a chartered bus, at midnight, to get to her house, as there was no other public transport available. Unsuspectingly, she and her male companion got into the bus to avoid waiting longer at that time of the night. Little did they know that a hellish encounter was awaiting them. The woman was gang-raped, brutalized, and thrown away from the bus by a gang of six drunken and depraved men. As the news appeared next day in the papers, there was a spontaneous swelling of support for justice for the girl and a sea of young men and women converged in front of the Parliament. The female victim was named Nirbhaya (Fearless) later on, as she valiantly fought with the attackers for her safety and dignity. The government was surprised and shaken by thousands of youngsters sitting in protest at the seat of power, the Indian Parliament. They did not know how to deal with the protesters who did not have any leader. The Ministers were heard wondering, "Who do we speak to? Who is their leader"?

Many observers began to compare this unusual phenomenon with the Arab Spring that swept across the Middle East with demands for democratization. A similar ground swell of support for an anti-corruption movement was experienced in 2011. Although the movement was initiated by an octogenarian anti-corruption crusader, Anna Hazare, a great many ordinary citizens jumped voluntarily into it even without being directly mobilized by any leader. They poured on to the streets in large numbers in solidarity with Anna Hazare's initiative in instituting a *Lokpal* (Citizen's Ombudsman Bill against corruption). Political pundits were at a loss to explain the support mushrooming across the country for the movement. Both these episodic experiences demonstrate the power of social media as the mainstream media and established powers were conspicuous by their absence. Social media is a potent and handy tool in eliciting opinion, disseminating useful information, mobilizing masses and so on.

In many countries, where some form of democracy exists, social media plays a powerful role in building active citizenship, and strengthening social cohesion through solidarity messages and creating support structures. On the downside, social media has caused havoc and mayhem in many societies including India. Social media lent currency to post-truth politics as debates began to be formed by appeals and emotions, got distorted by sentimentalism, deliberate disinformation, dishonest and outright fabricated news. A few instances would illustrate how the misuse of social media can cause mayhem.

In May 2017, seven people were lynched as rumors of child abduction spread through WhatsApp. Without checking the facts, people zeroed in on the suspects and lynched them. There have been about 30 murders on account of fake news and rumor-mongering.

In 2017, again, there was a rumor that the new currency note of INR2000 had a spying technology that could track our bills 120 meters below the earth. The Finance Minister had to come on television to scotch the rumors. There was a fake news doing the rounds that the Chief Minister of West Bengal who was supportive of Muslims and fighting hard the BJP's (*Bharatiya Janata Party*) *Hindutva*[1], was herself a Muslim. Her name rhyming with her real name Mamata Banerjee, was 'Mumtaz Bano'. She came from Bangladesh, did 'namaz'[2] five times in her privacy, hence was against Hindus. It was a canard as Mamata Banerjee is a high-caste Hindu, has the highest percentage of Muslims in her state and has been nurturing and defending her secure political constituency against the BJP marauders.

Especially, during elections, fake news are generated, and spread thick and fast. Social media is heavily used to win elections. The ruling BJP used social media to the hilt to win in the last elections. In the last general elections, BJP President Amit Shah, exhorting his party workers and campaign managers, said, "you cannot win the elections without being active on social media." BJP almost turned the campaign into a "digital election" in addition to the traditional methods of leaflets, posters, house-to-house visits, etc. BJP had appointed 900,000 cellphone *pramukh* (managers) to cover 927,533 polling booths in the country. They were advised to send video, audio, text, cartoons, or graphics to at least three WhatsApp groups, each group comprising 256 members, which was the maximum one could add. They can send this to five persons (again maximum at a stretch). But they managed to reach almost everyone in that particular booth. Many political observers suggest that BJP partly won the elections by negative campaign through the social media.

In conclusion, I would like to say that social media — Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, LinkedIn, WhatsApp, etc. — are all technology based. Technology cuts both ways like the proverbial choice between swords and ploughshares. Unless we make sagacious and judicious use of technology, it can harm, and not help.

But one should not throw the baby with the bathwater. Social media, which is being misused by the vested interest should be checked and regulated. There are several tips available in the same Internet on how to identify and isolate fake and fabricated news. But to save gullible minds, laws should be introduced to prevent misuse and prosecute the guilty. One is aware of the international concerns on the mal-use of social media as well as data sovereignty. Both are contrarian but equally serious. As a general organizing principle, as it is being explored in India, any news that contains an intent to harm, disturb and destabilize an individual, a community or the country, should be disallowed. Any news that attacks the basics of a country's constitution should be treated illegal, taken off and the creator and carrier of that news should be punished. Likewise, fake news that disturbs bilateral peace, and international harmony, used mainly by terrorists, fundamentalists and racists should be made punishable.

When we have managed to separate the corn from the thorn, the genuine from the spurious and toxic, we could truly harness the power of social media.

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[1]*Hindutva*, which literally means Hinduness, is the ideology of India's ruling party, the BJP – the editor.

[2]*Namaz* or *salah* is the obligatory prayer that Muslims must perform five times a day – the editor.

Even the Opposition, non-BJP parties and the Progressives were unconscious participants in spreading fake news. Let me share a personal experience. I got a message in my WhatsApp that the American Intelligence Agency, CIA, Israeli Mossad, and British "KGB" had done a survey which gave BJP less than 200 seats in the Lower House out of 543, and to other parties 343. They had given the state-wise break-up of seats. I jumped in joy on my feet, and without batting my eyelid, I sent it across to my friends and allies. I did not think for a second why these three agencies should combine in a survey, and give a set of unpredictable and unlikely figures. When I re-read the message, I saw KGB is mentioned as a British Intelligence Agency. That gave it away and confirmed in my mind that it was fake news.

Two Perspectives

(Editor's Note: The following article is based on a panel discussion on strategies to counter fake news and disinformation, held in Pasig City, Philippines on 28 October 2019. The panel featured presentations from Marije Laffeber, Deputy Secretary General of the Party of European Socialists (PES); and from John Nery, Convenor of the Consortium for Democracy and Disinformation. The panel discussion was one of the sessions in the Academy of Progressives: Executive Course that was organized by the Network for Social Democracy in Asia.)

Marije Laffeber

We frequently organize training academies in Europe on digital strategies. We bring in trainers and experts to discuss the best ways to use social media and how to counter fake news.

We need to talk about disinformation because it is being used more and more, even here in the Asian region. How do we counter it? We have to devise a more structural approach, while being more astute than those who, for one reason or another, deliberately spread fake news.

But what is fake news?

They are based on hoaxes. Fake news thrives because of hoax websites that spread hoax information. Unfortunately, these are not satire that try to amuse their readers. Rather, they pose as serious news sites and try hard to be taken at face value. They also use face blocking methods that make you think that you've read something reliable, but in effect you don't. And they use social media to help traffic their sites. Fake news, in other words, is propaganda that distort and mangle the truth.

A good example is the 2016 US elections. During the last three months of the campaign, when things became harder and tougher, fake news stories gained more circulation, often even outperforming legitimate news, and this, of course, heavily influenced the results of the elections.

The Oxford Internet Institute has recently released a report entitled *The Global Disinformation Order: 2019 Global Inventory of Organized Social Media Manipulation*. It looks at the use of algorithms and automation, and how big data shapes public life. I encourage everyone to read the report, which can be downloaded for free.

Some of the key findings of the report is that organized social media manipulation has more than doubled since 2017. It also revealed that 70 countries use computational propaganda to shape public opinion; while in 45 democracies, politicians and political parties use propaganda tools to amass fake followers and manipulate media to gain support. The report further pointed out that in 26 authoritarian states, governments use computational propaganda to control public opinion, suppress press freedom, discredit criticism and drown out political dissent.

Foreign governments also deploy cyber-troops to promote their interest, with China now being one of the major players in the global disinformation order. The report also indicated that 25 countries are working with private communication firms offering computational propaganda services. And Facebook remains the most preferred platform of choice for social media manipulation. This is the reality. This has been thoroughly studied by scientists and experts. And this is taking place in at least 56 countries.

Hungary is a stark example, where Viktor Orban's far-right government use public news to convey one simple message: "Immigration is bad. Immigrants cannot be trusted. Therefore, you need to vote for me because I'm your guy."

And because this message is repeated over and over again, young people begin to think that this is, indeed, the reality. You therefore have people who are very afraid of immigrants even though they have yet to meet a single immigrant. Playing on this fear also allows the government to neglect more pressing issues such as education and food on the table.

This is happening in Hungary, and this is also happening in the rest of Europe. And one reason why this is happening is because of the rise of the internet. The more we become active online, the most isolated we feel. We therefore have this desperate urge to be part of a social group, and we are afraid that we will be excluded from that group if we express a different opinion. And because of this fear, most people choose to remain silent and refuse to participate in debates on the internet.

So how do we change opinions online?

First, it is important that people have access to other sources of information. However, it is extremely difficult to change people's opinions with information alone. We also need to use more emotional techniques like storytelling. We, therefore, have to create our own stories and content, and make them more emotional.

And doing so does not have to be expensive. In Europe, we make videos using our own smartphones. And usually, when you have real people telling real stories, it's worth is much more than when you make a proper political advertisement. It is also important to have an intimate knowledge of your electorate. You must therefore know your electorate so that you can address them directly.

Remember that fake news operators make money by spreading propaganda and disinformation. Rightwing parties and politicians, on the other hand, use fake news to discredit mainstream media. Donald Trump, for example, constantly attacks media outlets that are highly critical of his policies, such as CNN and the Washington Post. Fake news is also used as a framing devise in hate speech to deprecate their victims. The right, for example, successfully framed Hillary Clinton as "crooked Hillary" during the last presidential elections in the United States. It must also be pointed out that fake new promote rage and anger. It is used to demotivate and immobilize voters. But their long-term aim is to covert these voters to their side.

To effectively counteract fake news, we must not be caught in their framing. Instead, we must put our trust in the power of our own stories. People believe whatever fits the opinions they hold so it's very hard, if not impossible, to change it, especially through social media. But we must still try to sway voters. It is necessary to counter fake news before elections — and even that is already too late. That is why we should start early and educate people on media literacy and critical thinking.

We have to start educating our children, and even our own party members. It is important to have training for volunteers and activists on how to use social media. We need to help people form their own opinions and make them aware of how their biases and preconceptions influence their understanding of what's wrong and right.

We should also be aware of our own party propaganda. It may not help in addressing the problem of fake news and might even add to it. Providing correct information is, therefore, very important. We should also refrain from extreme partisanship wherein we adopt a worldview of "us versus them." Instead, we should focus on people's needs and how we can help improve their lives. We have no right accusing the other side of spreading fake news when we ourselves are doing it. It is therefore important that we learn how to Google a subject without using fake news or hoaxes. We should also educate our party activists and train them to appreciate satire.

Generally, we don't have much money for campaigning in the European elections. The Party of European Socialists (PES), for example, would have to campaign in 28 states with just €2 million, which is infinitely small compared to American elections. That's why it is imperative that we be creative in our approach. What has been truly helpful in our case is providing our activists with proper training about the elections, about the candidates and about the main points of our political agenda, as well as free training on social media. We believe that it is important to train our cadres so that they can properly engage people regarding our message.

Political framing should also be given adequate attention. You can have a glass half-empty or half-full. It all depends on how you frame it. You can have a well-thought-out election manifesto, but probably 99% of voters will not read it because they think it is too complicated or will consume too much of their time. It is therefore important to create striking images or short videos that can help us fight fake news. By political framing, we refer to the process of presenting something to people that will connect to them in a politically charged way. In social sciences, people receive, interpret and communicate their realities through images.

Alexandra Ocasio Cortez (AOC) is one progressive politician who is good in communicating through images. Initially, we brought in AOC's campaign manager in our election trainings. Eventually, AOC herself went to Europe to share her experiences and insights. She was a completely fresh politician, but she had lots of enthusiasm. In her talk, AOC said that she usually doesn't react to hate speech and fake news, because if she does, she will only be giving ground to the haters and that will only help them in the end.

Let me emphasize that facts are important. If we want to debunk fake news, we need facts. But we will not win with facts alone. It is important to reframe the debate in our favor and that we are able to speak through images.

To end, let me share a quote from former American president Barack Obama:

"If you have to win a campaign by dividing people, you're not going to be able to govern them. You won't be able to unite them later if that's how you start."

John Nery

I am happy that we are discussing the topic of disinformation because there is an increasing number of efforts to fight this phenomenon. Disinformation is the main problem. I believe that this is not so much a question strategy, but a question of scale and that is a problem that have not yet been solved. But maybe by working together, we might finally find the answer to that vexing question.

Let me begin by sharing my five-point checklist on why it is important to fight disinformation. First, we need to agree what the stakes are. For me, the most succinct explanation of why disinformation is the

preferred tool of totalitarian governments is from Hannah Arendt's book *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. Published in 1951, the book argued that the ideal subject of totalitarian rule is not the convinced Nazi or the committed communist, but people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction, between true and false, no longer exists. In other words, confusion, the lack of clarity, is the main purpose of the campaign of disinformation.

There is a phrase that was popularized by *Vox* in the United States: the firehose of falsehood. Donald Trump is engaged in spreading untruth in the *firehose of falsehoods* and it is the sheer quantity of lies that is the point of the campaign. At some point people will say, "I don't know what to make of it anymore. I don't know, I'm not sure."

Second, we need to define what the problem is. I recommend Claire Wardle and Hossein Derakhshan's work *Information Disorder* to provide us with a common platform or common definition of terms. For instance, disinformation refers to something specific. Mal-information, on other hand, is a distinct concept. It refers to honest information that was kept private for a long time, and then suddenly brought into the public sphere for malicious purposes. A specific example is doxing — putting private information out there simply because you belong to another party. In this case, the information is correct, but it is being used for malicious purposes.

Misinformation is something that we are all guilty of, especially those of us in traditional media. Misinformation is the occasional or accidental sharing of wrong information not because you want to do it but because that is the nature of the beast called journalism. If there are a thousand details that needs to be verified, such as the spelling of a name, chances are, you will occasionally make mistakes.

Disinformation on the other hand is the deliberate sharing of false information or altercation for largely political or commercial objectives. Disinformation is often disguised as news and are fake news. Why? Even after years of attack against traditional media, people still see legitimate news stories as authentic sources of information. How many among us, when there's a typhoon, would rather to a blogger rather than to a traditional news site? Once our lives are at stake, we go to the ones who have track record.

Third, we must include the Asian perspective. We do our homework by clarifying the stakes and by defining the problem. However, many of our texts have a Western or European perspective. There's nothing wrong with that. But we must remember that those of us in Asia also have our own experience.

Fourth, we need to integrate science in our analysis; and fifth, we need to listen to the experts.

One question that has been raised is, "Why do people follow authoritarian leaders?" The great Canadian scholar, Bob Altemeyer, talks about three elements, which we will later discuss in greater detail. On the other hand, Daniel Kahneman, the Nobel Prize-winning economist for behavioral economics, talks about two types of thinking: System 1, which is fast, instinctive and emotional; and System 2, which is more deliberative and logical. System 1 thinking is vulnerable to organized disinformation, because when we see something, we then immediately arrive at a conclusion. Jonah Berger's *Why Do These Things Go Viral?* is also another important work, wherein he identifies six elements of contagiousness.

Now I will talk about disinformation in the Philippines before I talk about the possible strategies to counter disinformation.

I recommend the 2018 report by Jonathan Ong and Jason Vincent Cabañes entitled *Architects of Networked Disinformation*. The two scholars describe what they describe as an invisible machine in the Philippines — industrial in scope, strategic in purpose, and exploitative in ethics. Their report presented seven key findings, but I will focus on the sixth which, I think, tends to push the scholarly discussion to the next level.

Looking at the Philippine experience from 2016 to 2018, Ong and Cabañes discovered two contrary, but at the same time, complementary principles. One is what they call controlled interactivity. This means that the people involved in organized disinformation follow a script. That's where the control comes from. They interact with the audience by following a script. On the other hand, there's another principle called volatile virality. This means that because you are dealing with real people (we are not talking about bots), those very same people might skew your message, help it become viral, but also devastate your message.

In the Philippines, we are familiar with the example of pro-Duterte bloggers, such as Mocha Uson. When she joined the campaign to push for federalism, she offered a sexualized appeal for federalism (probably because of her background in sexualized entertainment). However, it backfired so badly and for all practical intents and purposes, that campaign is now dead. That's volatile reality — sometimes the people that you work with can negatively affect their campaign.

An important section in Ong and Cabañes' report shows the three levels of the invisible machine. At the top level, you have the architect. In the Philippine setting, these are real people who no longer work for big agencies like McCann Erickson, but they may have had cut their professional teeth there.

Now they work for boutiques — boutique ad agencies or boutique PR agencies and they justify their work in disinformation for different but many creative reasons.

One of the architects justify their work as, "I'm just like Kerry Washington from the TV show Scandal. I'm doing edgy, experimental stuff. Never mind our democracy." At this level, we are dealing with people who are used to creating brand bibles and used to working with traditional media and are capable of putting together entire ad campaigns. They are the architects of disinformation, and many of them justify their actions by claiming that they are "doing creative work."

Below these architects is the second layer of digital influencers. They look for influencers with at least 50,000 followers. They get paid a lot. Obviously, the digital influencer will bring in their own network into this invisible machine and they get paid per package and they are used to doing this, not just for political campaigns but also for commercial campaigns, and so on. And on the last level, you have the fake account operators. These are people who are probably paid per post or per week. It is a form of livelihood because that is the way they earn their living.

This invisible architecture of networked disinformation is very powerful. But there has also been a pushback. For example, what happened with Facebook in the Philippines was that in three waves, they purged hundreds of fake account operators. Many of them were run by a particular architect who happened to be the main person behind the social media campaign of President Duterte — Nick Gabunada. He had a company which had more than 200 fake accounts, and Facebook purged them for coordinated inauthentic behavior.

But purging fake accounts is not enough. In fact, the first thing that we need to do is to understand the local context, which will vary greatly from each other. I follow Alexandra Ocasio Cortez on Instagram, for example. She is a great example of what is called an extremely online person. I am not sure if we can just take everything we learn from her, and then apply it to the Philippines or in other Asian countries. We need to be able to understand our own context and see if the strategies that AOC uses will be applicable to us.

So why does it work?

Jonah Berger identified the factors on that enable an idea to become viral. He says that there are six principles of contagiousness. And he summarized them as STEPPS. First, S is *social currency*. We share things, make them go viral because it is a form of social currency. It makes us look good and trendy. Part of the reason we share things is social currency.

Second is T: *trigger*. We share things because it triggers an image. Some of the content that goes viral are triggers. We share them because they trigger something nice or nasty when we share them.

Then there's E: *emotion*, which is probably the most important. Most of us share content because of emotions that the content makes us feel. However, there is a dichotomy of emotion. There are some emotions that are low arousal like contentment. You are at the beach and you take a picture of your toes on the sand. People may like it, but people will not probably share it. Another example of low arousal emotion is sadness. People might like it or share condolences, but they are not necessarily going to share the post. On the other hand, there are high arousal emotions. These are anger, outrage, lust, and so on so forth.

The first P is *public*. We share things because it is out there. The point is that the more visible it is, the more shareable it is. Success

is its own reward, so to speak. Many years ago, people were sharing links of the Gangnam video by Psy. Why? Because people were sharing the video. It is a proof of its own success. The more visible it is, the more shareable it is.

The second P is *practical value*. We share something because it offers practical information. In the Philippines, we have this thing called *walang pasok* (no classes) due to bad weather. And we share that because we don't want to wake up early in the morning and find out classes are suspended. So, we share that, and it becomes viral because it carries practical information. Now, practical information can be positive. For instance, on election day, you can make something viral because it says these are the things to avoid bringing to your precinct.

And the last S is *story*. We share content because it has a story. There's a photo of a street kid studying outside McDonald's, beneath the neon light of the store. It went viral because it tells a story about overcoming adversity, about hard work, and about sacrifice.

So why do people fall for authoritarians? Altemeyer reminds us that there are, in fact, three principles. First, *authoritarian submission*. There is an element in human nature that succumbs to the source of power. Second, *authoritarian aggression*. Many people follow authoritarians in a human weakness for violence. And lastly, there is *authoritarian conventionalism*. Most people will just accept the way things are. It's a "father always knows best" mentality. In the Philippines, for instance, there is a nickname for President Duterte — "Tatay Digong" (Father Digong). This conveys the image that Duterte is the father of the nation, which then reinforces that part of human nature that defines authoritarian conventionalism.

The second thing is we need to do is to organize. For our purposes, we need to organize a quick response team. Unfortunately, in today's world, news breaks out, not on the traditional media, but on social media. We therefore need to have a team that is ready to respond to these things that can go viral on social media, and we need a data base team. Many of the campaigns on this information are based on patterns. We, therefore, need someone who can quickly collect and collate fake news. This database can eventually be a source of power.

We also need to realize that there is a growing critical mass that is opposed to fake news and disinformation. In fact, there are more and more organizations, and even academic and civil society organizations, coming together because they are all alarmed by the spread of disinformation. We need to look for these synergies.

Our own group, the Consortium on Democracy and Disinformation, have asked three of the country's top universities — Ateneo de Manila University, De La Salle University and the University of the Philippines — to work with them and provide us with some sort of cover. We are also working with the Holy Angel University in the province of Pampanga. This means that we don't have to reinvent the wheel when it comes to Central Luzon. We just have to partner with an institution.

But we also need to support standard media. Surely there are many issues and many shortcomings with the newspapers, with television, with cable and with online news sites. But in fact, we do need to continue working with them. Let us be clear that even in the social media age, some of the biggest players in social media are standard media. For instance, in the Philippines, the largest accounts are ABS-CBN and GMA, with over 7 million followers on Facebook and Twitter. And yet we don't really know that. When we think of social media, we think of bloggers. That has to change.

The fourth strategy is we need to engage. The most important engagements are on the digital platforms. You can demonize Facebook but at the end of the day, we need to work with them. There are good people in Facebook, especially at the middle level. There are many people working in Facebook who are horrified by the same things that horrify us, so it is always good to engage with

them. Of course, that can also work to your advantage if someone in another party or a troll reports your account and you are suspended. It always helps that you have access to people inside. So, we need to engage.

Fifth, we need to work with the universities. We should look at them as powerhouses of information. There's a lot of skill available there. Professors who have done their own research on disinformation and the libraries also contain a lot of archived information on disinformation.

And lastly, we need go on the attack. The best defense is a good offense. We need to seize the initiative and we need to change the narrative. We have a stake in this. We cannot remain on the defensive all the time, we also need to seize the initiative.

But I have not answered the most important question, and that is scale. Howie Severino, a documentary reporter in GMA has this example. There was a fake website of GMA, with a different URL with a fake story. What GMA did was that they looked for where the server was based, and discovered that it was somewhere in California and they wrote to the company that owned the server and said if you don't take this down, we are going to sue you. And that fake news was taken down. But by then it had 12,000 shares. Then GMA wrote a statement, saying that this is fake news, that we sent a letter of desistance to the server, and they are taking this down. And that letter was shared only 12 times. That's the difference in scale.

Bad news travel because it appeals to many things—social currency, emotion, etc. But we need to push back. There is no alternative.

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