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CONSUMING DIGITAL DISINFORMATION

How Filipinos Engage with Racist and Historically Distorted Online Political Content

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FOREWORD

The economic, political, strategic and cultural dynamism in Southeast Asia has gained added relevance in recent years with the spectacular rise of giant economies in East and South Asia. This has drawn greater attention to the region and to the enhanced role it now plays in international relations and global economics.

The sustained effort made by Southeast Asian nations since 1967 towards a peaceful and gradual integration of their economies has had indubitable success, and perhaps as a consequence of this, most of these countries are undergoing deep political and social changes domestically and are constructing innovative solutions to meet new international challenges. Big Power tensions continue to be played out in the neighbourhood despite the tradition of neutrality exercised by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

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THE EDITORS

Consuming Digital Disinformation: How Filipinos Engage with Racist and Historically Distorted Online Political Content

By Jason Vincent A. Cabañes and Fernando A. Santiago, Jr.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Many current counter-disinformation initiatives focus on addressing the production or "supply side" of digital disinformation. Less attention tends to be paid to the consumption or the intended audiences of disinformation campaigns.
- A central concept in understanding people's consumption of and vulnerability to digital disinformation is its imaginative dimension as a communication act. Key to the power of disinformation campaigns is their ability to connect to people's shared imaginaries. Consequently, counter-disinformation initiatives also need to attend to these imaginaries.
- This report examines why the precarious middle class in the Philippines has been particularly susceptible to digital disinformation. It focuses on two key imaginaries that disinformation producers weaponized in the year leading up to the 2022 national elections. The first was a long-simmering anti-Chinese resentment, which racist social media campaigns about Philippines-China relations targeted. The other was a yearning for a "strong leader", which history-distorting campaigns about the country's Martial Law era amplified.
- Ironically, some practices adopted by members of the public to protect themselves from the toxicity and vitriol of online spaces increased their vulnerability to digital disinformation. The cumulative impact of these was for people to dig deeper into their

existing imaginaries, something that disinformation producers targeted and exploited.

- We offer two suggestions for future counter-disinformation initiatives. The first has to do with addressing people's vulnerability to the weaponization of their shared imaginaries. Counter-disinformation initiatives can move past divisive imaginaries by infusing creativity in imparting information. Collaborating with well-intentioned professionals in the media and creative industries would be key to these kinds of initiatives.
- The second has to do with addressing people's media consumption practices. These practices tend to open them up to sustained and long-term digital disinformation campaigns, which provide them with problematic imaginaries to dig into. To establish a similarly robust common ground of reality, counter-disinformation initiatives should themselves be programmatic, not ad hoc.

Consuming Digital Disinformation: How Filipinos Engage with Racist and Historically Distorted Online Political Content

By Jason Vincent A. Cabañes and Fernando A. Santiago, Jr.*

INTRODUCTION

In this report, we argue for the importance of paying attention to individuals and their actual engagement with digital disinformation content. This endeavour is a crucial component for crafting more effective counter-disinformation efforts, especially at a time when online information disorder is exponentially growing and constantly evolving.

Much of the recent research on the rise of digital disinformation has focused on characterizing its production. There is a burgeoning set of journalistic and academic works cataloguing different social media manipulation tactics in Western liberal democracies, like coordinated bots swarming UK Twitter and apps feeding into psychographic targeting on US Facebook (Bastos and Mercea 2017; Hutton 2021; Marwick and Lewis 2017; Wylie 2019). Other works similarly taxonomize fake news and political trolling production in non-Western contexts, as in the strategic distraction initiatives of China's "Fifty-Cent Army" and the

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anti-Western Twitter operations of Russia's troll army (Martineau 2019; Wardle and Derakhshan 2017; Jing 2016; King, Pan, and Roberts 2017). There is also a growing number of studies looking at the Southeast Asian context particularly, from cyber troops in Thailand to online buzzers in Indonesia (Hui 2020; Sastramidjaja and Wijayanto 2022; Sombatpoonsiri 2018).

The works mentioned above are valuable. Collectively, they reveal how the rapid spread of digital disinformation the world over has been fuelled not only by the toxic convergence of socio-structural and technological developments in the digital and creative industries, but also by the interlinked labour conditions of creative and digital workers across the world. The insights of these works about both the patterns and the granularities of fake news and political trolling operations have been crucial in informing counter-disinformation initiatives of governments, big tech companies, and the third sector (Wasserman 2022).

That said, too much focus on the production of digital disinformation can inadvertently cement a techno-deterministic view of this phenomenon. Techno-determinism is a long-debunked but still persistent view that overinflates the power of technologies to determine the course of society (Livingston 2018). In relation to digital communication, it assumes that media technologies are more powerful than media users who are thought to have little agency. And regarding digital disinformation particularly, techno-determinism overemphasizes the manipulative power of social media platforms whilst viewing its users as helpless and unable to recognize truths and lies (for a concrete example of this thinking, see Wylie 2019). This view limits the kinds of counter-disinformation initiatives we can imagine.

One expression of techno-determinism in counter-disinformation can often be found in top-down and state-led initiatives that focus too much on platform regulation, as is the case with the US, France and India. These initiatives are right to underscore the importance of addressing the policy environment in which media technologies operate because platforms have gained tremendous leverage in contemporary society (Rahman and Thelen 2019). However, they share the logic that "since platforms are responsible for the problem and have not done enough to fix it, they must either solve the problem themselves or be punished for their failure to

do so" (Montgomery 2020, p. 3). Consequently, these initiatives overly emphasize the centrality of platforms in bringing about the rise of online information disorder without considering enough the "range of possible interactions or relationships with platforms that mediate, structure, or resist platform power" (Caplan, Clark, and Partin 2020). As we discuss in this piece, the effectiveness of fake news and political trolling content does not just rest with their existence across social media platforms. It is also about how they amplify already existing polarizing issues in society and problematic media consumption practices of the public.

A parallel expression of techno-determinism in counter-disinformation approaches would be projects that are too focused on media literacy. These are helpful in the long-term endeavour of cultivating informed citizens, as they equip people with cognitive tools against ever-diversifying strategies of falsehood, deception, and misdirection online (Tompkins 2020). When underpinned by techno-determinism, however, they do not acknowledge enough the broader sociological forces that make people vulnerable to fake news and political trolling. Indeed, a more critical kind of literacy is one that should go beyond skills in evaluating online content to also involve "understanding the internet's production and consumption processes, its democratizing potential and its structural constraints" (Polizzi 2018). Later in this piece, we point out how people's socially shared experiences play a key role in whether and how digital disinformation content might resonate with them.

BEYOND TECHNO-DETERMINISM IN COUNTER-DISINFORMATION

To get beyond a techno-determinist view, counter-disinformation initiatives should come to terms with how digital disinformation is a set of entwined "wicked problems" (Rittel and Webber 1970). They are comprised of issues "that are highly complex, interdependent, and unstable — and can only be mitigated, managed, or minimized, not solved" (Montgomery 2020, p. 1). If disinformation is thought of in this way, then responsive counter-disinformation entails attending to the many dimensions of online information disorder. One such dimension

that has been understudied is how people consume fake news and political trolling content across the social media platforms that matter to their everyday lives.

It is in response to the above that this piece presents insights from our qualitative research that explores how the everyday life and media consumption contexts within which people encounter digital disinformation might shape their interpretation of such content. Our research looks at the case of the so-called precarious middle class in the Philippine capital of Manila. We zero in particularly on their engagement with two digital disinformation campaigns that proliferated during the lead-up to the Philippines' May 2022 national elections. The first one is about racist content about contemporary Philippine-China relations, whilst the second one is about historically distorted content about the country's Martial Law era in the 1970s and early 1980s.

THE CASE OF MANILA'S PRECARIOUS MIDDLE CLASS

The Philippines is a useful case for looking into the parameters that might help create more responsive counter-disinformation efforts because of how cutting-edge the digital disinformation industry in the country is. Facebook executive Katie Harbath even colourfully described it as the "patient zero" of the world's information disorder epidemic (Silverman 2019).

When discussing the genesis of large-scale political disinformation campaigns, what loom large are the June 2016 Brexit referendum in the UK and the November 2016 US national elections. The May 2016 Philippine national elections, however, already previewed the vast array of strategies that political campaigns could use to weaponize social media. In the lead-up to voting day, the country's digital disinformation industry showed how the hyperextension of advertising and public relations tactics to the realm of politics can make a dent in electoral dynamics (Ong and Cabañes 2018, 2019). Amongst many other things, they used "campaign plans" to establish the overall direction of disinformation dissemination blitzes, "brand bibles" to set the roles that different social media avatar accounts played in these blitzes, and

"360 media strategies" that dictated the distribution of fake news and political trolling content across social media platforms. Through such tactics, the country's disinformation producers unleashed a torrent of toxic, vitriolic, and, ultimately, viral social media content that amplified and mobilized support across political camps (Sinpeng, Gueorguiev, and Arugay 2020; Tapsell 2020). Even in the lead-up to the 2022 national elections, the country's digital disinformation producers continued to refine their tactics, which became ever more central to the electoral campaigns (Soriano and Gaw 2021, 2022).

More specifically, this study argues for the importance of focusing on the precarious middle class in the Philippines. These are individuals who comprise 37 per cent of the population (Albert, Santos, and Vizmanos 2018). They work in occupations that contribute to a monthly household income of between PHP15,780 (approx. US$280 in 2023 terms) and PHP78,900 (approx. US$1,410 in 2023 terms). Importantly, these individuals also have "good enough access" to the Internet, as they can afford mobile phones and prepaid plans that enable them to connect online even if in limited and intermittent ways (Uy-Tioco 2019). Notwithstanding their unideal digital connection, they and the other Filipinos who are online spend the most time on social media globally, averaging 4 hours and 15 minutes per day (Kemp 2021). Unfortunately, their most favourite platforms, such as YouTube and Facebook, have been identified as hotbeds of digital disinformation.

What makes the precarious middle class—and especially those residing in the capital city of Manila—a significant demographic as regards thinking of counter-disinformation initiatives is that they are a key public with whom digital disinformation producers seek to connect. Many disinformation campaigns are grounded on the concerns of this group. The campaigns articulate these people's frustrated aspirations about a seemingly elite-led democracy that favours only those whom it wishes to favour, leaving out those like them from the benefits of whatever economic progress the country has achieved (Cabañes and Cornelio 2017, p. 242). This has to do with how the precarious middle class have incomes that make the middle-class lifestyle attainable but not necessarily sustainable. On one hand, they get a taste of the "good life", buying clothes in shops like Uniqlo, hanging out in coffee shops

like Starbucks, and travelling on a shoestring to nearby destinations like Singapore (see Cruz and Dela Cruz 2023). On the other hand, however, these individuals do not live in gated communities and so are still exposed to the capital city's many problems: from public infrastructure compromised by state corruption to criminality on the streets brought about by persistent poverty (see Garrido 2019).

THE IMAGINATIVE DIMENSION OF DIGITAL DISINFORMATION

We posit that a useful concept for understanding how individuals engage with digital disinformation is the "imaginative dimension of online information disorder" (Cabañes 2020). This concept points out that as a communicative phenomenon, fake news and political trolling have strong roots in people's shared imaginaries. By imaginaries, we mean the narratives, emotions, and ways of doing things that they collectively hold about the socio-political world that they inhabit.

The abovementioned concept draws on the sociological idea of deep stories (Hochschild 2016). This pertains to the portrayal that individuals have of their socio-political world, which they then share with others. This portrayal is premised on their thoughts about who they are, what values they hold and, ultimately, what their place in society is (for examples, see Norris and Inglehart 2019; Pilkington 2016). The imaginative dimension of digital disinformation also draws on the historiographic notion of social memory (Tosh 2015). This is about the shared interpretation of events and experiences by a group of people, over time, which gives them collective identity. This interpretation can serve "to explain or justify a group's perception of the present, often at the cost of historical accuracy" (ibid., p. 3). It can also feed popular narratives concerning nation-building and politics.

Characterizing the imaginative dimension of digital disinformation on any given issue entails two steps. First, one must identify the powerful shared imaginaries—that is, the narratives, emotions, and ways of doing things—people draw on for understanding the world they live in and the kind of individual agency they have in such a world (Jameson 1981). What makes these shared imaginaries important is that they serve as

key resources for interpreting political—and politicized—media content (Kreiss, Barker, and Zenner 2017). In this piece, we identify the shared imaginaries that underpin the engagement of Manila's precarious middle class with two of the most persistent digital disinformation campaigns in the lead-up to the 2022 Philippine national elections. One is racist digital disinformation about contemporary Philippine-China relations. The other is historically distorted disinformation about the country's Martial Law history.

The second step in characterizing the imaginative dimension of digital disinformation is to identify how people's media consumption practices relate to the concerns they have over maintaining their different social relationships, from their family to the broader community. To be sure, these practices—including seeking news and information—are increasingly moving towards "personal" media technologies like mobile phones and social media platforms like Tik Tok (Newman et al. 2023). However, their practices are still shaped by their ties to other people (see Miller et al. 2016). In this piece, we also detail how key media consumption practices of Manila's precarious middle class take into account people's apprehensions about their many relationships. They include social media diet curation amid toxic online content, platform jumping in relation to the need for safe spaces online, and alternative fact-checking to respond to their waning trust in those traditionally seen as information authorities.

MEDIA INTERPRETATIONS AND SHARED IMAGINARIES

Racist Disinformation and Anti-Chinese Resentment

One set of digital disinformation content our interview participants encountered stoked nationalist and racist sentiments held by some Filipinos. These kinds of content came from across political camps. So, whilst there were online campaigns meant to bolster then-president Rodrigo Duterte and his style of governance, there were also those meant to torpedo him. To achieve their diverse goals, these different campaigns connected with people's collectively shared imaginary

of anti-Chinese resentment. Although this amalgam of narratives, emotions, and ways of doing things was primarily geared towards the Chinese government, it unfortunately also extended to Chinese nationals and even to Filipinos with Chinese heritage or descent (henceforth, Chinese Filipinos).

The anti-Chinese sentiment of Filipinos was partly fuelled by contemporary geopolitical developments. They did not like China's increasingly assertive territorial claims in the East/Southeast Asian region. They were especially resentful of how China ignored the 2016 decision of the United Nations Permanent Court of Arbitration that ruled in favour of the Philippines regarding the Philippine-claimed portion of the South China Sea (Dreisbach 2019). Alongside this, Filipinos also felt that their country was being subtly invaded by China. They pointed to the almost 300 per cent increase of overseas Chinese in-migration to the Philippines between 2016 to 2019, which was driven by the rapid increase of Philippine Offshore Gaming Operator (POGO) establishments in the country (Senate of the Philippines 2020; Venzon 2019). There were even those who feared Chinese annexation, with their country becoming a "province of China" (Reuters 2018). One of our participants, Luz, a 40-year-old female financial advisor, echoed these sentiments when she described the Chinese government as "exploitative". Her opinion was that it was only in talks with Duterte's government "to grab the China Sea" (*sic*).

There were also historical roots to the anti-Chinese sentiment of Filipinos, owing to the presence of Chinese migrants that predates the formation of the Philippines as a postcolonial nation. For instance, the trope of the "untrustworthy Chinaman" has long circulated amongst the locals. This can be traced back to the physical and social exclusion of the Chinese in Manila during the almost 400-year Spanish colonial regime from the 1500s to the 1800s (Chu 2010). Parallel to this is the trope of the "disloyal" Chinese. This accusation has often been thrown at the country's Chinese-Filipino minority community, despite their high degree of integration with broader Filipino society (Ang See and Ang See 2019). These claims have been enmeshed with the complicated feelings that non-Chinese Filipinos have with the rapid socio-economic ascent of many in the Chinese-Filipino community, which gained momentum during

the almost 50-year American colonial period in the early to mid-1900s and continues today (Chu 2021). For instance, Amielhyn, a 24-year-old female administrative assistant, recounted that it was nothing new for her co-workers to express disdain for their Chinese-Filipino boss. She said it made her cringe when out of their boss' earshot, her colleagues would use the slur "chingchong" in discussions about the unfair advantage of the Chinese in the Philippines.

The digital disinformation campaigns in favour of Duterte sought to put a gloss on his earlier pivot to China. This was especially since none of the 26 promised projects envisioned as part of China's Belt and Road Initiative materialized during his presidency (Ridon 2021). The strategy failed to deliver big-ticket development projects like the Subic-Clark railway project, the Bonifacio Global City-Ninoy Aquino International Airport segment of the Metro Manila Bus Rapid Transit, the safe and smart city projects for the Bases Conversion and Development Authority, and transportation and logistics infrastructure at Sangley Point.

The online campaigns amplified a crafted narrative of Duterte pursuing the Philippines' best interests by hedging between China and the US. To this end, they disseminated content to burnish his image as a strong leader and a master tactician. As an example, VERA Files (2021) fact-checked a video posted on the Facebook page of *Filipinews Today* that "spliced old video pronouncements of President Rodrigo Duterte to mislead that he had joined the United States in 'denouncing and warning' China for deploying and positioning ships in Philippine waters".

Such campaigns played well with the interview participants who were supportive of Duterte. When confronted with the former president's attempt at being friendly with China, Andrew, a 27-year-old male sales executive, mirrored the crafted narrative described above. He reasoned that this issue had to be placed in the context of Duterte's overall excellent governance. If anything, he said, "The relationship between the Philippines and China is not the biggest problem of our country anyway".

But even when the participants engaged in mental acrobatics that echoed the line of digital disinformation campaigns defending Duterte's China-friendly stance, they would still articulate the shared imaginary of anti-Chinese resentment. Take for instance Marisol, a 29-year-old

female administrative assistant. She explained that she did not find anything "majorly wrong" with Duterte wanting to be close to China. In fact, she could forgive the president for trying to do so. However, she disliked that she was being made to feel that the Philippines was becoming a "province of China". Marisol expressed dismay about the country's openness to Chinese migrants. She shared that on a recent trip to Divisoria—a shopping area in Manila frequented by the popular class—she felt overwhelmed by the Chinese presence there. She said it was "like being in China ... because there's so many Chinese stall owners there", without acknowledging that some of them were actually Chinese Filipinos.

Meanwhile, the digital disinformation campaigns that opposed Duterte aimed to weaponize against him his overtures towards China. Given that no other critique seemed to stick to the former president's "Teflon" populist political image and performance, these campaigns zeroed in on his perceived closeness to Beijing. Anti-Duterte elements put out content that portrayed an image of his government as China's lapdog. In another fact check by VERA Files (2020), they found a fake quote card published on the Facebook page *Confeermed* that falsely attributed to Duterte ally Senator Bong Go a statement that "he would suggest to Pres. Rodrigo Duterte to replace 'whining government employees' with Chinese workers and granting them civil service eligibility".

Despite aligning with the overall message of disinformation campaigns that blasted Duterte's stance towards China, the interviewees who opposed him were quick to point out that they were "not racist". Unfortunately, because of their frustration with the former president's continued popularity despite the many criticisms levelled against him, they would make remarks that validated, even if only subtly, the shared imaginary of anti-Chinese resentment.

One stark example is Armand, a 45-year-old male store supervisor, who claimed to have a nuanced view of Philippines-China relations. In the course of our conversation with him, however, he suddenly made a false claim that 90 per cent of the Chinese migrants presently in the Philippines were "illegal" and had "no papers". Armand then made the problematically racist link between this fake number and the challenging COVID-19 pandemic conditions in the country. He said, "It came

from them [the Chinese] and it has spread. They want to contain it, but unfortunately, it has just spread more and more." This kind of thinking also animated how Jackie, a 24-year-old male project officer, attempted to explain away anti-Chinese sentiments on social media. He said that he did not condone these expressions. But given what was happening to the country during the pandemic, "there are valid reasons why people say that."

In all, our interviews indicated that anti-Chinese digital disinformation from across political camps did not shift our participants' support or opposition to Duterte. They clearly showed, however, that campaigns aiming to connect with the shared imaginary of anti-Chinese resentment had serious consequences. In an attempt at political expediency, they served to reinforce pernicious forms of nationalism and racism.

Historically Distorted Disinformation and the Yearning for a "Strong Leader"

A second set of digital disinformation content that our interview participants came across targeted the contemporary political anxieties of Filipinos. These materials came from camps supporting the family of the current president—but at the time of the research, potential 2022 presidential candidate—Ferdinand Marcos Jr. They looked to be part of long-running historical distortion campaigns that preceded even the 2016 national elections. Collectively, they sought to recast the Philippines' Martial Law period as a "golden age" for the country and as a testament to the aspirational brand of leadership of Marcos Jr.'s father, the late President Ferdinand Marcos Sr. These campaigns deftly connected with the shared imaginary of some Filipinos about yearning for a "strong leader". Their collective stories, sentiments, and ways of doing things were crystallized in the idea that the country needed someone who would instil discipline in their compatriots and, consequently, create the conditions for true social progress in their country.

Here it must be made clear that the participants had a range of political stances, including about the Marcoses. Unlike the highly polarized discourses on social media, however, they appeared to possess a more nuanced view of politics. This aligns with existing scholarship that

describes Filipinos as having low political polarization (see Arugay and Slater 2018; Curato 2018). Although they had leanings that were more or less supportive of different political personalities in the Philippines, they were also cognizant of the country's political dynamics. They saw their society's political divides as less about ordinary citizens like themselves and more about the country's oligarchic leaders. We can see this with Janzen, a 36-year-old male office staff. He expressed his belief that one should not attach one's personal fortunes to whichever "Pontius Pilate" was in power, "not to Ninoy [Aquino, who is often depicted as the nemesis of Marcos Sr.], not to the Marcoses, or whoever else et cetera." He instead believed that "one's livelihood is yours … you and you alone can do what is needed for your own survival".

That said, many of the participants expressed disillusionment—even if in differing degrees—with the kind of Philippine democracy that emerged in the aftermath of the 1986 People Power Revolution, which ousted Marcos Sr. They were part of the generation who were either not born yet or were still children in 1986. They grew up witnessing a time of hope, when people thought they were in a new era of democracy that would lead the nation towards economic and social development (Villegas 1987, p. 205.) Many of the participants instead felt dragged down by the "infighting elites" jostling for power. This is something encapsulated by the above-mentioned quotation from Janzen. These participants also felt similarly about the "undisciplined masses" who did not know how to improve their lot on their own. For an example of this, we return to Armand, the 45-year-old male store supervisor. He exclaimed, "That's really the problem with Filipinos. When someone tries to put limits on what they do, they find that difficult ... It doesn't matter what the government tries to do, if people never follow the rules …"

The shared imaginary of yearning for a strong leader seemed exceptionally pronounced for those participants who were supportive of the Marcoses. They thought of themselves as good citizens and, so, expressed a strong desire for a leader capable of disciplining the rest of the citizenry towards societal progress. This imagined leader of theirs would do whatever it takes to clamp down on rulebreakers, so that hardworking and law-abiding individuals like them can be allowed to pull up their own bootstraps and work on making their lives better. Such

a belief is rooted in the promise of the *Bagong Lipunan* (or New Society), which was Marcos Sr.'s vision of a "great epic of national development" (Martial Law Museum, n.d.). Through broad societal reforms that addressed poverty, hunger, corruption, deception, and violence, "every individual Filipino could be free to fulfil their potential as human beings" (ibid.).

The participants open to thinking of Marcos Jr. as a presidential candidate were also those who expressed support for Duterte. It seemed like the latter further ignited their yearning for a strong leader. To explain why this was the case, one can turn to the work of the anthropologist Wataru Kusaka (2017). He argues that as president, Duterte depicted himself as a "social bandit" who would do everything needed to "save" good citizens. As one of his grand performances of reining in the country's oligarchs, he allowed himself to be widely perceived as influencing Congress in its decision to take away the broadcasting franchise of the supposedly elite-allied media network ABS-CBN. By shutting down one of the leading media companies in the Philippines, he wanted to showcase his ability to go toe-to-toe with even the most powerful elements in society (Robles 2020). Parallel to this, his grand performance of disciplining the masses was his government's violent "War on Drugs". Through recognized police operations that then inspired "vigilante-style" killings, it left thousands of urban poor individuals dead (Atun et al. 2019).

The collective narratives, emotions, and ways of doing things surrounding Duterte's actions were bolstered by engineered online content that romanticized his governance style. For example, the geographer Deirdre McKay (2020) found a meme featuring a portrait of a smiling Duterte with the text "We love our President!". According to her, "the original meme, circa 2016, is found on thirteen sites, including Twitter and Facebook pages and meme generators, as well as featuring in news reports on the online activities of the 2016 presidential election campaign". McKay recounted how one Filipino migrant worker decorated a printed version of this meme with four cut-out hearts that each contained the following lines: "I love my president. Honest and true."; "God bless all people in the Philippines."; "He corrects mistakes correctly."; "He supports kids in schooling." Some of our participants

also had similar sentiments. For instance, Jennica, a 22-year-old female homemaker, expressed her respect for Duterte and his brand of good-citizens-first leadership. She admonished, "We should just follow where he goes … he's already thought really hard about whether his plans are good for us."

The heightened yearning for a strong leader that Duterte benefitted from made some of the participants receptive to digital disinformation about Martial Law and Marcos Sr. This, in turn, opened them up to considering Marcos Jr. as a viable presidential candidate. Significantly, this happened even if they were aware of the many recorded atrocities during the Martial Law era, including abuse, torture, disappearances, and killings (see Human Rights Violations Victims' Memorial Commission 2023).

As an example, we can look at the take of the participants supportive of Marcos Jr. about one of the most prevalent lines of digital disinformation: that the Martial Law era was a "golden age" of peace and prosperity for the Philippines. AFP Philippines (2020) fact-checked a meme claiming that under the presidency of Marcos Sr., the Philippines was only second to Japan in the world's list of richest countries. This was shared across multiple social media platforms, with one post on Facebook being shared over 300 times.

One of the participants we mentioned earlier was Luz, a 40-year-old female financial advisor. Like the online campaigns, she believed that the Martial Law era really was a golden age for the Philippines. Luz belied the claim that this was just a social media fabrication and said that this was really "real life". She came to this conclusion even if her grandparents did tell her that during the Martial Law era, the Marcoses were "very strict. You weren't allowed to loiter out in the streets. There were designated hours when you could go out and when you should go home." After all, they also said that life during that time "was very good".

Jennilyn, a 29-year-old female administrative assistant, said something similar. Also aligning with the online campaigns, she wondered out loud how much progress the Philippines would have had at present if Marcos Sr. was still president. Jennilyn acknowledged that people's freedoms during the Martial Law period really were curtailed. She recounted her

parents saying that at the time, "You couldn't even watch cartoons on TV. It wasn't allowed." Still, Jennilyn thought that it was good for Marcos Sr. to have disciplined Filipinos. She claimed "Filipinos don't really follow the rules unless you become very strict with them. So, there's a reason why Marcos [Sr.] did what he did."

What our interviews with the participants supportive of the Marcoses indicated was how open some precarious middle-class Filipinos are to the idea of a president who wields unchecked executive powers. Because of their everyday life experiences in a seemingly decaying capital city, they do not at all mind strict discipline if it can usher in the long-awaited social progress.

MEDIA CONSUMPTION PRACTICES AND CONCERNS ABOUT SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS

Social Media Diet Curation

One of the common media consumption practices amongst the participants was to try and avoid what they described as "toxic" material online, which they mostly defined as political content. They explained that their lives were already stressful. The context of the pandemic conditions of 2021 further heightened this feeling. As such, they did not want to engage with online content that would exacerbate their stress.

In actuality, however, some of the participants would still be exposed to much of the content—including digital disinformation—shared by people they were connected to on their social media networks. But, having no energy to scrutinize most of the featured posts on their feeds, they would just inattentively scroll through them. To give an example of this, we return to Janzen, a 36-year-old male office staff. He said that he found all the political gossip on Twitter too much, as he grew up being taught to eschew community rumour-mongers. The content of the Twitter posts would still register with Janzen, but he would not bother thinking through them. As he said, "I don't really care. I look at it and that's it. It's annoying to actually read what you see because when you get affected, then you're the one who loses out. So, I don't let myself get affected …"

Unfortunately, digital disinformation producers know that some people engage with online content in this inattentive way. They work this to their advantage by crafting content that is punchy, entertaining, and memorable. They package these in social media posts that mimic the look and feel of actual news content that might not be so easily discernible as fake news (Tandoc, Chew, and Lim 2020). Because people find it challenging to be constantly vigilant with what they see online, the embedded messages in such kinds of content still manage to connect.

Platform Jumping

Alongside the participants' social media curation, they also try to get away from toxic people and interactions online. To do this, they make full use of how technologies have increasingly become "polymedia" (Madianou and Miller 2012), that is, "a constellation of different media as an integrated environment in which each medium finds its niche in relation to the others" (p. 3). The participants would jump around from one social media platform to another to tend to the different relationships they have online. One of the things they want to do is to create a "safe space" to express their existing beliefs whilst avoiding those who held different political perspectives.

Earlier, we mentioned Roger, a 24-year-old male project officer. He was one of the participants who explained why he would do platform jumping. Roger said that he would often be on Facebook because he used it to keep in touch with his relatives, most of whom stayed online on that platform. He also said, however, that he would switch to Twitter whenever he felt the need to articulate his political opinions. Roger explained, "Most of my relatives and friends who are on Facebook don't really share my opinions about certain things. What I do is just share on Twitter."

Parallel to Roger's recounting was that of June, a 21-year-old female university working student. She said although she would be on Facebook for her social interactions, she shunned the political content on the platform. June thought all of it was "fake news". Conversely, she thought "almost everything on Twitter is true". With her simplistic binary

as a guide, she would engage more with political matters on this other platform instead.

One matter of concern about platform jumping is that it allows a person to use their access to diverse networks of people on social media to find like-minded communities, which narrows their exposure to different ideas. This ability to self-select which online channels or communities to join prevents them from being exposed to other alternative viewpoints and a broader range of issues. This, in turn, opens the participants up to the risk of finding themselves in an echo chamber that digital disinformation producers seek to amplify (see Ong 2022). The irony is that their desire to avoid toxic online content drove them to create their own online safe spaces.

Alternative Fact-Checking

Another practice that heightens the susceptibility of online media consumers to disinformation is, paradoxically, fact-checking that is driven by an inherent distrust of mainstream media. Jennica, a 22-year-old female homemaker whom we talked about earlier in this piece, warned, "It's important to not immediately believe what's reported online. It might be fake news." She argued that it was of utmost importance to countercheck content on the Internet by looking at other sources.

But this was where the problem would lie. To be sure, there were still those who turned to traditionally authoritative sources to ascertain whether a news item was true or not. Those participants primarily referenced the mainstream news media brands in the Philippines. Some of them would mention *TV Patrol*, the flagship primetime news programme of ABS-CBN, which has streamed its content online since Duterte's allies shut them down. Others would say they trusted the news programmes of GMA Network, which is currently the Philippines' sole broadcasting giant. Others still point to mainstream online news brands like Inquirer.net, Philstar.com, and Rappler.com.

There were other participants, however, who no longer trusted these kinds of sources, labelling them as biased. For instance, Jhoanna, a 32-year-old female freelance officer, said that her sister who had once worked for a mainstream news media organization shared with her that,

"Often what you see in the news is not true. It's already been framed and angled in a certain way. You don't really get to see the whole picture." The way she saw it, the misgivings of mainstream media did not call for industry reform. It called for a new and different set of "authoritative" sources of information. This sentiment was shared by Marisol, a 29-year-old female administrative assistant whom we mentioned earlier. She scorned mainstream media, saying, "If I want to know what's really going on, I prefer knowing from the source itself. Isn't it that vloggers who support politicians have their own channels? I'd rather listen directly to them than the potentially exaggerated version of MSM (mainstream media)".

Digital disinformation producers have perniciously amplified the line of thinking that mainstream media is beyond saving. Not only are the media "bias" (*sic*), but they are also on the side of the Philippines' powerful elites (see Balod and Hameleers 2019). Apart from mainstream media, digital disinformation producers have also deployed this argument to question other traditional sources of authoritative information more broadly, like academics and experts. These producers have pushed the idea that, unlike such people, digital influencers and vloggers are better attuned to the true sentiments of ordinary Filipinos (see Nolasco 2019).

CONCLUSION

We have argued that crucial to developing effective communicative counter-disinformation initiatives is an understanding of people's actual engagement with fake news and political trolling online. Drawing on our insights about how the precarious middle class in Manila consumes racist and historically distorted content on social media, we offer two key suggestions. Both involve turning digital disinformation on its head by using its very own strategies.

The first suggestion is based on how people's vulnerability to digital disinformation can be found in their shared imaginaries towards contentious or polarizing issues. In the case of our participants, fake news and political trolling content continuously poked at their entanglements with the Philippines' racial and ethnic as well as social class divides. Counter-disinformation efforts should consequently craft

bespoke interventions that bring to the fore the possibility of a common reality based on people's shared stories, sentiments, and practices. Unfortunately, digital disinformation producers have demonized fact-checking and media literacy as a means of establishing a common reality. They have labelled initiatives at imparting facts and providing relevant context as elitist, saying that those behind these counter-disinformation initiatives feel that they know better than everyone else.

One possible way for counter-disinformation efforts to get beyond this problem is to move away from overly direct delivery of facts and relevant context. They can be more creative in sharing information with people by weaving such content into engaging narratives in media. Historical facts can, for instance, be incorporated into stories of family, drama, action, or romance. One other avenue that can be simultaneously explored would be to present content via compelling formats across media. Some of the more promising formats include animated online series and interactive digital games. For all these, collaborating with well-intentioned professionals in the media and creative industries would be key.

The second suggestion relates to people's media consumption practices that have made them vulnerable to sustained and sophisticated digital disinformation campaigns. These campaigns provide problematic frames for people's shared imaginaries, which they then dig into. Over time, their content become woven into people's predominant concerns and perceptions.

For counter-disinformation efforts to effectively push back at long-game disinformation campaigns, they cannot be disparate ad hoc projects. They need to be programmatic. This means establishing an alternative way of framing people's shared imaginaries. And this framing should be more democratically oriented and less divisive than the prevailing ones. Counter-disinformation efforts need to eschew top-down counter-disinformation frameworks offered by multilateral institutions in favour of paying close attention to people's collective narratives, feelings, and practices. These shared imaginaries should then be the basis for coming up with a coordinated series of projects.

For this to work, however, there also needs to be in place organized funding mechanisms. The hope then is that funders will provide more

support for long-term and creative efforts. Indeed, whilst the battleground is imaginative, its necessities are still very much material.

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