Assembling the Troll Factory: An Actor-Network Analysis of Disinformation in the Philippines

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ASSEMBLING THE TROLL FACTORY: AN ACTOR-NETWORK ANALYSIS OF DISINFORMATION IN THE PHILIPPINES

By

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ABSTRACT

At present, the study of disinformation remains relatively confined to personality-oriented and technologically deterministic approaches in the context of white nationalist populism or Trump cronyism. Guided by Actor-Network Theory's translation process, this thesis builds on ethnographically grounded and comparative research on disinformation producers in the Philippines as it looks at the two most recent presidential elections in 2016 and 2022. Drawing from netnographic observations across social media platforms Facebook, Twitter, Youtube and Twitter, as well as published media interviews, I propose that disinformation networks under Rodrigo Duterte and Bongbong Marcos proved deeply complex, hierarchic and exploitative. The empirical material illustrates how different actors came together under one voice, mobilising a network of entities to promote each presidential candidate's election. By making visible the organisational relations and labour arrangments underpinning political disinformation campaigns, as well as the mechanisms of control exercised over them, the following paper aims to deepen an understanding of these harmful networks in order to prevent their future occurrence.

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List of Acronyms and Abbreviations
ANT- Actor-Network Theory
OFW- Overseas Filipino Workers
BBM- Bongbong Marcos
PR- Public Relations

1. Introduction

"When you think about it, I 100% agree that the Philippines was patient zero. That was the beginning, because a month later it was Brexit and then Trump got the nomination and then you had the US election. And so there's a lot of related but separate problems when we're thinking about these issues…"

Katie Harbath, in 'Protecting Election Integrity on Facebook' (Rappler, 2018)

Four years ago, during a Facebook conference on election integrity, the Philippines was declared 'patient zero' in the global disinformation epidemic. At the time, reports of cyber trolling and keyboard armies were coming to define campaign trails (Sombatpoonsiri, 2018, 2, 6). With little to no regulatory consequences put in place, the means of disinformation production today have only grown more varied and elusive. The country's unique hyperconnectivity to social media has accelerated an intensive spread of political untruths (Combinido & Curato, 2021, 21). But the language of digital contagions, while exposing the digital strategies used to empower illiberal strongmen, fails to capture the economic and political inequalities which created the very space for a disinformation epidemic to metastasize. To understand the life cycle of disinformation from its first conception, a closer inquiry into the social identities and labour relations within the everyday economies of cyber trolling production is required. Herein lies the purpose of this research: it explores the organisational structures, subjectivities and processes which gave birth to disinformation during electoral periods within the Philippines. By unearthing the networks which shape disinformation today, it provides us a groundwork to better understand the international dimensions of related studies, including big data collection, commercial and state surveillance, or artificial intelligence advancement. These phenomena, while almost always treated and studied discretely, have at least one thing in common: the move of the control of knowledge to the centre of social life (Haggart et al., 2019, 2). In order to grasp the context from which this paper works within, a brief historicisation of the Filipino political system is necessary.

1.1 Background and context of the topic

A deeper exploration into the Philippine's colonial history, policing and information revolutions lends some critical insight into today's disinformation networks. The lengthy American occupation following the 1898 storming of Manila was not without its own colonial legacies (McCoy, 2009, 15). At this particular edge of empire, the Philippines became a drawn out social experiment in the use of policing, producing what some argue as the world's first surveillance state (McCoy, 2009, 16). The integration of policing within public morality enforcement, particularly against vices such as gambling and drugs, survived the colonial government, and the fusion of police power and political corruption became a root source of the country's repeated legitimation crises and volatile excess of executive power (McCoy, 2009, 16-17). In a series of autocratic regimes and populist uprisings following its independence in 1946, the Philippines has experienced waves of historical revisionism and democratic backsliding. By and by, this political history has produced an environment ripe for disinformation's picking.

For one, the period of Martial Law brought by President Ferdinand Marcos in the 1970s remains integral, albeit contested, in today's national consciousness. Suspending constitutional rights in the name of societal reform and anti-communism, Marcos Senior embarked on a brutal campaign of censorship, political repression and militaristic expansion (Reyes, 2018, 459). Many of those imprisoned in these bloody roundups included members of the Communist Party of the Philippines-New People's Army, intellectuals, journalists and elitist 'oligarchs', or private companies owned by anti-Marcos families (Reyes, 2018, 459, 463). Whilst effective in ending the Martial Law era, the resulting People Power revolution could not break an oligarchic system sustained so deeply by crony capitalism, police abuse and impunity (Reyes, 2018, 468-470).

The election of Rodrigo Duterte in 2016 signaled a dramatic shift in the political narrative, one fueled by demagoguery and rabble rousing. Running on a populist hardline ticket, Duterte's 'tough-talking' campaign positioned the war on drugs, anti-corruption and nationalism at the centre of his administration (Iannone, 2022, 18). Here, the phenomenon of 'Dutertismo' catered particularly well to a growing middle-class resentful of rising crime and poor infrastructure, including small shop owners and overseas workers (Thompson, 2016, 8). The normalisation of public shaming, harassment and political lies resonated heavily with public anxieties, particularly along lines of anti-elitism and the 'fake news' syndrome (Combinido & Curato, 2021, 27). Local journalists were not only made more vulnerable under this populist

rhetoric, but the Philippine's traditionally elitist media ownership structures also restricted independent journalists from speaking out against issues that profit compromising interests (Ong & Tapsell, 2022, 254-256). What critical academics Corpus Ong and Jason Cabanes coin as the 'architecture of networked disinformation' emerges from a country marred by weak political ideologies image-based politics, further beset by political personalities buying out their voters and constituents (Ong & Cabanes, 2019, 5773-4). As a result, the Philippines assumes the perfect breeding ground for new microtargeting techniques of disinformation.

Fifty-eight years onwards, political agendas and disinformation techniques have combined to achieve a new order of (un)truth. The decisive victory of Ferdinand 'Bongbong' Marcos Junior and Sara Duterte in 2022 symbolised the culmination of what Sol Iglesias defines as a 'competitive authoritarian regime': a system where free, or outwardly free, elections are countered by a reduction in civil liberties and political freedoms, especially as impunity holds outs (Iglesias, 2022, 576-7). The president's deflection of the atrocities committed under his father's name and his exaggeration of the regime's achievements has been a carefully scripted communicative performance over the years, carried through by inspirational memes and hashtags, loyalist Facebook groups, and fun and relatable digital profiles (Combinido & Curato, 2021, 32-33). The role of social media to re-glamourise the Marcos family has been especially unique in its capacity to enable fan participation in historical mythmaking, particularly with the 'celebrification' of family members, the whitewashing of Marcos Senior's dictatorship and narratives of national healing (Mendoza, 2022, 392-3). Amateur Tiktok collages, meme wars and reactionary Youtube videos accessorised the politically sanitised, hollow version of the official media campaign (Ong, 2022, 399). A product of a networked propaganda project which dates as early back as 2014 (Mendoza, 2022, 394), the 2022 elections demonstrate the long shelf-life of disinformation narratives beyond key political moments.

A conduit for political polarisation in the Philippines, aggravated by weak institutional organs and democratic fragility, digital information here is no less isolated from its economic relations. Three economic developments in particular have accelerated the digital trailblazer status of Filipino consumers. First, the Philippines today ranks as one of the biggest exporting countries of migrant labour (Combinido & Curato, 2021, 22). As it stands, there are approximately 2.3 million Overseas Filipino Workers (OFW), prompting a new generation of

'doing family' from a distance; in this context of migrant labour, the demands for connectivity have launched graduation livestreams, Facebook groups for legal advice or investment opportunities, and even online spaces for OFWs to exchange their political grievances and anxieties (Combinido & Curato, 2021, 22). This is particularly important when one considers how over 1.3 million OFWs voted in 2016, overwhelmingly for Rodrigo Duterte (Feldstein, 2021, 149). Second, Filipinos are considered some of the most highly qualified yet inexpensive labour force worldwide, providing digital freelance services such as data analytics or social media content moderation (Graham et al., 2017; Roberts, 2016). The result is a dispensable workforce which, in the case of electoral periods, nudges many creative workers down the slippery slope of the digital underground (Ong & Cabanes, 2019, 5784). Finally, the degree of poverty in the country renders many without the finances to pay for mobile data plans. In response, SMS promotions often combine a 'free Facebook' addition in their package bundles with no deduction from data usage. In this sense, Facebook has become one and the same with the Internet for the populace (Feldstein, 2021, 148). By historicising the political culture and economic processes which formed the modern Filipino state, we come one step closer to understanding a collection of experiences that have been largely absent from conventional disinformation studies.

1.2 Significance of the Research

The case of disinformation in the Philippines is a cautionary warning to other countries. Beyond political elections, disinformation narratives are fast proving themselves as potential indicators of deeper polarisation, unrestrained majoritarinism, decline in institutional legitimacy, and corrosion of socio-political consensus (Arugay & Baquisal, 2022, 551). Similar personality based political systems, such as India or Indonesia, are teetering at the edge of this lucrative industry which feeds on disprivilege and disposable labour. The same can be said for Western liberal democracies with their image-based political cultures, particularly in this digital age (Ong & Cabanes, 2019, 5785). The digital economies, partisan politics and the power relations which weave in between combine to give disinformation a virtually omnipresent status. Notwithstanding the severe consequences of an unfiltered and unregulated disinformation network, the subject also raises important questions on legal transparency, corporate and government accountability and community advocacy. Yet, despite a recent explosion in relevant

academic publications (see Henkel, 2021; Vaidhyanathan, 2018; Ohlin, 2021), very few studies have managed to analyse disinformation beyond a personality-oriented or technologically deterministic approach. Those seeking quick rationalisations will often attribute the populist victories of Brexit, Donald Trump and Duterte to exceptional social media-fueled disinformation operations, brought to life by the likes of trolls, cyber bot armies, and Chinese or Russian interference (Ong, 2022, 396). Far from a complete analysis, these narratives which produce technological villains and a gullible, ill-informed populace are dangerously reductive in understanding the wider digital political culture. Furthermore, as an overwhelmingly Euro-American field, disinformation studies often fall short in grasping the locally-specific histories and institutions of postcolonial media systems, particularly as they *enable* a new media elite to emerge and take control (Ong & Tapsell, 2022, 252-255). This by no means takes away from emerging scholarship in communities and contexts of the Global South (see Bradshaw & Howard, 2017; Farkas et al., 2018; Ong & Cabañes, 2019; Wasserman & Madrid-Morales, 2021), but suffice it to say, the empirical research on disinformation remains geographically, historically and theoretically imbalanced. It is this very gap in the empirical and conceptual literature, and the far-reaching implications of professionalised and commercialised disinformation, that this thesis seeks to amend. By investigating structures over individual agents, and understanding the organisational behaviours and motives behind political marketing, this research aims to bring accountability to those wielding economic power across the disinformation industry. And for those on the front lines of disinformation, including investigative journalists and civil society, breaking down the micro-level operations behind disinformation networks enables the groundwork for an emancipatory framework- one where truth speaks out against untruth and power.

1.3 Research question and structure

This seemingly messy but, in actuality, coordinated system of disinformation-for-hire networks offers a theoretical basis for understanding an underexplored part of the information ecosystem within the Philippines. By examining the presidential electoral periods between November 2015-May 2016 and October 2021-June 2022, from the start of their candidacy announcement to their election, this thesis functions to answer the following questions. First, how is content production, distribution, and marketing organised across the Filipino

disinformation network? And second, what are the mechanisms of organisational control exercised over these digital labour arrangements? Using an interdisciplinary model to guide my approach, this paper employs an Actor-Network Theory (ANT) framework to examine digital work arrangements and media production. As a network-centred analysis, this paper is a netnographic examination of the participants within the labour of disinformation production, an adaptation of ethnographic approaches for the Internet space. Working off a rich collection of social media content on Facebook, Twitter, Youtube and Tiktok, supplemented by existing journal interviews and statements from creative industry workers across Rappler, the BBC, Channel News Asia (CNA) and other media sites, ANT's method of translation will be applied to further explore the motivations and structures which underpin the arrangements of the Philippine's disinformation for hire.

In this backdrop, the analysis takes shape in the following manner. Chapter two discusses the theoretical frameworks and literature which grounds this thesis. This segment first outlines the key literary debates, ideas, strengths and weaknesses of disinformation studies to date, as well as their merit to this research. It then goes on to explain and justify the use of ANT in understanding the network arrangements of disinformation, as well as the emergence of a more holistic 'Ant and After' branch. Chapter three illustrates the methods of netnography applied in this case study, as well as detailing the process of data selection and collection. Chapter four contains the empirical material of this thesis as it focuses on the election periods of Rodrigo Duterte and Bongbong Marcos. Guided by Michel Callon's translation model (Callon 1984), this chapter positions the findings within the critical framework of ANT as it explores the organisational story of Filipino disinformation networks, and the labour relations, interests and identities which underpin them. Chapter five discusses the findings of this thesis, specifically the process of translation as *representation*, and reflects on limitations and challenges. Finally, the concluding Chapter 6 reflects on the democratic implications of disinformation networks, the spaces for resistance and advocacy, and future research agendas within the field.

Chapter 2: Literature review and Theoretical Concepts

While taking on new shapes and magnitudes in their digital manifestations, the information disorder shaping contemporary politics is far from new. For the purposes of this paper, disinformation is defined in accordance with the High-Level Expert Group on Fake News and Online Disinformation of the European Commission as the following: "all forms of false, inaccurate, or misleading information designed, presented and promoted to intentionally cause public harm or for profit" (HLEG, 2018, 11). Often confounded with 'fake news', a species of wider disinformation, this analysis refrains from the latter's use due to its uber politicisation and general ambiguity as an object of study.

2.1 Disinformation Studies: An Overview

Disinformation as a conceptual and practical tool has only recently entered the public imagination and media lexicon, particularly in the wake of the 2016 US elections. The academic discourse remains no stranger to this development, for only a handful of isolated case studies across the disciplinary realm have tackled the subject matter head-on. The very premise of disinformation, however, has been alive for much longer in the scholarly context. Propaganda, arguably a conceptual relative to disinformation, has a long, well-traced history in communications research hailing back to the Institute for Propaganda Analysis in the 1930s (Freelon & Wells, 2020, 148). In the shadows of this increasingly qualitative field, the study of disinformation materialised amongst cognitive psychologists, and later political scientists. The combination of participatory media and a growing skepticism of scientific establishments in the 21st century, aggravated by populist rhetoric, triggered an interdisciplinary rush towards the study of disinformation. Thus, the year 2016 marks a watershed moment in the literature; the average number of articles on disinformation published per year skyrocketed from 6% before 2016 to 20% in the subsequent years (Wasserman & Madrid-Morales 2021, 42).

As a relatively young area of study, disinformation does not constitute a literature in the traditional sense. As it stands, minimal efforts have been made to build a wider programme of empirical research, aggravated by the fact that analyses across various disciplines fail to feed from one another. Despite this, several distinct themes can be located across the literature. Most noticeably, scholarship has centred on international affairs such as electoral periods,

referendums, authoritarian regimes and territorial conflicts (Lopez-Garcia et al., 2021, 15). Moreover, quantitative analyses of media choice within disinformation studies have found nearly one in three articles focused on Twitter as their mode of choice (Lopez-Garcia et al., 2021, 15). In their attempt to synthesise the literature, Deen Freelon and Chris Wells offer a comprehensive review of disinformation's scholarly evolution as they divide the study into two schools of thought: Content and Reception (Freelon & Wells, 2020, 149-151). The former, tackling disinformation content in terms of its purpose, audience and affects, is best exemplified by the likes of Franziska Keller and colleagues as they analyse behaviours of state-sponsored disinformation accounts in South Korea (Keller et al., 2019); by Krafft and Donovan as they perform a micro analysis on peer production practices by alt-right forums (Krafft & Donovan, 2020); and by Josephine Lukito's quantitative assessment of Russia's 2016 disinformation campaign across various social media platforms (Lukito, 2020). Meanwhile, the causal links between disinformation exposure and shifting opinions, attitudes and behaviours have combined to form the largely experiment-based Reception Studies (see Zimmermann & Kohring, 2020; Garrett et al., 2020).

Within this wider literature, a critical branch has gradually emerged which challenges the *extent* of disinformation's impact on democratic polities. Popular explanations have often assumed, if not dramatised, the impact of foreign sponsored campaigns in electoral results or democratic processes. Intending to ground and desecuritise disinformation studies, scholarship in critical disinformation studies has argued that the infodemic of bots, trolls and conspiracies stokes, rather than creates, social divisiveness along units of class, gender and race. Matamaros-Fernandez, Farkas and colleagues provide a starting base into this inquiry as they unpack the systemic (re)production of racism in the digital realm through critical race perspectives (Matamaros-Fernandez et al., 2021). Taking this a step further, Alexander Lanoszka argues that the strategic effects of disinformation, particularly in terms of swaying foreign policy alignments and tactics, have been largely exaggerated in the context of Russian campaigns targeting the Baltic states (Lanoszka, 2019).

A surge in disinformation scholarship pertaining to the Philippines is evidenced after 2016, the year of Rodrigo Duterte's election. As a growing body of literature, academic contributions have more or less fallen across the following themes: narratives of disinformation

(Mendoza, 2022, Arugay & Baquisal, 2022), regime change and democratic backsliding (Iglesias, 2022; Curato, 2022) and historical approaches towards the country's state of digital repression (Combinido & Curato, 2021; Feldstein, 2021). Of these, Pamela Combinio and Nicole Curato's exploration into the digital public sphere of the Philippines is an excellent start into disinformation operations since the 2016 election. Embedding their research into histories of political economy and political culture, they probe further into disinformation narratives beyond elections, including strategies of Cyber Tokhang and historical revisionism (Combinido & Curato, 2021). Similarly, in his examination of social manipulation, Steven Feldstein effectively contexualises the conditions facilitating the Philippines' digital repression as he details the nodes of a digital repression network during Duterte's leadership (Feldstein, 2021). Comparative analyses also present a flourishing methodology of the literature. Jonathan Ong and Ross Tapsell's work examining disinformation shadow economies between the Philippines and Indonesia, one which exposes the network of local PR firms, political strategists and foreign businesses through a worker-centred analysis, provides a critical groundwork for this direction (Ong & Tapsell, 2022). Exercising an ethnographic approach to understand the social identities, work arrangements and moral justifications of the disinformation to hire business, Ong's research further rests on multi-disciplinary models such as production studies, sociology and critical economy (see Ong, 2022; Ong, 2019).

Despite the growing body of literature on disinformation, 'potholes' are no stranger to the field (Solnick 1998). Unresolved areas in the wider research have only just begun to receive attention, including ethnoracial aysmmetries in disinformation exposure (Freelon et al., 2022), visual politics of disinformation (Dan et al., 2021) and effects of legislative regulations (Nunez, 2020). While disinformation studies are gradually spilling over into Southeast Asia, demonstrated by the budding work on the Philippines and Indonesia, a deeply Euro-American lens remains preserved within the broader discipline. Furthermore, a holistic study of network patterns and social arrangements, one guided by a network-based theory such as ANT, remains virtually non-existent. The call to resolve these theoretical limits is not only necessary, but as the following section will demonstrate, a space for synthesis can and should be made.

2.1.2 Synthesis of literature: The New Disinformation Agenda

For the purposes of this thesis, two research gaps will be of particular significance. First, studies of the organisational arrangements and power effects of disinformation, one which explores the social and economic mechanisms behind troll farms, has remained largely absent from the agenda. Despite a rich literature on networked organisations, particularly in the social media era (see Zhang, 2020; Joia & Soares, 2018; Williams, 2020), only a few studies, like Tobais Lemke and Michael Habegger's social network approach to examine Kremlin-linked news outlets, have adopted such approaches to understand the patterned nodes which breathe life into disinformation (Lemke & Habegger, 2022). Research towards off sourced, online gig work at the global peripheries, demonstrated by Mark Graham and colleague's ethnographic case study on Southeast Asia or Sarah Robert's analysis of digital content moderators, is one subfield that has considerable potential to grasp the hierarchical and relational structures shaping disinformation for hire trolls (Graham et al., 2017; Roberts, 2016). Secondly, disinformation analyses have remained a largely Euro-American enterprise, one which fails to consider motivations beyond the language of the white, nationalist and populist man. While the 2016 US elections have shown their weight in launching the popularisation of disinformation studies, it has simultaneously proven stilting in widening and decentring a predominantly Western field. As it stands, the parameters of disinformation studies have largely been defined by 'trolls' and 'bots' in the context of white nationalist populism, digital misogyny, and Trump cronies. Jonathan Ong's exploration of disinformation shadow economies and the archipelago of troll networks in Southeast Asia provides an excellent contribution for this new agenda (Ong, 2022). These network analyses, removed from the Western focal point, are critical in unearthing information environments that come at the expense of political and human freedom.

It is from this critical juncture that this thesis begins its examination. By examining elections periods across the Philippines, it is my aim to expose the underground networks, their political economies, and more importantly, the mechanisms of power which underscore disinformation production. This review of disinformation's structural arrangements will not only help to better understand the market and political systems which created the conditions for disinformation campaigns to emerge, but more importantly, it aims to equip civil society with the necessary knowledge to resist, counter and prevent disinformation in the future. In turning to the research question, some plausible answers as to how disinformation business models have proliferated in the Global South could be found in the financial instability of young, digitally

savvy working ‘trolls’ and ‘buzzers’; in political consultancies and digital professionals with loose political ideologies; or in state-sponsored disinformation production (Ong & Tapsell, 2022, 258). Avoiding the rabbit hole of big personality names or ideologically driven campaigns which characterises much of the Western discourse, this thesis works to expose a darker, more infiltrating system of commercial and political disinformation, and by doing so, create a framework to prevent its future production.

2.2 Actor-Network Theory (ANT)

> Until someone pointed out to me that the acronym ANT was perfectly fit for a blind, myopic, workaholic, trail-sniffing, and collective traveler. An ant writing for other ants, this fits my project very well! (Latour, 2005, 9)

Today, as we enter an increasingly technology-driven society, Actor-Network Theory, otherwise known as ANT, presents one of the more comprehensive guides towards understanding modern innovations, organisational changes and societal evolution (Williams, 2020, 2). The rise of the Internet, and the outgrowths of media platforms and big data, have presented numerous challenges to our concept of the ‘social’. In the face of a constant shrinking of meaning, one where social is removed from associations of politics, biology, economics, psychology, organisation and technology, ANT resumes the very task of tracing these associations (Latour, 2005, 5-7). By doing so, the social is made wide, complex and unlimited – a framework necessary to understand networks both visible and invisible to the onlooker. As this section outlines the key concepts, critiques and responses of ANT, its relevance to disinformation will similarly be crystalised.

2.2.1 Core Concepts

The theory first gained traction at the end of the 20th century, when academics outside Science and Technology Studies registered the utility of ANT for understanding and describing translation within their own discipline (Williams, 2020, 2). Over time, the application of ANT expanded into a rich variety of subjects including business, information systems and sociology (Williams, 2020, 203). The literary contribution of a few academics, including Bruno Latour, John Law, Michel Callon, and later Annemarie Mol, have been hugely significant in building out

the theory. Several key concepts have emerged which define the shapes and reach and corners of ANT. Above all else, ANT is both a theory and a method to explain social translations and the patterned networks of heterogeneous materials, one which is highly concerned with the mechanics of power (Law, 1992, 380-81). According to early ANT literature, in particular Callon's (1984) seminal piece "Some elements of a sociology of translation", the process of social translation includes four stages which lends to the formation of an actor-network. These stages involve: 1) problematisation, in which the focal actor establishes themselves as an obligatory passage point in the network of relations 2) interessement, in which the focal actor looks to rally the interest of the other entities, and by doing so, cement their allegiance to the actor-network; 3) enrolment, the immediate product of a successful interessement, wherein a set of interrelated duties and tasks is allocated and duly accepted by the actors; 4) mobilisation of alliances, the stage where actors are displaced and reassembled across the network in order to meet the needs articulated by the focal actor; here, mobilisation is only made possible through the existence of an actor-spokesman, or a 'translator', who negotiates, speaks and moves on behalf of the remaining actors (Callon 1984). Callon cautions on the existence of a fifth stage, that of dissidence, which may follow at any point after the negotiations and alliances are made (Callon, 1984, 219). In other words, no network is ever given, and contestation is always possible.

These various networks are not inanimate, but instead participate in shaping the social relationships that they form (Law, 1992, 382). Moreover, these very networks are shaped by any and all who participate, including both human actors and non-human actants (Latour, 2005). The term 'actor' can therefore be used to describe a person, a computer, a tree or even a bacterium. The status of equality is bestowed upon these actors, and agency is assigned on the action produced by the actant in the network (Williams, 2020, 7). These networks are often rendered invisible to the naked eye because of the simplifying process of punctualisation, wherein patterns that are more widely performed or routinised are more easily concealed (Law, 1992, 385). Thus, the social is only made visible by the traces it leaves behind when new associations are produced between human and non-human elements (Latour, 2005, 8). It is the combination of these aspects which distinguish ANT studies from the wider discipline of sociology and network frameworks.

However, like all theories, the first articulation of ANT did not come without its share of critical appraisals, as will be discussed shortly.

2.2.2 'Ant and After': Criticism and response

In a series of critical evaluations, scholars have cited ANT's proclivity towards essentialism, dualism and determinism concerning the objects and subjects of its study. Here, they refer to ANT's inability to explain the emergent capacities of actors, the divide between humans and non-humans in social practice and the evasion of translation processes (Whittle & Spicer, 2008, 617). For Whittle and Spicer, it is the theory's radical equalisation of agency, which presumes that all actors and elements and nodes within the network are equal, and its radical accounts of power which prove most problematic. Not only does this collapse of human and non-human action reduce the 'meaningful' character of the human spirit, but moreover, ANT's Machiavellian assumptions to power renders it overly rationalistic, cynical and incapable of problematising motives and interests (Whittle & Spicer, 2008, 620-222).

The combination of these critical assessments opened the door for significant theoretical reconsiderations, under the name of Ant and After. The argument for this new literature attests that realities are enacted in the processes of knowing (Law & Singleton, 2005; Alcadipani & Hassard, 2010). Different narratives do not simply describe these realities, but rather authorise them into being, thereby denying a singularity of existence. As a result, Ant and After highlights the ontologically political nature of knowledge, challenging previous accusations of its apolitical stance (Alcadipani & Hassard, 2010, 424-429). Ultimately, what the Ant and After literature has proven is that ANT, as Mol (Mol, 1999, 74) suggests, is a multiple-branched approach with various interpretations and usages. And it is this traveler's guide to ANT, with its emphasis on the *politically* patterned networks and actants, that is adopted to understand Philippine's disinformation networks.

Chapter 3: Research methodology

3.1 Case study method

To properly trace the complex and heterogenous elements which compose disinformation networks in the Philippines, this study adopts a case study methodology. Comparing the presidential elections between Rodrigo Duterte in 2016 and Bongbong Marcos in 2022, the two case studies will offer invaluable insight into the historical evolution of actors, strategies, interests and societal impact of the trolling industry. These two elections present separate, highly contested moments in the political biddings of the Filipino government. Their entanglement with emerging technologies and existing personality politics furthermore makes for a rich source of analysis, one crucial for understanding future electoral developments.

This flexible method is well suited to the subject as it explores a phenomenon in a micro-analysis, thereby refining the boundaries between the phenomenon and its real-life context (Yin, 2009, 18). Moreover, its capacity to uncover non-events, to mix exploratory and confirmatory analysis and to facilitate process tracing is unmatched with other research strategies in political studies (Brecher & Harvey, 2002, 162-64). And as more elections lean towards the domain of digital campaigns, unleashing a rabbit hole of data mining and click farms, the results of this case study will prove relevant to wider studies of disinformation, elections, and ultimately, democratic validity.

3.2 Qualitative Source Analysis – Netnography

To grasp the patterns and movements of Philippine's disinformation networks, across both the offline and online space, this paper conducts a netnography of content between November 2015-May 2016 and October 2021-June 2022. Emerging during the 1990s, with the Internet still in the early days of genesis, netnography was seen as a qualitative research methodology that repurposed ethnographic research techniques to the study of cultures and communities materialising from electronic networks (Costello et al., 2017, 2). As the study of online communities and the metaverse has ballooned, so have understandings of the term netnography. Adopting Robert Kozinets definition, netnography here offers: a "more human-centred, participative, personally, socially and emotionally engaged vector" (Kozinets, 2015, 96).

This study adopts a purely observational version of netnography, monitoring the online community as it integrates the gathered information and knowledge into the theoretical framework. From the offset, I faced several barriers which denied my active participation in the online community. These obstacles included linguistic differences, the closed and underground nature of disinformation labour, as well as my own position as a junior, female student. It is precisely for this reason that I use what Loanzon and colleagues described as an unobtrusive, "specialized type of lurking" (Loanzon et al., 2013, 1576), one that preserves the natural context of the community and avoids the risk of bias. This was combined with existing in-depth interviews with key stakeholders on news publications to capture important aspects of disinformation networks and to enhance the power of netnography as a research method.

3.3 Data Collection

Exercising a more focused approach, I have scraped and cataloged the observed patterns of both text and non-text social media content posted under relevant hashtags and keywords, including but not limited to #Du30, Duterte, #bongbongmarcos and #BBM. Chosen for their high engagement and viewership during each of the candidate's election campaigns (Feldstein, 2021 152; Mendoza, 2021, 392; Ong & Cabanes, 2018), these particular hashtags and keywords proved to host the most provocative and troll-esque threads, comments and content; this was in part due to political strategies of 'mixing hashtags' to reach their competitor's camp (Guanzon, 2022). Guided by the existing literature on disinformation strategies wielded during Rodrigo Duterte and Bongbong Marcos' election campaigns, the social media platforms chosen for analysis include Facebook, Twitter, Youtube and Tiktok. The key difference between the 2016 and 2022 elections is that while the former relied on Facebook and, to a lesser extent, Twitter, the latter diversified its application use (Arugay & Baquisal, 2022, 554-55). According to a surveyed report, Facebook and Twitter were the predominant social media applications in the country before Youtube toppled both in 2021 (Arugay & Baquisal ,2022, 553). A year later, the Philippines was ranked seventh in the world for Tiktok usage, with 40.4 million users aged 18 and above (Mendoza, 2022, 390). The transition from text-based content to largely video content has been tied to numerous factors: a) the ease in consuming, sharing and distributing videos within a user's network, b) Youtube and Tiktok's relative absence in regulating disinformation across their platforms, c) cheap deals offered by telecom networks for Facebook and Youtube

and d) tailored algorithms designed to keep users immersed indefinitely (Mendoza, 2022, 389-391; Arugay & Baquisal, 2022, 552-553).

Duterte's campaign primarily involved two channels: Facebook and Twitter. Data from 21 November 2015 (the day of his campaign announcement) to 30 June 2016 (the start of his presidency) were collected. The input from Facebook and Twitter was collected manually through advanced keyword searches, including 'Duterte2016', 'DuterteforPresident', 'Du30', 'Duterte', and other variants. The main hub of data for Bongbong Marcos's election was Youtube, Facebook and Tiktok. Here, data was collected from 5 October 2021 (the day of his campaign announcement) to 30 June 2022 (the start of his presidency). Data from these platforms was also manually gathered, using the keywords and hashtags 'BBM', 'BongbongMarcos', '#bbmfor2022president', '#uniteam', and '#bbmsara2022' amongst other adaptations. Of the millions of posts available, I collected and sampled the top 10 posts from each platform with the relevant advanced searches. In total, 40 postings were collected from the four selected social media forums, conducted over a period of 3 months.

Chapter 4: Findings

Using Callon's four stages of translation, two episodes were mapped out which concern disinformation within Philippine's election process: Duterte's disinformation network between 2015 to 2016 and Marcos's disinformation network between 2021 to 2022. I examine how the varying intensity of the linkages between these actors/actants – notably PR and advertising executives, family members, digital creators and influencers, online trolls, and social media as a space – translates toward the emergence of disinformation networks. ANT is applied here to trace how content produced online moves through a network amounted by social media channels and media coverage until they gradually embody a version of reality- that is, once they reach a point of stabilisation. This section is thus organised into four segments for each translation described above as it details moments of problematisation, interessement, enrolment and mobilisation.

4.1 The Election of Rodrigo 'The Punisher' Duterte

4.1.1 Problematisation: Actors and obligatory passage points

On November 21, 2015, Rodrigo Duterte announced his bid for the Philippine's presidential election. Widely considered one of the first social media elections in the country, the 2016 presidential contest reflected a contentious and noxious battle fought on the web. In a matter of months, the former Davao City Mayor would be labeled the 'undisputed king of Facebook conversations' (Etter, 2017). This unprecedented reliance on social media was not merely a byproduct of the digital times. Simply put, Duterte's campaign team did not have the ready funding nor resources that other major political parties held, and as a result, their 10-million peso ($214,199 US Dollars) media campaign budget turned to more creative strategies (Eusebio, 2022).

The central question, or 'problematisation', driving Duterte's campaign was essentially: how to win the people's votes with the limited funding available? Not only did social media act as a cheaper means to reach a wider audience, but moreover, the spatial proximity between a screen and its user allowed politicians to connect directly with people in a more authentic and personal manner (Combinido and Curato, 2021, 25-26). Thus, the problem became one of rallying the

country behind motifs of anti-crime and drug interventions (Campbell, 2016). The questions formed by Rodrigo Duterte's campaign team and the commentaries they provide bring three other actors into the story: the PR and marketing executives, the digital creators and the trolls of the keyboard armies. Reduced to a smaller selection of key actors, the following descriptions can be synthesised as follows:

a) The PR and marketing executives

These are campaign strategists hired directly by politicians, often from local boutique marketing services and PR agencies. Using various corporate branding techniques, from traditional 'core campaign messaging' to new digital methods of 'signal scrambling' and 'hashtagging', these executives navigate the largely unregulated industry of political marketing as they design networked disinformation campaigns (Arugay & Baquisal, 2022, 552; Ong & Cabanes, 2018, 5; Sambatpoonsiri, 2018, 6). Their interests lie in manipulating online trends and amplifying client-desirable content in digital spaces.

b) Digital creators, bloggers and macro influencers

Subcontracted by campaign strategists, various digital creators and big personality influencers are used as promotional capital. Most will have somewhere between 50,000 to 3,000,000 followers on Facebook and Twitter, in addition to a large following on blog pages or other respective social media channels (Ong & Cabanes, 2018, 6). While content will vary greatly, including lifestyle or political commentary, they are united under the architecture of the PR industry.

c) Cyber trolls and keyboard armies

These are networks of hundreds of individuals, who operate both real accounts and fake accounts known as 'sock puppets' (Feldstein, 2021, 152). Savvy in new media communications and political marketing, these paid trolls are typically junior-level employees tasked to 'assist' with a political campaign; they are paid a fixed daily rate based on an agreed quota of copy-pasted posts, comments or shares (Ong &Cabanes, 2018, 37; Sambatpoonsiri, 2018, 6). These fake accounts are hired to penetrate different community groups, threads or news websites, largely

organised by geography (Mindanao, Visayas, Luzon and OFWs), and spread content in line with their informal contract (Gavilan, 2016).

Here, Duterte's capitalisation of the social media space, and his title of strongman leadership and sobriquets like 'The Punisher' (Campbell, 2016), acts as an obligatory passage point between a system of alliances or associations between each of these entities. One question – how to win the election with only 10-million peso – is enough to entangle an assemblage of actors, including the identities and links between them. If the campaign design executives want to maintain their business; if the digital creators seek to boost their follower engagement; or if the paid trolls want to survive and not be deleted, then they must recognise the question of Duterte's campaign while understanding that they cannot secure what they want alone.

4.1.2 Interessement

It is this stage of translation that the group of actions performed by the focal actor seeks to crystalise and stabilise the identity of those actors established through its initial problematisation (Callon, 1984, 196, 206-208). The range of possibilities for different mechanisms and devices is virtually unlimited, as illustrated by the story of Duterte's election. One of the more transparent interessements are the economic incentives offered by the campaign strategists to participate in the disinformation network. In November 2015, when the former mayor of Davao ran for presidency, he recruited a marketing consultant by the name of Nic Gabunada to organise his social media army. In an interview with Rappler, an independent news organisation in Manila, Gabunada discusses how the 10-million peso budget forced them to approach the campaign from a new angle:

> *"To a certain extent, this might have encouraged us to work harder, to use our skills from organising, from alliance work, to organise these people on social media. When you don't have money, you become creative"* (Gavilan 2016).

Strapped for cash, the role of the strategic marketing executive takes hold as Gabunada sets off to 'organise these people on social media' in a creative and budget-friendly manner. His firm is driven by monetary capital to produce a pro-Duterte alliance across online election discussions.

Various investigative reports by Rappler highlight the flows of money between the Duterte campaign team and social media influencers. This was the case with digital marketing group Twinmark Meda Enterprises; leaked internal documents reveal the company's strategy of paying stars and influencers to share content from Twinmark-owned sites, which served profitable ads amidst all the false information and propaganda (Elemia, 2021). Influencers earned somewhere between P10,000 to P250,000 monthly, including internet personality Mocha Uson's P1million paycheck in one year alone (Elemia, 2021).

Anonymous interviews with professional trolls during the presidential campaign also highlight the business behind the copy and paste 'keyboard warrior'. One troll, by the pseudonym William, describes the set-up akin to a call centre operation; each day, the team leader would list target posts on a white board that boasted high numbers in likes and shares, as well as a carefully scripted response for each worker to echo in the chambers of the Internet. For William, trolling became a full-time occupation when his PR agency was enlisted by one of the political candidate's team in the presidential race. Originally just brand marketing and image building, the campaign plan soon turned to troll tactics which were paid handsomely. The economic incentive is reflected here as William recalls,

> *"We really worked at it, 24/7…But the pay was very good. You could earn P2,000 to P,3000 (US) a day just doing copy-paste" (Caruncho 2016).*

William denies the title of troll, preferring instead 'social media marketing consultant' among other names (Caruncho, 2016). A second interessement is insinuated at this point, one guised in the language of morality and 'doing one's job.' Money aside, incentives for trolls are equated to performing a respectable job successfully. Wearing virtuous faces and sidestepping accountability, the professionalisation of the disinformation business masks the invisible operation (Ong & Cabanes, 2018, 3).

4.1.3 Enrolment: Trials and Tribulations

Success is never guaranteed, even with most convincing argument or the most compelling trapping device (Callon, 1984, 211). Having discussed some of the more prominent interessements of this particular disinformation network, we now turn to the third stage of

translation: enrolment. Defined by the negotiations and the trials of strength and tribulations which accompany the interessements, enrolment here seeks to understand if, and how, Duterte's election story overcame these difficulties in its course for success.

One such challenge included the condemnation of big-name influencers tied to the Duterte campaign. Take Esther Margaux Justiniano Uson, better known as Mocha Uson, a Filipino singer, actress, dancer and political blogger turned Duterte supporter. Infamous for spreading fictitious and unsupported claims on her blog and social media accounts, Uson was the target of netizen backlash as well as various petitions aimed at suspending her platform (Quilet, 2016). One of the larger petitions gained nearly 35,000 signatures, eventually resulting in the suspension of Uson's Twitter account (Quilet, 2016). However, instead of the desired effect from these petitions, many were instead critical of the implications this suspension held for the right to freedom of speech; for Twitter user @JanusNovio, he writes that the petition to shut down Uson's page 'feels kinda wrong' despite his apparent dislike for the influencer (Novio, 2016). Again, the user @AihRealMonsters expresses her appall at the number of people signing the petition, deploring that 'freedom of speech is still freedom of speech' (Filipina, 2016). Furthermore, with support of counter-petitions (Anne, 2016), the remainder of Uson's accounts are still up and running to this day.

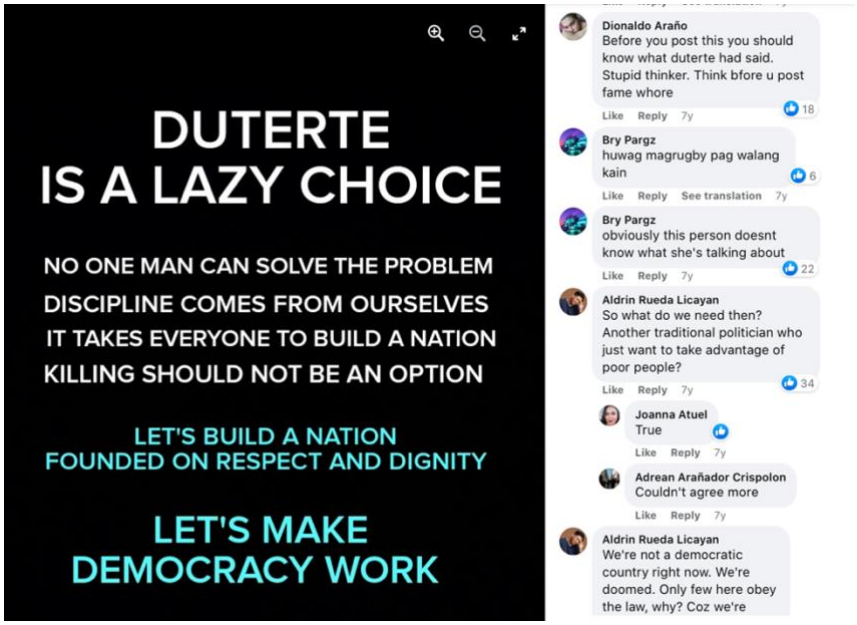


Figure 1. Image of Facebook post 'Duterte is a Lazy Choice' (Edwards 2016)

Another trial of strength for Duterte's disinformation network involved the critical investigations published by journalists in the Philippines. In response, both during and well after Duterte's election, journalists faced a barrage of cyber abuse and hate threats, suspension of social media accounts, and most insidious of all, death (Combinido & Curato, 2021, 20; Feldstein, 2021, 138). Even those in the wider public challenging Duterte's strongman persona faced immediate backlash from the swarm of trolls and bots. The following post, which labels Duterte as a 'lazy choice', received over 12,000 reactions and around 2,300 comments (Figure 1). Comments were permeated with verbal abuse directed at the user, including misogynistic slander, disinformation-riddled memes, curse words and even rape or death threats. Similar to breaking the challenge of journalist inquiries, the scattering of political trolls at this time amalgamated to overcome the external threat to their narrative.

More recently, Facebook came out with a statement in 2019 announcing the removal of over 200 pages, groups and accounts they deemed engaged in coordinated inauthentic behaviour in the Philippines (Gleicher, 2019). Singling out Nic Gabunada as the network's architect, Facebook found around 3.6 million accounts followed one or more of these disinformation pages (Gleicher, 2019). While this infiltration of the disinformation network marks a disruption in the interessements, and the linkages tying digital creators and trolls to campaign strategists, they did not diminish the operation nor hinder its success. This is evidenced by the survival of hundreds of thousands of posts and pages which speak collectively for the #Du30 movement, as well as the continuation of similar disinformation strategies in subsequent elections.

4.1.4 Mobilisation

The final stage of translation concerns the ability for a handful of representatives to 'represent all the uncountable others' (Callon, 1984, 214). How did Duterte's campaign for election come to speak for the (in)visible many, influencers and trolls and all? Careful observation of Twitter and Facebook spaces signal three related narratives at the cornerstone of the #Du30 coalition. These include a strongman discourse, humanising anecdotes and the concept of 'real talk'; they combine to establish a singular and purposeful language, one that trickles down from Duterte's campaign team to the political troll working into the late hours of the night.

Turning to the content produced by digital creators and bloggers, these same narratives are churned out across different posts, and with more intensity the closer the election nears. In Figure 2, Filipino actor, model and vlogger Ruru Madrid posts on Twitter verbalising explicit enthusiasm for a Duterte presidency, one based around discipline and near-draconian measures for curfew and public safety. Similar to Madrid's post, some bigger-name macro influencers include actress Mocha Uson; Rey Joseph 'RJ' Nieto, author of the Thinking Pinoy blog; and celebrity and radio personality Jasmine Curtis-Smith, known better as DJ Chacha. Driving the online conversation around themes of positivity, Duterte's former political achievements and humanising anecdotes (see Figure 3; Figure 4; Figure 5), this influencer culture taps into the affordances of online platforms to produce politically-inclined and monetisable material. Together, these online celebrities and influencers synthesise, and more importantly *mobilise*, together under Duterte's disinformation network.

Figure 2. Image of Twitter post 'Yes I am #DU30' (Madrid, 2016)

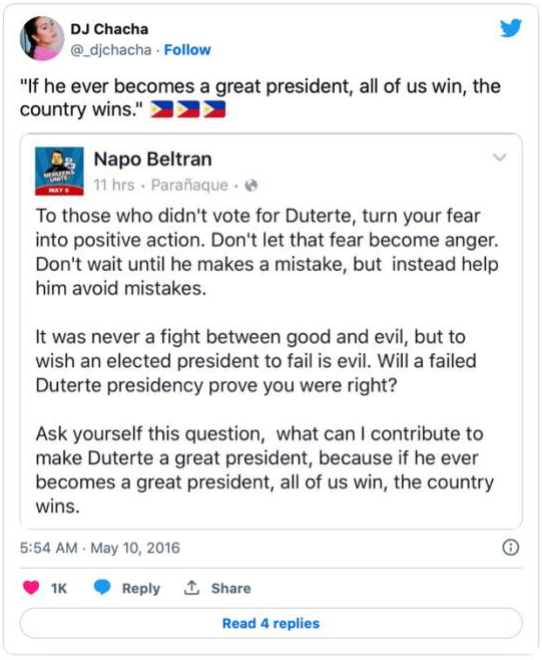


Figure 3 (Left). Image of Twitter post 'If he ever becomes a great president' (Chacha, 2016)

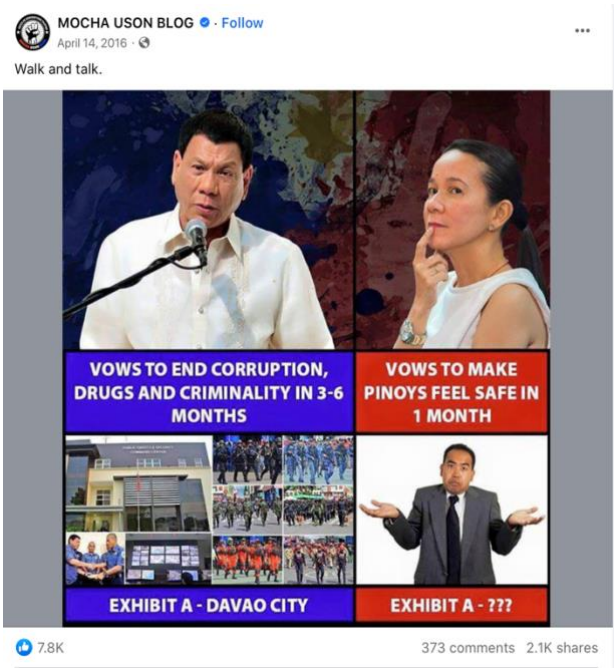


Figure 4 (Right). Image of Facebook post 'Walk and Talk' (Uson 2016)

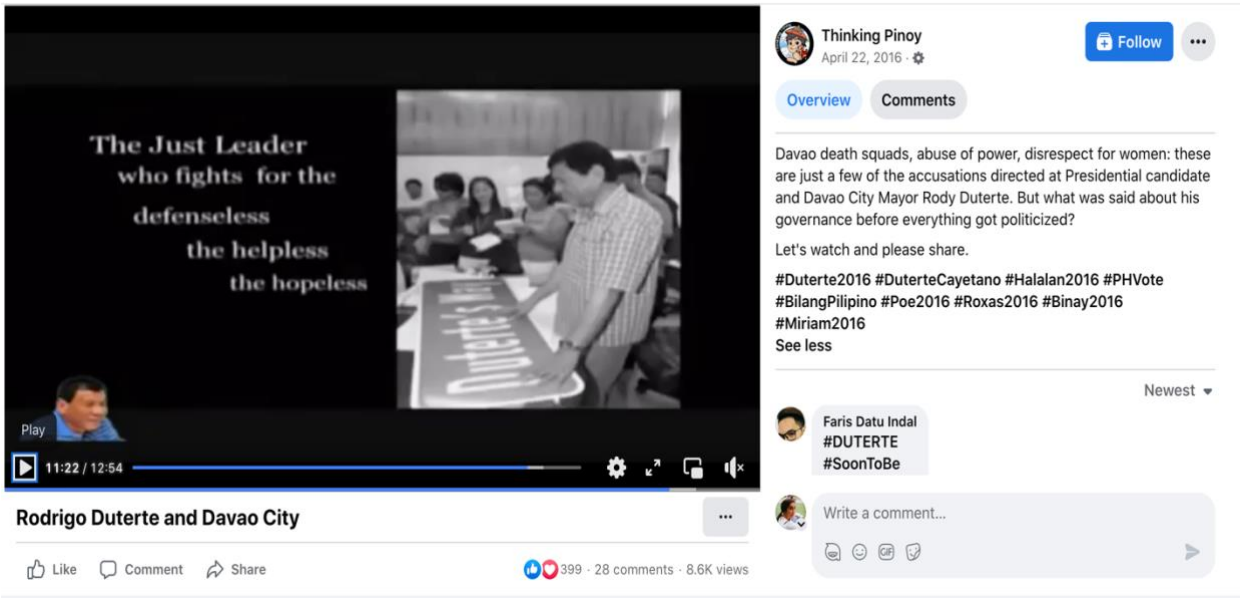


Figure 5. Image of Facebook video 'Rodrigo Duterte and Davao City' (Nieto 2016)

These digital trendsetters, who have a combined following of almost 9,000,000 people, point to a collective representation of Duterte's campaign team, the focal actor. In another sense, these dispersed influencers have reassembled across the network to meet the needs defined by the centre, and by doing so, their traces are rendered invisible to the untrained eye (Law, 1992, 385).

Finally, the consolidation of representation is best exhibited in the endless pro-Duterte Facebook groups and troll-operated posts on the web between 2015 and 2016. Some more prominent ones include the ‘OFW’ group with 34,000 members, the ‘MindaVote’ group and its body of 590,000 members, the support page ‘Dugong Maharlika’ with 314,000 followers and finally, the ‘Duterte Social Media Supporter’ community with over 287,000 followers and counting (See OFW n.d.; MindaVote n.d.; Dugong Maharlika n.d.; Duterte Social Media Supporter n.d.). Between the barrage of campaign rally videos, inspirational quotes, reposted news clips and political infographics, this network of coordinated political content works to cement the strongman archetype of Rodrigo Duterte.

A series of intermediaries and equivalences are arranged which result in the allocation of the spokesman. In the case of the 2016 election season, Duterte’s campaign strategists became influential and were listened to as they headed a deeply hierarchical operation. Thus, the progressive mobilisation of previously disconnected actors, one which gradually forms alliances and acts as a united front, is achieved.

4.2 The Election of Bongbong Marcos: The Dictator’s Son

4.2.1 Problematisation: Actors and obligatory passage points

Ferdinand ‘Bongbong’ Marcos Junior, son of a kleptocratic dictator, swept the election polls with a decisive victory in early May of 2022, receiving almost double the vote of his closest competitor Leni Robredo (Dulay et al.,, 2023, 86). In contrast to Rodrigo Duterte’s campaign, Bongbong Marcos was bankrolled heavily by a hodgepodge of Marcos family cronies, tycoons and donors, many who are barred from making political contributions in the first place (PCIJ, 2022). A total of 67 donors contributed P624.7 million ($11.23 US Dollars) to the Marcos campaign, according to his legal counsel’s *Statement of Contributions and Expenditures with the Commission on Elections* (PCIJ, 2022). After more than three decades, the historical memories which might have once prevented the enthronement of another Marcos, particularly those concerning the huge stockpiles of gold or bank deposits held by the family (Ruud & Endresen, 2022, 405), were lost to a carefully curated revisionist campaign. Orchestrated by the Marcos team, the election results that fateful Tuesday afternoon was the result of a decades-long operation to rebrand the family’s name and image, particularly through a hyper-charged social

media campaign (Ong, 2022, 399). This confrontation with a checkered historical understanding of the former Marcos martial law era thus lends itself to the following problematisation for the Marcos campaign team: how to uncouple a family history of oppression, cronyism and kleptocracy from the election platform, and by doing so, win the 2022 presidency? To convince entire generations of Filipinos, the Marcos political machinery took to popularising, even glamourising, individual family members like Sandro or Imelda Marcos, alongside pushing narratives of 'national healing' and blatant whitewashing of Marcos Senior's dictatorship (Mendoza, 2022, 392). The underlying problem of this story roped in four actors, many of them an extension from the previous network formed in 2016. To understand how each actor is concerned by the problematisation, definitions are set forth below.

a) The PR and marketing executives

Similar to the 2016 elections, although less publicised, these campaign strategists hail from PR firms or marketing services hired directly by politicians. These executives design and oversee networked disinformation campaigns.

b) Family members

Scattered across key political postings, the Marcos dynasty and their loyal supporters hold significant power in the country's government. Their gradual return to the Malacañang reflects a wider domination of the political environment by a narrow and rapacious elite.

c) Influencers

These are digital creators subcontracted by campaign strategists to promote politically inclined materials. Followers can range somewhere between 5,000 to 5,000,000 on social media, moving beyond simply macro influencers to also include a smaller subset of 'micro influencers' (those with 10,000 to 100,000 followers) (Arugay & Baquisal, 2022, 556; Ong & Cabanes, 2018). Largely found on video- or image-based platforms, influencers thrive off Marcos-commissioned videos or professional photoshoots as they generate collages, reaction videos and conspiracy deep dives (Ong, 2022, 399).

d) Political trolls

A continuation of Duterte's time, these are networks of individuals who operate both real accounts and fake accounts. They are increasingly more adept at creating seemingly organic content and personalities, at times even creating non-political pages and groups that push out political propaganda (Devlin, 2022).

For this story, the obligatory passage point between a system of associations is Marcos's strategic manipulation of social media forums- a manipulation which harnesses narratives of historical revisionism and celebrification. The argument developed by the Marcos campaign team is constantly repeated: a) the PR and marketing company's desire for a profitable quarter, b) the Marcos family members' struggle for power, c) the influencer's appetite for more clicks, fame and money, and d) the troll's hustle for quick cash and online survival can only be achieved when they recognise their alliances around the successful election of Marcos. By doing so, the son of the dictator makes himself indispensable to proceedings.

4.2.2 Interessement

The interessement, if successful, confirms the validity of the problematisation as it locks into place the alliance it initially implied (Callon, 1984, 207). An important interessement device in this scenario, one that creates an interface between the various stakeholders, includes the economic incentives tied to disinformation. The streams of income and financial benefits is a repeated feature of those actors involved in Marcos-related disinformation production. This argument is illustrated by drawing on the journalist interviews published during the election season.

In stark contrast to his competitors, Marcos did not record any significant ad spending on social media platform; instead, significant investment was thrown towards meme wars, influencers and political fan groups (Ong, 2022). For example, a paid troll under the alias Sharon describes how her job supports her family financially. With a daily target of at least 150 shares, her fake profiles and SIM cards are instructed to promote a certain politician during election season (Paulo, 2022). On a personal level, her participation amounts to a financial motive:

> *"What's important is we get our pay cheques, and we deliver on what they ask…. I'm still doing this job as it's helped me a lot financially, especially during the pandemic"* (Paulo, 2022).

In a documentary series published by the Filipino news publications Rappler in June 2022, several amateur influencers and vloggers generating pro-Marcos content are interviewed. Although these same micro-influencers refuse to disclose their monthly earnings on the record, Rappler deduces from various conversations that a subscriber count of 10,000 earns around P25,000 per month; 50,000 subscribers earns closer to P100,000 per month; and 100,000 subscribers procures a whopping P400,000 per month (Rappler, 2022, 06:55-07:20). One Youtuber, whose channel Euphoniaco TV boasts over 150,000 subscribers, is a self-described Marcos advocate and political commentator. When asked about his journey into vlogging, Euphoniaco responds,

> *"I was an OFW working in Singapore. I had no freedom, I had a boss, and I was far from my family. Thanks to vlogging, I was able to reunite with my family. I am no longer far from them. I can give my children what they want and I can say we have a middle-class life"* (Rappler 2022. 06:27-06:45).

Similar to political trolls, influencers like Euphoniaco are driven by the pursuit for a comfortable, middle-class life. For many OFWs, social media affords the space for these diasporic communities to stay connected and to exchange grievances or anxieties about political developments (Combinido & Curato, 2021, 22). Rich in money and *content*, the Marcos family provides endless fuel for these digital creators as they lucratively pump out video after video, regardless of their validity. Most of the money, however, remains in the pockets of the 'chief architects' of network disinformation (Ong & Cabanes, 2018). While these PR, marketing and advertising agencies are just as much driven by commercial incentives, they do so from the cushioned luxury of existing financial stability. On the condition of anonymity, an executive of an independent public relations agency under the name Rosa discloses in a CNA interview how,

> *"Usually, in our industry, and specifically for our team, there's no need to approach certain politicians. It's the other way around. They need us more than we need them"* (Paulo, 2022).

Breaking down the numbers, she explains how moderate operations for a national client could easily span from P800,000 to a P1,000,000 a month (Paulo, 2022). In this manner, monetary capital gave credence to the problem for which Marcos's campaign was the solution. Moreover, it came to act as an interessement device which converged an assemblage of actors, from PR and marketing executives at the upper rungs of the disinformation network down to its underbelly of trolls.

In addition, this paper argues that the project-based nature of disinformation operations, namely their informal, short-term contracts and delivery-oriented criteria, guaranteed several interessements for multiple actors. As workers hold loose and limited connections with one another, transparency concerning client interests and the purpose of this distributed labour is consequently muddied (Ong & Cabanes, 2019, 5799). Two offshoots from this informal quality become apparent. First, there is the emergence of competitive collegiality and market mentality, one which pits political trolls and influencers against one another as the disinformation project rewards higher reach and engagement. For example, as she discusses the formalities of clocking into the troll hours, Sharon's interview with CNA makes it clear that she is not interested in knowing the identities or faces of her bosses and fellow workers (Paulo, 2022). For her, it is about survival and outperforming the numbers of her colleagues. Second, and cause for a related interessement, is the displacement of responsibility through different discourse strategies, including a lingo of professionalisation. A few days before the 2022 election, an anonymous BBC interview with the troll 'Jon' reveals that, "I consider myself a troll- or, politically speaking, I'm a social media marketing consultant" (Devlin, 2022). The very same discourse of professionalisation is reflected in the CNA interview with the PR executive Rosa. Deploying terminology ranging from 'implementing national campaigns' and 'social media amplification' to 'artificial boosting of followers and content', these strategists use euphemisms and industry words to project a routine practice (Paulo, 2022). In actuality, they mask and minimise the impact of their work, distancing themselves from the harmful disinformation materials produced in real life.

4.2.3 Enrolment: Trials and Tribulations

Turning to the third moment of translation, what forms of negotiation and adversities did the story of Marcos's election encounter, and how did this enable its succession? In response to the rise of disinformation content pumped into the web, a front of journalists, fact-checkers and political opponents coalesced to undermine the Marcos network. Both in traditional media and in the spaces of social media, these voices were a check to the waves of disinformation flooding the Philippine information ecosystem. However, government orchestrations of 'red-tagging' – the labeling of individuals and groups as rebels or supporters of the communist insurgency – rendered community journalists, human rights advocates and political opposition vulnerable to abuse online and offline (Crispin, 2022). This was the case of Maria Ressa, founder of independent newsgroup Rappler and Nobel Peace Prize awardee. In 2020, she was convicted of cyber libel after 11 cases had been filed against her and Rappler, alleging libel, foreign ownership and tax evasion (Garrido & Reyes, 2021, 8). An observational exploration of social media communities across Tiktok and Youtube illustrates an onslaught of inflammatory trolling. In Figure 6, a nano-influencer by the username MJE101 posts a video on Tiktok with the words 'Maria Ressa stop being bias!! Stop spreading misinformation!!!' written in bold. The caption prescribes an ostensibly pro-Marcos stance, along with a medley of hashtags like #bbmfor2022president, #marcosforever and #rapplerfakenewsmedia. Other prominent arrests of red-tagged female journalists include Frenchie Mae Cumpio of Tacloban-based Eastern Vista; Paola Espiritu, the Ilocos correspondent of *Northern Dispatch*; and, Lady Ann Salem of *Manila Today* (Kahn, 2022, 71).

Figure 6. Image of Tiktok post 'Maria Ressa stop being bias!!' (@MJE101 2022)

Beyond journalists and civic activists, a spate of red-tagging and vandalised posters followed Bongbong Marcos's opponent Leni Robredo in the lead up to the election (Crispin, 2022). In the case of Robredo, trolls and influencers were relentless in deploying trendy and derogatory hashtags, particularly on Tiktok. Netnographic monitoring ties some of the highest engagement of anti-Robredo, pro-Marcos content with viral hashtags such as #notopinklawan, #lenibobo and #yellowfree2022, each connected by their overtly misogynistic, ridiculing and historically inaccurate propagation.

4.2.4 Mobilisation

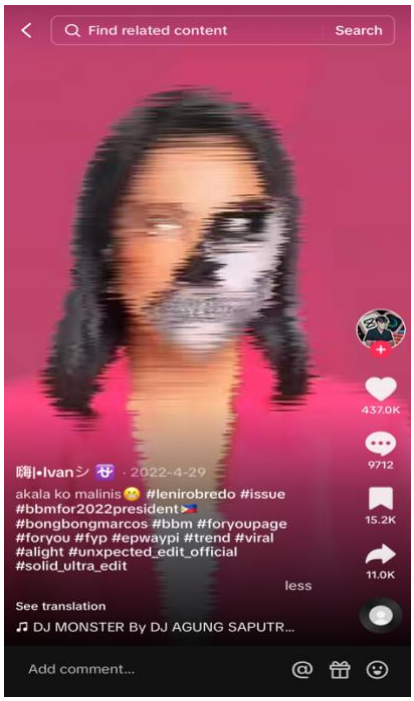
Herein lies the moment of mobilisation, where the few come to represent and speak for the many. In the words of Callon, to speak for others is to first silence those in whose name we speak (Callon, 1984, 216). This final stage of the translation process concludes with the establishment of a network of alliance between the different actors, one married by a consensus of interests. For one, a stabilised front of Marcos henchmen is evidenced across the motely of digital influencers, including both big name celebrities and nameless nano influencers or vloggers. One of the UniTeam's staunchest supporters Toni Gonzaga, actress-host-producer-vlogger and all-around 'Ultimate Multimedia Superstar', not only performed in several campaign sorties, but also used her social media presence to further positive campaigning of unity under Marcos (see Gonzaga, 2021; Gonzaga, 2022). Another showbiz personality, the model and actor Diego Loyzaga, scattered Marcos content across his respective social media accounts. One post alone, with Loyzaga donning a 'BBM-Sara' jersey, received over 10,500 likes and 1,000 shares (Loyzaga, 2022). On the other side of influencer operations lies the short-form content published across Tiktok. To give a few examples, the following images published by Marcos fan accounts and a host of micro influencers provide a glimpse into this Tiktok community and the narratives espoused within them; Figures 7-10 each received some of the highest engagement under the hashtags #bbm, #bongbongmarcos or #bbmfor2022president, with a combined total of over 2,000,000 likes, 31,000 comments and 55,000 shares. Each establishes one of the key narratives central to Marcos's campaign, from historical whitewashing to chilling anti-Leni edits, as they reach and disperse across different corners of the Tiktok space. More importantly, they cement the initial problematisation articulated by the Marcos team: securing the election and returning the family to the Malacañang Palace.

Figure 7 (Left). Image of Tiktok Video '#BBM for President' (Habon, 2021)

Figure 8 (Right). Image of Tiktok Video 'During EDSA revolution' (Irene, 2022)

Figure 9 (Left). Image of TIktok Video 'We will always carry the flame that will burn until Marcoses Return' (Shop, 2022)

Figure 10 (Right). Image of Tiktok Video 'Leni Robredo' (Ivan, 2022)



Furthermore, Marcos family members were simultaneously mobilised under the name, face and speech of Bongbong Marcos. One of the more illustrious examples manifests itself in the Youtube channel of Senator Maria Imelda Josefa 'Imee' Romualdez Marcos, eldest daughter

of the late Ferdinand Marcos and older sister to Bongbong Marcos. A striking juxtaposition to Bongbong Marcos's generic, arguably bland, persona, Imee played an important strategic role in her real talk, relatable, and charismatic *maldita* (sharp-tongued or bratty) archetype as she carried out the direct attacks on behalf of the Marcos campaign (Ong, 2022, 399). This rings especially true in her 'Exorcism of Len-Len' series, a satirical parody of rival and competitor Leni Robredo (Marcos, 2022a). These complemented countless other videos of hers reacting to archived videos of parents Imelda and Ferdinand Senior or celebrating them as fashion and lifestyle icons (Marcos, 2022b; Marcos, 2022c). While less inflammatory than his auntie, Sandro Marcos, now representative of Ilocos Norte's 1st congressional district, presents another supplement to the mobilising process. With over a million followers on Facebook, Sandro acts as a promotional mantlepiece for his father's campaign, including weekly family vlogs, campaign rallies and recycled content from BBM-Duterte events (Marcos, n.d.).

On Facebook, a pro-Marcos mobilisation is achieved through the countless community groups and public endorsement pages. Whether it is the loyalist member groups 'Bongbong Marcos' Presidency' and 'President Bongbong Marcos Loyalist', together with a combined following of 31,000 people, or the 'Bongbong Marcos Singapore Chapter' community for the legions of politically-inclined OFWs, each is host to tributes of Marcos family chauvinism (see Bongbong Marcos' Presidency, n.d.; President Bongbong Marcos Loyalist, n.d.; Bongbong Marcos Singapore, n.d.). These displays of loyalism, from both real and inauthentic bot accounts, range from over-glorifying Marcos legacy projects and family celebrification to fan compilation videos and anti-Leni material. Similarly on Youtube, swarms of BBM-verse videos, often marked by appealing graphics or clickbait titles using the word 'pahiya'(shame) to discredit other presidential candidates, are used to anchor discussion around Marcos (Muyot, 2022). Together, these accounts herald the formation of a singular voice - the Marcos team – as they achieve a successful mobilisation of the 2022 disinformation network.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Integrating the main findings of the netnographic exploration within the ANT framework, I now address how the two most recent elections in the Philippines saw to the formation of disinformation networks. Guided by Callon's four moments of translation, this discussion positions the results of the digital observations into the messy and heterogeneous practices of association that (re)make our understanding of 'society' (Latour, 2005). Based on the analysis of the empirical material, each election period demonstrated a successful exercise in translation of disinformation networks. Tracing the activities of influential players within these networks, a notable continuation of actors is evidenced across the 2016 and 2022 presidential campaigns. These include the a) PR and marketing agencies designing the disinformation campaigns; b) digital influencers and online personalities; c) political trolls for hire; and, in the case of Marcos, the d) bigger personas of his family extension. Behind the madness of disinformation production lies this invisible system: hierarchic in nature, strategic in expertise and deeply exploitative in its morality and ethics. The PR and marketing executives hide in plain sight, doused in professional attire, as they direct the activities of influencers and trolls. Between the two, as Marcos engaged with more Internet subculture communities, including on video-oriented applications like Tiktok, the 2022 elections saw to a growth in entities and linkages across the influencer and troll milieu.

For each case, the project-based nature of networked disinformation lent itself to varying degrees of social and economic motives. Media interviews with Rappler, Manila Standard, Lifestyle Inquirer, CNA and BBC highlight the arousing factor of income stability and upward mobility attached to disinformation labour, particularly amongst influencers and trolls for hire. For those in the upper echelons of the actor-network, particularly PR executives during Marcos's campaign, it was the illusion of profitable power and the idea that *"they need us more than we need them"* (Paulo, 2022) which induced their alliance. Unlike Duterte's surprising transparency on his team's marketing and social media management, specificities around Marcos's PR and marketing executives were largely absent from the online space, aside from the occasional anonymised interview. This absence is intentional and likely explained by a series of non-disclosure agreements or other legally binding papers.

Certainly, the actors studied were faced with a host of different uncertainties. For one, during the moment of enrolment, prominent journalists or active netizens presented active barriers to achieving each focal actor's problematising question. Duterte and Marcos each suffered disparaging criticism from both domestic and foreign media outlets, many of whom accused the candidates' use of troll farms and political manipulation; by doing so, these actors actively sought to reveal the internal relations and alliances which afforded each network's formation. Yet, the situation proposed for them here, one which continuously defined and linked entities between trolls, influencers, PR and marketing executives, and family members, proved worthy of the trials they encountered. An effective translation, from one perspective of ANT, involves speaking for others in a single, representative language. Moreover, it entails simplifying and concealing the complex power struggles which led to the consolidation of the network (Callon, 1984, 223-224). In the case of Marcos, the initial objective set out by his campaign team was achieved: a landslide victory of over 31 million votes in May 2022, despite a family history of human rights violations and ill-gotten wealth (Iglesias, 2022, 575-576). Only those voices speaking in unison were heard in the final stage of mobilisation, or in this instance, those performing narratives of the Marcos family 'victimhood' and historical whitewashing; of forgiveness and healing; and of individual celebrification. The same applies for Duterte, who garnered over 16 million votes with a meager P10-million budget (CNN Philippines, 2016). Duterte's own language of discipline and anti-crime weaved itself through the countless influencer and troll postings on Facebook and Twitter. In this sense, a seemingly natural order is evidenced in both election episodes. As a result, the enshrinement of these identities, linkages and alliances during the 2016 and 2022 elections paved the way for each candidate's consolidation of power.

However, this study sounds a note of caution against the perpetual stability of translations. As both Callon and Law warn, a fifth stage, that of dissidence, can occur at any moment following the negotiations and alliances forged; such a dissension of the actor-network is when translation eventually becomes treason (Callon, 1984, 218-219; Law, 2006). Five months after Marcos's election, reports came out revealing the disbandment of the United Vloggers and Influencers of the Philippines (UVIP), a pro-Marcos association formed with the sole purpose of gaining access to Malacañang. Fits of internal squabbling and confusion marked

the hyper-partisan group in the months leading to the dissolution, particularly around concerns of presidential access and organisational leadership (Talabong, 2022). While the vloggers continue to preach their pro-Marcos unity agenda, they now do so separate and without the umbrella of the UVIP (Talabong, 2022). Thus, whilst the implications of this fall-out are too young to bear the name of dissidence, they reenforce the perpetually fluid and dynamic state of actor-networks.

Hardly a fixed analysis, the concept of translation is slippery and it is likely readers will find different potential points of entry, sites of tension and appreciations for new insights. This is cause for its highly interpretive, and likewise, contested style. Yet, in the words of Annmarie Mol, this paper "does not claim to capture everything. Instead, it is intended to suggest some ways of travelling through" (Mol, 2002, 7). Each actor-network, far from a singular entity, is multiple and dynamic. And it this beautiful complexity which makes every ANT traveler's journey here for a unique contribution that will, ultimately, develop and further advance the work proposed.

Chapter 6: Concluding Remarks

5.1 Synthesis of arguments

By digitally exploring the electoral periods of Rodrigo Duterte and Bongbong Marcos, this thesis shed light on the relations directing the information ecosystem. Using ANT as a theoretical and methodological framework, supplemented by netnographic data collection during each respective election, the findings from media interviews and social media point to the successful mobilisation of networked disinformation within the Philippines. Each episode of translation tells a story of a significantly hierarchic association of actors, namely that of the PR and marketing executives; digital influencers; Marcos family members; and political trolls. Alliances were made possible by a series of financial impetuses, as well as a professionalisation of the labour which invoked moral justifications; the latter not only reduced the tangible impact of disinformation production, but equally so, it *displaced* it to other actors in the network. In both cases, the candidates won a landmark victory in electoral numbers, achieving their initial problematisation. More importantly, these elections signaled the shift into a new 'way of politics' in the Philippines, one which digitally tapped into existing latent grievances and anxieties of the populace.

5.2 Implications for democratic quality

Disinformation campaigns very often advance corrosive falsehoods, which spreads misperceptions and subverts sources of higher epistemic demand. The result is a disillusionment towards academics, scientific institutions, professional journalism organisations and other institutions of expertise (McKay & Tenove, 2021, 708). Coupled with techno-affective polarisation and the widespread perception of inauthentic actors, these harmful offshoots of disinformation present a very real harm to deliberative systems of democracy (McKay & Tenove, 2021, 708-710). In the case of the Philippines, Duterte's presidency became marred by a murderous war on drugs and a crackdown on independent media and speech. And while Marcos Junior has promised a more compassionate approach in leadership, in his words a 'high level of accountability', his first year in office has largely maintained similar policies as his predecessor;

to this day, journalists and human rights activists continue to be harassed and killed, while drug-related killings carry on unabated (Fitzgerald, 2023).

Yet, the role of professional manipulators should not be overstated. Spin-doctors, digital influencers, Internet subcultures and alternative information outfits play upon an epistemic crisis which predates their time (Cosentino, 2020, 139). Their ability to chisel out spaces of fear and dissent rests on a crisis of trust, on a broken social bond that has long pervaded global society. These same spaces, moreover, have been met with valiant acts of resistance from a community seeking truth in the untruth. Technology companies, while still evading full responsibility as 'content platforms', are increasingly adhering to the calls of NGOs and journalists as they accelerate the monitoring and curbing of hate and disinformation (Consentino, 2020, 141-142). Media literacy initiatives and fact-checking organisations, like Vera Files in the Philippines, are another stalwart of epistemic defense (Vera Files, n.d.). And journalists, despite the very life-threatening consequences and mental burnout of their labour (Ong, 2022, 400), continue their undercover probes into the disinformation undergrounds, simply because the alternative is not an option. Yet, while highly laudable, these counter-disinformation operations are only one piece to the post-truth puzzle. To overcome an emerging field of disinformation networks and political lies, work must be enacted on the more structural level of culture and politics, with the aim of reinstating *trust* amongst the citizenry and body politic. This presents a difficult road ahead, one which asks questions undercutting the very grounds of our common living and social governance. But only by examining and re-examining our trust in politicians, socio-economic systems, even in ourselves and our collective choices, may truth defy disinformation.

5.3 Looking forward

As a relatively young subject matter, the study of disinformation networks has much to gain from other analytical approaches and cross-disciplinary methods. At present, more attention is required to the organisational dynamics of disinformation, which theories such as ANT or Management and Organisational Studies provide excellent starting guides for. A growing literature on rebellion and resistance within digital labour, from ethnographic explorations of platformised creative labour and click farms to content moderation, is reviving a critical

anthropological and Marxist understanding of power and social relations online (see Siciliano, 2023; Graham et al., 2017; Roberts, 2016; Lindquist, 2019). Above all, it is critical that voices in the underbelly of the disinformation machine are heard and listened to with reflexivity and empathy. Herein lies the importance of an on-the-ground and politics from below approach to the field, one which takes into account the gross humanness behind disinformation. Other related areas which deserve due attention include the role of multinational social media corporations and advertising companies as sites of content production; the psychological repercussions and burnout of those producing and battling disinformation; and finally, acts of resistance against digital capitalism. Together, this meld of network studies and economic social theory has the potential to tap into some enrichening insights concerning disinformation in the 21st century. Not only can these other bodies of sociological theory and the productive tensions they occasion widen the field beyond its existing scholarship, but more importantly, these analyses can inform the pursuit of an open and trusting society.

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