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Digital disinformation and the imaginative dimension of communication

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Abstract
To nuance current understandings of the proliferation of digital disinformation, this article seeks to develop an approach that emphasizes the imaginative dimension of this communication phenomenon. Anchored on ideas about the sociality of communication, this piece conceptualizes how fake news and political trolling online work in relation to particular shared understandings people have of their sociopolitical landscape. It offers the possibility of expanding the information-oriented approach to communication taken by many journalistic interventions against digital disinformation. It particularly opens up alternatives to the problematic strategy of challenging social media manipulation solely by doubling down on objectivity and facts.

Keywords
digital disinformation, fake news, political trolling, social narratives, audiences

The slew of recent works on digital disinformation has spotlighted the unprecedented proliferation of organized information disorder campaigns across the globe. Many of these works—including those from journalists and academics alike—have focused on revealing the startling arsenal of social media manipulation strategies that have been developed in different countries the world over (Bradshaw & Howard, 2017). They have cataloged, among others, Cambridge Analytica's psychographic targeting experiments on Facebook (Cadwalladr & Graham-Harrison, 2018; Ireton & Posetti, 2018), the Russian troll army's anti-Western operations on Twitter (Martineau, 2019; Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017), and the Chinese "Fifty-Cent Army's" strategic distraction initiatives within their own country's "Great Firewall" (Jing, 2016; King et al., 2017). Many of these works have been crucial to mapping out the toxic confluence of socio-structural, technological, and even personal conditions that have led to the rapid innovations characterizing today's information disorder online. Indeed, they have been at the heart of how different governments, big

tech companies, and third sector groups are developing their counter-disinformation strategies.

This article, however, argues that a comprehensive understanding of digital disinformation necessitates an approach that can complement production-focused studies about this pernicious phenomenon. Intentionally or otherwise, all the attention paid to taxonomizing the kinds of digital disinformation and anatomizing its producers and their techniques seems to have inadvertently contributed to a problematic overemphasis on the informational dimension of fake news and political trolling. A clear manifestation of this is the moral panics in public discourse—from journalistic pieces to media and information literacy initiatives—that have been driven by concern for the ever-diversifying strategies of falsehood, deception, and misdirection online (e.g., Alba & Satariano, 2019; Leetaru, 2019; Nunberg, 2019).

Rehearsing the "powerful media-weak audiences" approach, but this time for our digital age, the moral panics about digital disinformation tend to overinflate the manipulative power of technologies and assume that dumbed-down social media users are unable to recognize truths and lies (see Livingstone, 2018; for examples, see also Woolley & Guilbeault, 2017; Wylie, 2019). Of course it cannot be denied that fake news and political trolling have contributed to undermining democratic deliberation across many contexts, from the so-called mature democracies in Europe to the so-called transitional democracies in Asia (Lim, 2020). What is problematic with today's panics, however, is that they take a strong information-orientation to understanding digital disinformation as communication. Echoing the information theory approach of Shannon and Weaver (1949), their concern has centered on the distortion of society's information dissemination processes. They consequently craft solutions along these lines. In journalism, one clear influence of this thinking is how contemporary news media have poured their energies primarily toward fact-checking initiatives (Graves, 2016). Their aim here is to help people separate out "truths" and "lies," especially online (see Greenblatt, 2017). Although these initiatives are important, I argue that their information-oriented approach to communication makes them unable to address a key communicative dynamic at the heart of fake news and political trolling (see Tandoc et al., 2019). And it is this that the piece addresses.

If we are to have a nuanced understanding of digital disinformation, it is important to pay equal attention to the imaginative dimension of this form of public, if pernicious, communication (see Blumler & Gurevitch, 1995). This dimension is particularly about the cultural, emotional, and narratival roots of fake news and political trolling online. By insisting on this point, this article builds on previous work positing that central to the persuasive power of digital disinformation is that they engage with powerful social narratives that people hold onto (Cabañes et al., 2019).

These narratives pertain to the stories that people tell each other that shape their sense of time and space and, consequently, enable them to contribute to the production of social organization (Jameson, 1981). Crucially for this piece, this notion underscores that although institutional media might work to frame public issues in ways that push for ideological closure as regards how to view the social world, there will be groups of people who can bring to bear diverse and even divergent understandings of the same world (Reese et al., 2001). Attending to social narratives allows us to recognize that digital media users actually play a crucial role in crafting, entrenching, and challenging the social views that circulate across the media. At the same time, it makes us cognizant of how disinformation can be pernicious because they tend to amplify people's shared stories, and especially those that diverge from established media narratives.

Of the diverse social narratives out there, the most relevant for this article is what the sociologist Arlie Hochschild (2016) calls "deep stories." Hochschild describes these as the stories that people tell themselves about who they are, what values they hold, and, ultimately, what their place in society is. As her ethnographic study reveals, these deep stories help shape, among many things, people's political choices and actions. This is an idea that is explained in greater detail later in this piece. At this juncture, however, what needs to be said is that to go beyond the moral panics about the triumph of disinformation over information, it is crucial to see fake news and political trolling as not only about clear-cut truths and lies. It is also about a constantly shifting landscape of resonances, dissonances, and counterpoints to the deeply held social views that people have about their socio-political realities.

This article also points out the possibility of counter-disinformation strategies that address not only its impact on how we receive information about our democratic societies, but on how we constitute their imaginaries of them. CW Anderson's (2018) work on the relationship between journalism and data indicates that although problematic, it is unsurprising that the primary journalistic choice for combatting digital disinformation has been fact-checking. Grounded in a historical analysis of journalistic practice, Anderson points out that in crisis moments like the election of Donald Trump in the 2016 U.S. elections and the vote for Brexit in the 2016 U.K. referendum, journalism has traditionally responded by "doubling down on objectivity" (p. 174).

Alongside objectivity however, it is also important for the news media to attend to the ways in which people's understandings of the social narratives carried by digital disinformation are entangled with a country's entrenched political systems, class hierarchies, and social dynamics (see Kreiss et al., 2017). This is especially the case given how in many country contexts, both the verbal and the visual language of scientific fact has become politicized and "cast as an elitist discourse that is alienating or, worse, insulting" (Anderson, 2018, p. 15). Equally important is that apart from the crisis of so-called mature democracies in the West, there are also distinct historical antecedents of mediatized populisms across the global

South (e.g., see Chakravartty & Roy, 2017; Gonzalez-Vicente & Carroll, 2017). This piece contends that part of journalism's counter-disinformation strategies then should be an engagement with the same social narratives that predominate both in digital disinformation and in people's deep stories about the world, either by connecting with them or provoking reflection about them.

The rest of this article develops an approach to digital disinformation that seriously considers its imaginative dimension and, consequently, its embeddedness in social narratives. And as an indication of how this approach might be useful, it provides quick sketches that map the approach onto the particular case of the Philippines, a country that is at the forefront of global innovations on information disorder online (Silverman, 2019). And as in many democratizing contexts today, it is a country where the success of fake news and trolling cannot be understood apart from people's shared imaginaries about populism and democracy (Arguelles, 2019; Curato, 2016).

On the Sociality of Digital Disinformation as a Communication Phenomenon

In developing an approach that aims to emphasize the imaginative dimension of digital disinformation, it is helpful to begin by establishing the sociality of this communication phenomenon. This means going beyond describing the communicative dynamics of fake news and political trolling as just about the distortion of information. It necessitates that we think about how the communication that these techniques engage in is enmeshed in human sociality, that is, the way that persons constitute their lives within a dynamic matrix of relations (Long & Moore, 2012). Concretely, this involves understanding that as communicative acts, these techniques connect with people's imaginaries and feelings about their social relations and, crucially, about their place in this social world. In further conceptualizing the sociality of communication generally and digital disinformation particularly, this article draws insights from two key works in the field of media and communication: James Carey (1989) on communication as ritual and Roger Silverstone (1999, 2002) on communication and mediation.

Disinformation and the Ritual View of Communication

The significance of Carey's (1989) work for this article lies in his well-known notion that apart from the all too often predominant transmission view of communication, we should also have an appreciation of the ritual view of it. For this, we need to see communication less from a technical lens and more from that of dynamic sociality. This is something we need to remember when thinking about digital disinformation.

Carey (1989) does not deny communication's informational dimension, that is, "the transmission of signals or messages over distance for the purpose of control" (p. 15). He is emphatic though about communication's imaginative

dimension as well, that it is also about "sharing, participation, association, fellowship and the possession of a common faith" (p. 18). Using this ritual view to explain newspapers beyond its information-imparting function, Carey underscores that their value lies in how they foster shared practices and shared perspectives. For him, it matters that we attend to how newspapers allow people to participate in the act of receiving and reading news material every day and in sustaining particular conceptions of the world around them. Importantly for the discussion at hand, Carey says that we should see news not just as pure information, "but [as] a portrayal of the contending forces in the world" (p. 16). And it allows its readers to share in this "presentation of reality that gives life an overall form, order, and tone" (p. 21).

Learning from the ritual view of communication, an approach that underscores the imaginative dimension of digital disinformation should not deny its transmissional quality. It matters that we are aware that strategists behind fake news and political trolling do seek to control, manipulate, and divert public attention as regards political personalities and political issues (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). But at the same time, this approach should be cognizant that the success of attempts at influencing the public is premised on how embedded these are in the shared practices and shared views that people have of their socio-political world. Digital disinformation producers are, therefore, not only in the business of truths and lies. They are also about engaging with the sociality of human communication, especially by connecting to, amplifying, and/or undermining particular shared visions among people (see Anderson, 2018).

Disinformation and the Mediational Approach to Communication

Although this article takes from Carey (1989) its general stance about digital disinformation as embedded in the dynamic sociality of shared views of the world, it draws from the work of Roger Silverstone (1999, 2002) the particular elements for unpacking this embeddedness. Silverstone's notion of mediation is valuable here for how it emphasizes the political element in the sociality of contemporary communication. He shows that this is something that runs across the distinct but entwined processes of creating, circulating, and transforming meanings and values attached to media. He defines mediation as a "fundamentally, but unevenly, dialectical process in which institutionalised media of communication . . . are involved in the general circulation of symbols in social life" (Silverstone, 2002, p. 761). This piece contends that we need to think about digital disinformation in similar terms, that is, as a fundamentally dialectical and also uneven exercise on constructing and reconstructing socio-political narratives in society.

In some ways, Carey's (1989) emphasis on the power of news media in shaping people's shared ways of looking at the world is also captured in the dynamics of mediation. This is because Silverstone (2006) acknowledges that those who are part of institutionalized media often have, in the first instance, the capacity to

define and determine these shared perspectives. As he puts it, they have "the power of the edit" (p. 141). However, Silverstone also says the mediational process is dialectical. He reminds us that the ordinary people who engage with the media play a key role in affirming, challenging, and even transforming the shared perspectives offered by the media. There is, consequently, an issue of power involved in the process of mediation, as media producers and media audiences negotiate about what meanings and values might be attached to the mediated symbols that circulate across society. So, key to the mediational approach is the importance of recognizing not only the "instability and flux" of these shared meanings and values, but also "their transformations" and "the politics of their fixing" (p. 16).

Based on the notion of mediation, a second lesson we need for a more careful approach to digital disinformation is that it should attend to the different people involved in the circulation and transformation of particularly dominant social narratives (see Georgiou, 2013; Madianou, 2005; Thumim, 2012). Such a consideration should cover the disinformation producers who, despite their pretense to individual authenticity, are mostly entwined with the institutionalized media (see Xia et al., 2019). Equally important, it should cover the "ordinary people" who constitute the different publics in social media (see Burgess, 2006; Thumim, 2012). They are those who might not be part of institutionalized media but nevertheless consume and produce social media content, including those who engage with digital disinformation. This can range from the "citizen marketers" who zealously do free promotional labor for the politicians and public causes they support to the users whose everyday interactions with social media are more mundane or even oblique (see Das & Ytre-Arne, 2018; Penney, 2017). Because the mediational approach to communication was theorized in the early days of digital media, our current thinking should account for the distinctions—but without ignoring the similarities—in which the negotiation between disinformation producers and consumers operate in contemporary society (Livingstone, 2018; Shifman, 2013). It should also account for the increasingly convergent experience that they have with media, such as the blurring of the lines between mainstream and social media, and content, such as the blurring of the lines between news and entertainment (Highfield, 2016).

To re-iterate, this article will, from time to time, map the approach to digital disinformation it is developing on to the Philippines case. This is meant to illustrate the usefulness of thinking about the imaginative dimension of fake news and political trolling. But at the same time, this is a deliberate move to de-Westernize the conversation around digital disinformation in extant scholarship, which still tends to be primarily about so-called mature Western democracies (e.g., Marwick & Lewis, 2017; Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017; Woolley & Guilbeault, 2017). The Philippines is a reminder of how distinctive the dynamics of digital disinformation can be in such a transitional democracy. As this piece fleshes out in the subsequent sections, the country's primarily market-driven disinformation industry emerges out of its democratizing context, which is

characterized by a strong personality-orientation and by patron-client ties that completely overwhelm its weak party system (Bionat, 1998; Coronel et al., 2004). At the same time, the Philippines is also a meaningful case on its own because it is at the cutting-edge of innovations on fake news and political trolling. A Facebook executive even colorfully described the country as the "patient zero" in the global disinformation epidemic (Harbath, 2018). In the same way that the Philippines is thought to be the Petri dish for many disinformation experiments, it has also been regarded as the site for testing many of their election integrity interventions.

On the Construction of Social Narratives and the Imaginative Dimension of Digital Disinformation

In the section above, we have established how the imaginative dimension of digital disinformation as a communication phenomenon is linked to the notion of sociality. We said that as communicative acts, fake news and political trolling online matter to the way that people constitute their lives within a dynamic matrix of relations. And this is because of how they zero in on people's imaginaries and feelings about their social relations and, crucially, about their place in this social world. This gives us the basis for a more nuanced account of how the social narratives carried in fake news and political trolling content might get circulated and transformed. To fully flesh out the imaginative dimension of digital disinformation then, this section inquires into how digital disinformation producers connect, amplify, and/or undermine people's deep stories. It also looks into how the public draw from their deep stories in encountering the social narratives carried by fake news and political trolling online.

On the Producers of Digital Disinformation

To understand how the imaginative dimension of communication matters to the producers of digital disinformation, we should look at how they engage with people's deep stories. Here, the existing literature on political communication—particularly on political marketing and campaigning as well as on performance and politics—has two important insights for us to build on.

One is that no matter what their claims to communicative power are, political communication professionals cannot just successfully push for the political messages their principals and/or their profit targets demand. Whether the campaigns that these professionals handle are personality- or issue-oriented, they know that they need to work with the existing social perspectives held by the audiences they are targeting. To put it in the terms I have established in this article, they need to attend to the imaginative dimension of digital disinformation work and connect to people's deep stories. We consequently need to move away from being shocked and awed by the digital weapons that digital disinformation producers brandish. We should instead understand that like other political communicators, having to deal with dynamic nature of people's shared views—

something that is developed more fully in the next subsection—means that these producers cannot predict with certainty how the fake news and political trolling content they create might be taken up.

In the quantitative tradition of political communication in the U.S.A., it has already been almost two decades since Shanto Iyengar and Adam Simon (2000) talked about the importance of "message resonance." Even then, they were already arguing that "campaign messages, whatever form they take—work their influence in concert with voters' prevailing predispositions and sentiments" (Iyengar and Simon, 2000, p. 158). These include both long-term concerns about political values and short-term concerns about what current issues need to be prioritized (see Ansolabehere et al., 1997; Petrocik, 1996). That said, their resonance model was heavily cognitive in focus and consequently had limited flexibility in terms of sociological analysis. In the qualitative tradition of U.K. scholarship on media and politics, however, we see a more socially oriented discussion of how political communicators engage with people's shared views of the world. The work of Margaret Scammell (2014) is exemplary of this. She points out that political marketing has become dominated by a branding model premised on personalizing politics, that is, constructing political campaigns that attend to the interests, needs, and emotional responses of its relevant publics. As she puts it, this work has become about bridging "distant high politics to the everyday" (p. 157). But because of the complexity of audiences, political communicators are not able to guarantee with complete certainty the success of the campaigns that they craft.

The above mentioned dynamics are clear in the case of digital disinformation producers in the Philippines. For instance, the two most successful work models of disinformation production in the country are premised on grasping the social narratives that currently predominate the imaginaries of the Filipino electorate. The so-called ad and PR work model is often led by industry consultants who own local "boutique" agencies (Ong & Cabañes, 2019). This hews very closely to the branding model of the personalization of politics (Scammell, 2014). This model relies on the honed instincts of the consultants in capturing what the "pulse" of the people is. But even then, their strategies do not always work, whether because, among many factors at play, they had misread the situation or because there were others who read it better than them. Meanwhile, there is also an emerging clickbait work model led by tech entrepreneurs (De Guzman, 2019). This one tries to identify the most resonant disinformation content through social media "engagement" metrics. Although it does not have the creative insight of an ad and PR expert, it relies on systematically churning out all sorts of content and then amplifies those that seem to be going viral online. In addition, this work model is heavily profit-oriented and so it does not care whether disinformation material become viral because people agree with them or otherwise.

The second related insight from extant work on political communication is that the adoption of the very same language that particular publics use in telling their

narratives about the social world is central to how professional campaigners engage with their deep stories. And like people's social narratives, this shared language is dynamic and constantly evolving. So when disinformation producers deploy fake news and political trolling that are premised on contingent assumptions about this language—for instance, whether they should tend toward the "civil" or the "vitriolic"; the "polished" or the "amateur"; the "technocratic" or the "populist"—changes in public sentiment can spell unintended consequences.

Scholarship on performance and politics sheds light on how political communication specialists work together with their principals to ensure that the latter communicate in ways that resonate with what people might expect of them. These communicative performances range from mainstream politicians walking the fine line between popularity and populism through hybrid performances of authority and authenticity (Coleman & Firmstone, 2017) to radical politicians ramping up their populist performances of being "one of the people" and being "against the establishment" (Moffitt, 2016). Together with this, some scholars have also underscored the importance of crafting messages that draw from ordinary people's "emotional literacies" (Corner & Pels, 2003) and "affective intelligences" (van Zoonen, 2005). This means using both verbal and visual language that are rationally graspable and, crucially, emotionally resonant with their individual personal experiences and their shared popular culture narratives. Recent works on performance and citizenship, however, remind us that this political communication strategy of tapping into the language of certain publics can be turned on its head and be used to voice grassroots protest and dissent. There are already a number of artists and activists working on this space (see Rovisco & Lunt, 2019).

Crystalizing the points above, digital disinformation producers in the Philippines have adopted the rhetoric that comes with the kind of populist political performance made mainstream in the country by its current president. Such rhetoric has enabled them to connect with a majority of the Filipino electorate—namely those from the precarious middle-class and the popular class—and their social narratives of disaffection toward the country's oligarchic democracy, which they associate with the socio-political elite and their upper-class values (Ong & Cabañes, 2019). This is evident, for instance, in the visual materials that disinformation producers deploy in social media. In these materials, they often weaponize "popular vernaculars," that is, the predominant aesthetic and symbolic resources that circulate in Filipino popular culture. To connect with people's anti-elite imaginaries, they select images and texts that powerfully resonate with key popular culture tropes, from well-loved local celebrities to well-loved quotations. More perniciously, these producers also deploy misogynistic photographs slut-shaming female political personalities and racist quotes demonizing migrants in the name of nationalism. It remains to be seen, however, whether this populist rhetoric will continue to be resonant with the people's social narratives about the country when the current president's term ends in 2 years. As historical perspectives on Philippine presidential politics have shown, the Filipino

electorate tends to follow a fairly established cycle of choosing leaders. They move from those whose personalities can be characterized as “great repudiators,” like the current president whose entire persona is built on a rejection of the overly technocratic approach of the previous liberal elite regime, to “orthodox innovators” to “preemptive leaders” to “disjunctive leaders” and back again (Teehankee, 2016b). And it is an open question as to what social narratives will come to the fore in the next cycle.

On the Audiences of Digital Disinformation

Paying attention to the imaginative dimension of communication means highlighting two important points about how audiences engage with digital disinformation. In many ways, these points are entwined with what has been discussed in the previous section. And both have to deal with contextualizing the ways in which audiences make sense of disinformation online.

The first point is related to the eloquent argument by Sonia Livingstone (2018) that even in our age of datafication, audiences are not “so gullible as popularly feared, precisely because they are neither homogeneous nor unthinking” (p. 4). Instead of viewing people in this simplistic way, we should instead understand their vulnerability to certain kinds of digital disinformation in relation to how much these are resonant, dissonant, or contrapuntal to their deep stories. As mentioned earlier, at the heart of these deep stories are the narratives that people craft and tell about politics and their place in it. As Hochschild’s (2016) ethnographic book with the Trump-leaning conservative, White, heterosexual, working-class Americans in Louisiana shows, these narratives do not need to be completely accurate as much as they need to feel true. In the case of the Louisiana voters, these happen to be the story about them being, as the book’s title goes, *Strangers in Their Own Land*. For these voters, other minorities—from the Muslims to the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) community to migrant communities—seem to have become increasingly prioritized by the state. Hochschild contends that this narrative powerfully captures their hopes, dreams, disappointments, and anxieties about contemporary America. There are also other scholars who have done a deep dive into similar deep stories that have become dearly held across different radical publics: from the fear and anger of toxic U.S. voters (Nussbaum, 2018) to the familial idioms of the U.K. far-right (Pilkington, 2016) to the cultural backlash of the “silent generation” in Anglo-Western societies (Norris & Inglehart, 2019).

Scholarship on digital disinformation needs to into the role of deep stories in people’s engagement with political messages. As Kreiss et al. (2017) argue, although there is much political communication research on the importance of people’s partisanship, more questions need to be asked about “where do these identities, feelings, and passion stem from, how are they created and sustained, and why do they take the expressive forms that they do?” (p. 476). And here, audience research can be helpful. It already has a long-standing tradition of

drawing connections between people's embeddedness within distinct social dynamics and how they engage with as well as express themselves through media content. Key examples of this are the works of Mirca Madianou (2005) on how the migrant experiences of Turkish-speaking Greeks influence and their stance toward national media news coverage; Jonathan Corpus Ong (2015) on how the firsthand experience that low-income Filipino television viewers have of poverty shape their evaluation of the proximate suffering of their compatriots; and Stephen Coleman (2006) on how the ordinary lives of the British fans of Big Brother matter to the way they approach mediated political election campaigns. All these works show that understanding how people interpet, talk about, and act on political messages always needs to be within the context of their consumption of other media content and, importantly, their everyday life experiences of the social world as well. More recently, audience research has also pondered how this social embeddedness of audiences continues to be important in their engagement with media content in our digital age. The scholars in the Consortium on Emerging Directions in Audience Research (CEDAR), for instance, insist that we should remember the complexity of audiences in describing how they interface with what is often construed to be the all-powerful digital media (Das, 2017). They identify four axes in which we see this complicated relationship, particularly "the audiences' changing coping strategies with hyper-connected and intrusive media, audience interruptions of media content flows, the co-option of audience labour, and the micro–macro politics of audience action" (p. 1258). These are things that we need to attend to if we are to understand how they connect with political messages online.

Going back to the case of the Philippines, there is currently little empirical exploration into the link between the deep stories held by the country's citizens and the digital disinformation that predominates its social media sphere. Very early on in the regime of the current president, Cabañes and Cornelio (2017) attempted an initial sociological reading of the link between the key concerns of ordinary Filipinos and the virulent and toxic kind of political trolling that took hold in the Philippines (for a reading of the deep stories held by those opposed to this regime, see Lorenzana, 2018). The argument was that digital disinformation in the Philippines would not have gained traction in the way that it has if this did not resonate with the social issues that concerned people the most, particularly those that mainstream media—whether wittingly or otherwise—did not sufficiently acknowledge and engage. This pointed out that the aggressive nature of the disinformation content in the Philippines became viral because unlike the mainstream media, they did so well to articulate the aspirations that ordinary Filipinos had about discipline brought about by their fears about the country's rampant disorder and criminality. The moral panics surrounding this was said to have "misse[d] out on the implicit discontent of the public and [their] desire for a game-changer who would finally recognise and act on their concerns" (p. 239). Although this continues to be key narrative strand in the minds of many in the Filipino public, gaining a comprehensive view of the key

imaginaries currently at play in the country needs much more empirical work that follow on from the questions raised by Kreiss et al. (2017).

The second point in this section is that audience interpretations also happen within the broader social context of people's media consumption practices. Even in this age when people are increasingly moving toward "personal" media technologies like mobile phones and social media apps, their practices of media consumption continue to be social (Marwick and boyd, 2014; Miller, 2011; Sinanan, 2017). This means that when people come across disinformation online, it is often the case that the practices surrounding how they process this does not end with them thinking about it alone in one single determinate moment. These would instead happen across time and within reach of the influence of other people around them.

Instructive to understanding the centrality of sociality in people's practices of processing digital disinformation is the literature on digital ethnography. Miller et al. (2016), for instance, point out that when people use information and communication technologies (ICTs) to materialize their desire for political participation, they also consider its impact on their social relationships. This is because alongside personal political inclinations, these people also take seriously their concerns for maintaining familial and friendly relationships with their social media contacts and minimizing the risks of damaging these. This has significant implications as regards how people might deal with information disorder online. This is borne out by works in journalism studies that explore how the social embeddedness of people influences how they might respond to fake news (e.g., Duffy et al., 2019; Tandoc et al., 2018; Wagner & Boczkowski, 2019). One particular study on how people engage with digital disinformation points out that social relationships are a key consideration in whether people decide to act on or ignore the fake news content they see on their newsfeeds. This study suggests that because people are always concerned with balancing their self-presentation and their relationships, perhaps "social media platforms can design functions that can allow proactive responses to fake news that do not compromise, but rather strengthen, social connections" (Tandoc et al., 2019, p. 14). Beyond this, this sociality of social media use is even more accentuated in contexts like India, China, and the Philippines where digital media access is not abundant, but instead range from "good enough" (Uy-Tioco, 2019) to "have less" (Soriano et al., 2018) to "deprived" (Arora & Scheiber, 2017). In these places, it is a commonplace experience to be literally sharing one's social media experience with partners, relatives, friends, neighbors, and other close relations.

To be sure, there is already a growing set of literature that does an excellent job of characterizing the social narratives that powerfully figure in today's Philippines (e.g., Arguelles, 2019; Curato, 2016; Teehankee, 2016a). Unfortunately, there has not been nearly enough scholarship about how the socially embedded media consumption practices of Filipinos matter in their engagement with the social narratives amplified by digital disinformation. To contribute to addressing this

gap, the author of this piece and the historian Fernando Santiago are currently working on a media ethnographic research that addresses this topic precisely. One of the cases that will be explored in the research will be the opposition disinformation about the complicated relationship between the Philippines and China, which is seen as a key weakness of the current regime. Although the springboard of opposition attacks had been the aggressive action by agents of the People's Republic of China on the West Philippine Sea–strained Filipino–Chinese diplomatic relations (Kim, 2016), this has recently been enlarged to include narratives of the Chinese embodying ecological destruction, disrespectful behavior, overbearing privilege, and most recently, epidemics (Ong et al., 2019). The goal of the study will be to understand how the social way in which Filipinos consume social media contribute to how much the social narratives pushed by fake news and political trolling online resonate or not with them. This will entail paying attention to how people's media practices are enmeshed in the experiences, discourses, and social norms about the Chinese that circulate among those with whom they consume social media.

Conclusion

This article sought to develop an approach to digital disinformation that seriously considers its imaginative dimension as a communication phenomenon. The peice argued that this approach should begin by establishing the sociality inherent in fake news and political trolling. For this, it turned to the work of James Carey (1989) on communication as ritual and of Roger Silverstone (1999, 2002) on communication and mediation. The rest of the article fleshed out how the said approach might look like. It first attended to how digital disinformation producers connect, amplify, and/or undermine social narratives, especially those that Arlie Hochschild (2016) refers to as people's deep stories. It then build on the Sonia Livingstone's (2018) points about audiences in our age of datafication to complicate our understanding of how the public draw from their deep stories when they encounter those social narratives mediated by digital disinformation. To indicate the usefulness of the insights presented, the piece also provided brief illustrations of how they might be mapped onto the Philippines, a country that is at the forefront of global innovations on fake news and political trolling online.

In light of what has been discussed above, this article re-iterates that counter-disinformation strategies that overly emphasize the informational dimension of communication are not enough. Journalistic fact-checking is of course helpful, and so is media literacy (see Chua, 2017; Nery, 2019). But they tend to put undue burden on individuals. We also need to pay attention to the imaginative dimension of disinformation as communication. And this means being able to identify not only the broader social narratives with which fake news and political trolling online resonate, but also understand the forces are shaping them.

We clearly cannot just double down on facts. We need other complementary tactics. And if these new counter-disinformation strategies are serious in

accounting for the imaginative dimension of communication, then they should consider at least three things. The first two might sound obvious, but they are worth stating because they are often drowned out by moral panics. One is to assiduously avoid thinking of audiences as easily controlled and manipulated and instead grasp that their vulnerability to digital disinformation is entwined with their social narratives and the sociality of their media consumption practices. Second is to be patient, cognizant of how—as in any political communication campaign—they can never fully predict how audiences will take up their messages.

The third point is the most urgent however. Counter-disinformation strategies should not only pay close attention to people's deep stories. Importantly, they should turn digital disinformation on its head by aiming to connect with these same social narratives. In the case of journalism, Barbie Zelizer (2017) argues, for instance, that journalists can do more to explore their capacity to harness the power of narrative and storytelling to "coalesce communit[ies]" (p. 176). Meanwhile, Nikunen et al. (2019) also point out that there are already strands of the profession beyond the American mainstream media tradition of objectivity that are open to taking "a more consciously emotional orientation to their potential readers" (p. 502). If counter-disinformation is to pose a stronger challenge to fake news and political trolling, then it needs to be imaginative in how it understands communication and, crucially, in how it itself communicates.

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