Multistakeholder Dialogue on Electoral Disinformation

Jonathan Corpus Ong
and Nicole Curato

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Internews

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Internews

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Acknowledgements

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Phase 1

Mapping Electoral Integrity Initiatives and Gaps Analysis
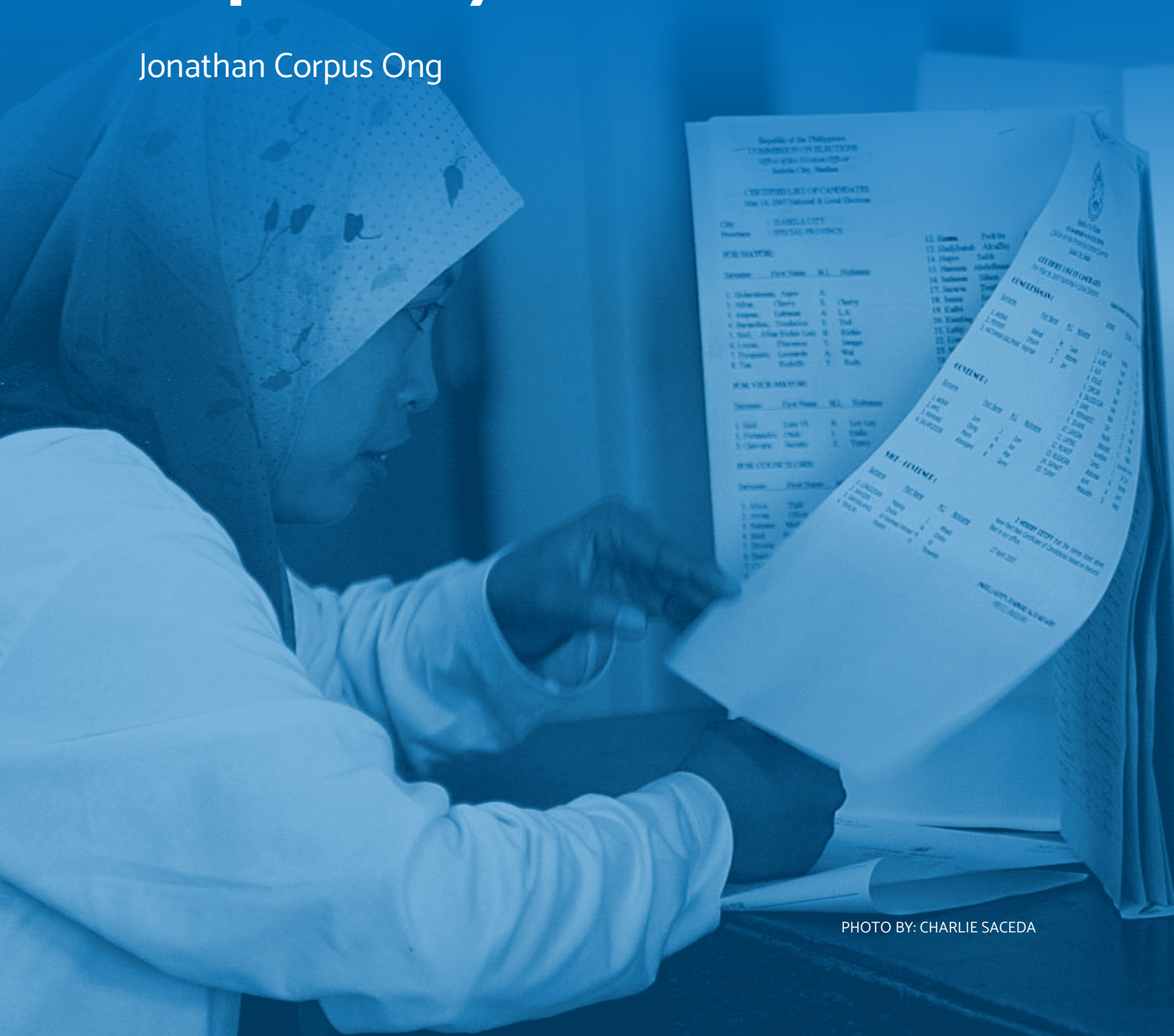
Jonathan Corpus Ong

Phase 1: Mapping Electoral Integrity Initiatives and Gaps Analysis

The Multistakeholder Dialogue on Electoral Disinformation (MDED) project sought the perspectives of pro-democracy actors and key agents in the electoral process to map out election integrity initiatives, assess organizational capacities for disinformation mitigation, and identify influence operations trends for 2022. Phase 1 of the project cast a wide net in sampling diverse participants both old and new players to fair elections projects. This report summarizes common themes from the focus groups and individual interviews with my own critical assessment of important gaps in coalition work and donor programming that MDED aims to enhance.

We conducted two large focus group discussions and 12 individual and small group interviews. Phase 1 of MDED coincided with my other related work on digital literacy, including a PCIJ journalist election coverage training, Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines capacity-building webinar, and UP Diliman's "Battle of the Trolls" webinar. I used these events as research opportunities to probe questions about organizational capacity, public knowledge about the issue, and interest in pursuing future collaboration.

Key Findings

1. Civil society organizations recognize that the country's democratic future is at stake in the May 2022 national elections. In Q3-Q4 2020, organizations are applying for grants, testing collaborations, and connecting with broader coalitions. It is a more diverse, if more competitive, environment engaged in voter mobilization, news and digital media literacy, and 'fake news' busting than ever before. The donor agencies supporting election integrity work remain few and far in between: USAid, AusAid, Konrad Adenauer and NED. These donor agencies have significant power and responsibility in shaping the structure and sustainability of pro-democracy initiatives in the country and should consider whether particular features of disinformation mitigation projects fit or not existing grant and programming mechanisms.

2. Most of the Manila-based news and civil society organizations have active relationships with donors. Regional and local news and civil society organizations are mostly supported to access training and capacity-building. They unfortunately have limited opportunities to develop original initiatives and invest in sustainable in-house infrastructure. Local-level organizations and workers claim they are better equipped to monitor disinformation

narratives as they germinate and develop than Manila-based workers, however, organizational power hierarchies sometimes disempower local professionals from leading story and project development addressing their communities' specific interests. One journalist based in Mindanao admitted a time when her editor from Manila claimed that her news story about Marawi siege was false. *"Minsan natatahimik din kami kasi natethreaten kami kasi sasabihin nila na mali naman yang nareport mo. Bakit ganito? So minsan tatahimik ka na lang talaga. That's our dilemma." "We local journalists clean up the mess of national journalists,"* another participant shared.

3. Many civil society organizations' original missions and mandates have expanded beyond the usual voter literacy campaigns to include mitigating disinformation (see Appendix 1 for a list of initiatives related to election integrity). Recognizing that there is also a battle happening offline, some have spearheaded initiatives that are invested in community-building among youth leaders, journalists, and content creators in the provinces despite the limitations because of the COVID-19 pandemic: "Social media is saturated already with a lot of campaigns so we are now back on our old networks on the ground."

4. There is a clear difference in quality between disinformation interventions and training modules that are strategically co-developed with expert researchers and journalists and the one-off seminars that enlist researchers and journalists as guest speakers with no active say in program design and development. We recognize real interest in business, civil society, and academic communities for critical and comprehensive digital literacy teaching/training modules. Donors should consider supporting module design and development where researchers are empowered to plan curricula and produce creative content in closer partnership with civil society organizations. The task of collecting and disseminating expert knowledge is assigned and outsourced to academics for training programs, yet they have limited say in the crafting of overall curricula.

5. Civil society and news organizations have experienced targeted harassment from the state, politicians, and the vociferous online 'trolls' supporting them. As one journalist expressed during the focus group discussion, "The fear of redtagging is real and it is so easy to do. Your name gets put on the list. *May mga* matrix *na* unchecked. And then the way that the terror law was passed, it has removed any kind of ramification, any guardrails against them.

I want to remain hopeful that maybe if journalist band together we can protect ourselves. But essentially it has come to that where we must band together because there are no laws to protect us." Wag Kukurap is a prominent coalition of over 40 media organizations that has not only promised issue- rather than personality-based election news coverage but also pledged sectoral solidarity in the face of threats to media freedom. While a highly visible call-to-arms, this pledge is also open-ended and operating within editorial and organizational constraints. On top of these important public statements of solidarity, there is an opportunity to actively take stock of individual organizations' digital resilience and cybersecurity infrastructure and develop strategic training programs around these. Anticipating that targeted digital attacks and conspiracy narratives are to come during a heated election season, we should anticipate the infrastructural, legal, and mental health support that workers need easy access to. While this coalition addresses an important gap for solidarity mechanisms in Philippines civil society, journalists depend on in-house organizational capacity. Support for cybersecurity and mental health and wellness of workers is uneven across news agencies.

6. Some journalists have the impression that there is audience fatigue toward 'fake news' and disinformation stories, particularly for the traditional styles of fact-checking. Journalists recognize there is real interest for more creative and deeper-dive investigations on disinformation in the elections. Globally, the tech policy and disinformation beats have grown exponentially and we've seen greater specialization in uses of computational methods, data journalism, and immersion in niche (conspiracy) communities. Locally the newsroom organizational frame for the disinformation beat supports a fact-check team and individual tech experts. Donors may consider incentivizing thematic projects emphasizing more creative methods and collaborations of reporting on disinformation.

7. Campaign finance and political strategy are central discussion points in mainstream media, the political machinery and new digital technologies are debated about by journalists and pundits in a way they have never been before. Political strategists and campaigners are platformed on mainstream media prominently and frequently. Yet given what we know about disinformation architects and the complicity of advertising and PR to political influence operations, there seems to be a disconnect between journalists' own desire to hold disinformation masterminds/'trolls' accountable and their own news production

agenda. There is still a gap here to develop a working group / coalition of researchers and journalists to open up critical conversation about holding advertising and PR masterminds accountable through investigative research and reporting. Important questions of how to responsibly platform campaign strategists on mainstream media without condoning what they do, when to practice strategic silence, and how to represent perpetrators need deeper reflection and public discussion. Journalists recognize that this professional introspection is long overdue, and within the sector, there is a momentum for change in election coverage, "One of the things that we have to focus in on now is internal change – how media people, the broadcasters, journalists think of themselves in an electoral system and in the electoral process that we are about to enter – to clarify what is really the role of a journalist in an electoral process and in a democracy like ours. It's not just about making money that's important but primarily it's about helping citizens make an intelligent choice about the future that they want to our country."

8. The fair elections advocacy group LENTE has faced an uphill battle bringing together advertising and public relations executive, political marketers, and social media influencers to draft a Code of Ethics for the 2022 elections. Both formal legislation and self-regulatory oversight of political advertising have been met with active resistance by creative industry professionals who have profited from a system that lacks any real oversight. One respondent who is a veteran of high-level national campaigns said to us, "My job is to skirt industry regulators". We get the sense that LENTE has done all that they can drafting a pledge signed by their partner groups. As one of their officers expressed, "The Code of Conduct is not a controversial document so that's why we're really confused, we really don't understand what these and PR organizations are fighting for when it's good PR for them that all of you are coming together signing a Code of Conduct." Perhaps MDED Phase 2 research might consider hosting a deliberative forum that brings together economists, accountants (e.g., COA), international journalists, and election lawyers that can more deeply discuss how influence-for-hire operations can be monitored, costed out, and/or regulated using audit and taxation frameworks.

9. Facebook has continued supporting civil society organizations and researchers for election integrity efforts both publicly and via backchannels. Unlike in the United States and Europe, Philippine academic and civil society communities have not advanced discussions around conflict-of-interest with regard to these arrangements. Global South researchers often experience governments rather than platforms themselves as primarily responsible for the shrinking of democratic space and are less publicly critical of the platforms. It remains an open question that needs real public debate whether researcher integrity and criticality are compromised when it comes to formal collaborations. Certainly, there is a gap for a working group that can place collective pressure on various platforms and their (lack of engaged) public policy officers in the country. We should be monitoring Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, Tiktok, Kumu, WeChat and Viber for the May 2022 elections.

10. PumaPodcast was the most enthusiastic of respondents to develop research-journalist collaborations for a podcast miniseries where we aim to interview disinformation workers at various levels in the hierarchy (we hope to prepare a treatment for submission during Project Phase 3). Another idea they're passionate about is a regular short segment on digital behaviors (e.g., "Should you block trolls"?) and news reporting trends (e.g., "strategic silence") for their existing podcast slate. Other respondents enthusiastic to collaborate on public engagement / digital literacy initiatives are MediaCommoner and Pagasa.ph. PCIJ is also keen to continue engagements for journalist training. CBCP and various archdioceses need support for in-house communication capacity-building.

11. Political strategists interviewed for this project mentioned that 'anti-fake-news' is part of the policy platform of the candidates they're advising for May 2022. They did not get into granular detail and we're uncertain whether this is simply campaign period strategy when they could label their political opponent as a 'fake news' peddler, or if this could build momentum for more repressive 'anti-fake-news' laws. Whatever the case, this makes for a highly muddled and cluttered information environment where disinformation mitigation could become politicized and even an 'empty signifier'. Real quality interventions and attempts to reframe discussions around 'trolling' will be competing with politicians' lip service platitudes and co-optation of 'anti-fake-news'.

12. There is still an active underground market for buying-and-selling Facebook groups and pages and the rate is Php15,000 for a page or group with 10,000 followers. While algorithms on Facebook and YouTube have made it more challenging to execute similar coordination as previous campaigns, fake accounts and cloaked groups continue to operate, increasingly through private messaging channels. PCIJ's interest in campaign finance reporting might have room for collaborative research and news articles about disinformation economies during the campaign season. PCIJ has expressed enthusiasm for collaborative news pieces for 2022.

13. Campaigners expressed to us that several of them had made an informal pact for "pa-pogian na lang ha", which supposedly means politicians campaigns will rely on positive advertising and transparent influencer collaborations rather than attack/smear campaigns or coordinated harassment. We are skeptical. Based on the anecdotes campaigners shared about previous elections, we should actually anticipate cybersecurity attacks/hacks and mal-information (leaks) as part of the information disorder toolkit that campaigners will use during election season. There is a huge desire to innovate and circumvent platforms' admittedly stricter policing of influence operations.

14. Some journalists, campaigners, and academic respondents also raised the question of bias among academic political pundits, claiming that some pundits are paid off by politicians. Previously there's been allegations of bias about pollsters and poll agencies as well. We should expect the "anti-elite" disinformation narratives to continue undermining traditional gatekeepers of knowledge through the election season using a mix of sensationalist allegations, personal attacks, and possibly real revelations.

15. Undermining trust on the electoral process is a disinformation narrative that many respondents expect, particularly in the scenario of a Duterte loss. There is a shared sentiment that the current administration will use its entire toolkit of legal scare tactics, political spin, and anti-media rhetoric to cling to power in 2022.

Organizations' election integrity initiatives

Implemented by	Initiative	Category	Description
The TOWNS Foundation	Bagong Botante Future Proofing Democracy	Voter education	• Information campaign to get the youth to register to vote • Uses KUMU (live streaming app) to reach out to audience • Also aims to educate youth about the job description of various politicians • Also aims to institutionalize their campaigns to make their efforts sustainable. Plans to work with schools and LGUs in the future to do so. • Partnered with VOTE PILIPINAS and Youth Vote
The TOWNS Foundation and PPCRV	Podcast to be released in October	Voter education	• Plan to release in October: Botantitas and Debutantes podcast: intergenerational dialogues about elections in the Philippines

The Asia Foundation	Youth Leadership for Democracy	Voter education	• Three pillars: youth leadership, coalition building, and civic education
			  1. Youth-Led Kabilang Ka Coalition (with 800 youth orgs members) – currently focuses on accessible voters registration across the country. This is community-based and taps Sangguniang Kabutaan and people and youth organizations. Provides small grants to youth orgs as long as they are non-partisan. Provides election toolkit with information about the election such as the role of the COMELEC etc.
			  2. Kabahiga Ka – voters education for the youth
			  3. Kaisa Ka – institutionalizing civic education

Implemented by	Initiative	Category	Description
Ateneo School of Governance in partnership with La Salle Institute of Governance, CODE-NGO and IDEALS	PARTICIPATE	Voter education Electoral process integrity Combating disinformation	• Three main objectives: 1) citizen oversight of the electoral processes, 2) access to information to promote informed voting, 3) constituency building for electoral reform • Does work to help combat disinformation and misinformation. Recently, they had a youth survey initiative sampled through partner universities in the Philippines to examine how youth understand the problem of disinformation. • Constituency building – voters education program and training, engaging youth, LGBT, PWD orgs. Lobby electoral reform bills, engages COMELEC
IDEALS	ALERT TAYO 2022 (initiative under PARTICIPATE)	Combating disinformation	• Online platform that promotes election-related correct information
Simbahang Liingkod ng Bayan	ELEKSYON 2022 COALITION	Voter education	• Works with religious groups and schools to work on the integrity of the election. • Generally focuses on voters education and citizen engagement programs • Socio-political information program with a bottom-up approach to understand community needs.
Wag Kukurap coalition	Wag Kukurap	Journalists' coalition / solidarity movement	• Upholding and promoting ethical principles and standards on election coverage among media agencies and journalists • Standing together against journalists' targeted harassment

Appendix 1. Organizations' election integrity initiatives

Implemented by	Initiative	Category	Description
Foundation for Media Alternatives	(see description)	Voter education	• Digital rights agenda for electoral candidates • Engaging with social media influencers and content creators • Introducing more popular formats to discuss information disorder such as comics and music videos
One News	(see description)	Sectoral capacity building	• Plans to organize a disinformation conference in October • Member of the Wag Kukurap campaign

PumaPodcast	(see description)	Voter education	• Releases the following podcasts
			  1. Ted Talks – podcast that talks about press freedom, human rights and similar issues
			  2. Usapang Econ – economics podcasts that aims to make econ digestible
			  3. COVID corner – package the information that is digestible
			• Partners with Youth-Led Coalition, plans to release Bago Ang Lahat podcast to present a different way to think about voting, present biographies of political figures to present the qualities of a leader to vote
			• Deep Dives – taking in election-related stories as they develop, issues that are not necessarily breaking news but can give context to them
			• Lined up to release an election-related podcast with Inquirer

Center for Media Freedom and Responsibility	Reviewing election coverage	Sectoral capacity building	• identifies which election narratives are gaining impact and what media needs to improve on specifically ethical and professional standards of election coverage

Implemented by	Initiative	Category	Description
KBP	(see description)	Sectoral capacity building	• Promotes accountability and responsibility among member broadcasters • Expands understanding of the role of journalists in the electoral process and helps broadcasters improve their interviewing techniques • Tries to act as a conduit of information for compliance of the fair election act and other election-related laws (about to enter agreement with COMELEC)
VERA Files	Fact checking and trainings (see description)	Combating disinformation	• Conducted a campaign finance study (but for TAF internal and not available for public access) • Fact checking since 2016; for elections 2022 they monitor statements by public officials including influencers, and online personalities • Puts out fact sheets of candidate profiles • Partnered with PPI on election series with schools across the country. This is conducted online • Conducted fact check training with OFWs (started in May in Europe)
NUJP	Media safety	Sectoral capacity building	• The media safety and training focuses on equipping journalists to be prepared for harassment and abuses • Plans to publish an ethics handbook on media coverage in general

Appendix 1. Organizations' election integrity initiatives

Implemented by	Initiative	Category	Description
FYT Media	(see description)	Voter education	• Two main programs related to media: 　1. Camp Journ – a digital citizenship program that integrates training and community building for journalists and young content creators in the provinces 　2. Reporters From Home – community-oriented content and story telling and campaigns • Building communities of young journalists and content creators on the basis of fact-checking • Totoo Ba (to be launched in September) - a fact checking platform that the public can participate and report disinformation • Fighters (partnership with Facebook) – community-oriented storytelling. Focused on the youth to train them on fact-checking. They focus mostly on visual fact-checking
FOCAP	(see description)	Voters education	• Conducts online forums targeted to voters education • Plans in the coming months: Presidential debate, series of forums to debunk the Duterte legacy propaganda
LENTE	Code of Conduct signing among PR firms and COMELEC		• LENTE is still planning when this event can be held

Respondent list

Category	Organizations
News and media organizations	ABS-CBN Altermidya Center for Media Freedom and Responsibility CNN Philippines Davao Today DYWC TeleRadyo Foundation for Media Alternatives FOCAP FYT Media GMA News KBP Media Commoner Now You Know PH NUJP One News Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism Philstar.com Philippine Press Institute Pumapodcast Vera Files
Civil society organizations	Asia Foundation Eastern Visayas Network of NGOs and POs (EVNET) IDEALS LENTE PAGASA.PH TOWNS Foundation Western Visayas Network of NGOs and POs (WEVNET) Youth-led Kabilang Ka Coalition
Faith-based organizations	Archdiocese of Manila Caritas Catholic Bishops Council of the Philippines Simbahang Lingkod Bayan

Appendix 2. Respondent list

Category	Organizations
Academia / higher education	Ateneo School of Government / PARTICIPATE Ateneo de Manila / Political Science De La Salle University / Dept of Communication University of the Philippines / TVUP
Political Marketing and Polling	Agents International Warwick & Roger
Political Parties	Hugpong ng Pagbabago Office of the Vice President Leni Robredo
Social Media Platforms	Facebook

Phase 2

Deliberative Forum on disinformation and multi-stakeholder collaboration

Nicole Curato with Bianca Ysabelle Franco

Phase 2: Deliberative Forum on disinformation and multi-stakeholder collaboration

1. Background

What counter-disinformation projects related to the elections can be enhanced by multistakeholder collaboration?

To answer this question, we conducted a three-day deliberative forum with twenty-eight implementers of anti-disinformation campaigns from all over the country. Thirteen participants were from civil society organisations (CSOs), six from the media, six from government, two from public relations, and one from the academe. (The profile of participants is available in Appendix 1.)

We purposefully invited a diverse group to generate collective wisdom on anti-disinformation interventions. Over three days, participants listened to experts and engaged in facilitated deliberations to diagnose the prospects and challenges of connecting current and future anti-disinformation campaigns of stakeholders with different expertise but with similar advocacies.

After a series of small group discussions, participants put forward recommendations for the plenary's consideration. The forum concluded with eight recommendations synthesised by the lead facilitator (see Appendix 2). An illustrator also provided a visual summary of the event.

2. The disinformation landscape

Participants described the disinformation landscape in the Philippines in creative ways. 'Talahib' (weed), 'kabute' (mushrooms), 'machine gun,' 'the pandemic,' and 'hydra' were some of the metaphors used to characterise the persistent character of fake news and troll operations today. Several participants from CSOs shared their[1] experiences of reporting Facebook pages posting fake news, only to find these pages reincarnated after a few days.

Participants expressed a shared feeling of being overwhelmed because of the scale and speed of disinformation. *'Paano tayo makipag-compete sa mga tao* that manages several accounts *sabay-sabay,*[2] asked one journalist from Northern Luzon. 'We do not have as much resources as those

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[1]   We are using gender-neutral pronouns to protect the anonymity of participants

[2]   Translation: How can we compete with people who manage several accounts at the same time?

propagating disinformation,' they added. A senate staffer affirmed this observation. They shared the challenge they faced in monitoring extensive and well-resourced troll operations on Facebook (FB) live and FB groups, where lies spread faster than truth. Participants also identified the disinformation landscape as 'evolving'. *'Bago pa natin yan ma-implement [interventions], may susulpot na naman na bagong challenges,[3]'* said a COMELEC staff. Platforms are also evolving, which becomes apparent when comparing the 2016 and 2022 elections. 'In 2016, we were not that worried about YouTube and Tiktok but now we are,' shared a writer from Manila.

3. Breaking the echo chamber while broadening the reach

For some participants, the disinformation landscape is not limited online. Participants from Mindanao emphasised that disinformation takes place in everyday interactions in the community, from parents who tell urban legends to their children to influential religious leaders who have the power to smear the reputation of some individuals. 'There is much disinformation that is not found online. It's closer to the heart and the community cannot say no to someone who is authoritative,' noted a professor from Mindanao. Others noted how disinformation has long been rooted in Filipino culture–the rumourmongers (mga 'Marites') and older or retired people who pass time by listening to gossip and speculations. A Bangsamoro youth leader suggested that anti-disinformation advocates should not only talk to each other but also extend the conversation to the community level. A youth leader based in Naga shared this observation. They noted how low-income communities are not reached by online-only anti-disinformation efforts because of poor digital infrastructure.

The Bangsamoro youth leader proposed a people-centred approach to examine the kind of information that reaches the people and craft innovative and culturally resonant ways to debunk disinformation. Many participants shared this suggestion. They recognised the tendency of anti-disinformation efforts to operate in echo chambers. A community manager of a media organisation based in Zamboanga observed that most attendees of their events are 'those who believe that disinformation is already a societal problem.' 'But how do we reach out to those who do not? How about those age groups in their 50s and 60s?' they asked.

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3   Translation: Before we even implement the interventions against disinformation, new challenges are suddenly emerging.

Multistakeholder Dialogue on Electoral Disinformation

November 4, 2021

Internews — Local voices. Global change.

FOCUS + TARGET
WHAT CAN WE DO RIGHT NOW FOR THE COMING ELECTIONS?

How do we hold people who peddle disinformation accountable?

How can individuals call out BIG COMPANIES PROFITING FROM DISINFORMATION without the risk of being sued or losing their livelihood?

How can we CREATE AND STRENGTHEN COALITIONS AND INITIATIVES by bringing everyone together?

ANTI-DISINFORMATION LANDSCAPE

Parang talahib. Growing everywhere. Disinformation actors and platforms have evolved

People get disinformation online + offline

Anti-disinformation campaigns speak to an echo chamber.

Messaging platforms are not monitored

WALA KANG ALAM, BATA KA PA

MANAHIMIK KA, MARITES!

Resistance from Pinoy culture.

BOTTLENECKS in ELECTION REPORTING + MONITORING

Barriers in collaboration bet CSOs + govt

Lack of support for projects outside Metro Manila

NO POLITICAL WILL in stopping vote buying

Hard to trace MONEY TRAIL in social media

PUBLIC DISTRUST + PERCEIVED ELITISM of fact checking

KALAT-KALAT ANG INITIATIVES, KANYA-KANYANG GOALS + AGAWAN NG FUNDING.

CHALLENGES

CHISMIS!

LIES!

INTRIGA!

HOW DO WE DISMANTLE A BRAND?

How can we better support our govt workers, photojournalists, and CSOs to fight disinfo?

Can we ever build a united front?

FAKE!

4. Breaking the echo chamber while deepening connections

Aside from breaking the echo chamber in anti-disinformation campaigns, participants also recognised the importance of deepening connections among different stakeholders. 'We work in silos,' said one social media manager from a news network. A program manager of a CSO expressed concern over the lack of a 'united front' among counter-disinformation advocates, while a journalist lamented that current efforts to fight disinformation are 'not as syndicated as those peddling disinformation.' When we probed the importance of collaboration, a writer from Manila pointed out that unity is imperative because 'the other side is very organized' and 'they do not target each other, they are targeting us'.

There are various reasons for the lack of coherence among initiatives. Organisations may have different goals. *'Kalat-kalat'* and *'kanya-kanya'* were some of the words participants used to describe this lack of coherence. They also compete for similar projects (*'agawan ng funders'*). Another factor for the lack of coherence is that each media outfit operates based on its own standard of reporting ('there's no unified standard'). Sharing of resources is also not common among media practitioners because they all compete for exclusive stories.

Deepening connections is also a concern for participants working in government. 'It's also hard for us in legislative work kasi we are on the line baka gamitin sa amin ang civil service rules,'[4] said one legislative officer. 'It's your career and family that is on the line,' they added.

Meanwhile, an official from the Commission on Human Rights expressed their worry that some CSOs have reservations working with government. Some are concerned about the slow speed for government partnerships to take off. A participant from the Commission on Elections (COMELEC) mentioned that it is difficult for recommendations for collaboration to be immediately recognised by government agencies because these require a majority, if not unanimous, endorsement by relevant parties. 'Isa ka lang, dalawa, wala ka nang kakampi, regardless if that's doable or good, walang mangyayari sa report mo,' they added.[5] There may be many good ideas, but there are complexities in implementation that need to be considered.

For some participants, working with government–especially government agencies that are themselves responsible for producing disinformation–requires caution. To this an official from the Commission on Human Rights replied that there are many faces of the government, and therefore there are different pathways for CSO collaboration. There was a discussion on how trust can be built across sectors to deepen collaboration.

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4   Translation: It's also hard for us in legislative work as we are on the line, civil service rules might be used against us.

5   If you're just alone, or two people, you have no allies. Regardless if that's doable or good, nothing will come out of your report.

5. Sustainability of initiatives

Building connections among stakeholders, of course, is not valuable in itself. For many participants, the value rests in forging collaborations that can be sustained to make an impact. As a campaign manager of a CSO initiative puts it, there are 'so many band aid solutions, few long-lasting solutions.' Many felt that the webinar-type approaches to disinformation are no longer enough given the scale of the problem.

Fact checking is one example of this. One editor said that their organisation runs fact checking trainings ranging from one hour talks to ten- or even fifteen-week trainings. 'But, even then, how do you sustain the engagement?' they asked. 'How do you ensure na napapractice siya at nasustain siya at 'di lang dahil eleksyon na?'[6]

A community manager responded to this reflection. They said:

> I was in a fact checking training last week. And we found out na mahina ang fact checking and actually intimidated sila [local participants] sa word na ito. And madalas kasi big network does this [initiative] and sila [local participants] tingin nila wala silang capacity . in fact checking, to produce content, video, graphics. Anything na naiintindihan ng kanilang audience. Isa talaga sa barrier ang language especially here sa Mindanao na mostly Hiligaynon, Chavacano, Bisaya, and our Muslim brothers, it's best that we use their language to maximize fact checking for local disinformation.[7]

The importance of designing sustainable counter-disinformation programmes surfaced in this exchange. The quote above flagged issues of what it means for fact checking trainings to be successful–from building the confidence of community journalists in conducting fact checks to developing capacity to create local content that can address local disinformation.

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6   Translation: How do you ensure that fact checking is practiced and sustained and not just because elections are coming?

7   I was in a fact checking training last week. And we found out that fact checking was weak and they [local participants] are actually intimidated with the word [fact checking]. It's usually the big network that does this [initiative], while they [local participants] think they have no capacity... in fact checking, to produce content, video, graphics. Anything that their audience can understand. Language is one barrier especially here in Mindanao where [the language is] mostly Hiligaynon, Chavacano, Bisaya, and our Muslim brothers, it's best that we use their language to maximize fact checking for local disinformation.

> **The Bangsamoro youth leader proposed a people-centred approach to examine the kind of information that reaches the people and craft innovative and culturally resonant ways to debunk disinformation.**

For a photojournalist, the sustainability of initiatives should also extend to news organizations investing in and hiring local journalists. 'It's better for news organizations to invest [on] people on the ground,' they said. Not only is this more cost-effective, it also puts an end to the practice of news organizations relying on user-generated content that can be more vulnerable to disinformation.

For some participants, paying journalists a good wage is also a sustainable approach to counter disinformation. As a senate staffer puts it, journalists 'sell their services because limited *ang* opportunities.' Others extended this observation to the challenges networks face during elections as they compete for advertisements and ratings. One journalist shared that 'it's difficult for news organisations to fight disinformation if they are competing for ads [and] ratings.' This competition also prioritises exclusive stories rather than fighting disinformation. Further, reporters are at the 'bottom of the structure' of media organizations, so they are not involved in decision-making.

Identifying the truth

Fighting disinformation means defending the truth. But which battles of truth should we prioritise? A writer from Manila argued that 'people want information but we are not giving them the information that they should be getting.' They also emphasized the importance of 'agreeing about the lies that we need to battle across platforms' to address the lack of coherence. The forum revealed the different

Multistakeholder Dialogue on Electoral Disinformation
November 5, 2021

PRIORITY

Academe + scholars + media in natl + regional lvls - should CREATE A 'PORTAL OF TRUTH' OR AN ONLINE REPOSITORY OF TRUSTED INFO AND ELECTORAL LIES. Should be available across different platforms and be made available now.

FAKE

Funders should INVEST IN SUSTAINED (NOT JUST ONE-OFF) COLLAB BETWEEN FACT CHECKERS, COMMUNITY JOURNALISTS & LOCAL CSOs. Need dedicated staff to address localised disinformation.

CSOs should REACH OUT to people not online + ENGAGE local community leaders, religious leaders, and families to LOCALIZE COUNTER-DISINFO EFFORTS.

PR industry + media + govt should CONVENE A MULTI-SECTORAL GROUP TO CRAFT A MOA to agree on messaging on truth vs lies.

News orgs should HIRE LOCAL JOURNALISTS AND PHOTOGS instead of relying on user-generated content.

HOT

PR agencies should COLLAB WITH CSOS TO USE DIGITAL MEANS (apps, platform ads) to target disinfo.

CHR should EXTEND PARTNERSHIP TO OTHER CSOS TO JOIN BANTAY KARAPATAN SA HALALAN monitoring group.

CSOs should convene and consult sectoral groups (e.g. youth, PWD) + CRAFT AN ELECTORAL AGENDA THAT WOULD SERVE AS A GUIDE in choosing their candidates amid the atmosphere of disinformation.

WE CAN'T JUST TELL THE TRUTH, WE HAVE TO SELL IT!

FAKE!

priorities of participants when it comes to addressing disinformation. For some, debunking fake news about COVID-19 should be the priority, while for others, addressing electoral lies and 'hot issues of the day' such as 'Marcos myths' should be at the front and centre of the campaign.

Participants that advocated to dispel Marcos myths and electoral lies identified the lack of an authoritative and consolidated source of information that could be useful for stakeholders, including tech platforms. 'If you watch any video on Covid, there would be a notice saying, "for reliable information, you will be redirected to WHO [World Health Organisation] or CDC [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention]." But for martial law, there is no repository on that. What's the truth? What's the best reference?' asked one lawyer. A writer suggested to create a portal of information, which could be as simple as a Google Drive, that consolidates research that dispels lies on the national and local level. For counter-disinformation advocates, it is critical to generate a consensus on identifying lies and truths.

6. Recommendations

After three days of deliberation, three recommendations got the most endorsements from participants. These recommendations reflect the main themes covered in the previous sections.

- Academic institutions, scholars, and media–at the national and regional levels–should create a 'portal of truth' or an online repository of trusted information and electoral lies. This portal should be available immediately.

- Funders should invest in sustained (not just one-off) collaboration between fact checkers, community journalists, and local CSOs. Funding can go to a dedicated staff in-charge of addressing localised disinformation.

- CSOs should reach out to people who are not online. They should engage local community leaders, religious leaders, and families to localize counter-disinformation efforts (e.g., rumour management).

Appendix 2 provides a catalogue of all proposals, as well as the reasons some participants put forward for supporting or not supporting these recommendations.

7. Evaluation

All participants had a positive evaluation of the deliberative forum. Appendix 6 presents the results of the evaluation questionnaire. Participants found the forum 'refreshing,' 'enlightening,' 'one of the most informative and engaging online discussions I have participated in so far,' and something that 'should be done more frequently.' The diversity of participants from different generations and geographic locations was also appreciated.

A number of participants valued the anonymity afforded to them in the forum. 'We do not want to be connected directly with our offices. We appreciate confidentiality, that we are going to be anonymous,' said a participant from the House of Representatives. Facilitators assured participants that their comments will not be attributable to them and reminded them that everyone is speaking based on their personal and professional experiences, not as representatives of their organisations. Participants from government agencies expressed their hesitations in deliberation.

> ❝ **Unity is imperative because 'the other side is very organized' and 'they do not target each other, they are targeting us'.** ❞

Among the points of improvement include allocating more time for discussions ('the discussions felt rushed'), giving time for participants to reflect on the questions ahead of time, and involve participants from other sectors such as big tech.

8. Acknowledgements

Participants' Profile

We invited 49 participants based on a purposive sample drawn from a recommended list from Internews and Dr Jonathan Corpus Ong who led MDED Phase 1. From the list, we specifically recruited implementers of projects so the deliberations can be grounded on the lived experiences of 'frontliners' in anti-disinformation campaigns.

The participants come from various backgrounds. Note that some of these backgrounds overlap, e.g., some participants both work as academics and media practitioners. To protect the identity of participants, we classify them based on how they introduced themselves in the forum.

Role	Location
CSOs	
Project consultant of an election monitoring CSO	NCR
Program officer of a networking NGO	NCR
Media and communications officer of a legal services CSO	NCR
Communications officer of a Mindanao-based CSO	BARMM
Bangsamoro youth leader	BARMM
National youth convenor of a youth CSO	Region V
Campaign manager of a youth CSO	Region V
Program manager for media and communications	NCR
Co-founder of a media literacy initiative	NCR
Member of a volunteer lawyer group against disinformation	NCR
Communications assistant of a BARMM-based CSO	BARMM
Founder of a governance CSO	NCR
Member of a youth coalition	BARMM
Media	
Community manager of an independent media outfit	Region IX
Photojournalist from a foreign media company	NCR
Writer/editor of a fact-checking media non-profit	Region III
Assistant manager of a news organization's social media team	NCR

Appendix 1: Participants' Profile

Role	Location
Social media manager of a news organization	NCR
Editor of a CAR-based newspaper	CAR
Government	
Legislative staff from the Senate	NCR
Advocacy and campaigns officer of a government agency	NCR
Legislative staff from the House of Representatives	NCR
COMELEC staff	NCR
Communications officer working on the senate committee on electoral reform and people's participation	NCR
Communications staff working on the senate committee on electoral reform and people's participation	NCR
Public relations	
Public relations director of an independent communications agency	NCR
Digital content associate of an independent communications agency	NCR
Academe	
Associate professor	BARMM

Recommendations

The lead facilitator synthesised various recommendations from three breakout groups to eight key recommendations. Participants were asked to vote publicly, via Zoom chat, whether they endorse or not endorse the proposal, plus the option of stating 'undecided.' Participants were encouraged to provide reasons for their votes.

Top 3 Recommendations

Recommendation 1

Academic institutions, scholars, and media - in national and regional levels - should create a 'portal of truth' or an online repository of trusted information and electoral lies. This portal should be available immediately.

High priority: 16
Mid-priority: 3
Low priority: 1

Recommendation 2

CSOs should reach out to people who are not online. They should engage local community leaders, religious leaders, and families to localize counter-disinformation efforts (e.g. rumour management).

High priority: 15
Mid-priority: 2
Low priority: 3

Recommendation 3

Funders should invest in sustained (not just one-off) collaboration between fact checkers, community journalists & local CSOs. There should be dedicated staff to address localised disinformation.

High priority: 13
Mid-priority: 6
Low priority: 1

Other Recommendations

Recommendation 4

PR agencies should collaborate with CSOs to use digital means (apps, platform ads) to target disinformation.

High priority: 9
Mid-priority: 9
Low priority: 2

Recommendation 5

CSOs should collaborate with CHR to join Bantay Karapatan sa Halalan monitoring group.

High priority: 8
Mid-priority: 9
Low priority: 3

Recommendation 6

CSOs should convene and consult sectoral groups (e.g. youth, PWD) and craft an electoral agenda that would serve as a guide in choosing their candidates amid the atmosphere of disinformation.

High priority: 6
Mid-priority: 7
Low priority: 7

Recommendation 7

PR industry, media, and government should convene a multi-sectoral group to craft a MOA to agree on messaging on truth versus lies.

High priority: 5
Mid-priority: 4
Low priority: 11

Recommendation 8

News organizations should hire local journalists and photographers instead of relying on user-generated content.

High priority: 5
Mid-priority: 10
Low priority: 5

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