



PARALLEL PUBLIC SPHERES: INFLUENCE OPERATIONS IN THE 2022 PHILIPPINE ELECTIONS

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Illustrations

Illustrations and infographics are designed by acclaimed artist **Tokwa Peñaflorida** (@tokwap on Instagram).

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Key Findings

This report examines the characteristics and consequences of influence operations in the 2022 presidential election in the Philippines. The report makes three main claims.

- 1. The term “influence operations” provides a broader frame to identify personalities, platforms, and practices that hack public attention, mobilize publics, and influence electoral outcomes.** While the term “disinformation” has been used in previous electoral cycles to refer to deliberately misleading or false information produced and disseminated for political and economic gain, the tactics used in 2022 went beyond these practices and evade efforts at fact-checking. Influence operations are neither illegal nor deceitful but they are exploitative of many gray areas of campaign finance regulation, platform policies, and journalistic norms, as well as latent anxieties and skepticism of citizens.
- 2. Influence operations build on cumulative impacts of longitudinal disinformation.** Historical distortions rebranding Marcos family legacy, planted long ago, reaped benefits for the 2022 race. Dispersed revisionist claims about the martial law era have now consolidated into an artful political narrative that the Marcos family are victims of history. Social media participatory cultures took this forward in new ways, not to mention new partisan broadcast channels that have gotten political legitimacy and financial investment.
- 3. The main consequence of influence operations in 2022 is the creation of parallel public spheres or two separate information ecosystems aligned with hardened political identities.** Legacy media’s role as gatekeeper of the national political center has eroded as citizens engage with news, punditry, and entertainment that affirm their political identity. Divisive electoral contest is socially experienced as an all-out political war: leading to friendship breakups and family quarrels but also social media brigading and cancel culture campaigns.

The report concludes with pathways forward as the nation seeks to rebuild today’s distorted public sphere.

Chapter 1

A MULTIVERSE OF MADNESS? AN INTRODUCTION TO INFLUENCE OPERATIONS IN THE 2022 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

The 2022 Philippine presidential election was not only a contest for votes, but a contest between two parallel political realities.

This election effectively ended legacy media’s privileged role as gatekeeper of the political center where national debates could gather authorities of different political camps to discuss important issues while affirming the nation’s shared myths and values. When President Ferdinand “Bongbong” Marcos Jr. refused attendance in official debates sanctioned by the Commission on Elections, he effectively endorsed and mainstreamed the news channels, partisan pundits, and influencers once derided as fringe, alternative, or even “fake news.” Previous election campaigns relied on national media events and live spectacles, including President Rodrigo Duterte’s campaign, which maximized Duterte’s exposure in presidential debates and press conferences by disrupting the norms of propriety in a liberal democracy. Marcos’ path to the presidency, however, happened outside the political center. By granting exclusive interviews with alternative channels and collaborating with fringe or even “canceled” micro-celebrities for lifestyle interviews and family rebranding, Marcos fragmented the national public sphere.

The result is a “multiverse of madness,” a metaphor that political scientist Julio Teehankee¹ used to describe the emergence of two political realities in the country aligned with hardened political identities of Marcos’ Uniteam and former Vice President and opposition leader Leni Robredo’s Kakampinks.² **Crucially, this Marvel Studios metaphor references the world-building and storytelling powers of a strategically networked “media-information-fantasy complex.”** Politicians, working together with content producers on broadcast and social media, consolidate their emotive political narratives that chip away, if not totally replace, the foundational histories put to text by academic experts and civil society groups and conveyed by legacy media.

1 GMA News Online, “Why Eleksyon 2022 is ‘political multiverse of madness.’”

2 Pink is the campaign color of presidential contender and former Vice President Leni Robredo. Kakampink, a portmanteau of *kakampi* (ally) and pink, means pink army.

This report discusses the influence operations that played a significant role in shaping political conversation during the elections and contributing to the rise of parallel public spheres. We highlight how the influence operations innovations most harmful to healthy political deliberation are those that stoked their political fandoms' biases and aggravated tendencies for affective polarization.

BOX TEXT 1. Conceptualizing “Parallel Public Spheres”

The public sphere plays a central role in our democratic life. By “public sphere,” we refer to the space where people meet to exchange their views, listen across difference, and solve collective problems.³ Social media, radio call-in programs, town halls, and barangay assemblies, as well as everyday political talk in the workplace, schools, and places of worship, among others, comprise the public sphere in the Philippines.

But what happens when these spaces become divided? What happens when we no longer find it bearable to listen to others whose views are unlike ours? What happens when citizens embrace a “war-like” mentality where people—including friends and family members—whose political beliefs we find unbearable are considered enemies unworthy of engagement? What happens when we only communicate with communities that affirm our beliefs?

What emerges from this scenario are parallel public spheres, or highly and unequally radicalized information ecosystems that demonstrate immense difference in terms of both issue positions and issue perceptions, not to mention journalistic norms of referencing and sourcing. In the United States, the fracturing and polarization of information ecosystems has been systematically documented. For instance, the

book *Network Propaganda* conveys a powerful critique of the far-right media ecosystem’s amplification of conspiratorial sources and narratives that the rest of the media landscape did not consider credible.⁴

In the Philippines, this phenomenon is much more recent. Traditionally, broadcast news media have modeled normative values of being “public watchdogs” in a liberal democracy⁵, while simultaneously shaped by developmentalist aims of educating “the masses.”⁶ The journalistic practice of overt partisanship is traditionally confined to regional and provincial media where local elites are likely to enlist local media producers in order to maintain patronage relationships with local communities.

In 2022, overtly partisan national broadcasters expanded in size, reach, and legitimacy. They capitalized on publics’ increasing distrust of legacy media,⁷ stoked by waves of legal harassment and conspiratorial attacks that accused them of operating illegally and undermining national interest. These channels savvily recruited charismatic social media influencers as their talk show hosts and resident experts, thus mainstreaming the media content once considered fringe by legacy media.

3 Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*.

4 Benkler, Faris, and Roberts, *Network Propaganda*.

5 While on paper Philippine broadcast news has leaned towards being public watchdogs, this role has not always been upheld in practice. Close ties between media oligarchs and political elites have sometimes led to a minimization of this role for commercial and political security.

6 Ong, “The Television of Intervention.”

7 Chua, “Philippines.”

Our Methods and Principles

In this report, we use the term **“influence operations”** to refer to **strategic communications that aim to hack attention,⁸ mobilize audiences,⁹ and influence electoral outcomes.**

We consider the term “influence operations” as a more useful concept, as opposed to the popularly used frame of “disinformation,” to characterize the dynamic of the recent Philippine election. **Disinformation, we find, carries a narrower remit that calls to mind fact-checking false claims peddled by online influencers, while “influence operations” is a more expansive frame¹⁰** that captures campaign strategies that may not be illegal or deceitful but are exploitative of the many gray areas of campaign finance regulation, platform policies, and journalistic norms, as well as latent anxieties and skepticism of citizens.¹¹

This report continues our longitudinal research on digital disinformation, having examined social media campaign strategies and disinformation narratives in the 2016 and 2019 Philippine elections, published as *Architects of Networked Disinformation and Tracking Digital Disinformation in the 2019 Philippine Elections*, respectively. From December 2021 to May 2022, we formed a multi-institutional team that monitored political conversations, campaign strategies, and disinformation narratives across mainstream and social media channels.

Our team employed mixed methods of (1) qualitative online observation and (2) interviews with campaign strategists, digital influencers, and election monitors. We kept weekly records of trending hashtags, mainstream media headlines, and coordinative behaviors of suspicious accounts. Our interviews built on long-term rapport with our key informants in the political consultancy and public relations industries, and we met new respondents as a result of our public outreach activities.

Consistent with principles of risky ethnographic research, and acknowledging recent trends of legal harassment of our academic colleagues in sociology, communication studies, and history,¹² we dis-identify information that might reveal identities of ordinary people in this report. **Our overall aim is not to name-and-shame private citizens but to critique the political and technical systems that enable, even reward, unfair digital campaigning.**

Our analysis has consistently applied principles of critical disinformation studies, namely: **(1) social media are powerful shapers of conversation but have no totalizing or “brainwashing” effects.** They are a key battleground for seeding

8 Marwick and Lewis, “Media Manipulation and Disinformation Online.”

9 Wanless, “What’s Working and What Isn’t.”

10 This is a similar argument advanced by Alicia Wanless who leads the Partnership for Countering Influence Operations. We resonate with this coalition’s emphasis on building transparency mechanisms and creating resilience against (authoritarian) state capture of the tech regulation space.

11 Curato, *Democracy in a Time of Misery*.

12 Mendoza, “Cyberlibel complaints vs Rappler.”

narratives and organizing fans, but neither digital campaigns nor troll operations determine electoral outcomes;¹³ **(2) Filipino voters are not *bobotante* (dumb or easily manipulable voters).** Instead, Filipino voters are agentic and cunning. They do not simply respond to seeded narratives but negotiate, reinterpret, and build on these narratives;¹⁴ **(3) Fighting disinformation is not simply about platform takedowns or bot-busting but holding chief disinformation architects accountable and exposing the global and local political economic arrangements that allow them to thrive.**¹⁵

Social media are powerful shapers of conversation but have no totalizing or “brainwashing” effects. They are a key battleground for seeding narratives and organizing fans, but neither digital campaigns nor troll operations determine electoral outcomes.

What’s New in 2022

Influence operations in 2022 are a far cry from the disinformation innovations of 2016 and 2019. Six years ago, we monitored the rise of impostor websites, irreverent vloggers, and coordinated troll behaviors. Three years ago, we observed the increasing popularity of micro- and nano-influencers that elude campaign finance rules, appealing to diverse ethno-linguistic groups and online communities.

In 2022, we see a continuation of earlier trends, but this time, influence operations have become more sophisticated and multi-tiered, such that they are able to construct and maintain parallel political realities.

The pro-Marcos political reality has been made possible by a **well-funded, full-service media-information-fantasy complex capable of diversified content production.** Melodramatic narratives that the Marcos family are the “real victims” of the EDSA Revolution’s liberal elites, once expressed via crude Twitter memes, went mainstream on broadcast channels and high-budget cinematic productions that have gained more gloss, reach, and legitimacy. Niche digital content targeted a wide range of social media users, from conservative *lolos* (grandfathers) on Facebook to TikTok teens, even queers into Sandro Marcos fanfiction. We observed that Marcos supporters evolved their content from producing disinformation attack memes that harass experts and cast doubt on historical facts to crafting a consistent and consolidated story that replaced the once-dominant EDSA narrative.

¹³ Ong, “The World Should Be Worried About a Dictator’s Son’s Apparent Win in the Philippines.”

¹⁴ Curato, “Politics of Anxiety, Politics of Hope.”

¹⁵ Ong, “Southeast Asia’s Disinformation Crisis.”

Filipino voters are not bobotante (dumb or easily manipulable voters). Instead, Filipino voters are agentic and cunning. They do not simply respond to seeded narratives but negotiate, reinterpret, and build on these narratives.

Meanwhile, an alternative political reality composed of the political opposition, as well as investigative journalists and fact-checkers, has been active in exposing the Marcos campaign's disinformation networks. While Kakampinks' achievements are many and monumental in making the electoral campaign participatory and inclusive, there are also truth-denying tendencies in their political reality. "False Asia" trended on Twitter each time Pulse Asia—a credible survey firm—released polling data that was not in the Robredo campaign's favor. A smear campaign against Pulse Asia's president Ronald Holmes took off, with some Robredo supporters demanding a lifestyle check on the university professor.¹⁶ Crucially, this campaign's parallel political reality is at its least grounded when actors perpetuate dismissive claims that Marcos voters are brainwashed by social media propaganda and "have no free will." **Such constructions, we argue, dehumanize voters by portraying them as deficient citizens incapable of making political judgments, therefore unworthy of engagement and deliberation. Crucially, such expressions directly play into the hands of populist leaders and their supportive fans as they reinforce the populist narrative that journalists, fact-checkers, and academics collaborate as an *anti-masa* (anti-mass) "thought police."**

The Long Game of Disinformation

This election proved that **influence operations have a long lifespan and their effects are not confined to one election cycle.** Rebranding the Marcos family from perpetrators of corrupt dictatorship to misunderstood public figures was paved slowly by lifestyle magazines and fashion brand endorsements and turbocharged by social media across multiple election cycles and Marcos memorial events.¹⁷ Their family's artful victimhood narrative slowly built up its persuasive power by playing off earlier campaigns that have smeared liberal leaders as vainglorious elites.

Previously, Architects of Networked Disinformation reported on the coordinated hashtag boosting of #IlibingNa, when anonymous Twitter accounts promoted Marcos Sr.'s burial in the Heroes' Cemetery back in 2016.¹⁸ In 2022, Marcos-commissioned videos and photos long-seeded and archived on social media

¹⁶ <https://twitter.com/GemoraAudie/status/1504256190699958272>

¹⁷ Salazar, "Marcos leads presidential race."

became ripe ingredients for presidential election ammunition—from meme wars¹⁹ on Twitter to YouTube reaction videos to TikTok musical duets.

The function of social media in the Marcos campaign **should not be understood in a kind of determinist capacity but in their unique opportunities for fervent fan participation and monetization of political content on social media.** Marcos folklore producers and conspiracists were rewarded in the digital economy with views and online engagement, paid ads (including Google), and lucrative endorsements. As we discuss later in the report, even non-Filipino YouTubers cashed in with Marcos fan-bait videos because of the Marcos fandom’s passionate digital engagement.

What’s at Stake

What, one may wonder, is at stake as we monitor the fragmentation of the Filipino public sphere into two separate media-information ecosystems with their own journalists, experts, and knowledge influencers? **What’s at stake is our capacity to deliberate as a nation and determine a path forward that is deemed legitimate despite our disagreements.**

We find that the emergent influence operations of 2022 have been instrumental in hardening political identities and competing value systems. Hardened political identities with irreconcilable value systems represent a shift in Philippine political culture once described as having “weak parties” and little ideological differences.

Fighting disinformation is not simply about platform takedowns or bot-busting but holding chief disinformation architects accountable and exposing the global and local political economic arrangements that allow them to thrive.

The recent election illustrates what happens when citizens are forced to choose between two sides, when political engagement that gains currency is not thoughtful deliberation or critical reflection but a wartime mindset of winner-takes-all.

Between these camps, genuine conversation is rare. Offline, this has led to family quarrels and un-friending. Meanwhile, online engagement has devolved to brigading, cancellations, and targeted harassment. In the coming years, **the challenging project will be how exactly to build new mediated spaces oriented toward mutual learning and inclusive public deliberations.**

¹⁸ Ong and Cabañes, *Architects of Networked Disinformation*.

¹⁹ Donovan, Dreyfuss, and Friedberg, *Meme Wars*.

Chapter 2

INFLUENCE OPERATIONS **INNOVATIONS IN 2022**

This chapter catalogs innovations in influence operations in the 2022 presidential election. Many of this year’s campaign tactics were deeply entangled with narratives that are not outright lies but create conditions for untruthful claims to take off and be normalized in mainstream political conversations. Crucially, these digital practices exploited the many gray areas of campaign finance regulation, social media platform policies, and journalistic norms. In other words, **not all of these influence operations could be neatly classified as “intentionally misleading” under the definition of “disinformation” or “using deceptive means” under the frame of “media manipulation.”**²⁰

This is precisely where we see our report uniquely contributing to the anti-disinformation landscape in the Philippines; our critical and longitudinal research spotlights how influence operations have developed workarounds to skirt popular civil society initiatives of fact-checking and social media platforms’ monitoring of inauthentic coordinated behavior.

Our main observation is as follows. We find that **2022 showed greater diversity and professionalization in the kinds of partisan influence operations at play.** Whereas we monitored the role of impostor websites and clunky conspiracy theory matrices in shifting the mainstream news agenda in previous electoral cycles, 2022 witnessed the emergence of new personalities, platforms, and groups that mobilized political fandoms by providing them digital opportunities for satirizing, shaming, or canceling their rivals. New digital content emerged, including pseudo-scientific expert claims and snake oil data analytics that give disinformation a more respectable gloss compared to cheap fakes or memes.

While our report spotlights distinct innovations in digital campaigning, the emerging personalities, platforms, and group behaviors we discuss could not be separated from the historical and political economic factors that make influence operations possible and profitable in the first place. As our previous reports have argued, **it is important that Philippine legal and civil society efforts to curb disinformation move beyond their narrow focus on unmasking low-level trolls, shaming bloggers, or blaming the “*bobotante*” toward accountability initiatives** that spotlight the power and responsibility of disinformation-for-hire architects who hide in plain sight from within creative industries.²¹

²⁰ Wardle and Derakhshan, “Thinking about ‘information disorder.’”



In this report, we expound on three main categories of emerging influence operations observed in the 2022 Philippine election cycle: personalities, platforms, and practices.

Personalities

Personalities play a key role in influence operations as the charismatic faces that lighten up political propaganda into social media fads or legitimize them with their “expert” imprimatur.

Previously, notorious bloggers, sexy and irreverent celebrities, and low-income “online trolls” were considered the face of disinformation. In 2022, the key faces of influence operations are more official and credentialed, cutting across social classes and even nationality. They display a wide range of political vocabulary and often play into the partisan divides of Uniteam versus Kakampink to drive more “engagement.”

1 Knowledge Influencers

WHO: Both credentialed pundits and self-styled experts peddle hyperpartisan analysis with dubious and politicized data interpretation

Special ability: Whether it’s doom-and-gloom or just-asking-questions, their “expert” commentary inflames political fans’ biases by supplying “credible” information

Platforms: Broadcast media, long Twitter threads, and TikTok explainers

“Knowledge influencers” refer to “self-styled intellectuals” on social media whose claims are politicized to support a particular political camp.²² Unlike vitriolic bloggers and “online trolls” of previous election cycles responsible for destructive attack messaging, knowledge influencers use erudite punditry and engaging educational content that are utilized for partisan ends.

Some of these knowledge influencers actively engage in hyperpartisan discourse. They provide creative interpretations and translations of politicians’ misspoken statements and odd public behaviors to recast these in a more favorable light. These influencers can come in two forms: some are credentialed experts with primary occupations in academia and think tanks, while others are online micro-celebrities skilled at crafting rabble-rousing political messages via punchy TikTok explainers or long Twitter threads.

²¹ Ong and Cabañes, *Architects of Networked Disinformation*.

²² See also Maddox, “Micro-celebrities of Information.”

PERSONALITIES



Knowledge Influencers

WHO: Both credentialed pundits and self-styled experts peddle hyperpartisan analysis with dubious and politicized data interpretation

Special ability: Whether it's doom-and-gloom or just-asking-questions, their "expert" commentary affirms political fans' biases instead of inviting critical reflection

Platform: Broadcast media, long Twitter threads, Facebook posts

Senator Satirist

WHO: A public servant used her official social media page to satirize her family's opponents

Special ability: Senator as amateur actress weaponized her real-talk auntie persona to deliver coded attacks that evade all fact-checks

Platform: YouTube, Facebook



AFAM Reactors

WHO: Attractive foreigners streaming Pinoy political content with intercultural commentary

Special Ability: Their sweetly accented English commentary lightens up distressing political issues while earning \$\$\$ from YouTube ads

Platform: YouTube reaction videos

The knowledge influencers of 2022 are different from experts of previous eras because of the fractured public sphere that has given way to parallel information ecosystems catering to competing political fandoms. Unlike the traditional academics that legacy media used to rely on for “balanced” commentary on “both sides” of an issue, today’s knowledge influencers signal affiliation to a political camp, formally collaborate with political parties, and signal boost their partisan micro-celebrity allies to drive their social media engagement.

Our concern in raising this issue is the extent to which scientific knowledge and empirical research are increasingly politicized for partisan ends, such that all sorts of knowledge could be discredited in the public sphere, dismissed as “biased,” or (mis)used by partisan groups as ammunition to justify their advocacies or dunk on their opponents.

We acknowledge that partisanship, or taking sides on a political issue, is necessary for democracy. Partisanship may encourage citizens to defend democratic values they hold important and identify these with a particular politician or party. Our concern in raising this issue is the extent to which scientific knowledge and empirical research are increasingly politicized for partisan ends, such that all sorts of knowledge could be discredited in the public sphere, dismissed as “biased,” or (mis)used by partisan groups as ammunition to justify their advocacies or dunk on their opponents.

The 2022 election cycle illustrated that some knowledge influencers playing the social media game of clout-chasing and appeasing political fandoms ended up ignoring scientific data and methodological conventions for hyperpoliticized commentaries around COVID as well as election survey methodology. Some entrepreneurial knowledge influencers were also hyping new technology, such as data analytics innovations that claim unprecedented powers of behavior analysis and social media monitoring. Those with primarily commercial interests seek to monetize their academic credentials or thinktank affiliations with consultancy gigs for politicians and big business seeking guidance during critical events such as elections.

Our interviews with campaigners revealed how some high-level knowledge influencers are secretly on the payroll of politicians as campaign consultants, while cultivating a persona of objectivity or expert neutrality when providing commentary online and in broadcast media. These transactions have remained obscured from campaign finance expenditure declarations, engagements with local or international press, and ethics boards of universities or private industries.

2 Senator Satirist

WHO: A public servant using her official social media pages to satirize her family's opponents

Special ability: Senator as amateur actress weaponized her real-talk auntie persona to deliver coded attacks that evade all fact-checks

Platforms: YouTube, Facebook

One exceptional senator used her official YouTube channel to create satirical skits during the election season. Under the directorial helm of Darryl Yap, the “Len-Len” series relied on Senator Imee Marcos’ *maldita* (snobbish, bratty, or mean) auntie image to deliver jokes at the expense of presidential candidate Leni Robredo. The senator’s powerful charisma and fluency with *beki*-speak (gay vernacular) genuinely came through to her 350,000-strong YouTube followers, 500,000 followers on Facebook, and thousands more on TikTok who viewed shorter clips.

In interviews with various media outlets, the senator satirist justified that this production was made in harmless fun (“*katuwaan*”), though she anticipated that her critics wouldn’t be able to take a joke (“*basto pikon talo*!”). Despite her brother’s public promise to conduct only positive campaigns, Senator Marcos strategically carried out attack messaging on his behalf. The “Len-Len” series consistently portrayed her brother’s rival Leni Robredo as bitter, dumb, and exaggeratedly hardworking. For example, in one skit that got over 4.5 million views on Facebook and 28,000 views on YouTube, her gossipy neighbor discussed that there are so many loud and critical bashers on social media that make them “bitter as coffee” (*ang papait ng kape*).

Her skits riff off viral spoofs of Robredo in pro-Marcos meme pages on Twitter, such as the “MaDumb” (a portmanteau of “madame” and “dumb”) series of TikTok videos that splice Robredo’s videos to make her look incoherent and incompetent.

While actors in national politics are not new, a politician personally using her official social media channel to produce lifestyle entertainment and comedy bar-style exchanges made for a real election campaign surprise. These satirical videos effectively skirted around the anti-disinformation intervention of fact-checking. It is also unclear whether these productions counted towards her brother’s official election campaign expenditure when these are hosted on an elected official’s public communication channel, and not actively calling the public to vote for a candidate. Senator Marcos’ use of entertainment media as tools for retelling a consolidated political narrative continues today with her continued

collaboration with Darryl Yap for *Maid in Malacañang*, a film about the Marcos family’s final days at the Malacañang Palace in 1986. These examples demonstrate that the Marcos media-information-fantasy complex has world-building capacities; by mixing genres and enlisting different collaborators, they deliver fresh content while artfully consolidating a political narrative.

While actors in national politics are not new, a politician personally using her official social media channel to produce lifestyle entertainment and comedy bar-style exchanges made for a real election campaign surprise. These satirical videos effectively skirted around the anti-disinformation intervention of fact-checking.

3 AFAM Reactors

WHO: Attractive foreigners streaming Pinoy political content with intercultural commentary

Special ability: Their sweetly accented English commentary lightens up distressing political issues while earning \$\$\$ from YouTube ads

Platforms: YouTube reaction videos

AFAM is sassy Filipino slang referring to “foreigners,” usually white and male. AFAM reactors are non-Filipino social media influencers who deliver color commentary over recordings of Filipino news and documentaries as a way of engaging passionate Pinoy fandoms. An extension of the popular genre of attractive foreigners gaining notoriety in viral videos when they speak or sing in Filipino languages, a few AFAM streamers pivoted from music-related reaction videos to politics-related videos in the leadup to the election. These content creators cashed in on Pinoy political fandoms’ intense digital engagements to produce reaction videos about the myth of Marcos family gold, media interviews with Bongbong Marcos, and election campaign advertisements. The appeal of AFAM streamers is they bring a foreigner’s curiosity, lightheartedness, and non-partisan perspective to issues reported on normatively by academics

and journalists. Following social media influencer logics of keeping things light and fluffy, AFAM streamers gloss over corruption, abuse, and atrocity to focus on quirky human stories of political figures they comment on.

This may seem banal, but, in a communication environment where historical truths are interrogated and delegitimized by various influence operations, AFAM YouTubers may inadvertently popularize strategic historical distortions as they chase online engagement and YouTube ad revenue.

For example, one YouTuber with over one million followers received 1.7 million views to an “honest reaction” to a conspiracy documentary about the Philippines being the richest country because of Marcos gold. The documentary claimed that the Philippines held over a million tons of gold reserves and that Ferdinand Marcos Sr. was the guardian who hid it from an elite cabal. The YouTuber opens the reaction video with North American-accented greetings of “Kumusta? Mabuhay! Magandang umaga!” (“How are you? Greetings! Good morning!”) and expresses feelings of overwhelming gratitude for viewer comments to a previous video he admitted was “Pinoy-baiting.” The reaction video portrays him making shocked “wow” faces directly to the camera as the documentary rolls on with absurd claims. While he expresses at one point that Marcos gold is likely the stuff of legend, he ends in classic influencer fashion by staying open to multiple possibilities: “Who knows? It could be real—like the existence of aliens!”

This may seem banal, but, in a communication environment where historical truths are interrogated and delegitimized by various influence operations, AFAM YouTubers may inadvertently popularize strategic historical distortions as they chase online engagement and YouTube ad revenue.

BOX TEXT 2. The Mainstreaming of LGBTQs in National Politics

“It felt like a Pride march.”

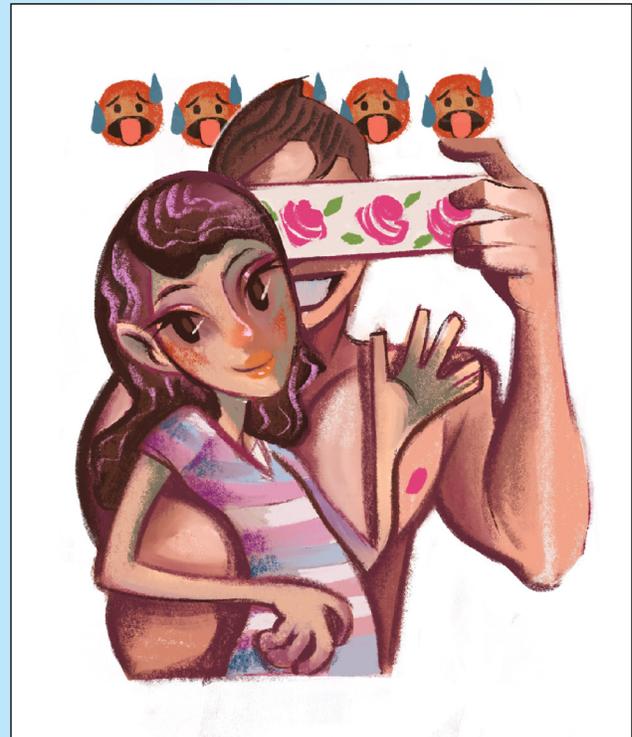
Queer activists and influencers were finally on the mainstream campaign trail as lead organizers hosting political rallies and mobilizing their diverse social media followers to take a firm political stand. While Filipino queer political engagement in online spaces is not new,²³ 2022 was the first time that a diverse range of LGBTQ political organizations, student groups, and (micro-) celebrities occupied prominent leadership roles for a presidential campaign.

In past elections, queer policy agenda was often sidelined during national campaigns, and thus queer political leaders had to suppress their own identities. In 2022, *beki* (queer) influencers lent their energies, diverse talents, and coordinated networks to various camps and engineered viral moments.

Queer micro-celebrities such as Mela Habijan had official hosting duties for Robredo sorties while artist-activists such as Rod Singh coordinated campaign endorsement videos and hashtag campaigns. Meanwhile, the “Alter Twitter” network of sexy queer men leveraged hypersexuality and lewd humor for attention-hacking posts. Queers repurposed the Robredo campaign slogan “*Kulay Rosas ang Bukas*” (“Pink is the Color of Tomorrow”) to make shocking puns about gay sex and rosy private parts in both digital spaces and on ground rallies. Gay men also edited their dating app profiles to signal political affiliation along with their preferred sexual position (“Bottoms for Leni”).

As the queer community is no monolith, we also observed that some *beki* politicians, celebrities, bloggers, and at least one party-list group also expressed support for the Marcos-Duterte tandem. *Beki* vernaculars were often used when they satirized and objectified political opponents in the name of “real talk.”

Whether pro-Robredo or pro-Marcos, the queer community demonstrated how their boundless creativity and outrageous humor could be harnessed for both positive campaigning and fiery attacks.



²³ In our previous report *Architects of Networked Disinformation*, our ethnographic interviews uncovered the role queer identity positions play in managing multiple online personas and crafting snarky messaging that playfully references beauty pageants, celebrity divas, and other icons of queer culture (see pages 35–36). See also Ong and Cabbuag, *Pseudonymous Influencers and Horny Alts in the Philippines*.

Platforms

This section highlights how a new genre of hyperpartisan broadcast news outlets and a youth-oriented social media platform offered new opportunities for politicians to reach specific audiences. Partisan broadcast television news channels gained new momentum and legitimacy when President Bongbong Marcos gave them exclusive interviews and shunned legacy media’s invitations to participate in national rituals of television debates and one-on-one “job interviews.” TikTok drew national and international media attention with headlines about its role in amplifying misinformation. Below we offer a critical analysis of TikTok’s role as a battleground for youth-oriented political communication. Rejecting platform determinist analyses that overplay one medium’s outsized role for winning an election, our approach analyzes the broadcast and social media platforms as dynamically interconnected where narratives are designed to flow from one medium to another.

1 Partisan Broadcast Media

WHAT: The Fox News-ification of Filipino national media

Special ability: National news media simultaneously diversified and split following hardened political lines, producing parallel political realities

National media’s core values traditionally include balance and independence, which presumes responsibility of “counterbalanc[ing] dominant groups in the society including big businesses, majority ethnic groups, and influential religious sects.”²⁴

Legacy media’s role as the gatekeeper of the political center from which nationalistic media events take place has gradually weakened in the six years of the Duterte administration.

In 2022, we observe national broadcast news as simultaneously diversifying and hardening into two separate media ecosystems split between liberal legacy media and newer, overtly partisan outlets.

Legacy media’s role as the gatekeeper of the political center from which nationalistic media events take place has gradually weakened in the six years of the Duterte administration. Legal harassment of media organizations such as ABS-CBN and Rappler, along with online smear campaigns and conspiracy theory narratives, have exacerbated the erosion of public trust in liberal legacy media.

²⁴ Lanuza and Arguelles, “Media System Incentives for Disinformation.”

²⁵ Gertz, “Fox News is the Republican Party.”

PLATFORMS



Partisan Broadcast Media

WHAT: The Fox News-ification of Filipino national media

Special ability: National news media simultaneously diversified and split following hardened political lines, producing parallel political realities

CONFIDENTIAL



TikTok

WHAT: The third largest social media platform in the country became a real battleground to seed political messages targeting the youth

Special ability: Its playful and unpredictable algorithm rewards content producers with “viral” successes

CONFIDENTIAL

In this fractious context, rival news outlets have seized the opportunity to grab market share by expanding, rebranding, and/or professionalizing partisan media content with higher production value, new personalities, and diverse genre offerings.

Historically, explicitly partisan news outlets in the Philippines were confined to local radio and newspapers, where journalists were important intermediaries in the patron-client relations between local elite families and the ordinary people they claimed to help, or to cheap and sensationalist tabloids at the national level. In 2022, the Philippine national news landscape reflects the partisan media systems of countries such as the United States, where conservative networks such as Fox News and One America News Network reflect the interests of the Republican Party,²⁵ while liberal-leaning networks such as MSNBC advance those of the Democratic Party.

Both liberal and illiberal news outlets now find themselves in the throes of deepening partisanship and are further incentivized by social media metrics to cater to the passionate engagement of political fandoms. Uniteam supporters find themselves tuning in to SMNI for exclusive content and appearances featuring Bongbong Marcos and family, while Kakampinks defend legacy media outlets and their prominent personalities.

2 TikTok

WHAT: The 3rd-largest social media platform in the country became a real battleground to seed political messages targeting the youth

Special ability: Its playful and unpredictable algorithm rewards content producers with “viral” successes/realities

During the election season, many journalistic reports spotlighted TikTok’s role in amplifying misinformation and miseducating (young) voters. Our analysis rejects the moral panics that overstate young people’s vulnerability to the platform’s so-called abilities for behavioral modification. In many ways, this news cycle repeated the same determinism used to critique Facebook for “ruining democracy” and winning the election for Duterte in 2016.²⁶

Our analysis is keen to emphasize that TikTok is distinctive from other platforms in Philippine political communication for its ability to reach Gen Z Filipinos, reward their consistent users quick virality even without mega-influencer status, and produce quick-and-easy “evidence collages”—defined by P.M. Krafft and Joan Donovan²⁷ as a disinformative tactic that

²⁶ Swearingen, “Facebook Used the Philippines to Test Free Internet.”

²⁷ Krafft and Donovan, “Disinformation by Design.”

aggregates decontextualized images and condenses information into “easily digestible and shareable format[s]”. TikTok’s green screen function lends itself well to filming “evidence collages.” Evidence collages were often used by pro-Marcos influencers to interconnect various tragedies across two Aquino administrations, such as SAF44, Dengvaxia, the Manila bus hostage crisis, and the Hacienda Luisita Massacre.

Our analysis is keen to emphasize that TikTok is distinctive from other platforms in Philippine political communication for its ability to reach Gen Z Filipinos, reward their consistent users quick virality even without mega-influencer status, and produce quick-and-easy “evidence collages.”

Launched in 2016, TikTok has over 35 million users in the Philippines as of early 2022²⁸ and is now the 3rd-ranked social media platform behind Facebook and YouTube. Compared to other platforms where large follower counts are required to achieve high reach and engagement, TikTok’s playful and unpredictable algorithm rewards its content creators the thrill of a “viral sensation” with a bit of luck, consistency, and creativity. Young content creators initially embraced the platform for participation in viral challenges such as duets and dance-alongs.

During election season, the same unpredictable algorithm meant that political fan expressions, misinformation, and conspiracy theory could achieve quick virality.²⁹ For example, Uniteam fans played with TikTok’s genre of dance-alongs with their own viral TikTok challenge to film a street dance to the beat of “Wala Kaming Pake Sa Inyong Presidente Basta Kami BBM Sara Duterte”³⁰ [We Don’t Care About Your President; We’re for Marcos-Duterte].

During Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, pro-Marcos and pro-Duterte accounts praised Russian President Vladimir Putin for his strongman leadership and drew connection points between Putin, Duterte, and Ferdinand Marcos Sr.³¹ TikTok videos spliced decontextualized footage of a Leni Robredo interview to insinuate that a Robredo presidency would lead the country to war given her allyship with the United States.³²

28 Kemp, “Digital 2022.”

29 In a 2021 report, we investigated the potential of TikTok and WeChat to spread health disinformation within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as political disinformation in the leadup of the 2022 national elections. The study is the first deep dive on the role that both platforms play in the country’s information ecosystem. See also Lanuza, Fallorina, and Cabbuag, “Understudied Digital Platforms in the Philippines.”

30 <https://www.tiktok.com/@felipemolon0/video/7095148748468210970>

31 Ong, “Pro-Marcos, Duterte accounts weigh in on Ukraine invasion.”

32 Vera Files, “Quotes from Robredo, Zelensky on Ukrainian allies.”

At the same time, charismatic educators such as Mona Magno-Veluz and Dexter Doria used TikTok to correct misinformation about martial law atrocities. Playing up their tita (auntie) educator personas, they use humor, accessible language, and personal experiences to break down misconceptions about martial law as the country's golden age. Magno-Veluz has over 450,000 followers on TikTok, and Doria's DiDiSerye videos are widely shared across social media platforms.

Practices

Aside from personalities and platforms, we also monitored two practices that exhibit “mob” behaviors aiming to silence, shame, and punish political opponents. First, the practice of brigading weaponizes social media platforms' own features of user reporting and flagging as a way to trigger monitors to downvote or block content. Second, canceling involves denunciation and calls for groups to withdraw financial support from public figures, celebrities, and even small businesses and their workers. These practices, we find, contribute to further widening the gap between the parallel public spheres.

1 Brigading

WHAT: Digital mobs gamify bot-busting and troll-hunting through mass reporting

Special ability: Getting rivals blocked on social media gives videogame-style gratification without addressing root causes

Platforms: Group chats, Twitter

Brigading is Meta's official term to describe adversarial networks where people work together to mass comment and mass report users to silence them online.³³ These concerted attacks have previously been observed in other platforms like Reddit,³⁴ and have even been observed in various pop culture fandoms such as K-pop.³⁵ We observed brigading as a strategy deployed by digital warriors of both political camps to take down social media pages and individual profiles they viewed as “trolls” hostile to their political candidate.

While brigading is not new, the 2022 campaign season saw brigading go public and mainstream. Brigading activities give videogame-style thrills to ordinary individuals who want to participate in anti-disinformation efforts. Pro-Duterte accounts had previously used mass reporting and DDoS attacks to silence activists,³⁶ journalists, and influencers critical of the

33 Gleicher, “Meta's Adversarial Threat Report.”

34 Jhaver, Goshal, Bruckman, and Gilbert, “Online Harassment and Content Moderation.”

35 McCurry, “How US K-pop fans became a political force.”

36 Aquino, “Facebook deletes 400 accounts before elections.”

PRACTICES



Brigading

WHAT: Digital mobs gamify bot-busting and troll-hunting through mass reporting

Special ability: Getting rivals blocked on social media gives videogame-style gratification without addressing root causes

Platform: Group chats, Twitter

CONFIDENTIAL



Canceling

WHAT: Digital mobs seeking accountability turn to name-and-shame online rituals that often lead to othering rather than understanding

Special ability: With a winner-takes-all war mindset, digital mobs gamify politics by hunting down enemies, either getting them kicked off social media or fired from their jobs

Platform: Twitter, Facebook groups, group chats

CONFIDENTIAL

administration. Throughout this election cycle, some of these accounts continued to operate in closed groups, such as the “DDS Troll Mass Report Initiative.”

Digital warriors should instead consider participating in broader digital literacy initiatives that have policy-impact and community outreach components in order to tackle root causes of complex problems they’re passionate to solve.

Meanwhile, Kakampinks frustrated with social media platforms’ failures to take down inauthentic bot-looking accounts and ban influencers responsible for hate speech organized “Mass Report Hours” in public pages and volunteer groups. Using open-access Excel documents, Kakampinks encouraged each other to list problematic accounts and identified predetermined times when they would simultaneously file complaints about those accounts, hence “mass report hour.” Kakampinks justified brigading tactics as “fighting fire with fire” and even contributing to bottom-up civil efforts at troll-hunting or bot-busting. One brigading event involved a group of Robredo supporters collecting links and screenshots to file complaints to Meta to take down accounts that insinuated that they were *bayaran* (paid supporters).

However, brigading reduces the complex political problem of disinformation to a technological issue that could be solved through coordinated online clicks. Digital warriors should instead consider participating in broader digital literacy initiatives that have policy-impact and community outreach components in order to tackle root causes of complex problems they’re passionate to solve.

2 Canceling

WHAT: Digital mobs seeking accountability turn to name-and-shame online rituals that often lead to othering rather than understanding

Special ability: With a winner-takes-all war mindset, digital mobs gamify politics by hunting down enemies, either getting them kicked off social media or fired from their jobs

Platforms: Group chats, Twitter

Canceling is the practice of withdrawing support for personalities or groups due to their “problematic” behavior. This can come in the form of boycotts, calls to de-platform, and collective assertion to frame the canceled as unworthy of support. Canceling seeks accountability for morally reprehensible actions of public figures.

Canceling can be traced back to social movements that gained traction online such as the #BlackLivesMatter and #MeToo movements which exposed and canceled racist, sexist, and misogynist attitudes of authorities and celebrities.³⁷ Historically, those who cancel most often come from marginalized social positions where canceling becomes an alternative means to regain collective power or retribution outside formal institutions.

During the campaign season, canceling meant a lot more than seeking accountability and reclaiming power. Celebrities, popular pundits, and businesses like restaurants and cosmetics retailers were subjected to online uproar whenever they crossed the line of unacceptable behavior set by partisan camps or unveiled their political color. Incessant and emphatic tirades popularly remolded cancel culture as a form of public shaming, name-calling, and bashing. Particular to the Kakampinks, support for Marcos-Duterte and the administration, spreading of fake news, and morally reprehensible views warrant canceling. Examples of canceled personalities include the showbiz celebrity Ella Cruz. In a press conference for the pro-Marcos film *Maid in Malacañang*, where she played one of the Marcos children, Cruz explained that for her, “history is chismis” (“history is gossip”). This was met with outrage online, including historians who perceived the comment as dismissive of an entire profession. As criticisms arose, social media platforms were flooded with demeaning remarks of “*bobo*” (dumb) and “*tanga*” (stupid) as well as humorous memes that alluded to Cruz’s comment.

It came to a point where every post and click online was handled with fear and anxiety of being canceled. Bridge-burning became the norm while staying connected despite conflicting views became the exception.

Intentionally or not, this same weapon of canceling was used against Kakampinks to create an image of a chaotic and angry mob ready to pick at anyone not of their own kind. This is a strategic counterpoint for the criticisms brought out to Marcos-Duterte supporters which rather amplify their message of unity. As Sara Duterte articulated, “*Kapag kayo po ay binato ng ‘cancel,’ batuhin nyo po ng burger ng Uniteam ni Marcos-Duterte*” (“When you’re canceled, hand them a free hamburger from our Uniteam”), referring to the famous Filipino proverb of treating hatred with kindness. Cruz, meanwhile, explained in a YouTube interview that being canceled made her even more empathetic towards the Marcoses—a

37 Romano, “The second wave of ‘cancel culture.’”

family who has been canceled for decades, but were redeemed as the truth surfaced.

As attacks become more salient, playing the victim card became an effective strategy for canceled personalities to (re)gain sympathy and mobilize their own followers. For instance, customers and followers alike of food chain Eng Bee Tin began their own brigade in response to the calls to cancel Eng Bee Tin. In the same vein, TikTok influencer Pipay and ABS-CBN, among other artists, gathered their own supporters to counter their cancellation. These altercations not only reinforce already-established political divides but also serve as moments of renewing memberships in political divides.

Consequences of cancel culture have spilled over to the private life of social media users. This election saw the rampant unfriending and blocking of social media friends, including relatives, close friends, neighbors, and acquaintances. It came to a point where every post and click online was handled with fear and anxiety of being canceled. Bridge-burning became the norm while staying connected despite conflicting views became the exception.

In hindsight, cancel culture during the elections could only do so much to depopularize, deplatform, and ultimately seek accountability from its targets.

In hindsight, cancel culture during the elections could only do so much to depopularize, deplatform, and ultimately seek accountability from its targets. Cancellation became a badge of honor for some celebrities who were given more media mileage to reframe the incident as one of bullying by the so-called liberal “thought police.”

INFLUENCE OPERATIONS INNOVATIONS IN THE 2022 PHILIPPINE ELECTIONS

PERSONALITIES



Knowledge Influencers

WHO: Both credentialed pundits and self-styled experts peddle hyperpartisan analysis with dubious and politicized data interpretation

Special ability: Whether it's doom-and-gloom or just-asking-questions, their "expert" commentary affirms political fans' biases instead of inviting critical reflection

Platform: Broadcast media, long Twitter threads, Facebook posts



Senator Satirist

WHO: A public servant used her official social media page to satirize her family's opponents

Special ability: Senator as amateur actress weaponized her real-talk auntie persona to deliver coded attacks that transcend all fact-checks

Platform: YouTube, Facebook



AFAM Reactors

WHO: Attractive foreigners streaming Pinoy political content with intercultural commentary

Special ability: Their sweetly accented English commentary lightens up distressing political issues while earning \$\$\$ from YouTube ads

Platform: YouTube reaction videos

PLATFORMS



Partisan Broadcast Media

WHAT: The Fox News-ification of Filipino national media

Special ability: National news media simultaneously diversified and split following hardened political lines, producing parallel political realities



TikTok

WHAT: The third largest social media platform in the country became a real battleground to seed political messages targeting the youth

Special ability: Its playful and unpredictable algorithm rewards content producers with "viral" successes

PRACTICES



Brigading

WHAT: Digital mobs gamify bot-busting and troll-hunting through mass reporting

Special ability: Getting rivals blocked on social media gives videogame-style gratification without addressing root causes

Platform: Group chats, Twitter



Canceling

WHAT: Digital mobs seeking accountability turn to name-and-shame online rituals that often lead to othering rather than understanding

Special ability: With a winner-takes-all war mindset, digital mobs gamify politics by hunting down enemies, either getting them kicked off social media or fired from their jobs

Platform: Twitter, Facebook groups, group chats

Chapter 3

DISINFORMATION NARRATIVES **IN THE 2022 ELECTIONS**

The previous chapter focused on social media personalities, platforms, and practices that offered politicians new ways to influence public conversation in the 2022 elections. This chapter examines social media as content or narrative. Our analysis of disinformation narrative is attuned to the emotionally manipulative language, false victimhood performances, and politicized uses of historical or scientific evidence when promoting or attacking individuals or institutions. The critical approach we adopt in this study means we are less interested in correcting misleading claims of influencers than in discussing the persuasive appeal of these compelling stories. We acknowledge that the most effective disinformation narratives are those that tap into citizens' anxieties, adopt grammars of melodrama and gossip, and exploit "information voids" on fringe or taboo topics that publics are nevertheless curious about.

We discuss four central disinformation narratives in this election cycle: (1) historical distortions and false victimhood claims; (2) electoral fraud; (3) anti-fact checkers and disinformation researchers; and (4) misogyny, homophobia, and transphobia.

Some of the 2022 narratives reinterpret or advance older narratives we had previously discussed in the context of the 2019 elections,³⁸ such as "anti-establishment" and "anti-mainstream media" narratives. For example, the anti-establishment narrative targeting liberal elite politicians was still very much part of the 2022 election cycle. We elaborate below how Marcos' victimhood performance positioned him and his family as victims of liberal politicians allegedly colluding with mainstream legacy media. Also, the anti-fact checkers and disinformation researchers we discuss here are an extension and acceleration of the anti-mainstream media narrative which we had previously discussed.

We acknowledge that the most effective disinformation narratives are those that tap into citizens' anxieties, adopt grammars of melodrama and gossip, and exploit "information voids" on fringe or taboo topics that publics are nevertheless curious about.

38 Ong, Tapsell, and Curato, *Tracking Digital Disinformation*.

BOX TEXT 3. TotooBa.Info Disinformation Reporting Database

In this chapter, we present a snapshot of disinformation claims reported on the TotooBa.Info database. TotooBa.Info is an online platform that gathered reports submitted by Internews' team of social media researchers and volunteers from the general public. Each of these reports contains a disinformation topic, a link to the associated social media post or webpage, and the general category of disinformation. A total of 3508 reports were submitted to the platform between December 2021 and August 2022: 352

reports on historical distortion, 2,261 reports on election-related disinformation (not exclusive to election fraud), and 97 reports on attacks against the media and fact-checkers.

TotooBa.Info was developed under the Initiative for Media Freedom (IMF), a five-year program implemented by Internews and funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) with the support of the American people.

Historical Distortions and False Victimhood Claims

Many academics and journalists have correctly identified that the most visible genre of disinformation in the 2022 elections was historical distortion. Long-form documentaries, short-form TikTok explainers, before-and-after memes, and digital sleuth livestreams are some of the media forms that Marcos supporters have used to advance historical revisionist narratives recasting the martial law period as the country's alleged "golden age." Negative, or attack, messaging versions of historical distortion include dismissing allegations of the family's alleged ill-gotten wealth and conspiracy theories claiming a hidden elite agenda behind the peaceful EDSA revolution that overthrew the dictatorship in 1986.

During the election cycle, social media functioned as a living archive for participatory Marcos mythmaking, where supporters riffed off each other's theories, shared and amplified each other's content, and attacked those who attempted to correct or fact-check them. For example, TikTok creators spliced old YouTube documentaries about the Marcoses' "untold story" and glamorous Imelda Marcos interviews with catchy filters, text overlay, and trendy background music to appeal to younger audiences. President Marcos himself casually replicated the narrative that Imelda Marcos' notorious shoe collection was mostly composed of presents from local shoe manufacturers in an interview with former television host and vlogger Toni Gonzaga. Pro-Duterte accounts also amplified these historical distortions, especially in cases where they cross-promoted the common brand of "strongman leadership" that Rodrigo Duterte and Ferdinand Marcos Sr. represent.

"Marcos historical revisionism" is **not simply an issue of falsehoods; it is a communicative performance touting the Marcoses as misunderstood victims who can relate to anyone's social and economic victimhood.**

Disinformation tactics, therefore, must be interpreted alongside wider influence operations, because falsehoods only take off when they are anchored to a compelling storyline that empowers their supporters to make sense of the world. Behind varied expressions of martial law-era historical distortion is a consistent “deep story,” one in which the Marcos family are supposedly the “real victims” of elite establishment politicians, civil society groups, journalists, foreign agents—even the activists who survived torture during the dictatorship. This performance of victimhood is an artfully compelling story that appeals to the anxious, the young, and the disenfranchised as it manufactures a sense of relatability: “If a powerful family like ours could be attacked or silenced by these liberal elites, then what about you?”

This is not new. In 2013, Imelda Marcos blamed the media for portraying the Marcos family as a family of thieves when they supposedly are the victims of theft upon the government’s confiscation of Marcosian wealth.³⁹ This has been echoed by Bongbong Marcos, who has said himself that he is a victim⁴⁰ of mainstream media, insinuating that journalists have “their own agenda.” Similar to Donald Trump’s tirades against liberal media outlets, he has recast as “fake news”⁴¹ legitimate evidence of his family’s ill-gotten wealth. Marcos and his sister, Senator Imee Marcos, have also accused⁴² Facebook of bias in its selection of fact-checking partner organizations.

Thus, the dominant disinformation intervention of the fact-check runs into an obstacle: fact-checks can only correct individual claims of falsehoods, but can’t respond to the melodramatic narrative that an all-powerful coalition of liberal elites has victimized the family who once brought honor and glory to a beleaguered nation.

As an alternative, the Marcoses have crafted their own media artifacts that (re)tell “their side of the story.”⁴³ Commissioned by Imee Marcos with her Len-Len series collaborator Darryl Yap, the comedy-drama film *Maid in Malacañang* has reportedly earned more than PHP 330 million in the local box office despite its negative reception from liberal film critics and historians as old-school propaganda.⁴⁴

39 GMA News, “SONA: Rep. Imelda Marcos.”

40 Mercado, “Bongbong Marcos: I am the victim of fake news.”

41 Mercado, “Marcos Jr. claims ‘fake news involved’ in ill-gotten wealth, estate tax cases.”

42 Terrazola, “Sen. Marcos questions FB fact-checkers in PH.”

43 Roper, “Historical revision? Marcos family to show their side of story, says Imee.”

44 Marques, “Marcos Brings Myth-Making to the Silver Screen.”

Indeed, false victimhood claims can effectively appeal to an anxious public when packaged in compelling myth and melodrama.

Thus, the dominant disinformation intervention of the fact-check runs into an obstacle: fact-checks can only correct individual claims of falsehoods, but can't respond to the melodramatic narrative that an all-powerful coalition of liberal elites has victimized the family who once brought honor and glory to a beleaguered nation.

BOX TEXT 4. TotooBa.Info Disinformation Reporting Database: Historical Distortions

Number of historical distortions reported in database: 352 out of 3,508

Trending Moment

Maid in Malacañang actress Ella Cruz went viral for her controversial statement “history is like gossip.” Fact-checker E-Boto and historians Ambeth Ocampo, Alvin Campomanes, and Xiao Chua refuted her statement and clarified historians’ rigorous methodology and peer review processes. Senator Imee Marcos herself came to Cruz’s defense, re-emphasizing their film’s mission as a subjective retelling of historical events that drew from her personal experience while inviting the Filipino public to finally hear their side.

Meme Wars

The images below show how different political camps drew from global and local entertainment cultures to target their rivals. The meme on the left pokes fun at conspiracy theorists among the Marcos camp.

The meme on the right attacks Robredo and swaps Pinoy superhero icon Darna with “MaDumbNa” (a portmanteau of madame and dumb).



Electoral Fraud

Claims of electoral fraud are not new to Philippine politics, and cycles of false electoral fraud claims are captured by the catchphrase, “In Philippine elections, there’s no losers, only victims of cheating” (“*Walang natatalo, meron lang nadadaya*”).

In the 2016 vice presidential race, Robredo’s victory over Marcos Jr. became a target of conspiratorial claims of electoral fraud from Marcos supporters. For example, public figure Larry Gadon insinuated that the company responsible for voting machines, Smartmatic, engineered the vote count against Marcos.⁴⁵ Marcos lost his formal electoral protest with the Supreme Court after a recount in 2020.⁴⁶

While we take the position that it is important for Filipinos to take a critical perspective on election administration and polling methodologies, it is also important to ground critiques in legitimate evidence.

In the leadup to the 2022 elections, similar conspiracies about Smartmatic’s rigged voter machine circulated. Some supporters claimed they read “intelligence reports” that US “elitists” and “globalists” were likely to alter the election results to ensure a Robredo victory.⁴⁸ TootooBa researchers also logged an entry about Senator Imee Marcos – who is head of the Senate Committee in Electoral Reforms – citing XSOX, an alleged hackers’ group, and claiming there were security breaches against COMELEC and Smartmatic in a Senate session last March 2022. Even Bongbong Marcos himself urged his followers on the eve of the elections to be cautious with their ballots, suggesting only electoral fraud could prevent certain victory.⁴⁹

Robredo’s supporters also advanced their own electoral fraud narrative, especially in light of seeing disconnects between her weak polling performance and large turnouts at her rallies. Some of her supporters casted doubt on the credibility of polling firms like Pulse Asia and raised the conspiratorial claim that polling firms were part of an elaborate plan of voter “mind conditioning.”⁵⁰ While we take the position that it is important for Filipinos to take a critical perspective on election administration and polling methodologies, it is also important to ground critiques in legitimate evidence.

45 Legaspi, “FACT CHECK: Gadon wrongfully claims Robredo cheated in 2016 elections.”

46 Ong, Tapsell, and Curato, *Tracking Digital Disinformation*.

47 Ong, “Pro-Marcos, Duterte accounts.”

48 Lopez, “Comelec, Smartmatic deny security breach claim by Imee Marcos.”

49 <https://www.facebook.com/BongbongMarcos/videos/417503249737898>

50 CNN Philippines, “Pulse Asia: Shift in voters’ disposition may happen closer to elections.”

BOX TEXT 5. TotooBa.Info Disinformation Reporting Database: Electoral Fraud

Number of electoral fraud disinformation reported in database: 2,261 out of 3,508. (The misinformation category with the highest number of fraudulent reports submitted to TotooBa.Info is electoral fraud.)

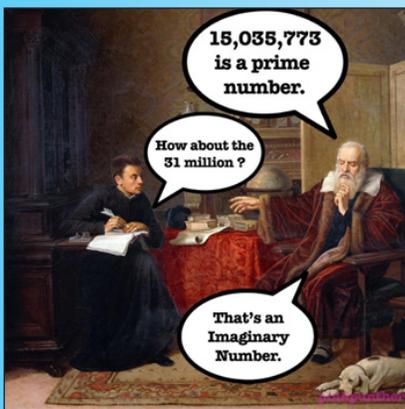
Trending Moment

Filipinos were primed for the worst kinds of widespread cheating prior to election day. Decontextualized media of tampered ballots of overseas Filipino workers went viral, just as YouTubers fearmongered that a massive blackout on election day would enable bad actors to rig the vote. One social media post generated 24,977 reactions, 7,622 shares and 3,640 comments for allegedly showing proof that Overseas Filipino Workers' ballots had been pre-shaded in favor of Marcos and Duterte. This disinformative post was recorded in TotooBa.Info's disinformation reporting database.



Meme Wars

Kakampinks posted memes on social media casting doubt on Marcos' 31 million votes. This meme below implies the fraudulent nature of Marcos' votes compared with Robredo's 15 million votes.



The Commission on Elections (COMELEC) was also the target of many memes. Supporters of both Marcos and Robredo branded COMELEC as unresponsive, incompetent, or biased.



Anti-fact-checkers and Disinformation Researchers

In official interviews, Bongbong and Imee Marcos have raised questions and accusations of bias about Facebook’s selectivity in their choice of local fact-checking partners, namely Rappler, Vera Files, and Agence France-Press. ⁵¹ Marcos supporters have amplified this distrust of fact-checkers and disinformation researchers in the academe. While some of these criticisms dispute individual fact-checks and raise valid questions about the process in which fact-checkers select claims to report on, the deeper narrative advanced by critics is that a group of liberal elite experts have banded together as a self-appointed “thought police” that undermines national interests to advance a “Western agenda.”

Over the past year, several pro-Marcos pundits and online influencers have popularized the phrase, “Who fact-checks the fact-checkers?” Some accounts target fact-check outlets and academics for being non-transparent and elitist.

Some digital sleuths on YouTube attack the methodology and reference lists of academics they brand as “biased” and rant about the “Western agenda” of their project funders. For example, one pro-Marcos/Duterte vlogger has garnered a huge following for his rebuttals of established academic and journalistic work that has exposed the Marcos family’s corruption and online influence operations. With almost 200,000 followers on YouTube, this vlogger posts reaction videos where he performs line-by-line critiques of academic and journalistic articles. His fans praise him for his ability to do independent research, simplify complex ideas, and uncover biases of “mainstream” experts. These platformed sentiments solidify and become “enduring and irreversible shifts in norms around politics and democracy” as opposed to simply “one-off efforts to manipulate public agenda.” ⁵²

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⁵¹ Terrazola, “Sen. Marcos questions FB fact-checkers in PH.”

⁵² Soriano and Gaw, “Broadcasting anti-media populism in the Philippines.”

Academics and civil society receiving philanthropic support from international development or media freedom sources are increasingly branded as unpatriotic and catering to an insidious foreign agenda. This follows patterns of other illiberal governments such as in India where international NGOs are attacked using nationalist rhetoric.⁵³

The Internews-funded research *Patient Zero: A Study on the Philippine Information Ecosystem and other Internews initiatives* were maligned by an influencer as a “trojan horse” for foreign interests and branded as the “SS (Secret Service)” and “the Gestapo.” Using nationalist rhetoric, they tagged local community media reports as “inciting sedition.”

BOX TEXT 6. TotooBa.Info Disinformation Reporting Database: Attacks against the Media and Fact-Checkers

Number of reported attacks against legacy media and fact-checkers: 97 out of 3,508

Trending Moment

Marcos and Duterte supporters rejoiced at the release of an Oxford Reuters Institute survey of trust in media outlets.⁵⁴ Rappler’s weak performance in the survey was framed in misleading ways in various memes, such as the one below. The Reuters Institute had to clarify their survey intentions and methodology and stated in a tweet, “It is false and misleading to claim that our research finds @rapplerdotcom is the least trusted (or most distrusted) news org in the Philippines.”



Meme Wars

Marcos and Duterte pages lumped media outlets as colluding with the opposition led by Leni Robredo. In this meme below, they insinuate that fact-checks by Rappler and Vera Files only serve to defend Robredo’s image.



53 Udupa, *Digital Technology and Extreme Speech*.

54 Chua, “Philippines.”

Misogyny, Homophobia, and Transphobia

Misogynist, homophobic, and transphobic speech were used during the election season to undermine the credibility of political candidates and other public figures.

According to Tsek.ph’s fact-check database, former Vice President Leni Robredo was the biggest target of disinformation.⁵⁵ Misogynist speech implying that Robredo is out of her depth (“*lutang*”) and hyperemotional circulated on social media, along with sensational stories commenting on her status as a widow and single mother. Conspiratorial stories accused Robredo of having an affair with a congressman. Vice presidential daughters also became targets of online rumors about a leaked sex video.

These attacks undercut the new political visibility that women and LGBTQs have achieved even within this election cycle.

Meanwhile, male presidential candidates were also targeted by homophobic remarks. Presidential candidate Panfilo (Ping) Lacson was the target of online homophobic jokes calling him “Pinky” that resurfaced rumors about his sexuality. His fellow presidential candidate Francisco (Isko) Moreno was also shamed as “*bakla*” (queer) for picking a fight with Robredo—the only female presidential candidate.

Homophobic slurs also hounded vice-presidential candidate Sara Duterte after she identified as a member of the LGBTQ community. These criticisms came in the form of calling the remarks dishonest and pure politicking, and even diagnosing the candidate as schizophrenic (e.g., “*nasa mood ang gender niya*”/“her gender changes depending on her mood”). Satirical references were often made to Sara Duterte’s old looks of sporting a mohawk and having short hair.

Sandro Marcos, son of Bongbong Marcos and representative of Ilocos Norte’s 1st congressional district, was also the subject of transphobic attacks. While Sandro Marcos himself has not identified as a member of the LGBTQ community, popular transgender performer Jake Zyrus routinely poked fun at his physical resemblance to the younger Marcos.

These examples, among others, demonstrate that despite the differences in political style and substance of the two parallel public spheres, they share a similarity in using misogynist, homophobic, and transphobic remarks to humiliate their political rivals. These attacks undercut the new political visibility that women and LGBTQs have achieved even within this election cycle.

⁵⁵ Gonzales, “Robredo is biggest disinformation victim.”

BOX TEXT 7. Misogyny in Focus during the Campaign Trail

Trending Moment

Vice President Leni Robredo was the target of old rumors that she is a mistress of former representative Jorge Banal. The conspiratorial claim, debunked by Rappler⁵⁶ in 2020, was stoked by the professionally produced video titled “The Exorcism of Lenlen Rose | Ang Dilawang Misis Banal” platformed by the Senator Satirist on her official YouTube page. The video referenced the character of Lenlen as “*magnanakaw ng boto, ng posisyon, ng buhay, ng asawa... alipin ng ambisyon at kati*” (a thief of votes, of [elected] positions, of lives, and of spouses ... a slave of ambition and lust).

The video has garnered over 1.5 million views on Facebook alone.

Meme Wars

The two images below represent different attacks on prominent female candidates. The photoshopped image on the left reinforces old stereotypes of disheveled women lacking in respectability and incapable of leadership. On the right, a social media user (shown in the photo on the right) draws a contrast between the respectable Leni Robredo and the undercutting Sara Duterte.



⁵⁶ <https://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/fact-check/robredo-banal-romantically-linked/>



Chapter 4

OUR COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT PLAN

In today's context of parallel public spheres where rival media-information ecosystems offer incommensurate truth-claims, disinformation interventions risk becoming highly politicized. New partisan media channels and knowledge influencers have succeeded in relativizing liberal institutions' established methods of academic research, historical narration, and fact-checking. And so, when politicians from across the political spectrum jump on the "anti-fake news" bandwagon, offering simple technical solutions to a complex crisis facing our democratic systems risks making disinformation a catch-all term for everything people in power do not like. Such an environment opens the door for political and economic opportunism where legislation and interventions launched in the name of fighting "fake news" introduce harms to privacy, free speech, and political deliberation.⁵⁷

In this confusing milieu, we emphasize the significance of a critical perspective in disinformation and digital literacy studies in the Philippines.

In this confusing milieu, we emphasize the significance of a critical perspective in disinformation and digital literacy studies in the Philippines. This means alerting citizens not only about artful disinformation narratives and recruitment strategies in our homegrown disinformation economies; it also means empowering citizens to apply their passion and creativity toward strategic collaborative interventions rather than those that deepen social divisions. We reject the genre of disinformation advocacy that displaces the disinformation crisis to the "brainwashing" effects of new media on low-income voters and anonymous trolls, rather than hold accountable political elites and chief architects of disinformation. We are also skeptical of top-down cybersecurity and carceral approaches that give disproportionate power to legislators and law enforcement rather than affected citizens. As we have discussed in previous chapters, it is often the very powerful who center their own victimhood when making political claims without acknowledging real social inequalities.

In this light, we present our Community Engagement Plan that presents a strategic and sociologically grounded approach to addressing influence operations not as a technical or legal problem alone but in their social, cultural, and political economic dimensions in local context. We are inspired by the spirit of creativity and volunteerism especially from young people in the wake

⁵⁷ See also Lim, *Securitize/Counter-Securitize*.



of the elections to offer their talents of strategic communication, language translation, graphic design, community organization, computational analysis, and legal support. We believe that a whole-of-society approach⁵⁸ to fighting misinformation involves taking risks to test new ideas and amplify new voices and approaches.

Our research team presents this Community Engagement Plan as starting points for sociologically grounded collaborative interventions. We are particularly excited to connect with collaborators from diverse sectors to translate critical research into accessible educational resources, legal advocacies, creative counter-narratives, deliberative spaces, and whistleblower protection mechanisms.

We offer our Community Engagement Fund as both creative experiment and sincere commitment to support community organizations and talented individuals keen to take forward any of our recommendations below. We seek project proposals that advance our Community Engagement Plan, and we are keen to fund at least five Community Engagement Partners with a startup fund of US\$1,500. (Proposal format details are at the end of this report.)

1 Changing the Narrative around Disinformation

Digital literacy initiatives should be empowering citizens rather than perpetuating *anti-masa* (anti-poor) sentiments. There is a tendency for popular journalism and fact-checking of disinformation to overtly or inadvertently reinforce social class divisions when “the uneducated” or those with cheap phones on Facebook Free Basics are blamed for disinformation and distrust against liberal institutions. **We need to change this narrative as it directly plays into populist assumptions about “elitist” liberals and gives them more ammunition for the information war.**

Part of our decision to use the broader umbrella of “influence operations” rather than disinformation was also to have a broader and inclusive frame for diverse stakeholders to contribute to interventions beyond the usual fact-checking of false claims.

Anti-disinformation campaigns can be proactive rather than reactive so as not to appear that we “talk down” to audiences. For example, there is recent research on the value of “prebunking videos” where the aim is to inform audiences of common styles, sounds, and genres of misinformation campaigns. This proactive approach aims to “inoculate” viewers instead of naming-and-shaming disinformers and dunking on “uneducated voters.”

⁵⁸ See also Donovan et al., *Mitigating Medical Disinformation*.

⁵⁹ DiResta and Goldberg, “‘Prebunking’ Health Misinformation Tropes Can Stop Their Spread.”

2 Open-Access Masterclass on Disinformation and Digital Ethics

We seek collaborators to co-create an open-access course dedicated to collaboratively learning about disinformation and crafting strategies to promote digital literacy for Filipinos. We envision this to be a curated portal that houses conversations with researchers and investigative journalists, video explainers, podcasts, interactive quizzes, moderated public forums, and links to open-access research publications. Responding to overwhelming public interest in disinformation studies and political communication research in the last election cycle, academics need to improve our own curation and accessibility of our research, as well as collaborations with teachers in primary and secondary schools who teach the foundations of digital literacy.

We have been inspired by volunteers who offered us their translation skills to communicate our academic studies in different languages. However, we recognize that academics need to be more strategic and proactive in commissioning translation work that communicates our work in a way that connects with diverse ethnolinguistic and age groups.

Our sociologically grounded approach to disinformation also requires that the lecture topics and practical exercises in this portal directly address communication ethics and digital ethics in the age of parallel public spheres. In our public engagements, we have noted that one of the most popular questions young people ask relates to practical advice on what to do with parents who believe in fake news, or how to deal with history teachers who infuse partisan propaganda in lectures. Collaborators from the fields of social psychology, philosophy, and development communication can co-design teaching materials, conversation guides, and debate prompts that promote healthy deliberative conversations are welcome. Teaching materials that can provoke democratic problem-solving can provide a useful ethical compass for young people growing up in an age of parallel public spheres.

3 Supporting Whistleblowers to Expose Disinformation-for-Hire

The Philippines, along with many global South countries, needs to open complex discussions of worker ethics and justice in order to address our homegrown disinformation-for-hire industries. We need to introduce pain points and accountability mechanisms that shed light on how local firms and businesses profit from hateful campaigns yet operate as industry “open secrets.”

The first step is to create worker support and protection mechanisms that ensure precarious workers would be protected in moments when they expose their organization’s complicity with disinformation operations

and other influence operations that cleverly skirt around regulations on campaign finance or content moderation. Our collaboration with PumaPodcast Catch Me If You Can⁶⁰ is one such experiment at normalizing discussions of ethics in the advertising and public relations industries. These are industries that have overtly and covertly worked against any regulatory oversight on the business of political campaigning. Policymakers, journalists, and academics can collaborate to create safe environments for whistleblowers from both top-level and boutique firms to come out into the open, recount their experiences in campaigns, and have real public dialogue about profiting from political campaigns. We seek legal and cybersecurity experts who might provide legal protection to such whistleblowers.



The second step is to connect local initiatives that shed light on disinformation-for-hire with relevant global advocacies. This includes addressing supply chain transparency in digital industries, including shedding light on regulatory gray areas such as in internationally outsourced work.⁶¹ We are also looking to connect with global and local experts spotlighting accountability in ad tech, such as the pioneering work of Check My Ads⁶² in exposing the underlying structures of monetization that social media influencers are able to exploit and private corporations have too often turned a blind eye to.

4 South-to-South Learning Spaces

The Philippines' disinformation advocacies often tend to replicate certain Euro-American frames of platform and technological determinism where Facebook, Russian operations, or Cambridge Analytica are blamed for influencing unthinking voters, similar to discourses about electoral hijacking in 2016 polls in the United States and the United Kingdom. **We suggest advancing “Southern” frames that center global South-shared experiences of media censorship, nationalist attacks against “Western” human rights principles, and thriving**

⁶⁰ <https://www.pumapodcast.com/podcasts/catch-me-if-you-can>

⁶¹ See Coca, “Technology is failing to create transparent supply chains.”

⁶² <https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSRsk6so8/>

local economies of disinformation-for-hire. Rather than anticipate Global North-to-Global South policy flows in the disinformation space, we recommend Filipino researchers and civil society actors to build and participate in more South-to-South learning spaces that bring us in direct conversation with our counterparts in Brazil, India, Thailand, and Nigeria, among others. For example, we are exchanging best practices in election monitoring through the DigiLabour portal, hosted by our Brazilian colleagues: <https://digilabour.com.br/2022/10/18/south-to-south-learning-spaces-vs-disinformation/>. **We invite collaborators to submit articles that we can host in this portal such that they open newer debates and insights about local infrastructures of “fake news” and distinct challenges of activist organizing in the global South.**

5 Strategic Policy Advocacy

Strategic policy advocacy involves creating lobbying strategies targeted at local legislators as well as expert coalitions that aim for platform transparency and accountability.

First, we will continue to monitor how arguments in congressional debates are constructed when justifying anti-fake-news legislation and the extent to which legislators draw on their personal experiences of being canceled or the subject of “unfair” content takedowns to inform their legislation.

Drawing from our own personal experiences of our academic research being misrepresented in legislative sessions to justify overbroad regulation of social media content, engaged researchers need support and guidance from legal experts and lobby groups to ensure critical research is not repurposed for a partisan agenda. We recommend coalition-building initiatives that bring together national and local government, legal experts, election lobby groups, and engaged researchers toward strategic policy advocacy that advances media regulations that center the experiences of vulnerable communities, rather than of powerful politicians. For this to happen, we encourage funding agencies to incentivize collaboration rather than competition when executing big projects. In our previous research, we found that working in silos has been one major barrier for an all-of-society approach to advocacy.

Second, we need coalitions that can guide social media platforms in navigating a potentially hostile regulatory terrain that has already branded them as “biased” in their support of local fact-checkers and media partners. We need to anticipate global trends of illiberal governments, such as Nigeria and India introducing platform bans and censorship as their way to exert control over social media conversation. There is also the more pressing challenge of how exactly to protect local organizations’ ability to receive international philanthropic support for pro-democracy initiatives. This strategic policy advocacy initiative must balance principles of transparency with flexibility for them to open backchannel communications with private platforms.

6 Making Our Values Visible

Researchers, journalists, and advocates have a role to play in rebuilding the trust we have lost with the public. Instead of relying on our credentials to assert our claims, we can do better at communicating our values, methods, and work processes. Filipinos are agentic deliberative actors who deserve an explanation as to why our methods, not our titles or institutions, deserve their trust.

One possible path forward is for professional academic organizations to create a code of conduct for their members that requires a declaration of consulting work with politicians, lobby groups, and other organizations when providing public commentary. Blogs like *The Conversation*⁶² have normalized these disclosures which promotes transparency among academics and knowledge influencers.

7 Community Engagement Fund: Collaborate with us!

Our research team is looking for organizations and individuals who can take forward any of these ideas above and pilot new interventions with our support and guidance.

We are seeking to at least 5 Community Engagement Fund Partners, whom we can award \$1,500 as a start-up fund to do projects such as:

- Popularizing critical research to diverse ethnolinguistic and age groups
- Creating a strategic whistleblower collective that offers legal protection and narrative strategy
- Designing interactive teaching materials for our open-access “masterclass” website
- Curating conversation guides that aim for depolarization or deliberation
- Creating a digital campaign promoting ethics and transparency in influencer marketing
- Studying ad tech in the Philippines

Deadline is December 1, 2022 to submit a one-page proposal that lists project objectives, target audience/s, outputs and intended media formats, and proposed budget. For inquiries and final submission, please email **communityengagementplan2022@gmail.com**. As academics and community-engaged researchers, we are more than happy to give feedback to preliminary pitches and offer mentoring and support to colleagues and young people during these fractious times.

62 <https://theconversation.com/global>

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