Patient Zero

A study on the Philippine Information Ecosystem

Rappler Research Team

Internews

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Contents

Executive Summary

On May 5, 2020, ABS-CBN, the Philippines' leading radio and television network was forced to go off air after the Philippine House of Representatives failed to approve the franchise bill that would have allowed it to operate for another 25 years. This resulted in loss of jobs for thousands of media workers employed by the network. It reduced Filipinos' access to information in many remote areas and made ABS-CBN refocus distribution on its digital resources.

Even before the shutdown, however, the Philippine media environment had already been in a state of flux for years, with the relentless growth of the mobile and digital space. This development affected not just media consumption, but also the way Filipinos interacted with the information ecosystem. The COVID-19 pandemic forced people to rely even more on digital, not only as a source of information, but also as the primary mechanism for connecting to the world of work and learning.

On average, across Southeast Asia, 1 in 3 (33%) of all digital service consumers are new to the service due to COVID-19, according to Google Temasek's e-Conomy SEA 2020. Around 16 million new user accounts were created from the Philippines as of January 2021, making it the 3rd top country globally in terms of largest absolute growth, according to digital media agency WeAreSocial. Overall, WeAreSocial reports that there are already 73.91 million internet users and 89 million social media users in the Philippines as of January 2021.[1]

As social media usage surged, newsrooms and journalists found themselves besieged by an unprecedented level of online harassment. The news groups that have been the primary target of attacks, ABS-CBN and Rappler, were the hardest hit, in terms of drop in trust ratings. Both newsgroups fell by 4 points in their trust scores, according to the Reuters Digital News 2021 report, and yet in terms of reach, they were in the top 4, showing exactly why they were targeted.

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1   Simon Kemp, "Digital 2021: Global Overview Report," January 27, 2021, https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2021-global-overview-report

Given the growing dominance of digital media, this research deep dived into the dynamics of this space to present a more robust understanding of the flow of information and disinformation in this new media landscape. Worth noting are the following:

- Unlike in traditional media, digital media audiences are not passive recipients or spectators. Even ordinary people become content creators themselves. This blurs the boundaries between "supply side" (content creators) and "demand side" actors (content consumers). Actors in this space do not even have to be real-world entities and personalities, as evidenced by the widespread use of fake accounts and anonymously managed social media assets.

- The ubiquitous use of smartphones; digital social networks and machine intelligence – described by MIT Professor Sinan Aral as the technology trifecta – fuel dangerous trends: personalized mass persuasion, hypersocialization, the tyranny of trends. The level of collection and use of behavioral data by these technologies make them potent behavioral modification tools.

- All of the above make social media fertile ground for disinformation techniques such as astroturfing as well as the Russian "Firehose of Falsehood" propaganda model which is characterized as: high-volume and multichannel; rapid, continuous, and repetitive; lacking commitment to objective reality; and lacking commitment to consistency.

Overall Findings

To illustrate the dynamics of the digital information ecosystem and how disinformation is seeded within this environment, Rappler explored cascades around the following themes: war on drugs, attacks against the press, and messaging around Martial Law and authoritarian rule. The themes were selected based on prevailing issues that have confronted the Philippines and the Duterte administration over the past 6 years.

These are findings of the study specific to the Philippine context:

- ***Already addicted to social media, Filipinos became more deeply immersed in the internet due to the pandemic.***

  For over half a decade now, Filipinos have topped the rest of the world in terms of time spent on the internet and social media. This level of immersion in digital media further deepened during the pandemic, after quarantine restrictions forced people to study and work remotely.

  Most of the respondents in Rappler's surveys have been using social media more because of the pandemic. Majority (60%) said they've been spending more than 4 hours on social media a day since the pandemic. Only 18% claimed to have already been spending the same amount of time on social media prior to the pandemic.

  In January 2021, less than a year after the lockdowns were imposed, data published by digital media marketing agency WeAreSocial indicated that Filipinos on average were spending at least 1 hour more online – an average total of 10 hours and 56 minutes – as compared to the amount of time they had been spending online in January 2020 (9 hours and 45 minutes). This is nearly 4 hours more than the global average of 6 hours and 54 minutes on the internet. Time spent by Filipinos on social media also increased slightly to 4.15 hours as of January 2021 from 3.53 hours as of January 2020.

- ***At least 1 in every 3 Filipino internet users is new to digital, is potentially unfamiliar with how it works, and vulnerable to disinformation and online manipulation techniques.***

  In the surveys conducted by Rappler, more digital immigrants say they are unfamiliar with how social media platforms work as compared to digital natives.

Among other things, some respondents in FGDs conducted as part of the study indicated that they use comments as reference for judging veracity of information. This indicates a lack of familiarity with astroturfing, a common disinformation technique. Astroturfing is a practice where disinformation networks use numerous fake accounts to create the impression of widespread grassroots support for a policy, individual, or product even when little exists.[2] In the past years, Rappler has found ample evidence of astro-turfed messages in relation to the issues covered by this study in the comments sections of news websites and on Facebook.

- ### *News organizations are still among the most followed information sources online. But they are increasingly drowned in social media noise.*

While the top media organizations in the country are still among the leaders of the pack in terms of following on social media, they no longer dominate the information ecosystem. Competition is no longer limited to other news organizations.

The scatter plot graph below illustrates this battle for eyeballs in the new digital information ecosystem. The data compares interactions and page likes for Facebook over 30,000 pages related to the Philippine information ecosystem that Rappler discovered through Sharktank. The list includes news organizations, civil society groups, brands, government pages, meme and viral content pages, and various other social media information sources. Nodes to the upper right are pages that top the rest in terms of combined interactions and page likes. The red nodes are newsgroups.

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2   Adam Bienkov, "Astroturfing: what is it and why does it matter," February 8, 2012, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/feb/08/what-is-astroturfing

Sharktank Leadership Page Likes vs. Interactions

Data gathered from Crowdtangle Leaderboard data from February 2020 to January 2021

Page Type ● Others ● News

https://public.flourish.studio/visualisation/5151821/

- *Trustworthiness is the primary consideration in following groups, pages, and channels on social media. But entertainment value and agreeableness are also major considerations, making audiences vulnerable to sources that deceptively use celebrity content to build online following.*

Most respondents in Rappler's website survey and the local communities survey said they generally follow accounts that they deem trustworthy. A significant segment, however, also considers entertainment value and agreeableness as major considerations in following a social media asset.

This could be a concern because while there are clearer lines between news and entertainment content in traditional media, the same rule often gets blurred in digital. A recent report that Rappler published concerning disinformation in YouTube exposed

how Showbiz channels shifted focus from celebrity gossip to hyper partisan content, many of which included disinformation.[3]

- *Majority (78%) of survey respondents say they can distinguish between real news and "fake news," but focus group discussions (FGDs) reveal that some believed previously debunked claims.*

Respondents in FGDs conducted as part of this research were able to cite specific claims the Rappler researchers described in the section on information cascades that had already been debunked by independent fact checkers. These include the claims around Martial Law, ABS CBN's alleged violations, and content about the drug war.

Most of the FGD respondents indicated they were aware the claims were dubious or untrue. Some, however, appeared to believe the claims they saw. The political belief of respondents, as indicated in their views with respect to the three issues covered by this study appear to be a factor in their susceptibility to believing particular claims.

- *There are similarities between disinformation in the Philippines and the "Firehose of Falsehood" Russian propaganda model.*

Many of the information cascades monitored by Rappler follow distinctive characteristics of the Russian firehose of falsehood propaganda model: high volume and multi-channel; rapid, continuous, and repetitive; lacking in commitment to objective reality; and lacking in commitment to consistency.

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3   Loreben Toquero, "Red flag for 2022: Political lies go unchecked on Youtube showbiz channels," Rappler, September 22, 2021, https://www.rappler.com/nation/elections/political-lies-unchecked-youtube-showbiz-channels-red-flag-candidates-2022

This is particularly true in the case of revisionist narratives related to Martial Law and the Marcos achievements, which were served repetitively to hundreds of groups and pages, including pages supposedly tackling "real Philippine history."[4] The same is true for messaging attacking the press and promoting the drug war. In many instances, FGD respondents said it is hard for them to remember or identify the original source of these claims, given the number of times the content has been shared and reposted.

- *Persistently seeded metanarratives against mainstream media cause audiences to follow hyper-partisan social media influencers who are perceived as "alternative information sources."*

Some respondents said they follow pro-administration social media influencers because news organizations don't cover everything that's happening. This response echoes one of the metanarratives that were repetitively raised against news organizations as described in the section of the information cascades. Media groups are typically attacked for "hiding the truth" and for not reporting on supposed accomplishments of the current administration as well as of the Marcos regime.

- *Government and politicians are among the gainers in the digital space. In some cases, they have edged out mainstream news organizations and media as the trusted sources of information.*

During the pandemic, people were exposed more to official government channels because the platforms boosted these channels particularly with respect to content related to COVID-19.

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4   Gemma Mendoza, "Networked propaganda: How the Marcoses are rewriting history," Rappler, November 21, 2019, https://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/investigative/networked-propaganda-how-the-marcoses-are-rewriting-history

Notably, some FGD participants expressed trust in information coming from government officials, generally saying that so long as information comes from official sources, it is enough. Amplified by the platforms, this blind trust in government online sources, makes audiences vulnerable to disinformation because Philippine state actors have proven to be behind a number of disinformation cascades. In its most recent takedown, Facebook identified[5] officials of the Philippine military as the administrators of dubious pages used to sow false claims and attack activists.[6] Rappler's investigation, which led to the takedown, revealed that these dubious pages were being amplified by official police pages.[7]

- ### *Through incoherent policies, neglect, and focus on engagement, platforms allowed disinformation to proliferate while diminishing the reach of news media.*

Measures adopted by the platforms during the pandemic, purportedly to counter misinformation about COVID-19 introduced friction in the sharing of all stories (including those from verified mainstream media) if they mention COVID-19 and related keywords. This, however, affected the reach of all news coverage of the pandemic, including those related to concerns about the government's inefficiencies in responding to the pandemic as well as issues concerning its use of public funds. These measures, in effect, diminished the capability of news organizations to provide checks and balances to government messaging in the space during a crisis.

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5   Nathaniel Gleicher, "Removing Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior," Facebook, September 22, 2020, https://about.fb.com/news/2020/09/removing-coordinated-inauthentic-behavior-china-philippines/

6   "Facebook removes inauthentic assets linked to the Philippine military," DFRLab, September 23, 2020, https://medium.com/dfrlab/facebook-removes-inauthentic-assets-linked-to-the-philippine-military-b61f9a38cb4a

7   Rappler Research Team, "With anti-terror law, police-sponsored hate and disinformation even more dangerous," Rappler, https://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/investigative/anti-terror-law-state-sponsored-hate-disinformation-more-dangerous, August 13, 2020

Page Likes of Government Agencies and Media Organizations

The following shows the growth of Facebook pages of selected government agencies and media organizations in the Philippines from January 1, 2020 to September 30, 2021. The bars show the daily interaction rate change (as a 7-day moving average) while the line charts show the cumulative increase of the page likes (expressed as a %-increase).

■ Page Likes (Media) ■ Page Likes (Govt) ■ Interaction Rate Change 7-day Ave (Media) ■ Interaction Rate Change 7-day Ave (Govt)

The graph below shows cumulative growth of government pages versus media pages during the pandemic. Interaction rate translates to how engaging the posts of the pages are, while page likes is a rough approximation of the pages' audience that receives regular updates. Sudden spikes in interaction rates but with low page like growth may be attributed to occasional viral posts reaching a broader audience.

Conclusion and recommendations

Without a doubt, digital media will have a significant influence on the Philippine May 2022 elections. While new COVID-19 cases are dropping and quarantine rules are easing up, the emergence of new variants means that campaigning will largely be online and on social media.

Rappler lists critical action points that various sectors of society need to adopt to ensure integrity of the May 2022 elections and to address democratic decay caused by disinformation.

Support and amplify public interest journalism and credible news sources

Persistent attacks have clearly crippled the Philippine press and critical action needs to be done in this respect. Some recommendations in relation to this:

- Platforms, civil society, and the academe should promote credible news sources that can serve as key sources of verified information about candidates and the electoral process;

- It is important to support efforts around media and information literacy and fact-checking. A significant part of efforts should go into helping the public understand the role independent journalists and newsrooms play in a healthy information ecosystem as well as the watchdog role they play in vibrant democracies. This is critical to rebuilding trust.

- Support also needs to go into exploring further action, including available legal options in relation to protecting journalists against online attacks. This needs to go beyond training on digital security and needs to take into consideration the most urgent threat: attacks against reputation.

- Support should also go to funding investigations and in-depth reporting around gut issues that will serve to illustrate to audiences the value of an independent press in a democracy.

Promote election integrity, enforce transparency and accountability

For the 2022 elections we reiterate this list of recommendations for the Commission on Elections (Comelec) and election watchdog groups:

- In relation to the elections, campaigning in the Philippines is governed by the Fair Elections Act. Traditional media, as well as their online properties, are required to submit reports about candidate placements in their platforms. The Comelec needs to take into consideration online dimensions of these in regulations while being cognizant of the unique dynamics of social media highlighted in this report.

- The Comelec should release candidate-disclosed lists of pages and groups officially associated with the candidates themselves. Content in influencer pages outside these official lists should be monitored and tracked in the same manner as traditional media assets are monitored and tracked.

- Campaigns on social media, as established, are not limited to traditional ad placements, therefore transparency should not be limited to transparency in relation to data on advertising placements. Platforms need to be compelled to disclose more while respecting data privacy.

- To address astroturfing and the firehose of falsehood propaganda model, it is important for data pertaining to comments in pages and community hubs with significant online reach to be visible for study and investigation. Here it becomes important to consider the dual nature of the social media platforms: they are not merely infrastructure for private communications. Public pages, community hubs, and even social media influencer accounts which have significant reach should be considered public broadcasting mechanisms, subject to standards of disclosure required of mainstream media.

- Given that the Comelec and most watchdog groups do not have the capacity to monitor these new public spaces, support must be given to a new breed of watchdogs that can help monitor these spaces.

- Conversely, newsrooms, fact-check organizations, and the academe need to collaborate more effectively in a way that sends platforms actionable data around disinformation narratives and disinformation actors.

Treat disinformation as a form of electoral fraud

- It is important to publicly repudiate candidates who use disinformation tactics to win. Watchdog groups have said that fake news should be considered as a form of electoral fraud.[8] The Comelec has also said that spreading fake news about the polls is an election offense.[9]

- Enforcement of this policy needs to take into consideration the fact that most black propaganda is circulated by false accounts or anonymously-managed pages. Particularly in relation to black propaganda and troll farms, candidates and watchdog groups should consider engaging lawyers who can file the necessary legal requests with respective platforms and authorities as necessary to unmask personalities behind troll accounts responsible for dubious pages sowing disinformation.

Address algorithmic amplification of disinformation and hate

Advocacy groups need to recognize that the key to solving the disinformation problem is the social media platforms themselves. Algorithmic amplification of lies is at the heart of the disinformation problem itself. The solution partly lies in addressing malign algorithms that amplify hate and disinformation for the sake of increasing time on site.[10]

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8   Sofia Tomacruz, 'Fake news' should be considered form of election fraud, says watchdog,' Rappler, December 7, 2019, https://www.rappler.com/nation/politics/elections/2019/218420-fake-news-should-be-considered-election-fraud-kontra-daya

9   Norman Bordadora, Spreading fake news on polls, an election offense punishable by imprisonment — Comelec, Rappler, March 13, 2019, https://www.msn.com/en-ph/kids/other/spreading-fake-news-on-polls-an-election-offense-punishable-by-imprisonment-%E2%80%94comelec/ar-BBUIppe?li=AAb280R&%2525252525253Bocid=iehp

10   Jeremy Merrill and Will Oremus, "Five points for anger, one for a 'like': How Facebook's formula fostered rage and misinformation," October 26, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2021/10/26/facebook-angry-emoji-algorithm/

We are in a state where institutions and advocates could leverage evidence of the online wasteland of the past 6 years to push hard for reforms and impactful actions on the part of social media giants like Facebook and YouTube.

- To address algorithmic amplification of disinformation, the Comelec, the media, and watchdogs should collectively engage with social media platforms for structural reforms between now and May 2022.

- These sectors should also be actively engaging with lawmakers to introduce needed laws that will allow for more transparency and accountability on the part of social media platforms that operate within the Philippine territorial jurisdiction.

Forge a pact against disinformation

Ultimately, the buck stops with the candidates and political parties. Beyond asking candidates for their stand on disinformation, the media should hold candidates accountable for both disinformation that their respective camps circulate and propaganda that benefits them.

The media and advocates should ensure that disinformation becomes an election issue raised with candidates in various stories, debates, fora, and other venues during the campaign season.

Beyond monitoring the actual voting and the vote count, these are critical steps in promoting free and fair elections in May 2022, especially since we now live in a world dominated by social media, also a world where poll outcomes can, unfortunately, be shaped by technology.

Overview

On May 5, 2020, ABS-CBN, the Philippines' leading radio and television network was forced to go off air after the Philippine House of Representatives failed to approve the franchise bill that was supposed to allow it to operate for another 25 years. With 42 television stations, 10 digital broadcast channels, and 23 radio channels located in various parts of the country, ABS-CBN's fate had far-reaching effects. It resulted in loss of jobs for thousands of media workers employed by ABS-CBN and its subsidiaries and affiliates. It reduced Filipinos' access to information in many remote areas that only ABS-CBN was able to reach. It also made ABS-CBN refocus distribution on its digital resources.

Even before the shutdown, however, the Philippine media environment has been in a state of flux for years, with the relentless growth of the mobile and digital space. This development has affected not just media consumption. It affected the way Filipinos interacted with the information ecosystem. The COVID-19 pandemic forced people to rely even more on digital not only as a source of information but also as the primary mechanism for connecting to the world of work and learning.

Around 16 million new user accounts were created from the Philippines as of January 2021, making it the 3rd top country globally in terms of largest absolute growth, according to data from WeAreSocial. On average, across Southeast Asia, 1 in 3 (36%) of all digital service consumers are new to the service due to COVID-19, according to Google Temasek's e-Conomy SEA 2020.

In its September 2021 survey, Pulse Asia says nearly half of Filipinos get political news from the internet. Overall, digital media agency WeAreSocial reports that there are already 73.91 million internet users and 89 million social media users in the Philippines as of January 2021.[11]

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11   Simon Kemp, "Digital 2021: Global Overview Report," January 27, 2021, https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2021-global-overview-report

Given the growing dominance of the digital space, which accelerated further during the pandemic, this research deep dives into the dynamics of this space to present a more robust understanding of the flow of information and disinformation in this new media landscape.

The research utilized the Information Ecosystem Assessment (IEA) methodology of Internews but also builds on this methodology given the unique dynamics of digital media. In doing so, it aims to answer the following research questions:

- What are the primary channels and platforms through which participants look for and access information? Why are these their chosen sources?

- How do disinformation actors cascade information?

- Are the participants aware of the information cascades around identified themes and issues and how did they come to know about it?

It also seeks to establish verifiable evidence of the following:

- Level of social media exposure, particularly the amount of time spent on social media and other digital platforms;

- Key players and networks involved in information operations and campaigns;

- Information sources that the participants tend to listen to and believe;

- Ways in which disinformation online and offline reinforce each other; and

- What social media platforms, traditional media channels, and other channels are used to spread disinformation.

Beyond this, the research also attempts to identify instances when digital platforms played a key role in amplifying deceptive content and behavior. It will also attempt to illustrate how personalized recommendation algorithms have been exploited to destroy trust in institutions and drive polarization and radicalization among digital audiences.

These are the findings of the study:

- Already addicted to social media, Filipinos became more deeply immersed in the internet due to the pandemic.

- At least 1 in every 3 Filipino internet users is new to digital, is potentially unfamiliar with how it works, and vulnerable to disinformation and online manipulation techniques.

- News organizations are still among the most followed information sources online. But they are increasingly drowned in social media noise.

- Trustworthiness is the primary consideration in following groups, pages, and channels on social media. But entertainment value and agreeability are also major considerations.

- Majority (78%) of survey respondents say they can distinguish between real news and "fake news," but focus group discussions (FGDs) reveal that some believed previously debunked claims.

- There are similarities between disinformation in the Philippines and the "Firehose of Falsehood" Russian propaganda model.

- Persistently seeded metanarratives against mainstream media cause audiences to follow hyper-partisan social media influencers who are perceived as "alternative information sources."

- Government and politicians are among the gainers in the digital space. In some cases, they have edged out mainstream news organizations and media as the trusted sources of information.
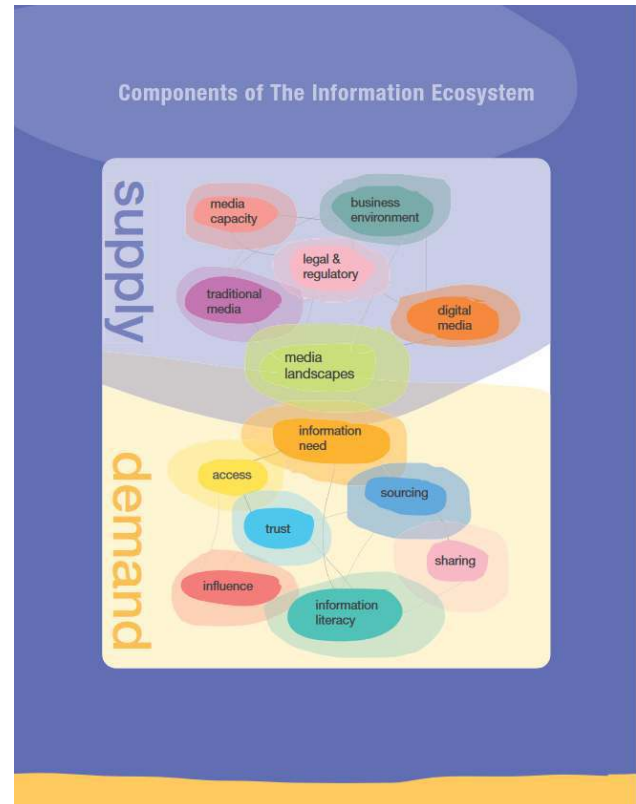
Through incoherent policies, neglect, and focus on engagement, platforms allowed disinformation to proliferate while diminishing the reach of news media.

Methodology

The traditional approach to information ecosystem assessments examines both the "supply" and "demand" sides of these ecosystems. In this framework, "supply" covers media landscape, media capacity, information infrastructure, tools, media, producers, consumer data, curators, and sharers. "Demand," on the other hand, considers the human factor including how people and communities find, share, value, trust, and use information in their own local contexts.

Strict differentiation between these components of the information ecosystem, however, does not apply to digital media where the lines between the content producers, infrastructure, tools, and consumers have been blurred or obliterated. This underscores the need to rethink how to properly observe and represent the impact of this medium.

Components of The Information Ecosystem

Within this context, conducting an exhaustive assessment of the new Philippine information ecosystem is an ambitious undertaking given that there is no single data set or study that represents its scope, reach, and dynamics as well as impact on society. Much of this space remains unknown partly because while metrics data abound, data that could provide a more nuanced view of the landscape and how it affects public perception is scarce. Digital platforms themselves do not share enough data that offer an overview of what transpires within their ecosystems. Most available data come from third parties whose ability to track may be limited to online sources known to their tracking systems.

What complicates data gathering further is the sizable Filipino diaspora, which means that conversations about Philippine issues and society are not just covered by actors located in the Philippines but also in countries where migrants live. The community of Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) also plays a significant role here. Many of the pages and groups that Rappler tracked as part of its research are presented as communities of Filipinos in various parts of the world. Experience of previous elections have shown that conversations within these online communities of Filipinos abroad affect political outcomes in the Philippines.

For this reason, this research used multiple techniques and data sources to come up with this assessment of the Philippine information ecosystem. It was conducted in two phases. Phase 1 involved conducting preliminary research on the Philippine digital media landscape using various existing studies and actual data on online content platforms. Phase 2 provided a landscape on media use from the perspective of communities on the ground.

For Phase 1, the research team consolidated existing research and data on the prevailing media and digital media landscape in the Philippines. Some sources included are data from the Functional Literacy, Education and Mass Media Survey (FLEMMS) conducted by the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA), surveys from the Social Weather Stations (SWS), the digital report that is published annually by prominent digital creative agency WeAreSocial, and even metrics from platforms like Alexa.com and other sources.

Rappler complemented this through its own social media scans and analysis of social media data that illustrate how information cascades online with a focus on three issues: "war on drugs," attacks against the press, and martial law.
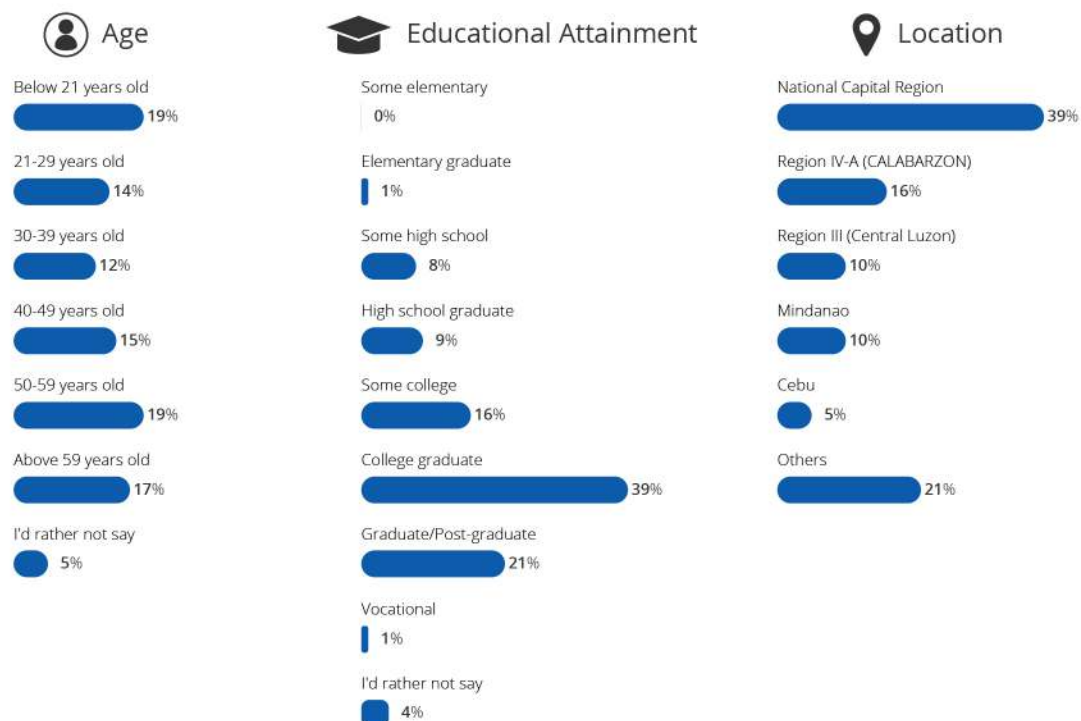
As part of this phase, Rappler analyzed and collected data through CrowdTangle, a tool owned by Facebook which is used by publishers and brands for social media monitoring; and Sharktank, a database developed by Rappler to capture messages and content distributed in known public social media spaces in the Philippines (public Facebook groups and pages).

Sharktank's unique database is a key resource and is now being used by data scientists and academic researchers who want to study the exponential spread of disinformation online and its impact on Philippine democracy. As of July 2021, this database has captured 382,633,021 public posts and 444,788,994 comments from 68,097 public pages, 23,736 public groups, and 4,759,678 users on Facebook. It has also captured 11,400,241 unique links from 235,265 websites. It has also gathered content from 331,471 YouTube channels.

Social media content related to the selected information cascades were consolidated and analyzed using natural language processing and social network analysis.

To complement and help nuance the initial findings of the study, Rappler was initially supposed to conduct on-ground focus group discussions (FGDs) and key information interviews (KIIs) in six areas. Quarantine restrictions that prevented researchers from accessing respondents physically weighed heavily on the decision to shift to research strategies online.

Demographic distribution of the Rappler Website Survey

Age
- Below 21 years old — 19%
- 21-29 years old — 14%
- 30-39 years old — 12%
- 40-49 years old — 15%
- 50-59 years old — 19%
- Above 59 years old — 17%
- I'd rather not say — 5%

Educational Attainment
- Some elementary — 0%
- Elementary graduate — 1%
- Some high school — 8%
- High school graduate — 9%
- Some college — 16%
- College graduate — 39%
- Graduate/Post-graduate — 21%
- Vocational — 1%
- I'd rather not say — 4%

Location
- National Capital Region — 39%
- Region IV-A (CALABARZON) — 16%
- Region III (Central Luzon) — 10%
- Mindanao — 10%
- Cebu — 5%
- Others — 21%

Percentage based off total 2,324 respondents who went through the set of demographic questions and completed the survey. From Rappler website survey.
Rappler Demographics https://public.flourish.studio/visualisation/8003559/

Thus, instead of on-ground FGDs and KIIs, Rappler conducted the following:

1. **Online surveys** that aimed to gauge Filipinos' social media consumption. The surveys were deployed in two different ways. Both surveys focused on subset analysis, to identify trends in specific respondent segments instead of general trends.

   - ***Rappler website survey.*** Conducted in May 2021, this survey gathered a total of 33,820 responses. Keeping only clean (without fraudulent responses) and completed responses, 2,324 were used for the analysis. As the survey was served on Rappler, the data is only used to project trends for the audience of Rappler, to be compared to the results of the second survey.

     Respondents from this survey are people with access to the internet and online news content. Respondents have an almost even representation across age brackets but have mostly received higher education, with 60% having at least a college degree. It's also heavily skewed towards Luzon residents, with 39% coming from the National Capital Region (NCR).
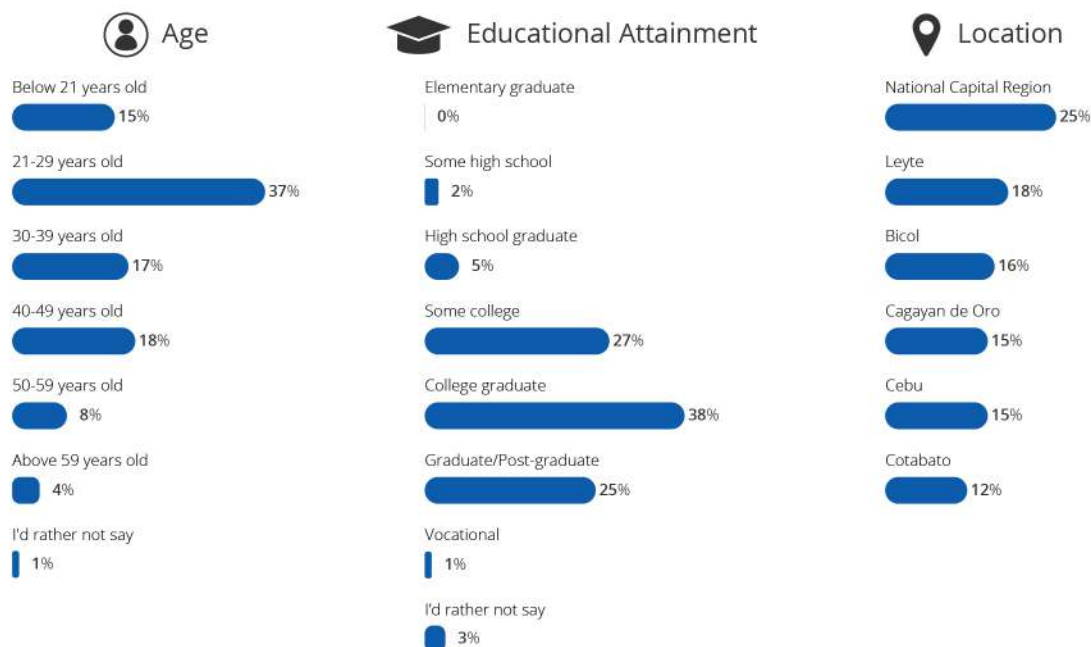
     The panel shows a high affinity for news only, with at least 86% saying they follow *Media and News Groups* on social media. This is followed by *Schools and Academic Pages* only at 36% and *Professional / Expert Pages and Groups* (e.g., professional associations) at 34%.

     At least 10% of respondents are page administrators or moderators of social media groups or pages, while 5% of respondents use social media for a living, either as a social media manager or a content creator.

   - ***Community surveys.*** These surveys were done in partnership with academic partners in six different areas (Metro Manila, Bicol, Leyte, Cebu, Cotabato, and Cagayan de Oro). Conducted from June 4, 2021 to August 5, 2021, the survey gathered a total of 461 respondents.

     Respondents from the survey served to respondents across the country through local partners show a high skew to the 21-29 years old age group, with 52% being 29 years old and below. A majority also have at least a college degree. The survey

Demographic distribution of the Local Communities Survey ——————

Age		Educational Attainment		Location	
Below 21 years old	15%	Elementary graduate	0%	National Capital Region	25%
21-29 years old	37%	Some high school	2%	Leyte	18%
30-39 years old	17%	High school graduate	5%	Bicol	16%
40-49 years old	18%	Some college	27%	Cagayan de Oro	15%
50-59 years old	8%	College graduate	38%	Cebu	15%
Above 59 years old	4%	Graduate/Post-graduate	25%	Cotabato	12%
I'd rather not say	1%	Vocational	1%		
		I'd rather not say	3%		

Percentage based off total 461 respondents who went through the set of demographic questions and completed the survey. From local communities survey.

Partner Demographics https://public.flourish.studio/visualisation/8003579/

is more evenly distributed across cities in different locations, but 25% are still from the NCR.

The respondents also show an affinity for news, with 87% saying they follow *Media and News Groups* on social media. Unlike the respondents from the first survey, however, survey respondents from this survey also follow other types of pages and groups on social media, with *School and Academic Pages* at 56%, *Lifestyle and Entertainment Influencers* at 56%, and *Professional / Expert Groups* at 42%.

13% of respondents from the select areas also said that they are page administrators or moderators of social media groups or pages, while 8 % of respondents use social media for a living, either as social media managers or content creators.

2. ***Online FGDs.*** Survey respondents from the community surveys became the pool from which partner researchers selected participants for FGDs conducted online in each of the six areas. Each FGD had a total of 10 participants.

   The FGDs probed further into the media consumption behavior of respondents, their exposure to disinformation and the information cascades tackled in the previous sections; and the impact of such exposure to their personal beliefs.

3. ***KIIs.*** In order to understand the media consumption behaviors and preferences of audiences who are either not as exposed or have no exposure to social media are still exposed to similar disinformation. KIIs were conducted in the same six areas where the community surveys and the FGDs were conducted. Rappler's research partners conducted five interviewees per area. Most of these interviewees said they don't have a Facebook account.

Background and context

Unlike audiences of traditional media, digital media audiences are not passive recipients or spectators. Even ordinary people who are usually seen as mere listeners or receivers become content creators themselves. They can also be conversationalists, critics, collectors, and joiners, according to Forrester, digital marketing research group. In what it calls the "Social Technographics" ladder,[12] Forrester defined these "segments of participation," as follows:

- Creators are defined as those who publish their own blogs and web pages, upload their own video, upload audio and music they created, or write and post articles.

- Conversationalists are those who update status on social networking sites.

- Critics post ratings and reviews, comment on other people's blogs, contribute to online forums, and either contribute or edit articles in wikis.

- Collectors are those who use RSS feeds, vote for websites online, and add "tags" to web pages or photos.

- Joiners maintain profiles and or visit social networking sites.

- Spectators read blogs, listen to podcasts, watch video from other users, read various content, including posts in online forums, customer ratings/reviews, and tweets.
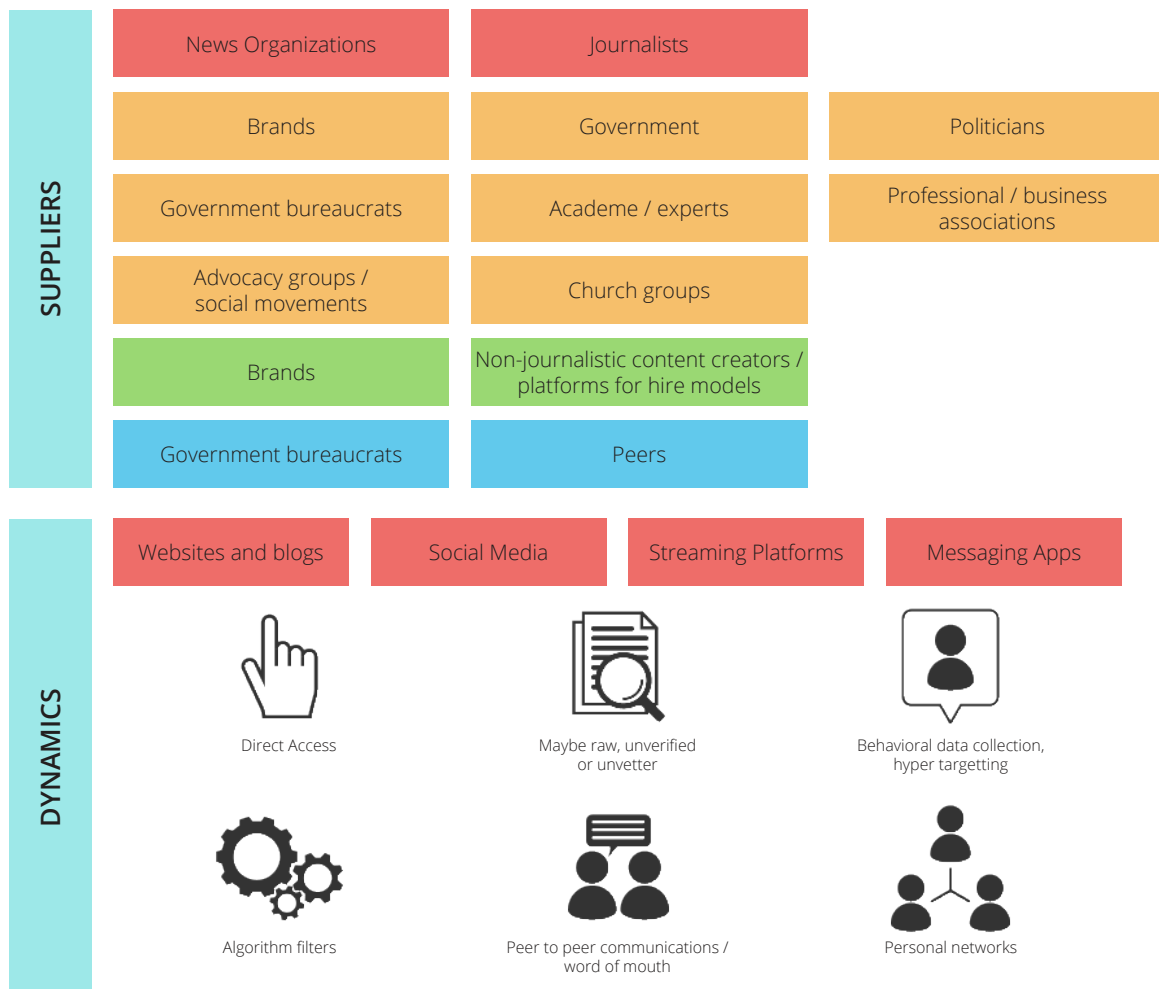
- Inactives do none of the above.[13]

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12   Reineke Reitsma, "The Data Digest: The Social Technographics Profile Of Facebook And MySpace Users (US)," Forrester, https://www.forrester.com/blogs/10-06-25-the_data_digest_the_social_technographics_profile_of_facebook_and_myspace_users_us/

13   Charlene Li and Josh Bernoff, "Groundswell: Winning in a world transformed by social technologies," 2011

Information Ecosystem
Digital Platforms

SUPPLIERS

News Organizations	Journalists	
Brands	Government	Politicians
Government bureaucrats	Academe / experts	Professional / business associations
Advocacy groups / social movements	Church groups	
Brands	Non-journalistic content creators / platforms for hire models	
Government bureaucrats	Peers	

DYNAMICS

| Websites and blogs | Social Media | Streaming Platforms | Messaging Apps |

Direct Access

Maybe raw, unverified or unvetter

Behavioral data collection, hyper targetting

Algorithm filters

Peer to peer communications / word of mouth

Personal networks

Philippine Information Ecosystem Assessment (Rappler, 2021)

In this new media environment, the traditional lines between "supply side" and "demand side" actors have become blurred. Content "suppliers" are no longer limited to the traditional media groups. After all, anybody can put up a website. Anybody with a mobile device and data connection can also broadcast and publish from anywhere using Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and Twitter. Newcomers to this space include streaming apps like TikTok and Philippine app Kumu. Traditional media and online news producers compete for eyeballs with other digital activities and numerous other actors.

Firehose of falsehood, anger & hate

These dynamics affect how information cascades happen and how disinformation spreads within the digital environment. It is now possible to create channels directly targeting audiences without going through traditional media gatekeepers. In fact, it is possible to reach audiences without revealing who is behind a message.

Research shows that only a small percentage of those online actually post, meaning the noise sometimes comes from a minority. In a practice called "astroturfing," disinformation networks create the impression of widespread grassroots support for a policy, individual, or product even when little exists.[14]

These conditions make social media fertile ground for what is described in a RAND corporation study as the Russian "Firehose of Falsehood" propaganda model.[15]

The distinctive features of this propaganda model, according to the RAND study are: high-volume and multichannel; rapid, continuous, and repetitive; lacks commitment to objective reality; and lacks commitment to consistency. According to the RAND study, what matters in producing and disseminating high-volume, multichannel propaganda are these: variety of sources, number and volume of sources, and the views of others, especially the views of those who are similar to the message recipient. This model is successful, according to the study, because first impressions are very resilient, while repetition of a message leads to familiarity, and familiarity then leads to acceptance.

Dangerous trends

Apart from obliterating old relationships between content creators and consumers, digital platforms also differ from traditional media in a more profound way: the way it collects and uses audience data. In this environment, technology itself can influence the course of public

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14   Adam Bienkov, "Astroturfing: what is it and why does it matter," February 8, 2012, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/feb/08/what-is-astroturfing

15   Christopher Paul and Miriam Matthews, 'The Russian "Firehose of Falsehood" Propaganda Model,' https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/perspectives/PE100/PE198/RAND_PE198.pdf

conversation through personalization algorithms that sift through all available content and use behavioral surplus to predict what acontent will keep you engaged, i.e. staying on the platform for longer periods of time.

This has become the ruling principle - the business model which Shoshana Zuboff calls "surveillance capitalism."[16]

Various studies have shown that intensive collection through smartphones and use of behavioral data by technology platforms allow them to create algorithms that control what individual users see. Social media has become a behavior modification system[17] that divides and radicalizes. As early as 2016, an internal Facebook study showed that 64% of those who followed extremist groups on the platform were led there by its recommendation algorithms and tools.[18]

In his book, The Hype Machine, Sinan Aral[19] talks about what he calls the technology trifecta that rule our worlds today: smartphones (the hardware we carry everywhere with us); the digital social networks and other apps (that gather our data based on our atomized actions); and machine intelligence that facilitate the hype loop process.[20]

If you were posting on Facebook, your every post is pulled together by machine learning, which creates a model of you that knows you better than you know yourself. It uses artificial intelligence to pull all these models together and serve your most vulnerable moment to a message to a company (the new advertising) or a country (the new propaganda). Except this is a perpetual machine that never stops. Once you're served a message, whether you click and read or not is gathered again by machine learning to perfect the model the platform has of you. The hype loop includes human behavior.

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16   Soshana Zuboff, "The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power," 2019
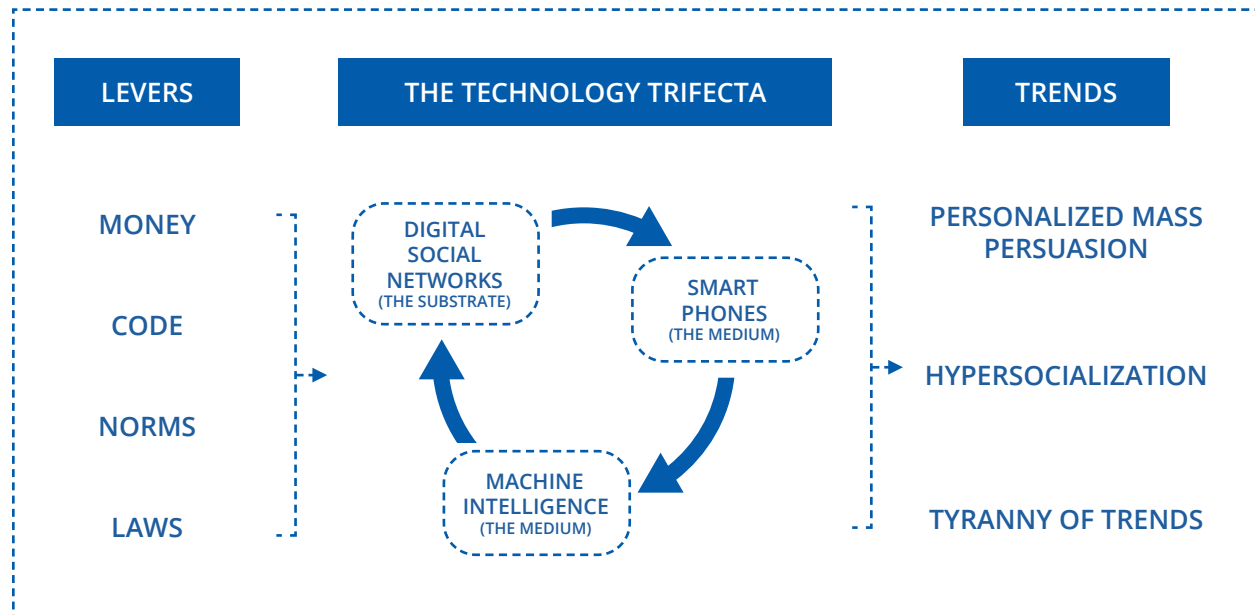
17   https://www.rappler.com/technology/maria-says-emergency-actions-needed-rein-social-media

18   Camille Elemia, "Maria Ressa: 'Emergency actions' needed to rein in social media," November 12, 2020, https://www.wsj.com/articles/facebook-knows-it-encourages-division-top-executives-nixed-solutions-11590507499

19   Rappler Talk: Sinan Aral and social media's Hype Machine, September 14, 2020, https://www.rappler.com/technology/social-media/interview-sinan-aral-social-media-hype-machine

20   Sinan Aral, The Hype Machine, 2020, page 32

The Hype Machine

This information ecosystem, writes Aral, creates the dangerous trends on the right: personalized mass persuasion, hypersocialization, the tyranny of trends.

Personalized mass persuasion means that you cannot only be targeted by messages that exploit your weaknesses but that the message sender can actually send out contradictory messages to millions of people – without them knowing they are receiving different messages. This is a fundamental difference between the advertising and propaganda we knew – one identical public message everyone sees versus the personalized message that is distributed with neither tracktability nor accountability. This is part of the reason why a lie told a million times becomes a fact.[21]

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21   Is Big Tech the New Empire? – Maria Ressa and Christopher Wylie, Al Jazeera, March 27, 2020 https://www.aljazeera.com/program/studio-b-unscripted/2020/3/27/is-big-tech-the-new-empire-maria-ressa-and-christopher-wylie

Hypersocialization means that every decision we make today is rarely made alone. Aral said, "the Hype Machine essentially injects the opinions of our friends, family, and the crowd into every decision that we make in the world."[22]

The Tyranny of Trends creates a potent behavioral push because of the virality and algorithmic amplification of ideas, thoughts, and behavior. Virality accelerates because of design, including the degrees of separation. In the physical world, there are six degrees of separation; in the Facebook world, that shrinks to 3.57, creating tighter social clusters and laying the groundwork for viral spread.[23]

These trends are clearly evident in the Philippines, considered the social media capital of the world for 6 straight years now due to its population's extraordinarily high amount of time spent on social media. Filipinos are more deeply immersed in the medium compared to the rest of the world, with a usage rate of over 4 hours per day per user, almost double the global average. In an interview with Rappler's CEO Maria Ressa, Cambridge Analytica whistleblower Christopher Wylie said this makes the Philippines an ideal target for experimentation on techniques for voter manipulation and or dissemination of propaganda. Successful techniques, according to Wylie, are eventually ported to more mature democracies in the west.[24]

Media use before the pandemic struck

As early as 2018, almost 100% of Filipinos on the internet were on Facebook.[25] In the Philippines, Facebook became the internet.

22   "Rappler Talk: Sinan Aral and social media's Hype Machine," Rappler, September 14, 2020, https://www. rappler.com/technology/social-media/interview-sinan-aral-social-media-hype-machine

23   Sergey Edunov, Smriti Bhagat, Moira Burke, Carlos Diuk, Ismail Onur Filiz, "Three and a half degrees of separation," Facebook Research, https://research.fb.com/blog/2016/02/three-and-a-half-degrees-of-separation/, February 4, 2016, accessed November 23, 2021

24   "EXCLUSIVE: Interview with Cambridge Analytica whistle-blower Christopher Wylie," Rappler, September 12, 2019, https://www.rappler.com/technology/social-media/cambridge-analytica-interview-christopher-wylie

25   Jake Swearingen, "Facebook Used the Philippines to Test Free Internet. Then a Dictator Was Elected," Rappler, September 4, 2018, https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2018/09/how-facebooks-free-internet-helped-elect-a-dictator.html

Television was still the preferred medium for Filipinos between ages 10 to 64 at 96% before the pandemic hit.[26] (See table below) But what is interesting was that it showed that, even before the pandemic, the internet was already catching up with radio, with 73.9% reporting being exposed to the internet (social media) as compared to 75.2 % for radio.

In terms of daily exposure, the Internet has overtaken radio and was already next to television as of 2019. Of the population surveyed, 66.3% were exposed daily to television. More people reported daily exposure to the internet (social media at 42.5%, and emails/research 25.2) than radio at 19.0 %. The same FLEMMS report found that 24% or 15.7 million of the 66.2 million adult Filipinos read the news daily through Facebook.

Table 2.

Proportion of population 10 to 64 years old in urban and rural areas by frequency of exposure to various forms of mass media, Philippines: 2019

Forms of Mass Media	Proportion (in percent)					
	All barangays					
	Exposed	Frequency of Exposure				Not reported
		Everyday	At least once a week	Seldom	Not at all	
Newspaper	63.3	4.3	13.0	45.6	36.5	0.6
Magazines	73.2	10.9	20.7	41.1	26.7	0.6
Posters	69.1	6.5	17.5	44.7	30.7	0.6
Television	96.0	66.3	17.4	11.8	3.9	0.6
Radio	75.2	19.0	20.0	35.7	24.7	0.6

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26   "Functional literacy rate of Filipinos by exposure to different forms of mass media ranges from 92.6 percent to 97.1 percent in 2019," Philippine Statistics Authority, published Monday, December 28, 2020, accessed Jan 18, 2021 https://psa.gov.ph/content/functional-literacy-rate-filipinos-exposure-different-forms-mass-media-ranges-926-percent

Forms of Mass Media	Proportion (in percent)					
	All barangays					
	Exposed	Frequency of Exposure				Not reported
		Everyday	At least once a week	Seldom	Not at all	
Movies	65.9	13.0	15.4	37.1	33.9	0.6
Internet (Emails/ Research work)	63.6	25.2	17.6	20.4	36.2	0.6
Internet (Social media)	73.9	42.5	16.2	14.7	26.0	0.6
Meetings	67.5	4.4	16.8	45.9	32.3	0.6
Report/ Correspondence	43.9	3.7	9.6	30.4	55.8	0.6
Calculations	80.3	29.3	24.8	25.8	19.6	0.6

Source: Philippine Statistics Authority, 2019 Functional Literacy, Education and Mass Media Survey

In its June 2019 survey, the SWS found that 1 in 5 (21%) of Filipino adults use Facebook daily as a source of news, beating radio and newspapers whose usage have significantly dropped.[27]
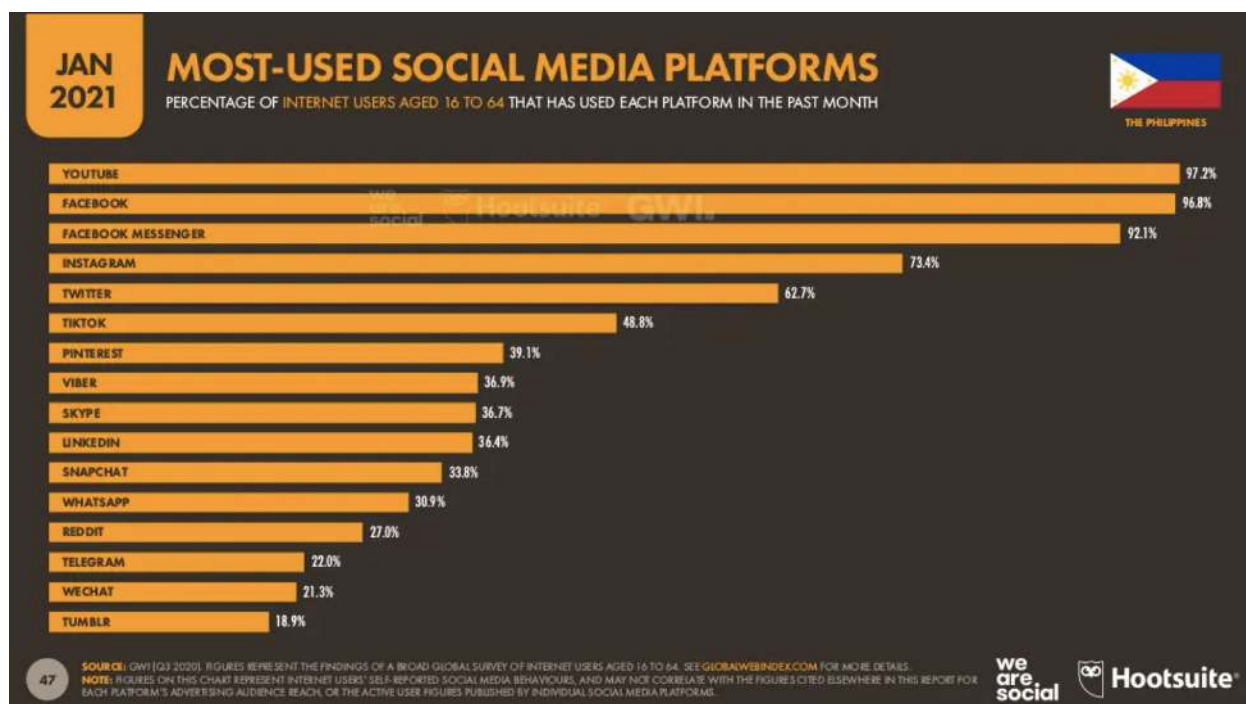
Months later, in its December 2019 survey, The SWS said nearly 1 in every 4 (24%) Filipino adults access news daily from Facebook.[28] This puts Facebook as the second top source of news compared to 69% or 45.8 million adults using television as a primary source of news. This is slightly higher than those who use radio (19%) and newspapers (1%) as a medium.

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27 First Quarter 2019 Social Weather Survey: 1 of 5 adult Pinoys use Facebook daily as a source of news, Social Weather Stations, June 29, 2019, https://www.sws.org.ph/swsmain/artcldisppage/?artcsyscode=ART-20190629182313&mc_cid=023b1e53fe&mc_eid=31b9d30a85

28 The same survey found out that 24 percent or 15.7 million of the 66.2 million adult Filipinos read the news daily through Facebook.

As of January 2021, WeAreSocial said YouTube became the most popular with 97.2% of total internet users. Facebook comes second at 96.8% of total users. Facebook's own messaging app, Messenger is top 3, with 92% of total users. (See below)

The shift to digital would accelerate dramatically as the COVID-19 pandemic forced people to work and study remotely due to quarantine restrictions.

How information cascades happen in the new Philippine information ecosystem

One politician who was able to harness the unique dynamics of digital media is Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte.
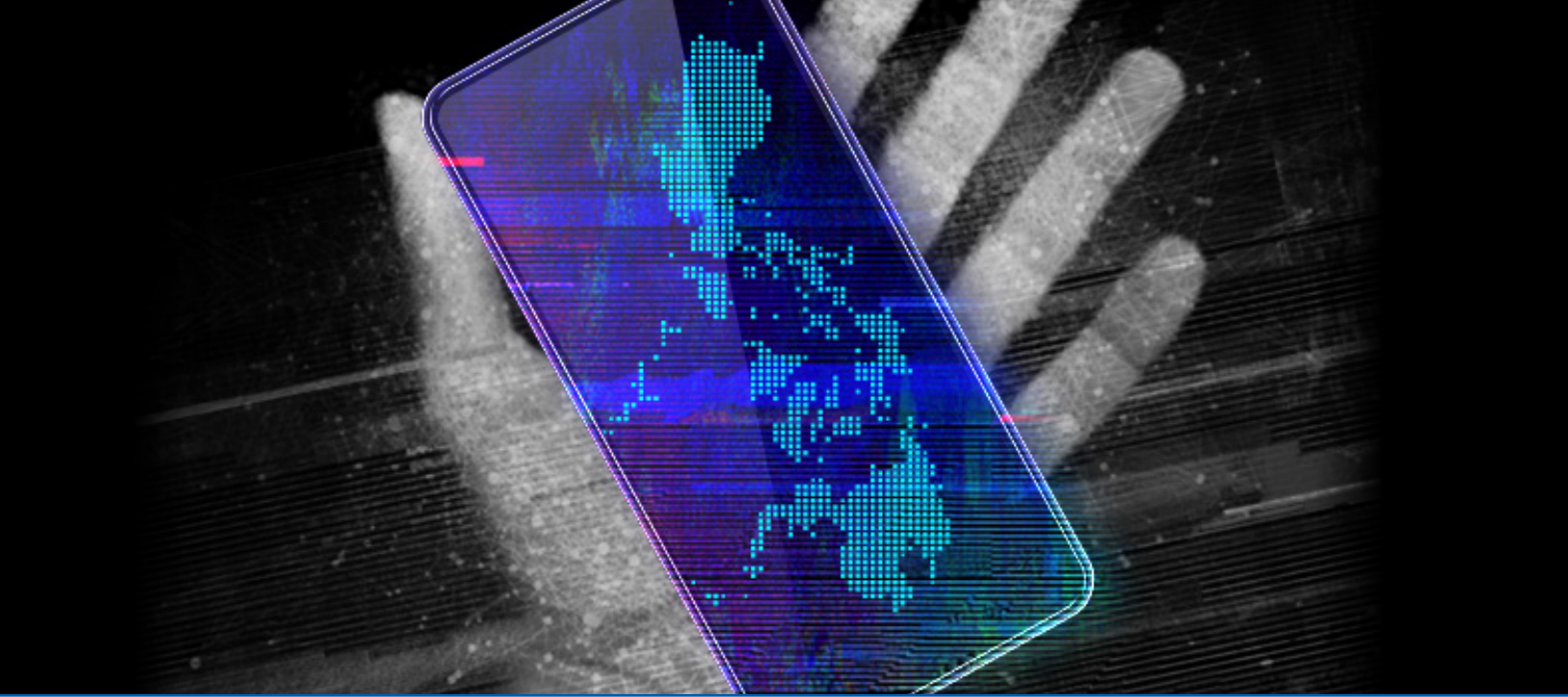
Duterte was the acknowledged dark horse in the 2016 presidential race. That social media-powered groundswell played a key role in his victory was very clear. His example was eventually copied by candidates who vied for senatorial seats in May 2019 and the same techniques are now being observed among candidates for the 2022 elections. These techniques include the use of numerous pages and groups to target niche audiences as well as the use of negative campaigning, including false content, against rivals.

Duterte did not have a national political machinery. As a local government executive, Duterte did have access to a network of local governments all over the country.[29] Duterte's campaign team used social media as the primary tool for mobilizing his supporters across the country and generating sustained buzz about him in the presidential race.[30] Data released by Facebook in March 2016, two months before the May presidential elections, showed that Duterte was most talked about among presidential candidates. During presidential debates, Duterte went on to win almost every online poll.

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29   Duterte goes on 'listening tour' for federalism, January 24, 2015, Manila Bulletin, https://web.archive.org/web/20160423123809/http://mb.com.ph/duterte-goes-on-listening-tour-for-federalism/

30   Jodesz Gavilan, Duterte's P10M social media campaign: Organic, volunteer-driven, Rappler, June 1, 2016, https://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/rich-media/134979-rodrigo-duterte-social-media-campaign-nic-gabunada
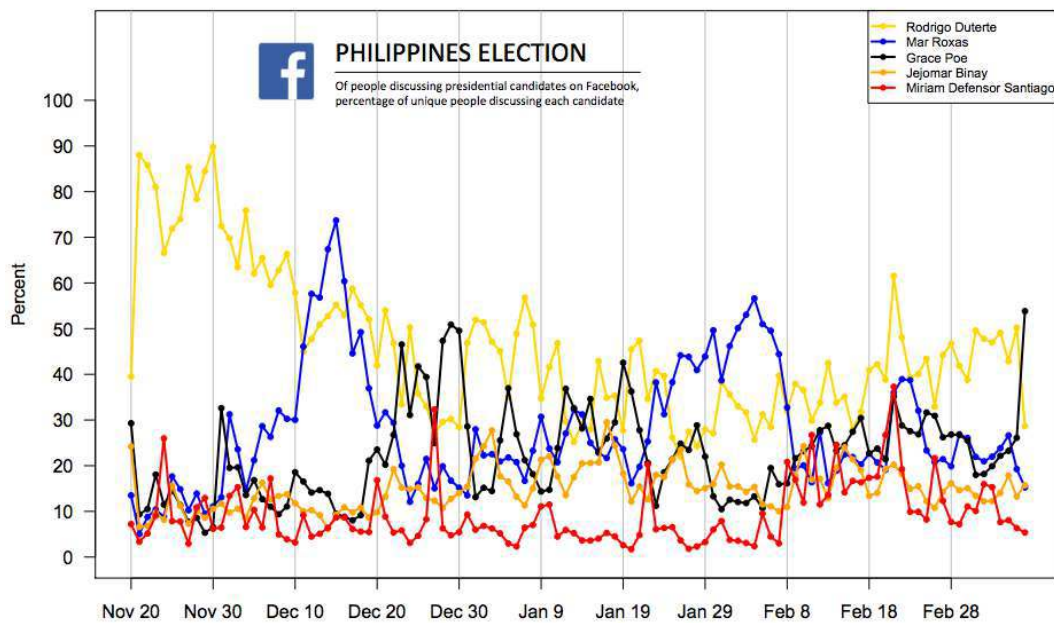
The campaign mode on social media, however, did not end after Malacañang was won. The graph below charts growth in the number of active pages supporting key politicians. It indicates a ramp after the 2016 elections – with the number of active fan groups and pages supporting Duterte continuing to increase both in numbers and in membership. The number of fan pages of Duterte and allies clearly outnumbered those in favor of opposition leader Vice President Leni Robredo.
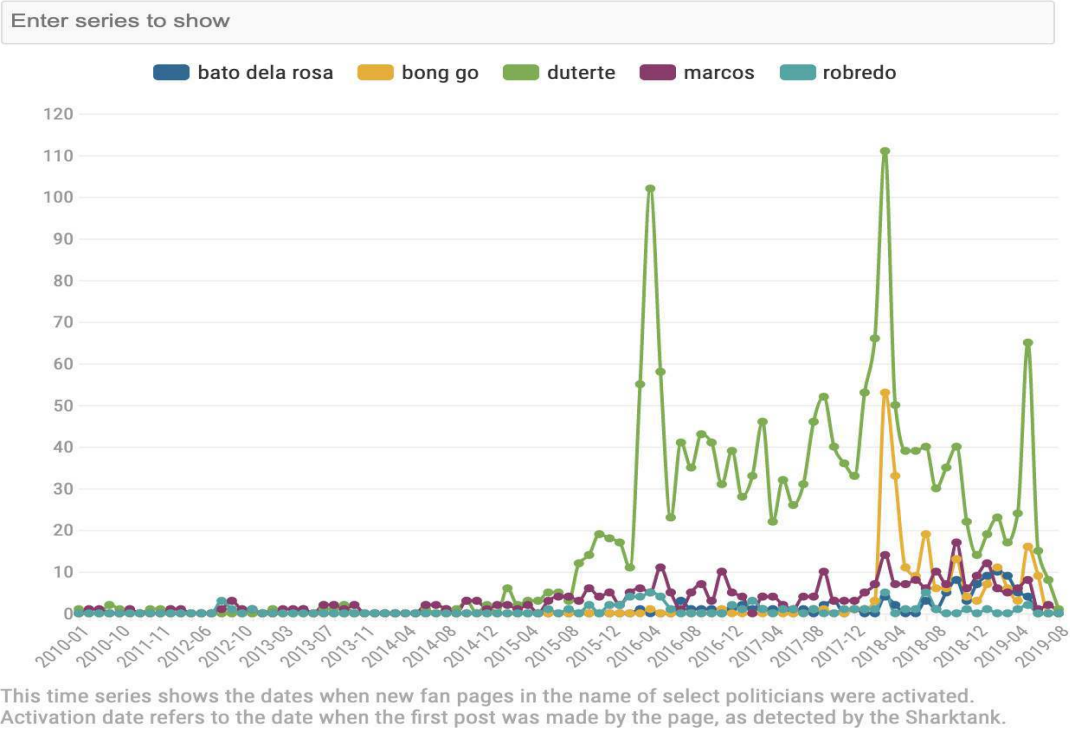
Having numerous pages and groups plays well into the way Facebook algorithms work: a user clicks on content and participates, the system takes the user down deeper into the echo chamber by recommending more of the same content, in this case, similar groups and pages. This draws parallels to the way Facebook recommended groups to Donald Trump's followers, effectively recruiting on behalf of these groups and pages in the United States.

Apart from successfully leveraging the network effect and niche messaging capabilities of Facebook, the Duterte administration also played into another critical element that social media platforms amplify: content that uses visceral, vitriolic language. The Duterte administration was able to successfully tap into this by harnessing pro-Duterte social media influencers who were given government positions or hired as consultants using public funds. In several instances, these state-aligned influencers targeted journalists and news organizations in profanity-laced attacks online.

In many pages and groups, visceral and vitriolic language typically accompanied lies and misrepresented content. Interestingly, as disinformation and online mobs, largely by

When were fan pages activated?

This time series shows the dates when new fan pages in the name of select politicians were activated. Activation date refers to the date when the first post was made by the page, as detected by the Sharktank.

supporters of the President, become a popular topic for conversation, pro-Duterte bloggers bristled at proposals prohibiting them from using offensive language, saying this is what makes their blogs popular.

A study conducted by researchers at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), published in March 2018, found that falsehoods diffused significantly farther, faster, deeper, and more broadly than the truth – in all categories of information. It further found that the effects were more pronounced for false political news than for false news about terrorism, natural disasters, science, urban legends, or financial information.

The MIT study also found that false news was more novel than true news, which suggests that people were more likely to share novel information. Whereas false stories inspired fear, disgust, and surprise in replies, true stories inspired anticipation, sadness, joy, and trust.[31]

In order to illustrate the dynamics of the digital information ecosystem and how disinformation is seeded within this environment, Rappler explored cascades around the following themes: war on drugs; attacks against the press; and messaging around martial law and authoritarian rule. The themes were selected based on prevailing issues that confronted the Duterte administration over the past 6 years. The administration's blood drug war, in particular, not only dominated the president's public messages. As media coverage of the drug war intensified, so too did online and offline attacks against newsrooms and journalists covering the war. Messaging around martial law and a strong man rule has also been something that was floated throughout Duterte's term, in varying degrees. During the height of the pandemic, this culminated in the enactment of the Anti-terrorism act, which is currently facing opposition at the Supreme Court.

It is important to note though that these cascades are not isolated narratives in themselves. These themes intertwined in social media conversations.

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31   Soroush Vosoughi, Deb Roy, Sinan Aral, "The spread of true and false news online," 09 Mar 2018, ScienceMag. org, https://science.sciencemag.org/content/359/6380/1146

Cascade 1: War on drugs

Before the 2016 elections, crime was not the top concern of Filipinos. A Pulse Asia survey conducted in December 2015 reported that economic concerns were top of mind: controlling inflation (45%), improving / increasing the pay of workers (42%), reducing poverty of many Filipinos (38%), creating more jobs (34%), fighting graft and corruption in government (34%). Only 25% saw fighting criminality as a concern.[32]

Table 5
MOST URGENT NATIONAL CONCERNS: OVERALL
December 4 - 11, 2015 / Philippines
(Multiple Response, up to 3 allowed / In Percent)

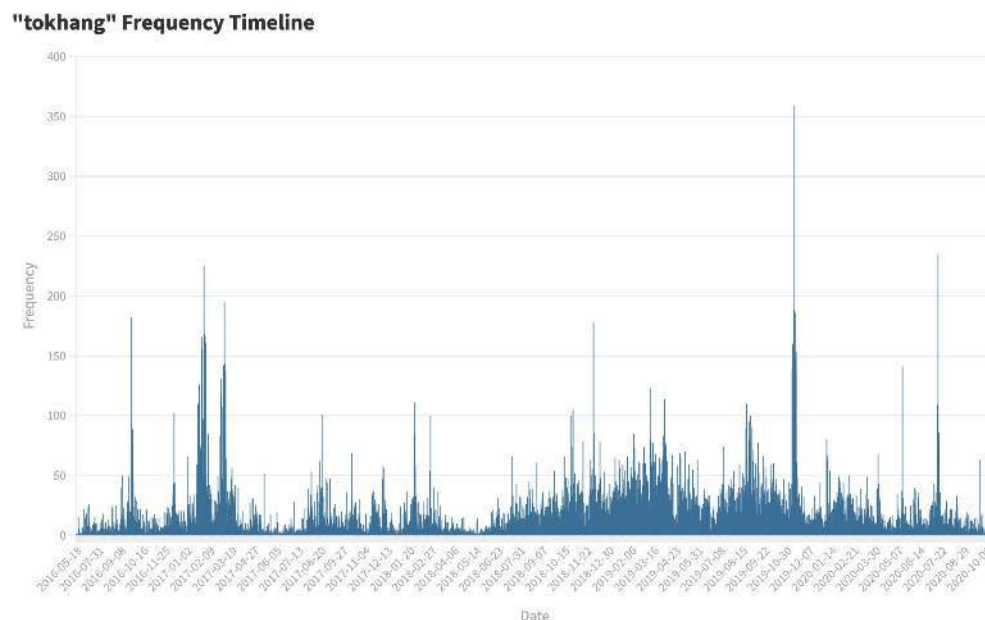| NATIONAL CONCERNS	RP	LOCATION				CLASS		
Base: Total Interviews, 100%		NCR	BAL LUZ	VIS	MIN	ABC	D	E
Controlling inflation	45	46	40	42	54	49	43	48
Improving / Increasing the pay of workers	42	47	42	44	37	30	43	43
Reducing poverty of many Filipinos	38	29	35	42	46	34	37	42
Creating more jobs	34	37	35	33	29	28	34	34
Fighting graft and corruption in government	34	37	34	33	31	29	34	33
Fighting criminality	25	21	24	28	26	27	25	25
Increasing peace in the country	19	15	20	15	22	22	20	15
Enforcing the law on all, whether influential or ordinary people	16	14	17	16	16	24	16	17
Stopping the destruction and abuse of our environment	12	8	13	12	10	12	11	13
Reducing the amount of taxes paid	11	13	12	11	7	15	11	9
Controlling fast population growth	7	15	7	5	5	11	8	4
Protecting the welfare of OFWs	7	8	8	6	6	7	7	5
Defending the integrity of Philippine territory against foreigners	4	4	4	5	3	4	4	4
Changing the Constitution	3	2	4	4	3	4	3	3
Preparing to successfully face any kind of terrorism	3	3	3	4	4	3	4	3

Q10. Sa mga sumusunod na isyung pambansa, pakisabi ang hanggang TATLONG isyung dapat aksyunan agad ng administrasyong Aquino. Maaari kayong magbanggit ng iba pa na wala sa listahan. Alin po ang unang isyung dapat aksyunan agad ng kasalukuyang administrasyon? Ang pangalawa? Ang pangatlo?

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32   Jodesz Gavilan, Health is Filipinos' top personal concern for 3 years now – Pulse Asia, January 11, 2016, https://r3.rappler.com/nation/118663-top-concerns-filipinos-pulse-asia-survey-december-2015

The push against the drug users started ahead of the elections, when then-presidential candidate Duterte promised to eradicate drug trafficking in three to six months.[33] Before the elections, pro-Duterte groups, websites, and personalities set the narrative that drug addicts and suspects are the biggest threat to the Philippines, propping up support for the campaign. The campaign really intensified after the new president took his oath of office in June 2016.

As soon as Duterte took oath, photos of dead bodies believed to have been killed by vigilantes in relation to the drug war started circulating on social media. Police operations against purported members of drug syndicates intensified, making one word representing the drug war become a household term: the term "tokhang," a portmanteau of the Bisaya word for knock (tok) and plead (hangyo). The chart below plots how the use of the term trended over time soon after the Duterte administration launched its "war on drugs" campaign in July of 2016. Tokhang involved police officers going door to door supposedly to root out drug-related offenders.
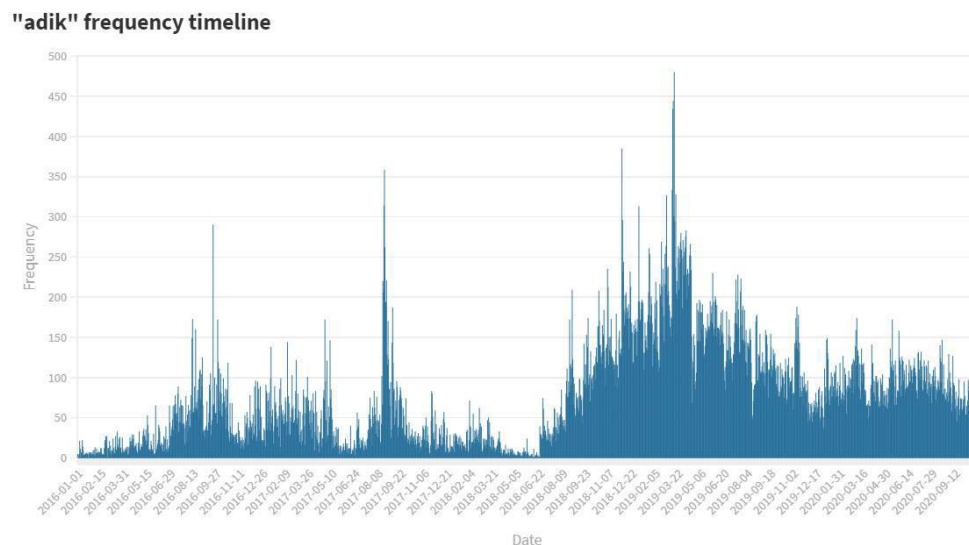

https://public.flourish.studio/visualisation/5110084/

To justify the brutal campaign against illegal drugs, it was important for the government to control the conversation on drug addicts. As the drug war intensified, the term "adik" or addict was also indiscriminately used not just against addicts but also against critics of the administration in social media posts and comments.

The graph below shows how mentions of "adik" (Filipino for addict) trended on Facebook before the elections and as the drug war intensified. (We observed more of this in the comments.)

"adik" frequency timeline

https://public.flourish.studio/visualisation/5150386/

Using natural language processing, Rappler looked at the different clusters of topics surrounding drug addicts, by analyzing Facebook posts collected by the Sharktank with mentions of the word "adik" from January 2016 to December 2020. These clusters are shown in the visualization below.

The scan revealed narratives that dehumanized drug addicts, exaggerated the country's drug problem, and attacked critics to make the drug war seem necessary.

- **"Adik" as an insult.** The biggest cluster showed posts where the word "adik (addict)" was consistently being used, largely by Duterte supporters, to insult critics of the government and accuse them of being drug addicts themselves. It was often used side-by-side with other attack words, like swear words "gago (stupid)" and "putang ina (son

Narratives about the drug addict ("adik")
An analysis of 5,392 Facebook posts collected by the SharkTank from 2016 to 2020. Clustered by topic using Natural Language Processing, cleaned up and labeled by Rappler analysts.
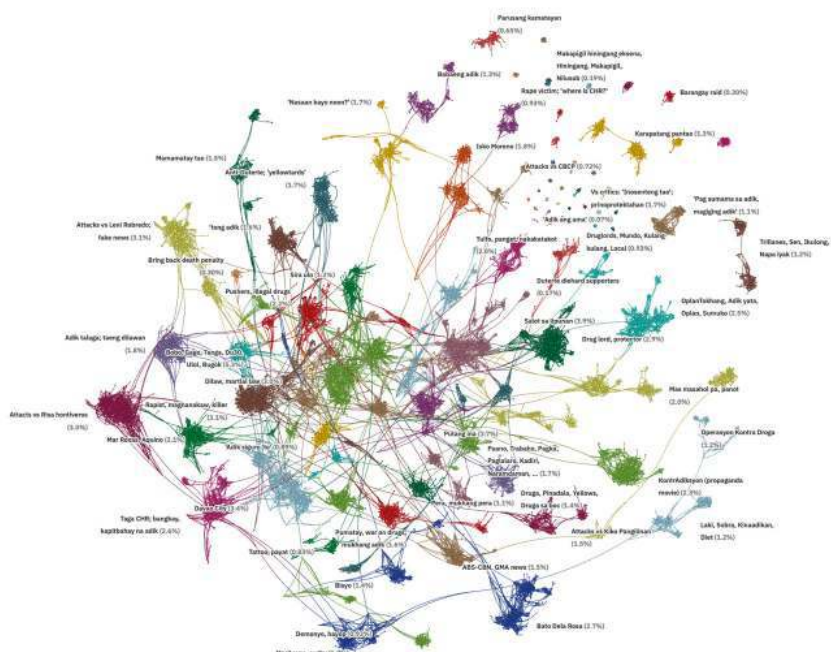
'Adik' as an attack word

Protecting the innocent

Plague on society

of a bitch)", as well as unique attack words coined by Duterte supporters online, like "dilawan" and "yellowtard" insults hurled against those perceived to favor the Aquino administration or Liberal Party.

- **Plague on society.** A key element of the drug war propaganda was to dehumanize drug addicts and brand the drug war as a necessary action to rid society of longstanding evil. Several clusters in the scan showed posts calling drug addicts as "salot ng lipunan (plague on society)," "demonyo (demons)," and "hayop (animals)." Drug users were also heavily being blamed for heinous crimes like rape and murder. To support this narrative, there were also posts about actual cases of crimes committed by drug addicts, as well as drug raids conducted by the police, often pointing out how widespread the drug problem is in the country.

- **Protecting the innocent.** Posts in this cluster frame the drug war as a means to "protect the innocent," accusing critics of siding against victims of rape and murder, supposedly committed by drug addicts. Members of the opposition like Vice President Robredo, Senators Risa Hontiveros and Kiko Pangilinan, were branded as "protectors of drug lords." The Commission of Human Rights (CHR) and its former chairperson, the

late Chito Gascon, were also swarmed for speaking up about the rights of suspects and drug addicts, but "ignoring" victims of heinous crimes. Media organizations were also accused of being biased against the drug war, all the while being mum about the plight of "victims" of drug addicts.

Officially, in response to rising criticism of the drug war, the Philippine National Police (PNP) started their own social media campaign called "#RealNumbersPH" supposedly to counter misinformation about the numbers of those killed due to their anti-drug operations.

Case study: Attacks against Leila de Lima

Disinformation about the drug war that Rappler has fact checked include supposed praise from foreign entities of how the Duterte government is handling the situation and attacks on opposition members like Vice President Robredo.

One case study which best exemplifies how disinformation on social media resulted in real world harm was the case of Senator Leila de Lima.[34]

De Lima, who previously led the Commission on Human Rights when it investigated vigilante killings in Davao City when Duterte was still mayor, also led a Senate investigation on the drug war in August 2016.[35] The Duterte administration accused her of being involved in the drug trade in the New Bilibid Prison when she was still secretary of the Department of Justice (DOJ) under former President Benigno Simeon Aquino III. Her co-accused is her driver, Ronnie Dayan, who allegedly served as her "bag man," collecting drug money from the prison to help fund her senatorial bid.[36]
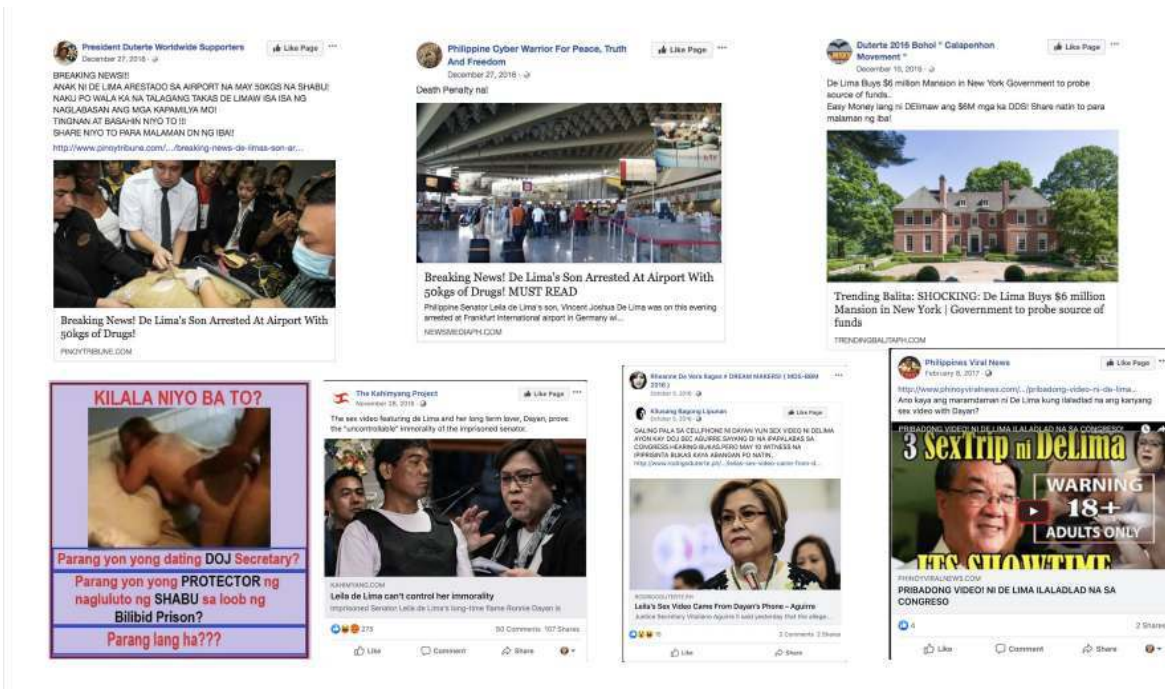
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34   Pauline Macaraeg, 'Premeditated murder: The character assassination of Leila B De Lima,' December 6, 2019, https://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/investigative/premeditated-murder-character-assassination-leila-de-lima

35   Jodesz Gavilan, "TIMELINE: Probing into the Davao Death Squad," Rappler, https://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/iq/171312-timeline-davao-death-squad-probe-hearing-investigations-rodrigo-duterte, June 30, 2017 accessed August 16, 2019.

36   Pia Rañada, "Duterte: De Lima 'facilitated' prison drug trade," Rappler, http://www.rappler.com/nation/144087-duterte-de-lima-facilitated-new-bilibid-drug-trade, August 24, 2016 accessed August 16, 2019.

As this was happening, black propaganda circulating about De Lima on social media included a story that claimed that she bought a USD 6-million mansion in New York City[37] and a fake report which claimed that her son was arrested at the airport for carrying drugs.[38] These claims have been debunked.

Many of these attacks were in the form of memes and misogynistic comments that depicted De Lima as a sex-hungry old woman preying on younger men. The worst attacks that spread the most on social media were screenshots from what was supposed to be a "sex video" between De Lima and her former driver Dayan which were circulated on YouTube and Facebook.[39]

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37   "De Lima denies 'US$6-M NY mansion purchase," Manila Bulletin, http://news.mb.com.ph/2016/10/30/de-lima-denies-us6-m-ny-mansion-purchase/, October 30, 2016 accessed August 16, 2019.

38   "Breaking! De Lima's Son Arrested At Airport With 50kgs Of Drugs," Newsfileph.com, http://www.newsfileph.com/2016/12/breaking-de-limas-son-arrested-at.html, December 2016 accessed May 23, 2017.

39   "De Lima denies starring in 'sex video,' says ex-driver under threat," ABS-CBN News.com, http://news.abs-cbn.com/news/08/20/16/de-lima-denies-starring-in-sex-video-says-ex-driver-under-threat, August 20, 2016.

De Lima later admitted to having an affair with her driver.[40] But a closer look shows that she was not the woman featured in the video that got circulated.

The strategy follows a pattern that Rappler observed on many occasions and is deployed around the world: bottom-up exponential attacks, top-down validation and spread. The narratives seeded online are reinforced by official statements or vice-versa: real world actions or statements are supported by narratives seeded on social media.

Many of these false claims that Rappler caught circulating online were posted after President Duterte hinted in a speech of a senator having a "sordid personal and official life" on August 17, 2016, ahead of the Senate probe into alleged summary killings during the anti-illegal drugs operations by police. Duterte later said in a press conference that he was referring to De Lima. He accused her, without providing proof, of accepting drug money from drug lords at New Bilibid Prison through her lover.[41] A House probe into the proliferation of drugs in New Bilibid Prison, which happened on September 20 and 21, 2016[42] further fueled misogynistic attacks online.

De Lima's alleged sex video was mentioned by the president even a year after the probe and months after De Lima was arrested on February 24, 2017.[43] On November 28, 2017, Duterte joked that he would show De Lima's sex tape to Pope Francis.[44]

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40 "De Lima admits past relationship with driver bodyguard – report," Rappler, http://www.rappler.com/nation/152373-de-lima-admits-relationship-ronnie-dayan, November 14, 2016, accessed August 16, 2019.

41 Bea Cupin, "Duterte attacks 'politicking, posturing' De Lima," Rappler, https://www.rappler.com/nation/143353-duterte-hits-leila-de-lima, August 17, 2016, accessed August 16, 2019.

42 Bea Cupin, "Bilibid probe: Why did drugs proliferate behind bars?," Rappler, https://www.rappler.com/nation/147094-bilibid-probe-drugs-proliferation, September 23, 2016, accessed August 16, 2019.

43 "Senator Leila de Lima arrested," Rappler, https://www.rappler.com/nation/161278-leila-de-lima-surrender-drug-charges, February 24, 2017, accessed August 16, 2019.

44 Pia Ranada, "Duterte jokes he'll show De Lima 'sex video' to Pope Francis," Rappler, https://www.rappler.com/nation/189799-duterte-jokes-pope-francis-leila-de-lima-rosary, November 28, 2017, accessed August 16, 2019.

In February 2017, less than a year after the attacks started, De Lima was arrested supposedly for violations of the Dangerous Drugs Act.[45] Shortly before her arrest, the government's propaganda machine trended #ArrestLeilaDeLima on social media.

In August 2019, concerned netizens asked Rappler to fact check a video which made it appear that De Lima admitted that she was a drug lord coddler. It turned out the video was a spliced version of the speech De Lima made before the Senate to denounce the drug war.[46] The video, which lasted for one minute and 28 seconds, was posted on August 8, 2016, at the height of the Senate investigation into the drug war by a Facebook Page called Pinoy Republic. By the time it was found and fact checked, it already had over 2.8 million views, over 88,000 shares, 10,000 reactions, and 5,000 comments.

Evidence brought against De Lima later turned out to be based on testimonies of convicted criminals.[47] Decrying her continuing detention without benefit of a proper trial, human rights

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45   Lian Buan, "EXPLAINER: What is Leila de Lima being accused of?," Rappler, https://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/iq/162354-explainer-leila-de-lima-accusations-drug-trade, February 23, 2017, accessed August 16, 2019.

46   FALSE: Video of De Lima 'admitting' she's a drug lord coddler, Rappler, https://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/fact-check/video-de-lima-admitting-drug-lord-coddler, AUG 17, 2019

47   Tony La Viña, "[ANALYSIS] Crossroads in the De Lima case," January 14, 2021, https://www.rappler.com/voices/thought-leaders/analysis-crossroads-de-lima-case

groups have been demanding the Philippine government "politically motivated charges" against her be dropped.[48] Over four years after the attacks, the Muntinlupa court which is trying the charges against De Lima allowed her to seek dismissal of two drug cases. If the court grants the demurrer, De Lima will be cleared.[49]

Cascade 2: Attacks against the press

Even before the formal campaign period began, Duterte supporters on social media have already been consistently on guard against the media, constantly protecting him from what they deem to be "biased" reporting, or anything that puts then candidate Duterte in a bad light. In several instances, bloggers supporting the president have called out the mainstream media for a supposed "bias" against him. Duterte himself has also slammed the media for "bias" and "sensationalism."

As dead bodies attributed to the war on drugs started piling up, a number of news organizations started tracking lists of those killed. For instance, the Philippine Daily Inquirer started a page entitled, "The Kill List."[50] Initial entries on this list were dated June 30, 2016 – hours after the new administration officially took over. ABS-CBN published an interactive map of people killed.[51] Media coverage also highlighted innocents who ended up being collateral damage. Rappler published profiles of victims who were killed even though they have no clear links with the drug trade[52] and a series on the involvement of the police in the vigilante killings.

48   "Philippines: Outspoken Senator Arbitrarily Detained Two Years," Human Rights Watch, https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/02/22/philippines-outspoken-senator-arbitrarily-detained-two-years, February 22, 2019, accessed August 19, 2019.

49   Aika Rey, Muntinlupa court allows De Lima to seek dismissal of 2 drug cases, December 29, 2020, https://www.rappler.com/nation/muntinlupa-court-allows-de-lima-file-petition-dismissal-drug-cases

50   The Kill List, Inquirer.net, July 7, 2016, https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/794598/kill-list-drugs-duterte

51   ABS-CBN Investigative and Research Group, "MAP, CHARTS: The Death Toll of the War on Drugs," July 13, 2016, https://newsprod.abs-cbnnews.com/specials/map-charts-the-death-toll-of-the-war-on-drugs
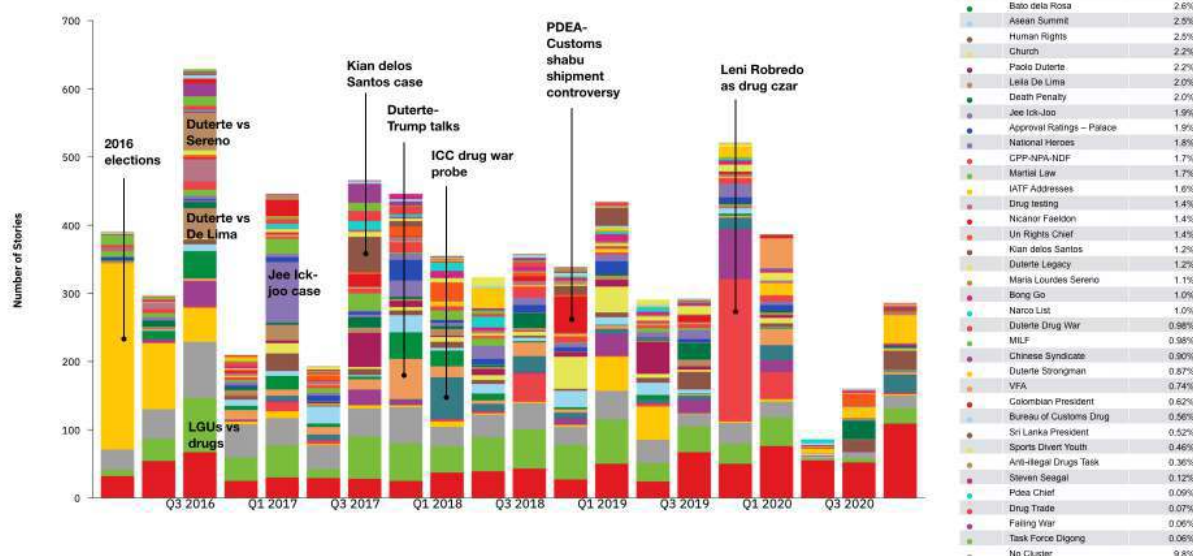
52   These are examples of these earlier stories: Jodesz Gavilan, "Drug user? No, Oman was a good son," Rappler, https://www.rappler.com/nation/oman-manaois-dagupan-drugs-war-killed, July 30, 2016; and Jodesz Gavilan, "Rowena Tiamson: Graduating honor student, choir member – not a drug pusher," Rappler, AUG 13, 2016

The graph below shows key themes in media coverage since 2016.

Media coverage of the drug war

6912 articles with mentions of "drug war", "war on drugs", or "illegal drugs" from January 2016 to December 2020. Philippines only. Clustered by topic using Natural Language Processing.

Clusters	
Drug Operations	13%
Drug-tagging	11%
2016 Elections Campaign	8.2%
Leni Robredo	4.7%
Police Drug Traders	3.5%
ICC Drug War Probe	2.9%
Trump	2.8%
Bato dela Rosa	2.6%
Asean Summit	2.5%
Human Rights	2.5%
Church	2.2%
Paolo Duterte	2.2%
Leila De Lima	2.0%
Death Penalty	2.0%
Jee Ick-Joo	1.9%
Approval Ratings – Palace	1.9%
National Heroes	1.8%
CPP-NPA-NDF	1.7%
Martial Law	1.7%
IATF Addresses	1.6%
Drug testing	1.4%
Nicanor Faeldon	1.4%
Un Rights Chief	1.4%
Kian delos Santos	1.2%
Duterte Legacy	1.2%
Maria Lourdes Sereno	1.1%
Bong Go	1.0%
Narco List	1.0%
Duterte Drug War	0.98%
MILF	0.98%
Chinese Syndicate	0.90%
Duterte Strongman	0.87%
VFA	0.74%
Colombian President	0.62%
Bureau of Customs Drug	0.56%
Sri Lanka President	0.52%
Sports Divert Youth	0.46%
Anti-Illegal Drugs Task	0.36%
Steven Seagal	0.12%
Pdea Chief	0.09%
Drug Trade	0.07%
Failing War	0.06%
Task Force Digong	0.06%
No Cluster	9.8%

The administration's supporters on social media did not take this sitting down.

On August 27, 2016, pro-Duterte social media influencer Mocha Uson posted a meme purportedly defining the term "presstitutes," a portmanteau of press and prostitutes. Uson captioned the post, "Bagong term na madalas na nating gagamitin. Kaya alamin ang kahulugan (A new term that we will use very often. So know the meaning)."

Minutes later, Duterte campaign spokesperson Peter Tiu Laviña posted a photo supposedly of a nine-year-old who had been raped and murdered. Here he also used the term "presstitutes," and lumped them in a list of groups that he described as "derailing the government's war on drugs."

Laviña's claim was false. The crime did not happen in the Philippines.[53] But while it was fact checked by the media, the message the post carried still got recirculated on social media.

Laviña and Uson's posts best exemplify the connection between information cascades related to the drug war and the attacks against the press. This was not the first time the term was used in Philippine social media pages. This, however, marks a ramp up in messaging against media groups. The graph below shows how the term "presstitute" trended from early 2016 to present.

Use of the term presstitutes initially peaked after Uson and Laviña's posts in August 2016. The second peak here happened on November 27, 2019, following news reports on problems and anomalies related to the Philippine hosting of the SEA Games.

The message was repeated not just in posts but also in comments to Facebook pages of news websites. At its peak, the term "presstitute" was used in almost 1,200 comments in a single day within these groups. The use of the term would spike again in other events

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53   Camille Elemia, "FACT CHECK: Photo used by Duterte camp to hit critics taken in Brazil, not PH," https://www. rappler.com/nation/duterte-camp-brazil-photo-rape-victim-critics, AUG 29, 2016

"presstitute" Frequency Timeline

https://public.flourish.studio/visualisation/5109780/

where media coverage of Duterte turns negative, such as during the Davao bombing and the subsequent signing by Duterte of the proclamation declaring a state of national emergency in the Philippines. At the time Rappler published its initial research (2018), 194 of 285 groups monitored by Rappler using the Sharktank had posts which used the word "presstitute." These 194 groups had a total of 6.57 million members, with an average overlap of 20% in membership among groups.

Apart from presstitute, data captured by the Sharktank from Facebook also showed a surge in the use of the words "bayaran," "dilawan," and "bias." At its peak during our monitoring, the term "bias" was used in 30,000 comments in a single day. Within groups and pages Rappler monitored, almost 50,000 posts and more than 1.8 million comments used the term "bayaran." A significant number of these were used in conversations about the media.

In October 2016, Rappler published its series on the weaponization of the internet which exposed the use of bots, trolls, and fake accounts in disinformation. The series triggered further attacks, this time specific to Rappler. Use of attacked keywords also spiked in posts and comments. Duterte's online supporters also initiated a #UnfollowRappler campaign that caused Rappler's Facebook following to decline.

This campaign convinced about 50,000 accounts to "unfollow" Rappler – about 1% of total followers at the time. It also affected Facebook's algorithms and affected Rappler's reach in the short term. These types of tactics were used not just against Rappler but also against other media groups that demand accountability.

This is not to say there are no legitimate issues that the Philippine media need to address – among them corruption, sensationalism, and inaccurate reporting. To a large extent however, across-the-board generalizations about their shortcomings successfully turned public sentiment against them among social media users.

To support the metanarrative of media bias, pro-administration social media assets often seeded messages claiming selective reporting and the media's non-coverage of government accomplishments. Rappler and VERA Files have debunked claims along this line numerous times.

These often come from "alternative news sources", which are websites and Facebook pages that mimic the content of mainstream news organizations, but are focused particularly on government propaganda, often packaged as good news not reported by the media. In fact, many of these alternative sources brand themselves as sources of "truths" being intentionally snubbed by mainstream news organizations.

This narrative of selective reporting is also often used as damage control, in times when the government faces wide-scale PR crises.

Case study: government crisis management during the 2019 SEA Games

The strategy of using disinformation to deflect blame was particularly effective in November 2019, when information operations were used to manage a potential disaster for the Philippine government's handling of the Southeast Asian Games (SEA Games), successfully manipulating public opinion and isolating "mainstream media."[54]

This week-long case study captured by Rappler shows how information operations turned a potential disaster for the Philippine government's handling of the SEA Games 2019 into a win.

"#Seagames2019Fail" started trending on November 25, 2019 all the way to the next day, with netizens calling out the government and organizers for the embarrassing welcome of competing athletes and allegations of corruption.

As online backlash against the government's poor handling of the SEA Games grew, pro-Duterte social media influencers and pages started seeding narratives of how media organizations were "only covering bad news" about the games. News organizations had, in fact, been consistently publishing inspiring stories about the athletes and the event itself, before and during the peak of controversy.

This narrative was supported by posts showing infrastructure built for the games, which, in fact, were only completed barely a few days before the events, and rushed due to the growing backlash. News organizations and specific reporters were being called out and targeted, accused of using the issue to destabilize the government. The athletes and supporters of the administration online were also simultaneously asked to post in support of the athletes, effectively drowning out posts about the controversy.
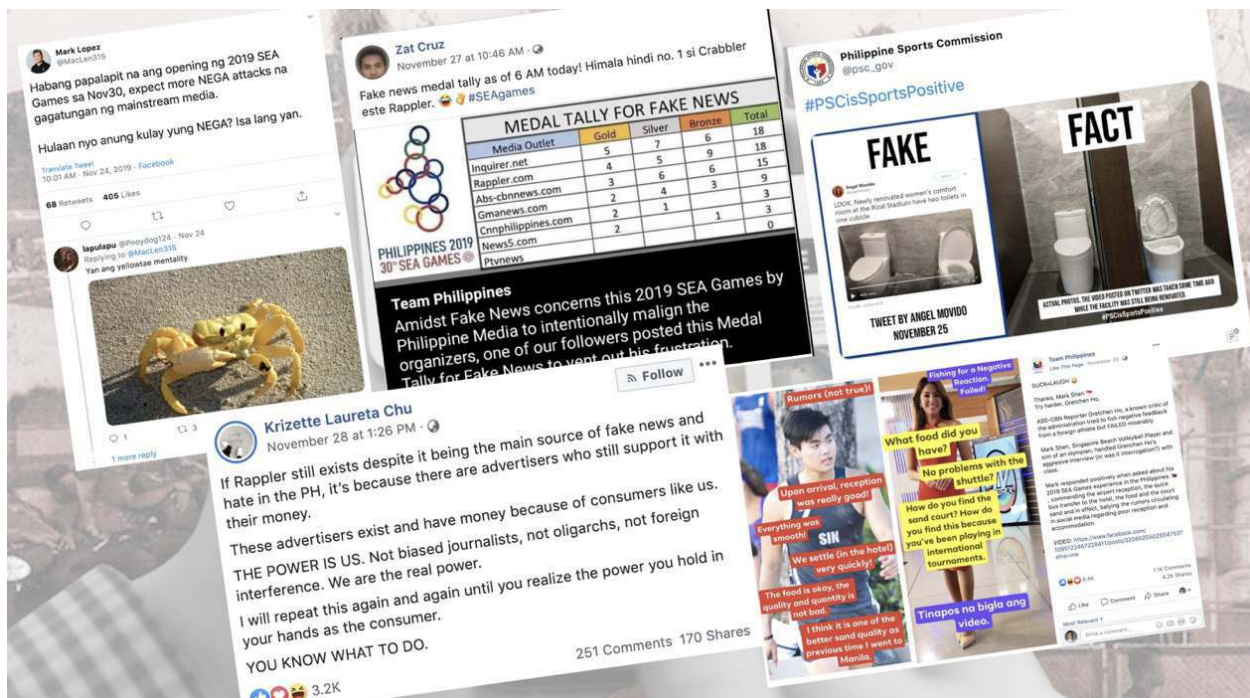
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54   Bonz Magsambol, "Don't blame media for SEA Games woes - NUJP," Rappler, https://www.rappler.com/sports/nujp-slams-attacks-against-media-coverage-2019, November 27, 2019
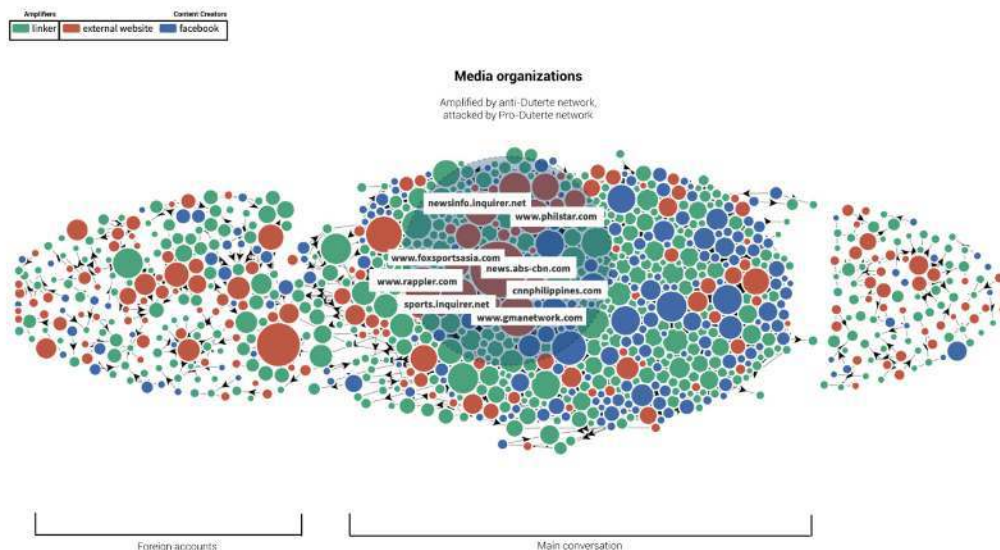
Anti-media rhetoric first came from politicians in support of the government, amplified by supporters online, led by known pro-Duterte bloggers with thousands of followers.
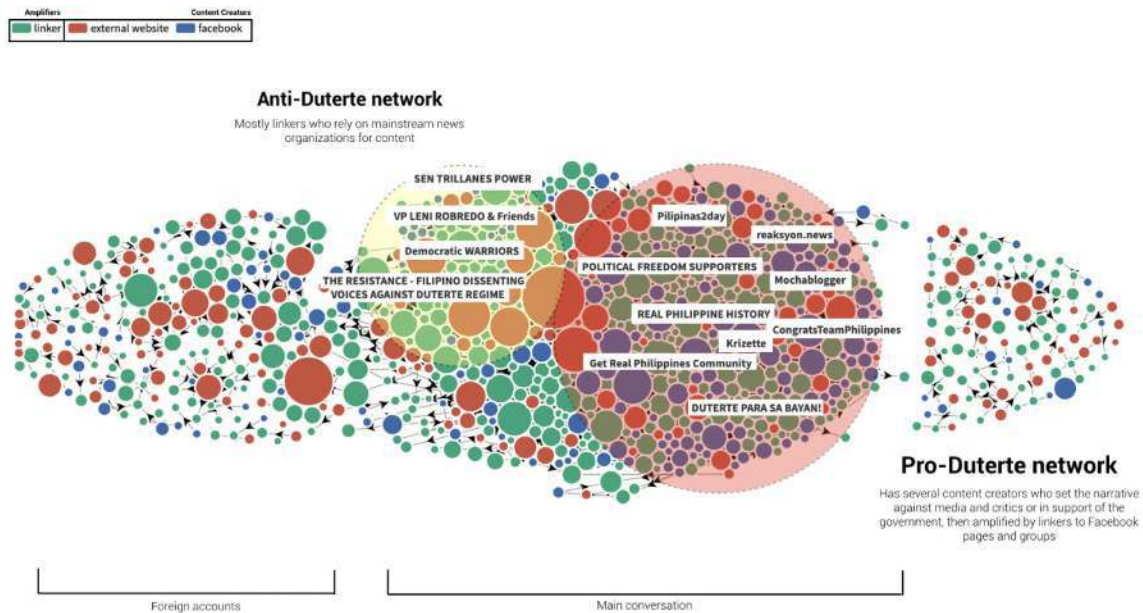
Pages like CrabblerPH, MochaUsonBlog, and DuterteToday – all known propaganda pages for the Duterte administration, actively amplified content supporting the SEA Games and attacking news organizations. Pro-Duterte social media influencers like Krizette Laureta Chu and Mark Lopez were among the most active content creators at the peak of the crisis, while Darwin Cañete, a controversial city fiscal or prosecutor who once likened critics of the Duterte administration to cockroaches, actively amplified posts from the network to his 65,000-strong following on Facebook. Together, the three were able to generate 107,690 interactions in one day. Zooming out on Facebook shows the government's propaganda network dwarfing other networks and taking over the conversation through sheer volume:

https://public.flourish.studio/story/137776/?utm_source=embed&utm_campaign=story/137776

In just a few days, #Seagames2019NotAFailure and #WeWinAsOne took over as top trending hashtags, highlighting two of the government supporters' main narratives: that mainstream media is out to smear the Games, and that, for love of country, Filipinos should focus on supporting the athletes and spreading good news.

Case study: attacks against ABS-CBN

One clear example of how a government armed with a powerful social media army could neutralize established media organizations is the case of Philippine broadcast giant ABS-CBN.

The Duterte administration's beef against ABS-CBN before he got elected. During the 2016 elections campaign period, ABS-CBN aired an advertisement showing clips of Duterte cursing, uttering a controversial rape remark, and saying he is ready to kill. Senator Antonio Trillanes IV paid for this ad. ABS-CBN later says that it was "duty-bound to air a legitimate ad."

Duterte supporters shot back with a vengeance against the ad online and offline, calling it "black propaganda" and a form of child abuse. The ads pushed Duterte's formidable online mob into action with the hashtags #DuterteTillTheEnd and #GMA and TV5 trending on Twitter the morning after the ads were released.

In Davao City, Duterte supporters called for a "non-violent" protest action outside the ABS-CBN, GMA, and TV5 stations in the city, using the hashtags #OccupyTVstations and #boycottabscbn.

Facebook groups of Duterte supporters also tried to counter the "unfair" ad with an ad of their own. A video labelled "Ang totoong TV ad ni Mayor Duterte" showed Duterte uttering statements about his love of country, determination to kill "only" criminals, and promise to lead a "clean government." An alternative version of the ad, this time featuring administration bet Mar Roxas was also spread through their network. The video followed the same format as the anti-Duterte ad but with clips of Roxas cursing and claiming he knows where to buy drugs in Davao City.

On the eve of the elections, Duterte's campaign team accused ABS-CBN of not airing ads they already paid for. On numerous occasions, the President vowed that he would block ABS-CBN's franchise renewal application.[55] On April 27, 2017, a few days after Duterte renewed the franchise of ABS-CBN rival GMA Network, Duterte said he would file criminal fraud claims against ABS-CBN and told Congress.
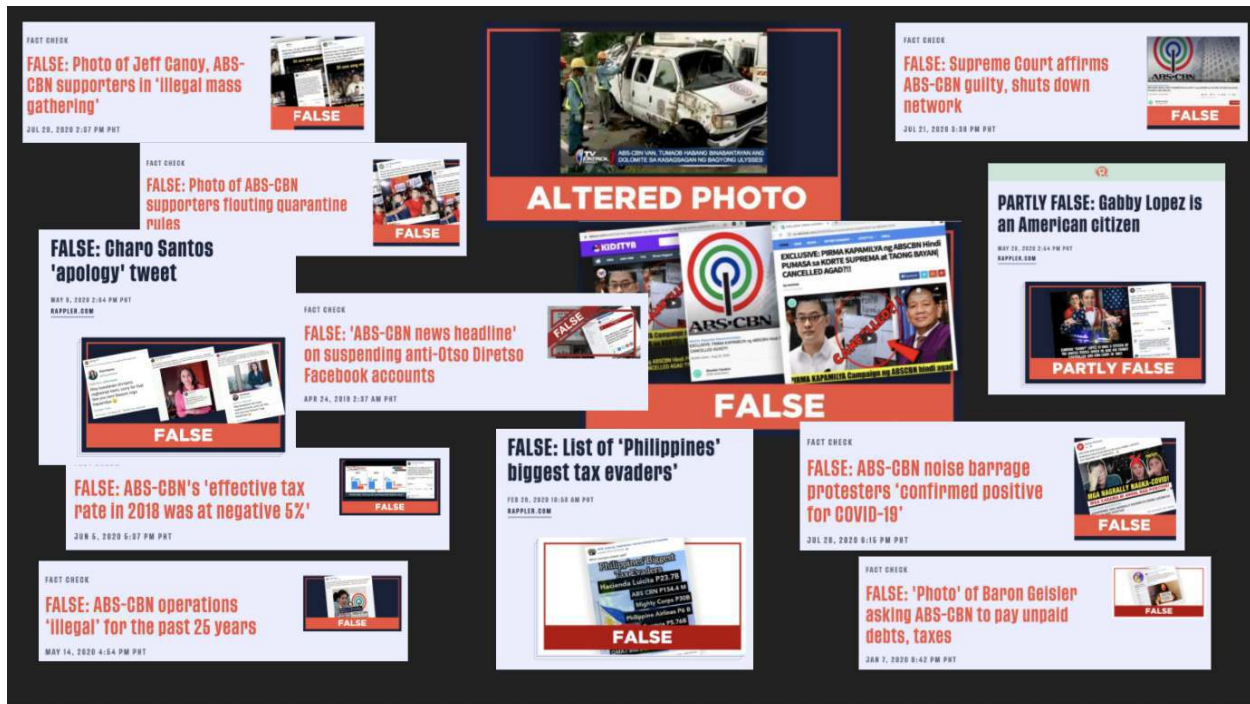
While the House committee on legislative franchises sat on the proposed franchise renewal bill, social media teemed with dubious claims concerning ABS-CBN, as well as its journalists and key officers.[56]

When the network was forced to go off air in May 2020, supporters of the administration went on double duty to fend off the online backlash.

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55   Pia Rañada, Duterte to block renewal of ABS-CBN franchise, April 27, 2017, https://www.rappler.com/nation/duterte-block-abs-cbn-franchise-renewal

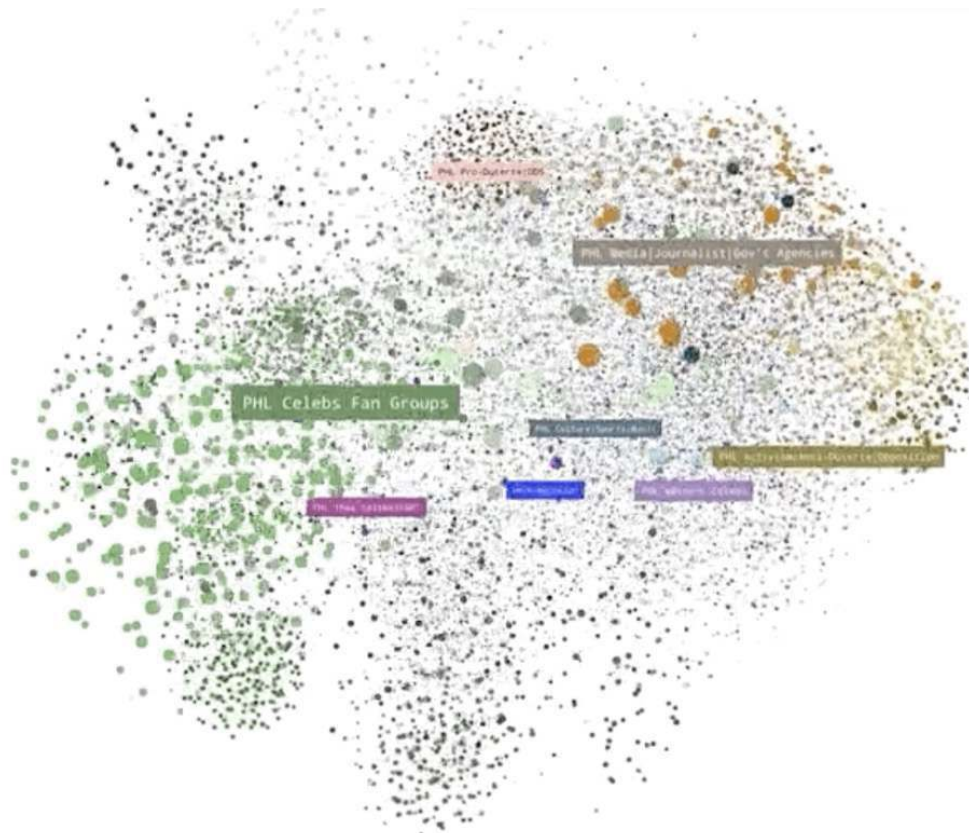56   Fact checks about ABS-CBN, https://www.rappler.com/fact-checks-about-abs-cbn

Being a huge network with a stable of popular celebrities and its own connections in Congress, ABS-CBN had resources to defend itself. This included celebrities with huge fan bases and people from various regions glued to ABS-CBN soap operas.

As the country watched the House of Representatives deliberate on the ABS-CBN franchise, state-aligned social media influencers found themselves face-to-face not just with massive public outcry, but also with TV personalities with larger clout and swarms of agile, loyal, and organized online fan groups.

When celebrities of ABS-CBN spoke up about their network's shutdown and found themselves the target of pro-Duterte bloggers and supporters' ire online, their legions of fans came to the rescue. They pushed back online with a massive campaign against pro-administration social media pages and groups which drowned out the administration's propaganda machine at certain points.[57]

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57   Don Kevin Hapal, "Propaganda machine meets its match: Celebrity fandoms," Rappler, June 16, 2020, https://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/in-depth/propaganda-machine-meets-match-celebrity-fandom

The network graph of tweets below mapped by network analysis firm Graphika,[58] shows that fan accounts which have largely stayed off politics before, campaigned to not only support their idols' TV network, but also fend off pro-administration social media influencers by reporting them en masse. These tactics were similar to old techniques employed by pro-administration social media pages and influencers.

What makes online fan groups effective in steering online conversations is similar to what makes propaganda and disinformation networks effective: volume and connectedness. Fandoms online are made of fragmented communities, usually segmented by location or focus (e.g., "bias" towards a specific member of a group/couple). Shared interests provide for strong connections within fan groups and between a fan group to another. Dedicated fans are able to find a community of like-minded individuals within social media platforms, and

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58   More about Graphika here: https://graphika.com/our-story

these communities essentially become echo chambers that further heighten their members' loyalty to the fandom's cause.

Data collected by Rappler shows that Twitter accounts that have spoken up in defense of ABS-CBN online when it was shutdown were mostly fandom accounts. These include fan groups of celebrity couples (eg. KathNiel, JaDine, LizQuen) and fans of international celebrities like K-pop and Thai celebrities – interest groups that are usually mum about politics online. Fan clusters have also been largely involved in previous instances where the pro-administration propaganda machine was drowned out by public outcry, as was the case in the #OustDuterte campaign in April.

All of this, however, did not save ABS-CBN. On July 20, 2020, an overwhelming majority of the House committee on legislative franchises voted to reject the bills to grant the network a franchise renewal.[59]

Cascade 3: Martial law, authoritarian rule

On May 23, 2017, following the attack of the Maute Group in Marawi City, President Rodrigo Duterte declared martial law in Mindanao. Originally meant to last 60 days, it was extended by two years, officially ending on December 31, 2019. This naturally triggered a spike in mentions of the "martial law" on social media for the period mentioned. But this period was not the only time conversations about martial law trended.

In the Philippines, the term martial law has been closely associated with Ferdinand Marcos, who signed the declaration of martial law in September 1972. Over four decades since, this remains the case. The graph below shows when conversations around martial law trended over time since 2016 in pages and groups monitored by the Sharktank. It shows that the topic trends every year, typically during the third quarter, during the anniversary of the 1972 Martial Law declaration.
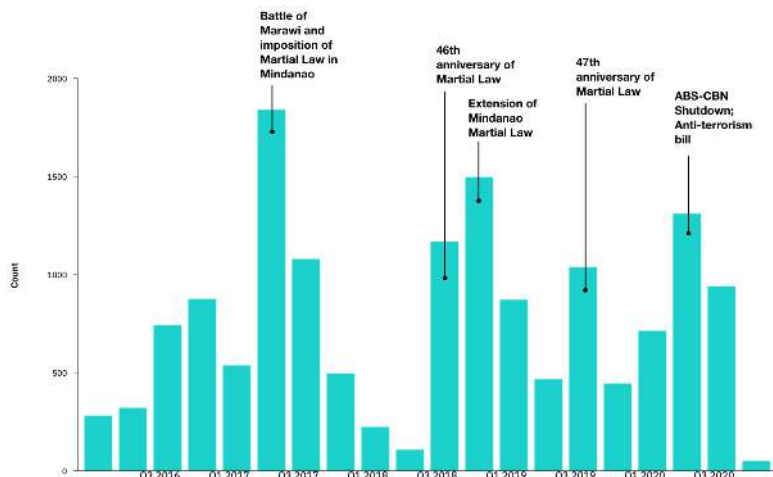
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59   "Philippine Congress denies ABS-CBN news broadcaster's franchise renewal," Committee to Protect Journalists, July 10, 2020, https://cpj.org/2020/07/philippine-congress-denies-abs-cbn-news-broadcasters-franchise-renewal/
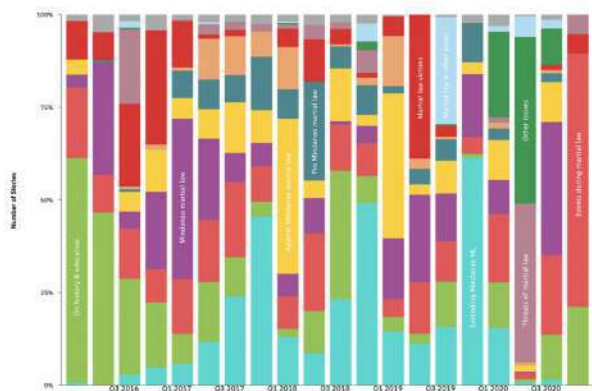
Mentions of 'Martial Law' over time

A sample of 15,000 Facebook posts with mentions of "Martial Law", collected by Rappler's
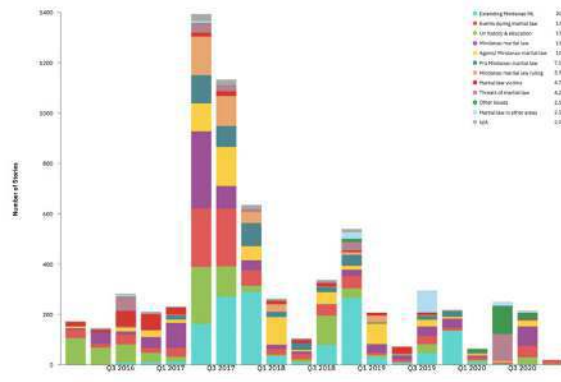SharkTank from January 2016 to December 2020.

What themes dominate online content on martial law during these times? The graph below clusters 6,787 stories about martial law published by newsgroups from January 2016 to December 2020 by topic. Before Duterte declared martial law in Mindanao in 2017, dominant themes included the need to educate people about history and martial law, the experiences of martial law victims, and other events during martial law. The graphs below show what subtopics dominate martial law related news stories every quarter since 2016. This interactive slider could be examined here https://public.flourish.studio/visualisation/5539902/
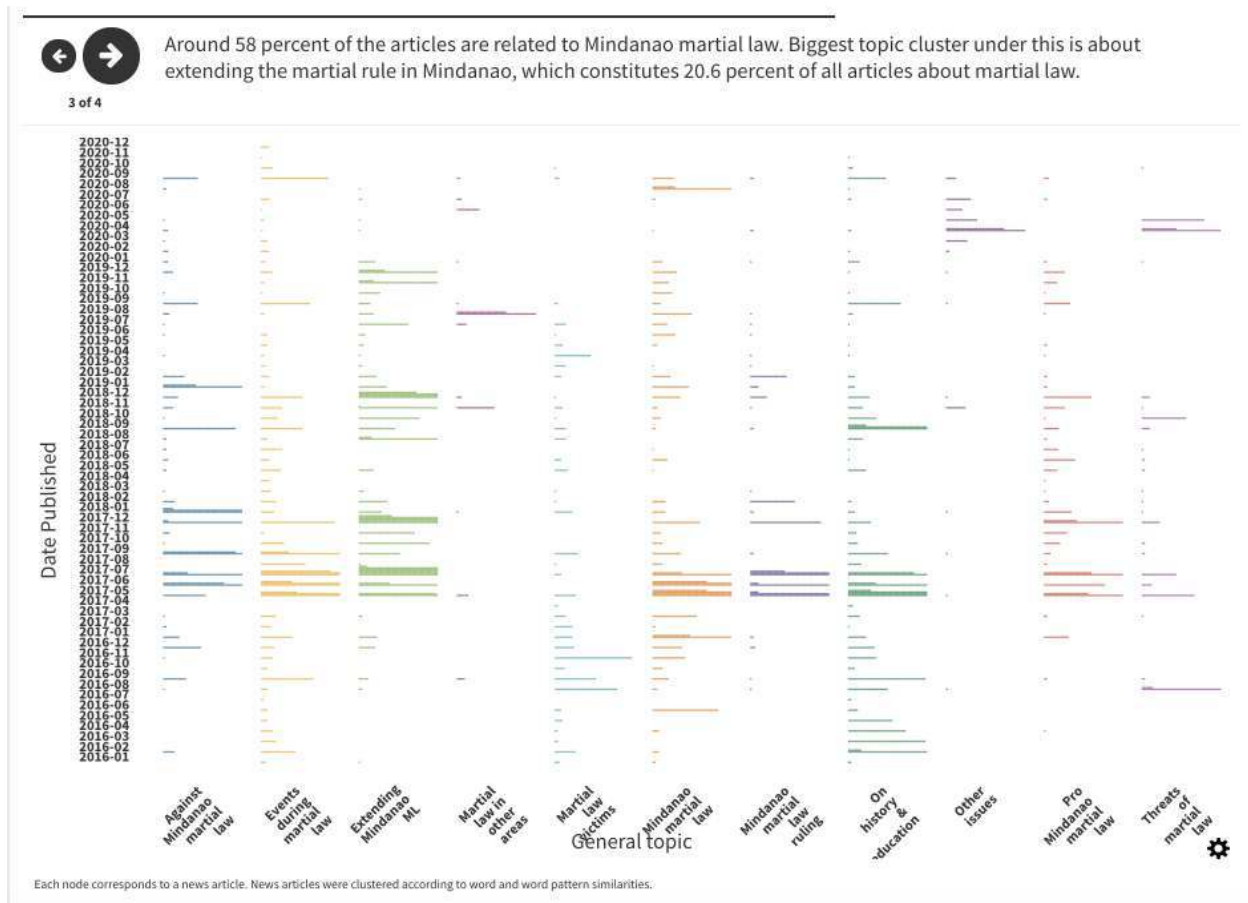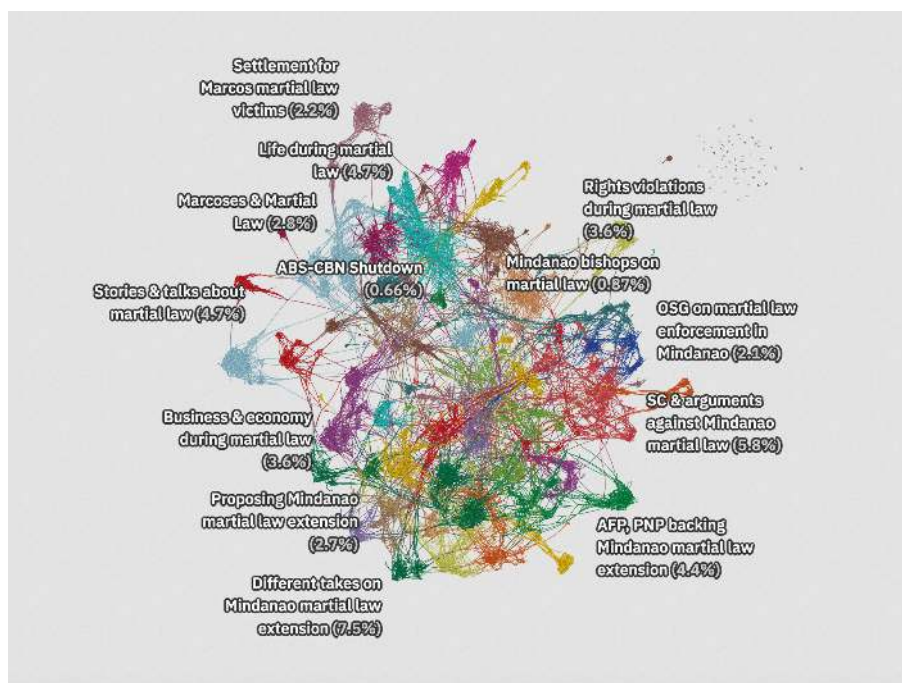
A further deep dive into this data set is possible through the interactive version of this graph, which clusters news stories by date and topic. Link to the graph here https://public.flourish. studio/story/793501/

After mentions of the spike after Duterte declared martial law in Mindanao in 2017, dominant themes became coverage around the enforcement of martial law in Mindanao, with some clusters focusing on proposals to extend the martial law period, coverage of the Supreme Court deliberations and opposition to the extension. (See network graph below, which was generated using natural language processing)

Duterte declared martial law in Mindanao on May 23, 2017, following the attack of the Maute Group in Marawi City. Originally meant to last 60 days, it was extended by two years, officially ending on December 31, 2019. Disinformation about how the administration handled the aftermath of this battle between the military and the islamic extremists tended to put

Duterte in a positive light. These include photos of supposed Marawi housing projects and budget comparisons between Duterte's Marawi rehabilitation project with Aquino's Super Typhoon Yolanda rehabilitation project. There are even fake quote cards citing supposed foreign royalty praising Duterte for his response to the Marawi Siege.

To check for counter-narratives to mainstream media coverage about the Marcos-declared martial law, Rappler looked into content posted on around 3,000 pages and groups whose names contain the keyword "marcos" or "duterte." These pages and groups comprise about 5% or of Sharktank's repository of pages as of March 2021.

In a span of seven years total content posted on these groups and pages amounted to around 300,000. The sheer number of posts published through these channels creates the possibility that, for audiences of these pages and groups, narratives created would rival those created by mainstream sources, therefore making their narratives appear legitimate. Of the 300,000 posts, 17,000 have at least one mention of "marcos." Most, if not all, narratives created are as a response to reports by mainstream sources.

What was interesting was that these pages mention very little of "martial law," with less than 2% of posts containing this keyword. A general theme of "do not believe mainstream

media" prevails, accompanied by alternative facts and conspiracies, such as the claim that the vilification of martial law is a PR tactic by political opponents ("dilawan") and that martial law was imposed as a means to curb the spread of communism. Metanarratives typically compared it to Duterte's style of governance.

Below are screenshots of some posts highlighting metanarratives on martial law seeded on these pages.

Martial Law na naman daw ang ginawa ni PRRD sa BOC! Sabi ng mga dilawan. Poor guys, their only chant is just martial law, martial law! tinangal niyo na nga ang pagkayellow niyo tapos martial law pa rin ang gimmick niyo so kung sa marketing pa, mahina kayo. Dapat may bago kayong pa-effect pero wala eh. Sino ba adviser niyo? Kulelat talaga kayo maniwala ka! Di na nga umeeffect ang martial law scare para sirain ang mga Marcos, si Duterte pa eh wala naman syang kinalaman sa panahon ni FM.

They said that PRRD [Duterte] made a "martial law" move at BOC [Bureau of Customs]. Poor guys, their only chant is martial law, martial law! You're removing your yellow-ness (opposition party) but your gimmick is still "martial law" so in marketing terms, you are weak. You should have done something new but you didn't. Who is you adviser? Believe me, you are sore losers! You're "martial law" scare has no effect in destroying Marcos, Duterte doesn't even have to do anything with the FM [Ferdinand Marcos] era.

Kung ang Martial Law noon ni Marcos at ang pamumuno ni Duterte ngayon ay walang pagkakaiba, IBIG SABIHIN WALA NAMAN PALA MALI SA GINAWA NI MARCOS AT WALA NAMAN PALA TALAGANG DARKNESS NOONG MGA PANAHON NA YUN. Sadyang ginulo at nainggit lang talaga si Ninoy sa kaibigan nyang si Ferdinand. MISINFORMED...

If Marcos' Martial Law and Duterte's governance has no difference, that just means that there is nothing wrong that Marcos did and there really was no darkness during those times. It's just that Ninoy [Benigno Aquino] confused us and was jealous of his friend Marcos. Misinformed...

Talo Na Naman ang Kalaban? I wish to read one day in the MSM a headline citing the victory of Anti Duterte forces on a single case filed against the Government. Nakakaumay na puro na lang talo ang kalaban. Heto yung score sa major cases: Martial law 1, 2, 3 – Talo. Marcos Burial – Talo Quo Warranto...

Did our opponents lose again? I wish to read one day in the MSM [mainstream media] a headline citing the victory of Anti-Duterte forces on a single case filed against the government. It's already boring seeing the opponent always lose. Here is the score in major cases: Martial law 1,2,3 - lost. Marcos burial - lost, quo warranto...

It must be noted that this messaging is not only prevalent in Duterte and Marcos fan pages. Rappler has also spotted similar messages seeded in numerous other Facebook pages and groups. In its series on Marcos networked propaganda, Rappler listed pages and groups where dubious claims tracked and fact checked by Rappler's fact check team have been shared. All together, these content generated over a million shares, reactions, and comments on Facebook.

Taking off from prevailing narratives in news coverage, metanarratives focused on offering alternative explanations: killings and torture never happened, martial law victims were troublemakers, and that Marcos wealth came from gold. They also attacked the messenger: mainstream media. Media groups are typically attacked for "hiding the truth." Below are some screenshots of posts Rappler detected and debunked over the past five years.
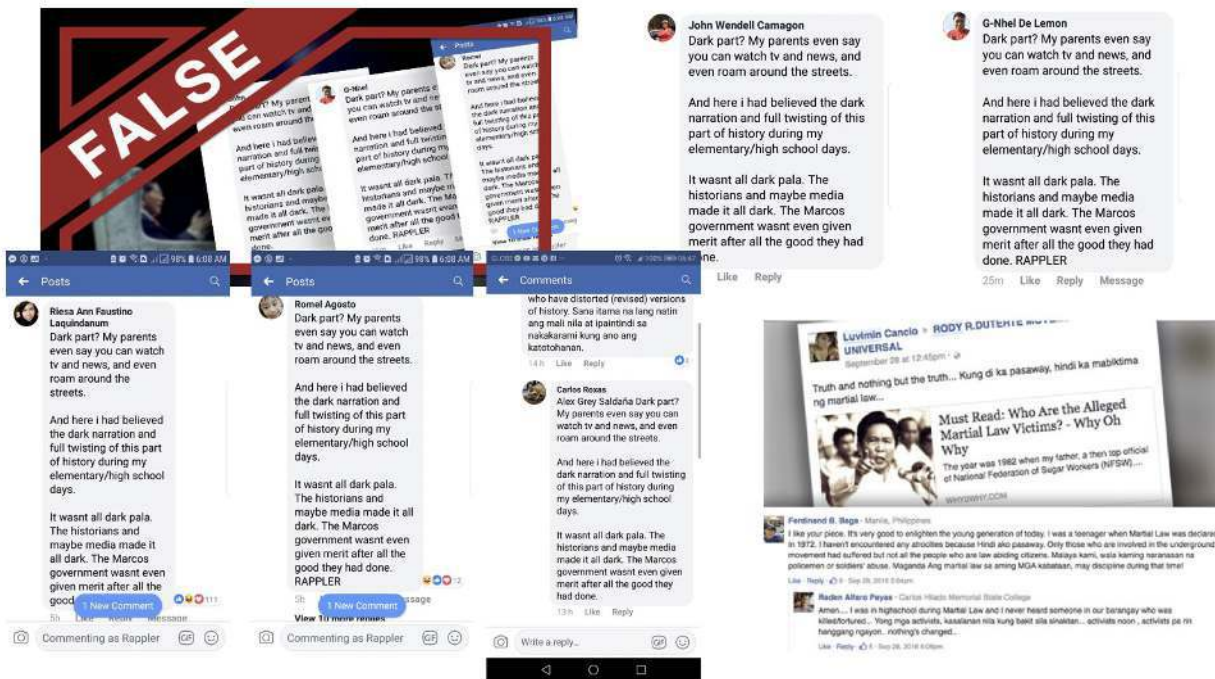
Posts claimed that the history we learned in books and in school was wrong, that Martial Law was a peaceful time, and that Marcos began many innovative and successful projects. These projects were supposedly halted by former President Corazon "Cory" Aquino after Marcos was ousted.

This narrative is expanded further to reflect the present-day situation, with Duterte as a representation of Marcos, and his predecessor Benigno "Noynoy" Aquino III representing the Aquino family. Their administrations are often compared in often false or misleading posts on social media, related to the economy and disaster response.

False narratives were also seeded in comments sections. Below are examples of comments seeding the narratives which claim that nobody was tortured during martial law and that the media and historians wrongfully depicted martial law as dark.

This messaging was further emphasized by Juan Ponce Enrile, who served as Justice Secretary and Defense Minister during the Martial Law years, on September 20, 2018. Enrile spoke to Bongbong Marcos about supposed "lies" being spread about Martial Law. However, Enrile himself repeated a number of lies, saying that only one person was executed during those 20 years and that no massacres occurred.

Needless to say, the Marcos family has already benefited from the work of propaganda networks. Ferdinand's son Bongbong almost won the 2016 vice presidential race, a result he has been contesting since. There have been claims on social media as well that say he already won the electoral protest.

On November 18, 2016, Ferdinand Marcos was buried in the Libingan ng mga Bayani (Republic Memorial Cemetery) amid public outrage.

The funeral, which was held privately and on short notice, was met with outrage online. The hashtags #MarcosHindiBayani (Marcos is not a hero) and #NeverAgain trended on Twitter.

However, the hashtags are no match for the consistent messaging on social media that the Marcoses were short-changed when Ferdinand was ousted and that Martial Law was a peaceful time that did little to no harm to the Filipino people. Meanwhile, his sister Imee won a Senate seat in 2019.

To a certain extent, the Duterte administration also benefited from the metanarratives as contents posted draw similarities between Duterte's administration and the late dictator Ferdinand Marcos' 20-year rule.

Like Marcos, Duterte is said to bring the Philippines back to its former peace and glory by ruling with an iron fist and increasing infrastructure. Duterte and Marcos even share the same enemies – drug lords[60] and "communists" – and their governments' respective opposition parties both involve the Aquino family. The narrative on martial law rationalizes dictatorship and justifies the need for a strong leader.

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60   One of the key executions during the Martial law years was that of Lim Seng, a Chinese drug lord who was executed on January 15, 1973. Ambeth Ocampo, "Lim Seng remembered," Inquirer, https://opinion.inquirer.net/95625/lim-seng-remembered, July 13, 2016.

Overall Findings: Assessment of the Philippine Information Ecosystem

Already addicted to social media, Filipinos became more deeply immersed in the internet due to the pandemic

Over the past decade, Filipinos have become increasingly dependent on the internet and social media for information, news and entertainment. For the 6th straight year, Filipinos topped the rest of the world in terms of time spent on the internet and social media. Following the pandemic, however, quarantine restrictions which forced people to study and work remotely triggered an unprecedented acceleration in the use of internet services in the country.

Most of the respondents in Rappler's surveys have been using social media more because of the pandemic. Only 18% claimed to have already been spending the same amount of time on social media prior to the pandemic. Majority (60%) said they've been spending more than four hours on social media a day since the pandemic.

The increase in time spent on social media is more significant for respondents living in the National Capital Region (NCR), with 53% saying they spend six hours or more a day on social media.
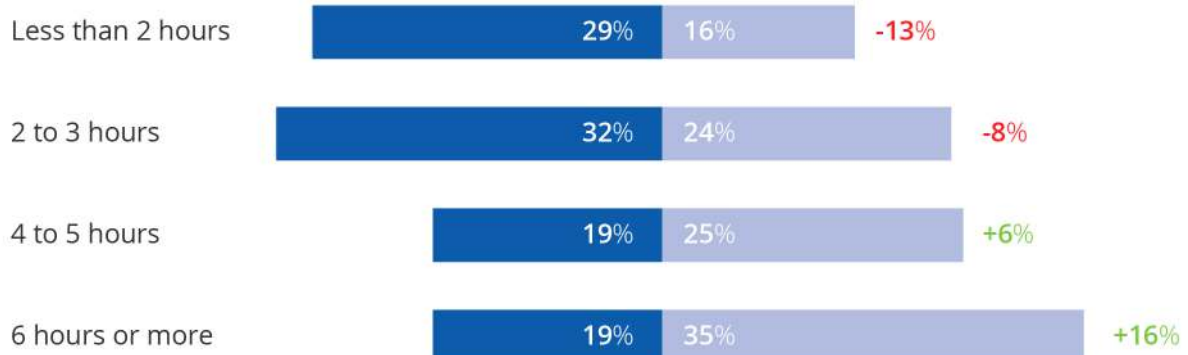
It is important to note that residents of Luzon, particularly Metro Manila residents, have been subject to stricter quarantine restrictions at the onset of the pandemic and in the waves of COVID-19 surges to come, which may have caused the higher uptick on social media residents for Metro Manila respondents in the local communities survey.

Respondents have been spending more time on social media since the pandemic started.

Shifts in time spend on social media per day

● Before the pandemic   ● During the pandemic

	Before the pandemic	During the pandemic	Change
Less than 2 hours	29%	16%	-13%
2 to 3 hours	32%	24%	-8%
4 to 5 hours	19%	25%	+6%
6 hours or more	19%	35%	+16%

Percentage based off total 2,324 respondents.

While the shift in time spent on social media is more radical for NCR residents, respondents outside NCR also reported spending more time on social media since the start of the pandemic. For respondents outside of NCR, 37% said they've been spending six hours or more on social media everyday, while 30% said they're spending four to five hours.

In terms of age, the increase in time spent on social media is much higher for respondents below the age of 30 years old, with 52% saying they've been spending six or more hours a day on social media since the pandemic started. Prior to the pandemic, only 20% of this segment

spent as much time on social media. Respondents over the age of 30 are also spending more time on social media, although not as much as younger respondents, with 29% saying they now spend six or more hours a day on social media.
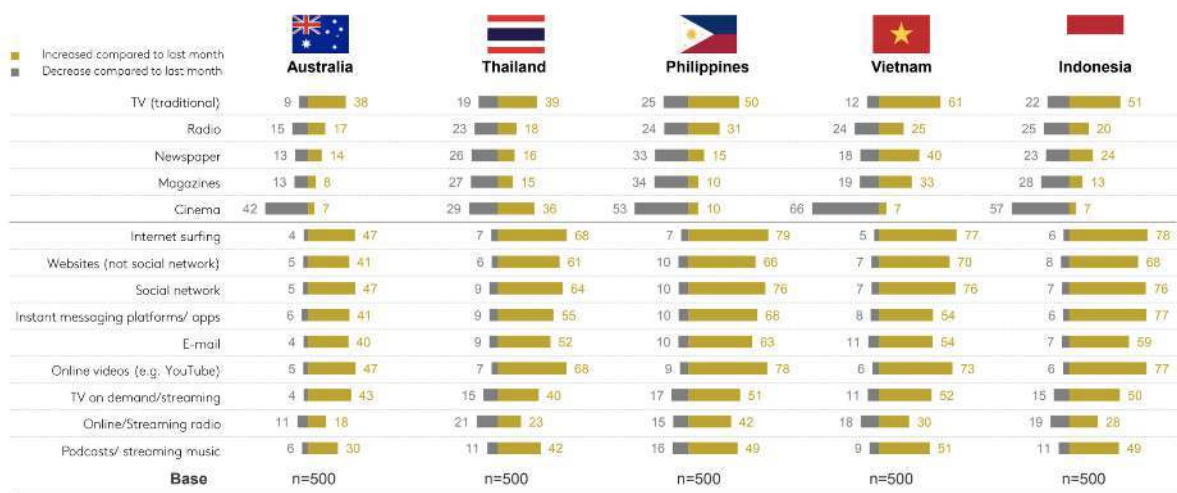
These results are consistent with other available data on social media usage.

Months after quarantine restrictions were enforced, Philippine-based respondents to a survey conducted by the Kantar Market Research (released in July 2020) reported that they accessed more internet-based services: internet surfing (79%), online video (78%), social network (76%); websites (not social media, 66%). *(See graph below)*

Media all around the world is in flux.

COVID-19
Barometer

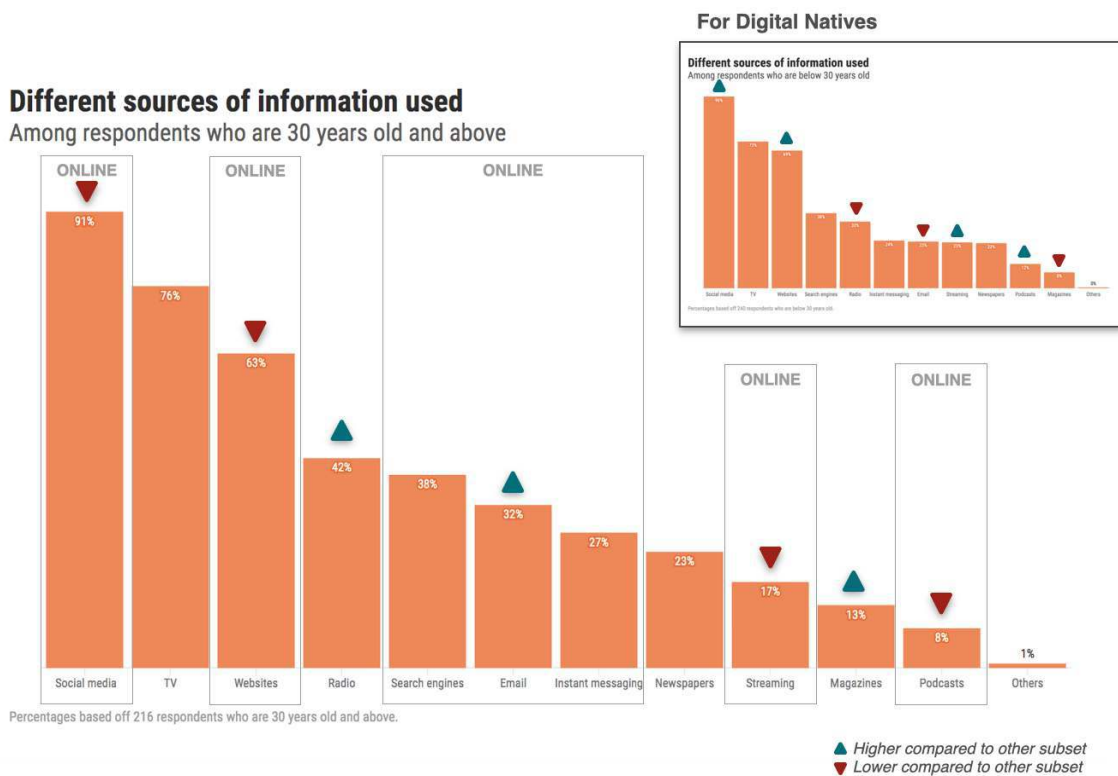Unprecedented growth is seen in Digital and TV, while radio, print and cinema is declining.

	Australia	Thailand	Philippines	Vietnam	Indonesia
▪ Increased compared to last month ▪ Decrease compared to last month					
TV (traditional)	9 / 38	19 / 39	25 / 50	12 / 61	22 / 51
Radio	15 / 17	23 / 18	24 / 31	24 / 25	25 / 20
Newspaper	13 / 14	26 / 16	33 / 15	18 / 40	23 / 24
Magazines	13 / 8	27 / 15	34 / 10	19 / 33	28 / 13
Cinema	42 / 7	29 / 36	53 / 10	66 / 7	57 / 7
Internet surfing	4 / 47	7 / 68	7 / 79	5 / 77	6 / 78
Websites (not social network)	5 / 41	6 / 61	10 / 66	7 / 70	8 / 68
Social network	5 / 47	9 / 64	10 / 76	7 / 76	7 / 76
Instant messaging platforms/ apps	6 / 41	9 / 55	10 / 68	8 / 54	6 / 77
E-mail	4 / 40	9 / 52	10 / 63	11 / 54	7 / 59
Online videos (e.g. YouTube)	5 / 47	7 / 68	9 / 78	6 / 73	6 / 77
TV on demand/streaming	4 / 43	15 / 40	17 / 51	11 / 52	15 / 50
Online/Streaming radio	11 / 18	21 / 23	15 / 42	18 / 30	19 / 28
Podcasts/ streaming music	6 / 30	11 / 42	16 / 49	9 / 51	11 / 49
Base	n=500	n=500	n=500	n=500	n=500

KANTAR

Source: Q10 In general, how has the coronavirus situation impacted your use of media? With reference to the last month, are you using the following media... (% for each one) - Wave 4 data (May 2020).

8

Comparatively, use of television only grew by 50%, radio by 31%, and newspapers by 15%. Across all media, internet-based services posted a significant net increase in use as compared to non-internet-based media services.

The Global Web Index's 2021 social media report, which tracked social media usage for 47 countries, also showed an increase in time spent on social media for 32 countries in 2020, including the Philippines, which has already been spending the most time on social media even before the pandemic.

For Digital Natives

Different sources of information used
Among respondents who are 30 years old and above

The same report shows higher time spent on social media usage for Gen Z respondents (aged 16-23) at an average of almost three hours a day across 2020, compared to boomers (57-64) at one and a half hours a day.[61]

Data published by digital media marketing agency WeAreSocial says that as of January 2021, Filipinos have been spending an average of 10 hrs and 56 minutes online, over one hour longer than they were doing in January 2020 (nine hours and 45 minutes). Filipinos spend nearly four hours more than the global average of six hours and 54 minutes on the internet. Time spent by Filipinos on social media also increased slightly to 4.15 hours as of Jan 2021 from 3.53 hours as of January 2020.

This remains well above global average, however. Filipinos spend over four hours more online than citizens of other countries as of January 2021. They also spend nearly two hours more on social media (four hours 15 minutes) than the rest of the world (two hours 25 minutes).

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61   Global Web Index, "GWI's flagship report on the latest trends in social media", 2021

The online surveys that Rappler conducted as part of this study showed that social media, TV, and websites are the most common information sources for all age segments, but respondents who are 30 years old and above still have a higher reliance on other sources like radio (42%), email (32%), and magazines (13%), compared to the younger respondents.

At least one in every three Filipino internet users is new to digital, is potentially unfamiliar with how it works, and vulnerable to disinformation and online manipulation techniques

Adoption of digital media gained more rapid momentum during the COVID-19 pandemic in the Philippines.

On average, across Southeast Asia, one in three (36%) of all digital service consumers is new to the service due to COVID-19, according to Google Temasek's e-Conomy SEA 2020. In the Philippines, the same study says new digital consumers account for 37% of all digital service consumers in 2020. More than half of these 54% are from non-metro areas.[62]

Just how many people in the Philippines are actually online? The figures vary. Digital 2021, the latest overview of data and insights on social, e-commerce, internet and mobile usage around the world published by Hootsuite-supported WeAreSocial, pegs the number at 68% of total population as of July 2021.[63]

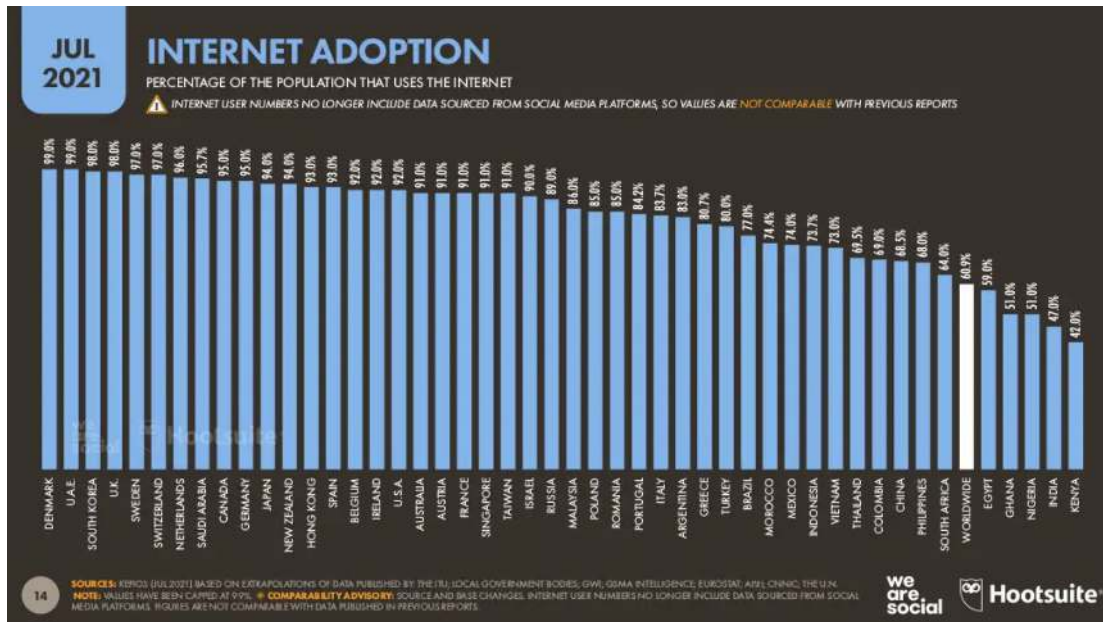---

62   e-Conomy SEA 2020, Google and Temasek

63   Simon Kemp, "Digital 2021 July Global Statshot Report," WeAreSocial, July 21, 2021, https://wearesocial.com/blog/2021/01/digital-2021-the-latest-insights-into-the-state-of-digital
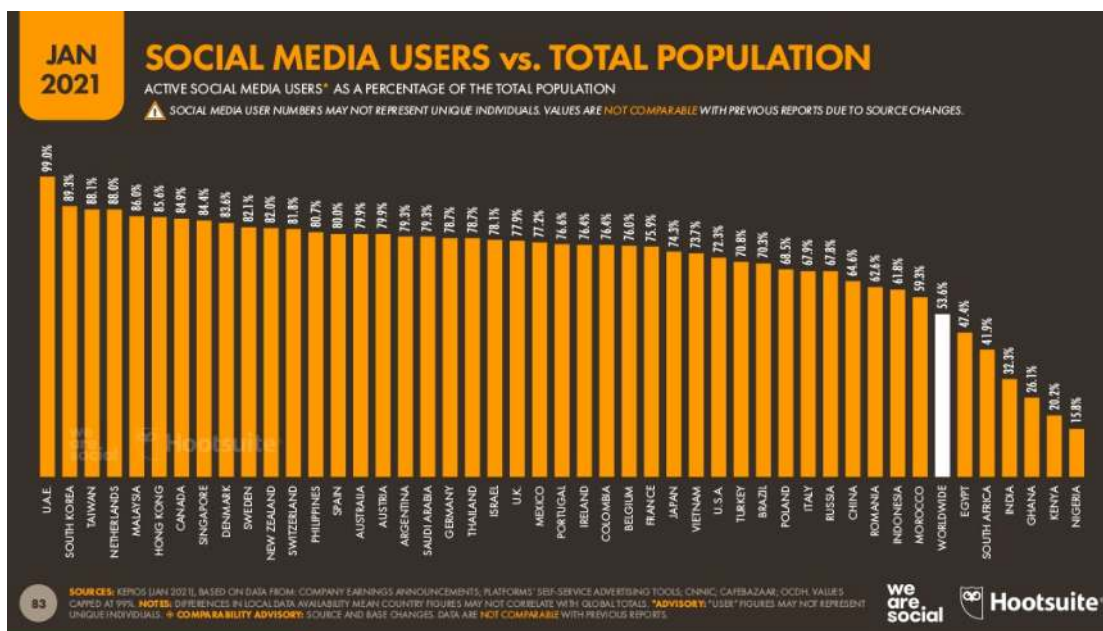
By January 2021, pegged active social media users at 80.7% of total population. It must be noted that these numbers may not represent unique user values.

Around 16 million users were created from the Philippines in 2021 making it the 3rd top country globally in terms of largest absolute growth, according to data from WeAreSocial.

Globally, WeAreSocial says there were nearly half a billion (13% of previous year) new users, equating to roughly 15½ new users every single second in 2020.

As of January 2021, Facebook's audience insights dashboard—a tool used by marketers to customize the targeting of ads within the platform—estimates that total active Philippines-based users in the platform could be between 60 million to 70 million.
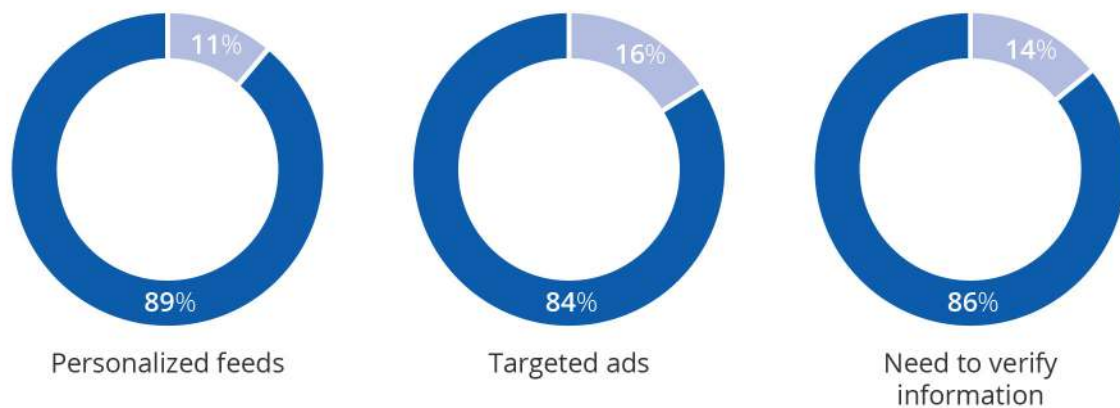
Being new to the digital space obviously implies that these users will be unfamiliar with how this environment works. This unfamiliarity with social media algorithms could make millions of these new users vulnerable to disinformation and forms of manipulation online.

In the surveys conducted by Rappler, more digital immigrants say they are unfamiliar with how social media platforms work as compared with digital natives. Around 90% of respondents say they are familiar with how social media algorithms work, including: personalized feeds, targeted ads, and the need to verify information on social media.

Awareness of social media algorithms & content

Among respondents who are 30 years old and above

● Aware ● Not Aware

11%	16%	14%
89%	84%	86%
Personalized feeds	Targeted ads	Need to verify information

Percentage based off total 216 respondents who are 30 years old and above.

However, the local community surveys show that more respondents who are 30 years old and above are unaware of these three, compared to younger respondents. At least 16% from this segment said they are not aware that ads on social media are targeted, 14% said they are not aware that information from social media needs to be verified, and 11% said that they are not aware that feeds on social media platforms are personalized.

As an example, in the FGDs that followed these surveys, a number of participants also said they refer to comments sections as additional sources of news and information. Below are some of responses that indicate this, when asked how they are able to get reliable information:

- A participant from Cotabato said, "*Usually para sa akin through news po. Kung pare pareho din po information na napapabalita. Then ako kasi, socmed user ako, minsan doon ako nagkakaroon ng information, usually sa comment sections nagbe-base.*

  (For me, usually through news. If it is the same, the information that is being reported is the same. Since I'm a socmed user, sometimes that's where I get information, usually [I base it] on comment sections.)

- Another participant from the area said, "*Ako po kasi, kapag may panibagong issue, nakikita ko sa socmed, nakikita ko sa FB. Ginagawa ko hindi ko basta basta sini-share, pinag-aaralan ko muna. Nagbabase din ako sa page kung reliable ba ito. Pangalawa, nagbabase ako sa mga comments. May mga nagko-comment na hindi sang-ayon, may nagco-comment naman na nagsu-support na ang impormasyon na iyon ay verified, or totoo talaga siya...*"

  (Because I, when there is another issue, I see on socmed, I see on FB. What I do is I don't just share [information], I study [them] first. I also based the page on whether it is reliable. Second, I based it on comments. There are those who commented who do not agree, there are those who commented that [they] support that, [and] that information is verified, or that it is really true...)

- "*Yung po sa akin, yung iba through comment other concerns nila. Doon ko makikita kung ano ang pagkakaiba ng dalawa. So doon po natin mako-compare kung ano ba talaga ang nangyari, at kung hindi pa ako masyadong satisfied doon sa pinakita o sinabi nila, ay nagtatanong ako ng reliable source,*" another participant from Cotabato said.

  (For me, the others through [the] comment [section coming from] other [users] concerns them. [From] there, I can see what the difference is between the two. So there we can compare what really happened, and if I'm not very satisfied with what they showed or said, I ask a reliable source.)

- Another participant Cotabato said, "*Ginagawa ko rin ang ginagawa nila. Chine-check ko ang comment section at bini visit ang profile, minsan kasi nagco-comment sila for the likes. Minsan pumupunta ako sa website gaya ng ABS-CBN at GMA News.*"

  (I also do what they do. I checked the comment section and visited the profile, because sometimes they comment for the likes. Sometimes I go to websites like ABS-CBN and GMA News.)
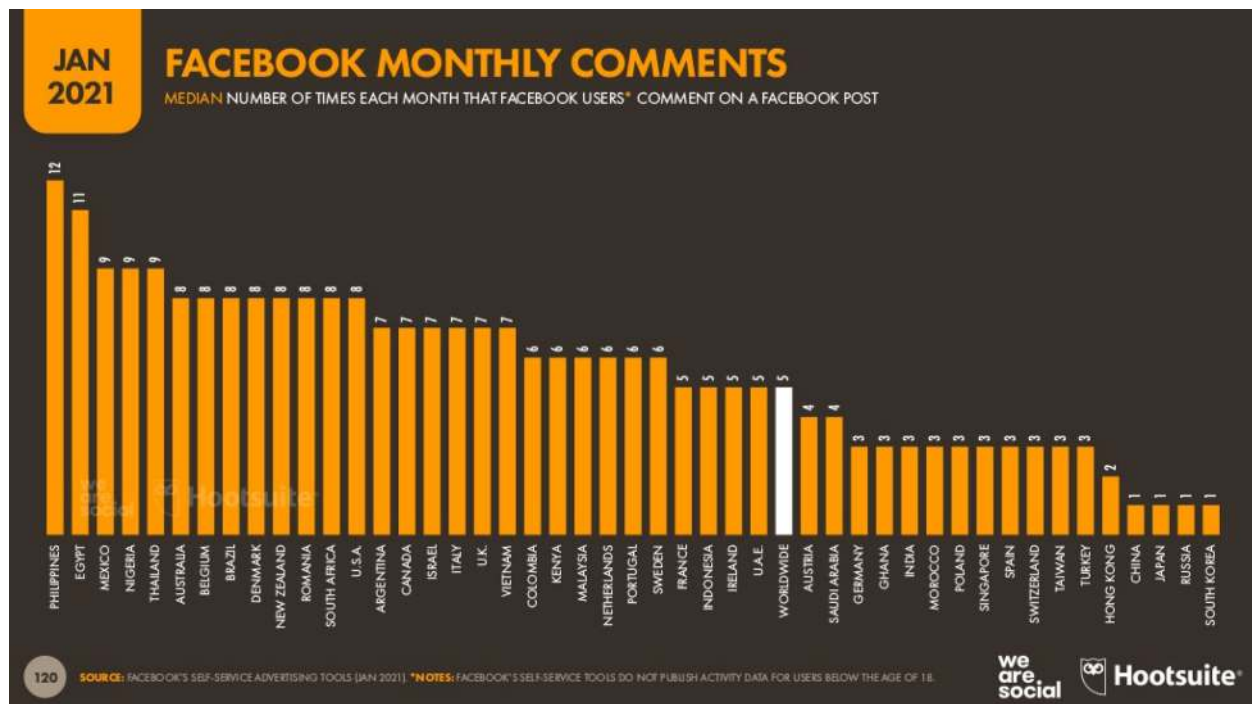
This demonstrates a lack of familiarity with astroturfing, a common disinformation technique. Research shows that only a small percentage of those online actually post, meaning the noise sometimes comes from a minority. In a practice called "astroturfing," disinformation networks create the impression of widespread grassroots support for a policy, individual, or product even when little exists.[64]

In the past years, Rappler has found ample evidence of astro-turfed messages in relation to the issues covered by this study in comments sections of news websites and on Facebook. The screenshot below shows an example of these messages.

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64   Adam Bienkov, "Astroturfing: what is it and why does it matter," February 8, 2012, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/feb/08/what-is-astroturfing

Incidentally, Filipinos top the rest of the world when it comes to the median number of times each month that Facebook users comment on a Facebook post. Data from WeAreSocial says the median number of comments posted per month by each Facebook user in the Philippines is 12 comments, more than twice the global average of 5 comments.[65]

This is significant because the analysis of information cascades presented in this study shows that disinformation and attacks against the press were also circulated through social media comment sections. Engagement systems such as reviews and reporting have also been mobilized against critics of the administration online.

Further, comments sections were also used to seed narratives against drug addicts and critics of the drug war. Comments were also used to a large extent in order to promote myths about the Marcoses and the martial law years.

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65   https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2021-global-overview-report

News organizations are still among the most followed information sources online. But they are increasingly drowned in social media noise

In its September 2021 survey, polling agency Pulse Asia said nearly half (48%) of Filipinos source their political news from the internet. Of this, 44% cited Facebook.[66] This does not necessarily mean that these respondents are accessing the websites of traditional news groups.

While traditional media organizations and even the purely digital news groups do have their own social media assets as well and these also have significant reach in these platforms, they are not necessarily dominating the entire digital playing field. Government channels and social media influencers are fast gaining ground.

Case in point, among pages related to news brands, ABS-CBN News' page[67] has the most number of page likes with 22,706,214 total followers as of October 12, 2021. This is significantly dwarfed, however, by meme pages like Von von,[68] which describes itself as a Korean page that provides "a daily dose of pinoy fun." As of the same day, Von von already has 59,199,961 followers.

The Facebook page of Dr. Willie Ong, who ran for senator in 2019, has over 14 million followers as of January 2021 — a reach almost comparable to the Facebook page of GMA News, which has around 15 million followers, and more than double that of Inquirerdotnet, Philippine Star and Rappler.

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66 Pauline Macaraeg, "Nearly half of Filipinos get news from internet, Facebook – Pulse Asia," Rappler, October 12, 2021, https://www.rappler.com/nation/nearly-half-filipinos-get-news-internet-facebook-pulse-asia-september-2021

67 This is the official page of ABS-CBN News: https://www.facebook.com/abscbnNEWS/

68 This is the link to Vonvon, a popular meme page on Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/ph.vonvon.me/

A similar pattern prevails on YouTube where monitoring is even trickier because of the lack of a single feed. YouTube is like a content lake where channels build their own content and following. Videos within this ecosystem are then recirculated using highly personalized search and recommendation algorithms.

Channels owned by the two top broadcast networks do dominate Philippine channels in YouTube. Following the ABS-CBN shutdown, the subscriber base of its YouTube channels increased significantly. Its entertainment channel reached 30 million pageviews in October 2020.[69] Its news channel on the other hand hit 10 million subscribers in November.[70] But among the top five is the channel of broadcast personality Raffy Tulfo, according to data from Socialblade.com[71]

The scatter plot graph below compares interactions and page likes for Facebook pages monitored by Sharktank. Data on interactions and page likes were obtained by uploading the list of around 65,000 pages tracked by Sharktank to CrowdTangle, Facebook's tool for monitoring social media. From this number, the team was able to extract leaderboard data for around 30,000 pages. This was then analyzed in order to compare reach (represented by total likes on posts) and number of followers of these pages. Nodes to the upper right are those that top the rest in terms of combined interactions and page likes. The graph shows how, in this ecosystem, newsgroups and mainstream media pages battle for attention with meme pages and a host of other pages.

69   "ABS-CBN Entertainment hits 30 million subscribers on YouTube," October 10, 2020, https://news.abs-cbn.com/entertainment/10/10/20/abs-cbn-entertainment-hits-30-million-subscribers-on-youtube
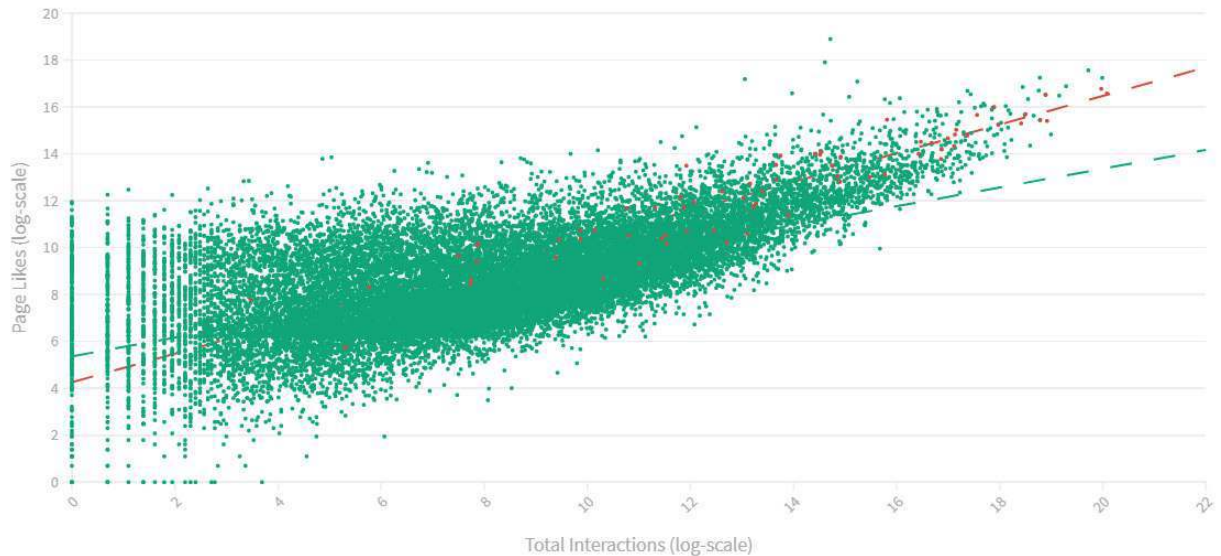
70   Miguel Dumaual, "10M subscribers and growing: ABS-CBN News receives Diamond award from YouTube," ABS-CBN News, November 15, 2020, https://news.abs-cbn.com/entertainment/11/15/20/10m-subscribers-and-growing-abs-cbn-news-receives-diamond-award-from-youtube

71   Top 100 Youtubers in the Philippines sorted by SB rank, accessed Jan 19, 2021, https://socialblade.com/youtube/top/country/ph

Sharktank Leadership Page Likes vs. Interactions

Data gathered from Crowdtangle Leaderboard data from February 2020 to January 2021

Page Type ● Others ● News

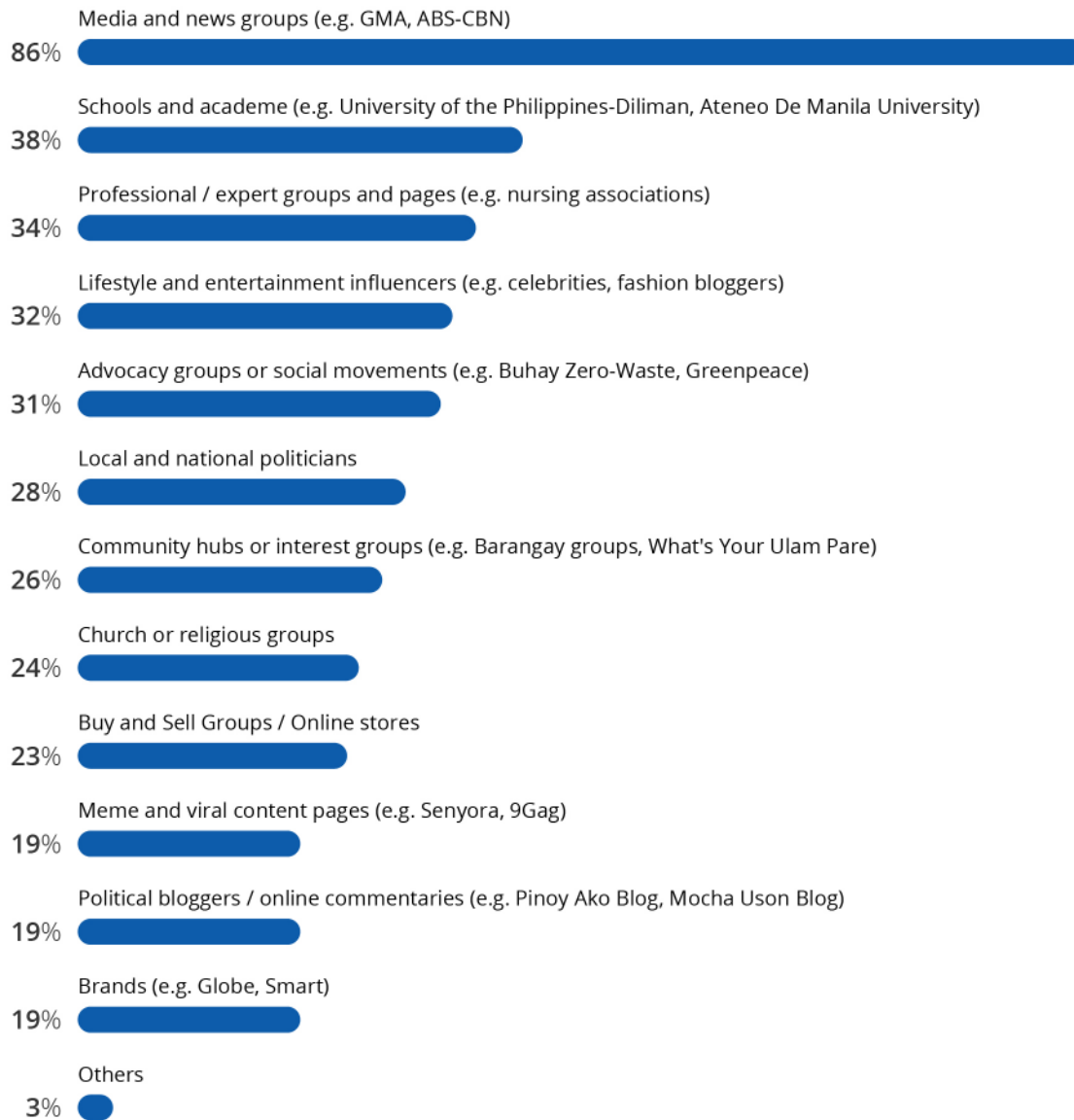https://public.flourish.studio/visualisation/5151821/

Respondents from both the Rappler survey and the local communities survey show high affinity for news, both with more than 80% saying they follow media and news groups on social media.

Not surprisingly, respondents on the Rappler site survey have a higher skew to only following media and news groups on social media, with only as many as 38% saying they follow other sources like schools and academe, professional/expert groups (e.g., nursing associations), and lifestyle and entertainment influencers.
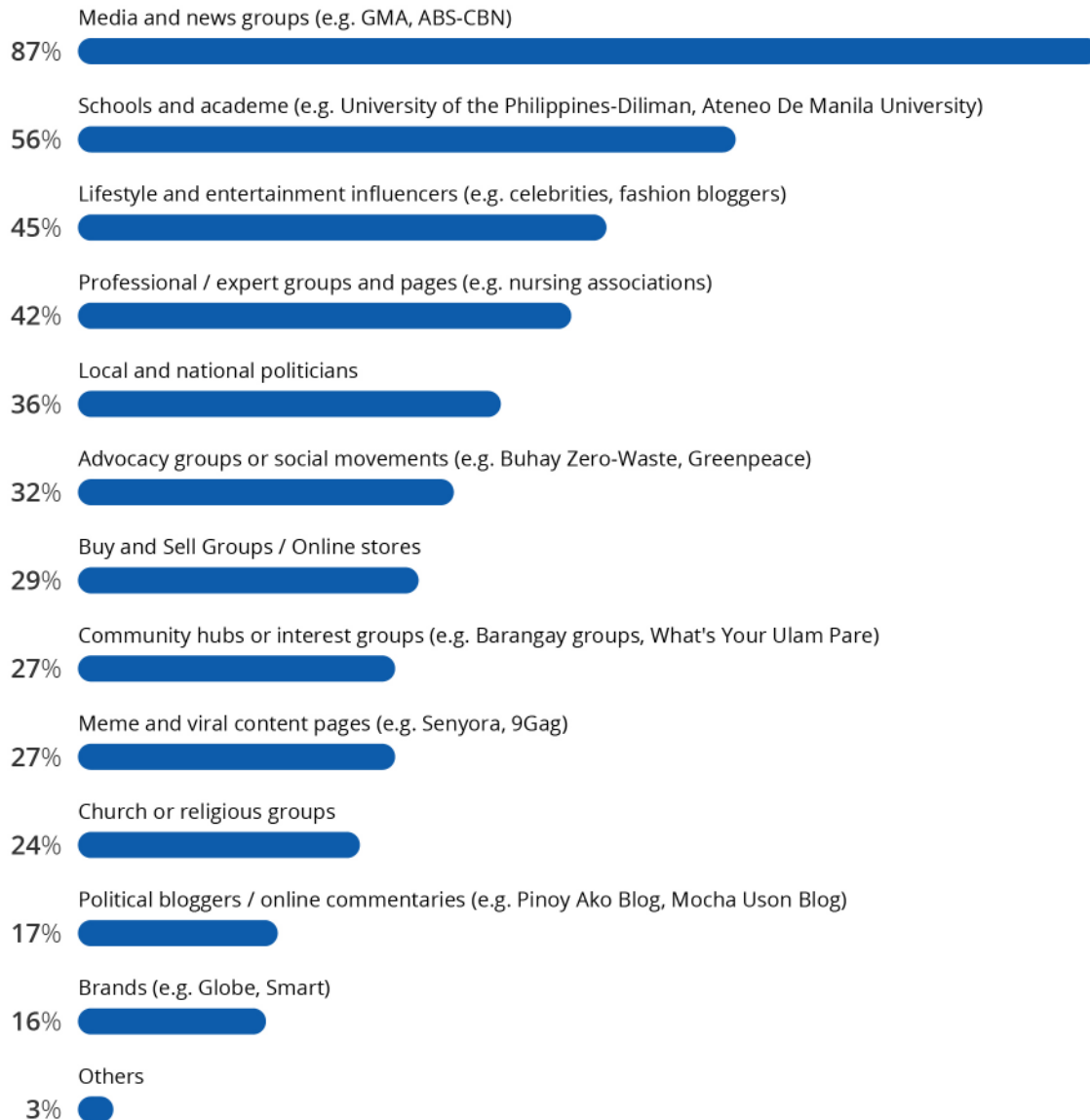
Awareness of social media algorithms & content

Media and news groups (e.g. GMA, ABS-CBN)
86%

Schools and academe (e.g. University of the Philippines-Diliman, Ateneo De Manila University)
38%

Professional / expert groups and pages (e.g. nursing associations)
34%

Lifestyle and entertainment influencers (e.g. celebrities, fashion bloggers)
32%

Advocacy groups or social movements (e.g. Buhay Zero-Waste, Greenpeace)
31%

Local and national politicians
28%

Community hubs or interest groups (e.g. Barangay groups, What's Your Ulam Pare)
26%

Church or religious groups
24%

Buy and Sell Groups / Online stores
23%

Meme and viral content pages (e.g. Senyora, 9Gag)
19%

Political bloggers / online commentaries (e.g. Pinoy Ako Blog, Mocha Uson Blog)
19%

Brands (e.g. Globe, Smart)
19%

Others
3%

Percentage based off total 2,324 respondents. From Rappler website survey.

Types of groups and pages followed on social media: Rappler: https://public.flourish.studio/visualisation/8003560/

Types of groups & pages followed on social media

Media and news groups (e.g. GMA, ABS-CBN)
87%

Schools and academe (e.g. University of the Philippines-Diliman, Ateneo De Manila University)
56%

Lifestyle and entertainment influencers (e.g. celebrities, fashion bloggers)
45%

Professional / expert groups and pages (e.g. nursing associations)
42%

Local and national politicians
36%

Advocacy groups or social movements (e.g. Buhay Zero-Waste, Greenpeace)
32%

Buy and Sell Groups / Online stores
29%

Community hubs or interest groups (e.g. Barangay groups, What's Your Ulam Pare)
27%

Meme and viral content pages (e.g. Senyora, 9Gag)
27%

Church or religious groups
24%

Political bloggers / online commentaries (e.g. Pinoy Ako Blog, Mocha Uson Blog)
17%

Brands (e.g. Globe, Smart)
16%

Others
3%

Percentage based off total 461 respondents. From local communities survey.

Types of groups & pages followed on social media: Partner: https://public.flourish.studio/visualisation/8003562/

Respondents from the local communities survey show more diversity in terms of the types of groups and pages they follow. While 87% of these respondents said they follow media and news groups on social media, 56% also said they follow schools and academe, 45% follow lifestyle and entertainment influencers, and 42% said they follow professional or expert groups.

Types of groups & pages followed on social media
Among respondents who are 30 years old and above

Media and news groups (e.g. GMA, ABS-CBN) — 84%
Schools and academe (e.g. University of the Philippines-Diliman, Ateneo De Manila University) — 45%
Professional / expert groups and pages (eg. nursing associations) — 43%
Lifestyle and entertainment influencers (e.g. celebrities, fashion bloggers) — 37%
Buy and Sell Groups / Online stores — 35%
Community hubs or interest groups (e.g. Barangay groups, What's Your Ulam Pare) — 31%
Church or religious groups — 27%
Advocacy groups or social movements (e.g. Buhay Zero-Waste, Greenpeace) — 26%
Local and national politicians — 24%
Political bloggers / online commentaries (e.g. Pinoy Ako Blog, Mocha Uson Blog) — 19%
Meme and viral content pages (e.g. Senyora, 9Gag) — 16%
Brands (e.g. Globe, Smart) — 15%
Others — 5%

▶ Higher compared to other subset
◀ Lower compared to other subset

Percentages based off 216 respondents who are 30 years old and above.

For Digital Natives

Types of groups & pages followed on social media
Among respondents who are below 30 years old

Percentages based off 240 respondents who are below 30 years old.

Those who are 30 years old and above, however, seem to follow official sources more. Eighty-four percent (84%) said they follow media and news organizations, 45% said they follow schools and academe, while 43% follow professional/expert groups. Only 37% said they follow influencers. In contrast, while media and news groups are also top sources for those aged below 30, the majority of them also follow schools and academe pages at 66%, as well as lifestyle and entertainment influencers at 53%.

Trustworthiness is the primary consideration in following groups, pages, and channels on social media. But entertainment value and agreeableness are also major considerations, making audiences vulnerable to sources that deceptively use celebrity content to build online following

In choosing what groups, pages, or social media channels to follow, most respondents (65% of respondents from Rappler's website and 73% of respondents from local communities) say they generally follow accounts that they deem as trustworthy.

Even within this audience, which has already been established as having a high affinity for news, a significant segment also considers entertainment value and agreeability as major considerations for following a social media asset.

Considerations in following groups & pages on social media: Rappler

Consideration	%
Trustworthy source of information	65%
Can get entertainment out of content	37%
Has posts that are agreeable	34%
Does not necessarily have agreeable posts, but fan of person/group	18%
Looking to connect with or meet other people	13%
Good to join as a seller/buyer	12%
Followed or joined by friends	11%
A job/school requirement	10%
Other	5%

Percentage based off total 2,324 respondents. From Rappler website survey.
https://public.flourish.studio/visualisation/8003563/

Considerations in following groups & pages on social media: Partner

Trustworthy source of information
73%

Can get entertainment out of content
51%

Has posts that are agreeable
37%

Does not necessarily have agreeable posts, but fan of person/group
19%

Good to join as a seller/buyer
15%

Followed or joined by friends
15%

A job/school requirement
11%

Looking to connect with or meet other people
11%

Other
4%

Percentage based off total 461 respondents. From local communities survey.
https://public.flourish.studio/visualisation/8003565/

Specifically, about half (51%) of the respondents from the local communities survey also look for pages that are entertaining. Entertainment value seems to weigh less for the Rappler audience at only 37%.

In choosing what groups, pages, or social media channels to follow, most respondents (65% of respondents from Rappler's website and 73% of respondents from local communities) say they generally follow accounts that they deem as trustworthy.

It must be noted that while there are clearer lines between news and entertainment content in traditional media, the same rule often gets blurred in digital. A recent report that Rappler published concerning disinformation in YouTube exposed how Showbiz channels shifted focus from celebrity gossip to political content.[72] YouTube channel Showbiz Fanaticz, for instance, shifted its content focus dramatically from celebrity gossip to content attacking critics of the administration. (See graph below)

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72   Loreben Toquero, "Red flag for 2022: Political lies go unchecked on Youtube showbiz channels," Rappler, September 22, 2021, https://www.rappler.com/nation/elections/political-lies-unchecked-youtube-showbiz-channels-red-flag-candidates-2022

Showbiz Fanaticz has been flagged over 40 times for publishing false or misleading claims. This practice of channels using celebrity content as a way to build an audience puts people who seek entertainment on the platform at risk of being served political disinformation.

Showbiz Fanaticz video topics

● Celebrities ● Critics & perceived enemies of gov't ● International Relations ● Local politics and political figures
● State forces ● National politics and political figures ● OFWs ● Other posts

https://public.flourish.studio/visualisation/8043027/

Apart from trustworthiness and entertainment value, respondents of the community surveys who are below 30 years old also have higher consideration for pages whose posts they agree with, as well as those already followed by their friends, compared to older respondents.

Respondents who are 30 years old and above seem to focus on trustworthiness, functionality (i.e. usually for trade), and being up to date with news (i.e. both on current events and about personalities they are a fan of).

Considerations in following groups & pages on social media

Among respondets who are from National Capital Region (NCR)

Trustworthy source of information
75%

Can get entertainment out of content
52%

Has posts that are agreeable
37%

Good to join as seller/buyer
22%

Does not necessarily have agreeable posts, but fan of person/group
21%

Followed or joined by friends
20%

A job/school requirement
12%

Looking to connect with or meet other people
11%

Other
1%

Percentage based off 114 respondents who are from National Capital Region (NCR). From local communities survey.

Considerations in following groups & pages on social media in NCR https://public.flourish.studio/visualisation/8003567/

Considerations in following groups & pages on social media

Among respondets who are from areas outside National Capital Region (NCR)

Trustworthy source of information
73%

Can get entertainment out of content
51%

Has posts that are agreeable
37%

Does not necessarily have agreeable posts, but fan of person/group
18%

Followed or joined by friends
14%

Good to join as seller/buyer
13%

A job/school requirement
11%

Looking to connect with or meet other people
11%

Other
5%

Percentages based off 347 respondents who are from Bicol, Cebu, Leyte, Cagayan de Oro and Cotabato.

Considerations in following groups & pages on social media outside of NCR: https://public.flourish.studio/visualisation/8003570/

In choosing media platforms to use as an information source, both surveys showed that accessibility is the primary consideration for use. Accessibility in the survey was defined as the platforms being free, cheap, or easy to get. Around 69% of respondents in the Rappler survey chose accessibility as primary consideration. This is followed by ease of navigation to see preferred content at 18%. Reliability as a source of information only comes third at 9% and 4% for respondents from Rappler's survey and respondents from the local community survey, respectively.

Related to the question of trust, during the community FGDs and KIIs, participants were probed further on where they were able to get reliable information about issues covered by the study. In responding to this question, most of the FGD participants talked about news organizations such as GMA, ABS CBN, Rappler CNN, Inquirer, One News, Philippine Star, Aljazeera, BBC, including the verified Facebook pages, websites, and channels of these news organizations. Radio stations mentioned included DZMM / Teleradyo, DZBB, DZRH and other AM stations.

Noteworthy was key social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Tiktok were also brought up as their sources of information.

For respondents who have little to no exposure to social media (people who say they only use social media very sparingly in relation to work and school), commonly mentioned reliable information sources are radio, TV (news stations), newspaper, and their community (friends and neighbors in general, friends with Facebook accounts). These included stations and channels mentioned in the previous paragraph.

Majority (78%) of survey respondents say they can distinguish between real news and 'fake news,' but FGDs show that some believed previously debunked claims

An overwhelming majority of respondents to the Rappler online and community survey (around 78 percent of respondents from the local communities survey) claimed to be able to distinguish between real and "fake news." (See graph below)

Shifts in time spend on social media per day

● Strongly disagree　● Disagree　● Neither agree nor disagree　● Agree　● Strongly agree

I can distinguish between facts and opinions.

4%	15%	39%	40%

79%

I can distinguish between real and fake news.

4%	17%	38%	40%

78%

However, a further probe on this subject during the FGDs reveal that some of the respondents who said in the survey that they believe they can distinguish between real and fake news turned out to have believed previously debunked claims online. This raises questions on the awareness of the respondents of their own capabilities.

While discussing information cascades covered by the study, participants were asked to cite specific messages they saw online which contradict their understanding of issues covered by the study. In responding to this, a number of respondents cited specific claims the Rappler researchers described in the section on information cascades that have already been debunked by independent fact checkers. These include the claims around Martial Law, ABS CBN's alleged violations, and content about the drug war.

In relation to Martial Law, specific narratives cited included a widely circulated claim that the Martial Law years were supposedly the golden years of the Philippine economy. Also cited were misleading claims about an infrastructure boom and already debunked claims about the peso-dollar rate during that period. With respect to martial law atrocities, participants cited claims that the only victims of Martial law were members of the New People's Army (NPA). YouTube videos which justified why Marcos declared Martial Law were also cited.

Most of the FGD respondents indicated that they were aware that the claims were dubious or untrue. Some respondents, however, indicated that they believed the claims they saw. For those respondents, it seems that the fact that the claims confirmed previously held beliefs play a role.

Respondents who said they were aware that the claims are not true said use of visceral and vitriolic languages and content that directly attack people among the key indicators that they associated with disinformation. This is indicated in their responses shared below:

- A participant from Cebu said that for him, if the piece of content involves hate speech, then it is likely disinformation. "….Also look for the content, if it involves hate speech, because it involves hate speech, then, that [is] probably disinformation especially if it's political in nature."[73]

- Another participant from CDO said,"…If it's already an attack or something on a certain person [then it is disinformation] "[74]

- "…Most of the disinformation posts begin with strong emotion-laden words. You might actually wonder if that person is sharing facts or just trying to convince even if the message has no basis just to put a personality in [the] spotlight.", a participant from NCR said.[75]

- "..When they use inflammatory words to prompt you to comment, they will increase the engagement of the post and the chances of reaching broader audiences will get high", another participant from NCR said. [76]

The political belief of respondents, as indicated in their views with respect to the three issues covered by this study appear to be a factor in their susceptibility to believing particular claims.

One specific narrative cited by a second FGD respondent from Leyte who clearly believed the claim was a widely circulated claim that the Jabidah Massacre did not really happen. "We only got the information from TV," the respondent said. He cited "established entities who attest that it was indeed cooked up to create a scenario that will justify the revolution in Mindanao." He added, "this issue has a huge impact for me because I'm still not sure if this whole issue of the Jabidah massacre is indeed a cooked-up issue."

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73   IEA FGD Cebu, July 17 2017, facilitated by PACE researcher

74   IEA FGD Cagayan de Oro, July 16 2021, facilitated by PACE researcher

75   IEA FGD NCR, July 13 2021, facilitated by PACE researcher

76   IEA FGD NCR, July 13 2021, facilitated by PACE researcher

Asked how content online affects his perception of issues, this respondent said, "My perception of issues was affected by acquiring many sources about issues. It directly affected my trust towards Marcos, and even Ninoy."

In the survey, this specific FGD respondent indicated that he strongly agreed with the questions on whether he fact checks, can distinguish between facts and opinions, can distinguish between real and fake news. He also says he only follows trustworthy and credible sources on social media.

This FGD respondent indicated in the survey that he does not believe that press freedom is under threat in the Philippines. He said he supports the drug war but does not think martial law is good for the country.

Responding to the question of whether he has encountered content online that contradicted his views, he said he has. He said he makes sure he verifies first with various sources. "There are too many sources with contradicting narratives. In this case, I weigh things in my head because I know that the media can change their tune and affect your thoughts."

The first Leyte respondent cited in the earlier finding also indicated in the survey that he strongly believed that he could distinguish between false claims and fake news. When asked during the FGD if he thinks he is able to get reliable information in relation to the issues covered in order to form an educated opinion or judgement, he said he is assured because his sources are blogs and Facebook pages that allow live audiences to directly ask questions.

There are similarities between disinformation techniques practiced in the Philippines and the "Firehose of Falsehood" Russian propaganda model

Information operations documented in this study show similarities with the Russian propaganda model as described by the study by the Rand Corporation. The Rand study mentions the following distinctive characteristics of this propaganda technique: high volume and multi-channel; rapid, continuous, and repetitive; lacks commitment to objective reality; and lacks commitment to consistency.

Rappler's investigations, for instance, showed that revisionist narratives related to Martial law and the Marcos achievements, for instance, were served repetitively to hundreds of groups and pages, including pages supposedly tackling "real Philippine history."[77] The same is true for messaging attacking the press and promoting the drug war.

Receiving the same message via multiple sources could be more persuasive than a single source, according to the Rand study, particularly if those sources "give different arguments that point to the same conclusion." People, according to the study, tend to assume that "information coming from multiple sources are likely based on different perspectives" and that they are therefore "worth more consideration."[78]

When queried on sources of disinformation they encountered online, participants mentioned Pro-Duterte social media influencers Sass Sasot, Mocha Uson, Thinking Pinoy (by blogger RJ Nieto), Jam Magno, Atty Bruce Rivera, and Larry Gadon were repeatedly mentioned as the ones who posted or shared the claims. Uson, Angeles, Nieto, Gadon and Cruz-Angeles have been repeatedly flagged by independent fact-checkers for posting falsehoods.

Many participants said, however, that it is hard for them to remember or identify the original source of these claims, given the number of times the content has been shared and reposted. This makes social media a very potent tool in distributing black propaganda against perceived enemies and political rivals.

Some of their responses are shared below:

- *"Dili na nako ma-pinpoint nga naa'y nagpaluyo ani kay daghan na ang nag-share ug re-upload maong dili na nako mahibaw-an kung kinsa jud ang owner atu nga video."*[79] (I cannot pinpoint who was behind it as the video was already re-uploaded several times.)

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77   Gemma Mendoza, "Networked propaganda: How the Marcoses are rewriting history," Rappler, November 21, 2019, https://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/investigative/networked-propaganda-how-the-marcoses-are-rewriting-history

78   Christopher Paul and Miriam Matthews, 'The Russian 'Firehose of Falsehood' Propaganda Model: Why it Might Work and Options to Counter it, Rand Corporation, https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE198.html, 2016

79   IEA FGD Leyte, July 17 2021, facilitated by PACE researcher

- "*Sa kadaghan na nag-share ug re-upload about sa martial law nga topic, dli na nako mapoint ang people behind those videos.*"[80] (I can no longer pinpoint who the videos were from because of re-uploading such content several times.)

  "*Wala nako kahibalo kung kinsa ang nagtag-iya sa video kay gi-reupload ra man to ug gi-share ra pud.*"[81] (I would not know who's the owner of the video since it was only reuploaded and shared many times.)

Among claims fact-checked by Rappler, many are so fantastic that they are easy to debunk. This does not seem to matter, however. What appears to matter is how often the narratives are repeated. The RAND study explains: "Due to their lack of commitment to objective reality (discussed later), Russian propagandists do not need to wait to check facts or verify claims; they just disseminate an interpretation of emergent events that appears to best favor their themes and objectives. This allows them to be remarkably responsive and nimble, often broadcasting the first 'news' of events (and, with similar frequency, the first news of nonevents, or things that have not actually happened)."[82]

Incidentally, a previous Rappler investigation found links between actors and so-called "experts" tapped by pro-administration social media influencers and those cited in Russian propaganda channels.[83] Rappler found that Adam Garrie, a person identified as being part of the "broader propaganda ecosystem" in the research paper, "The Tactics & Tropes of the Internet Research Agency,"[84] was also the most cited "expert" in an analysis of headlines published by The Daily Sentry, a website known for publishing false or misleading claims.[85]

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80   IEA FGD Leyte, July 17 2021, facilitated by PACE researcher

81   IEA FGD Leyte, July 17 2021, facilitated by PACE researcher

82   Paul and Matthews, The Russian Firehose of Falsehood…" Ibid.

83   Rappler Research Team, "EXCLUSIVE: Russian disinformation system influences PH social media," January 22, 2019, https://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/investigative/russian-disinformation-system-influences-philippine-social-media

84   Renee DiResta, Kris Shaffer, Becky Ruppel, David Sullivan, Robert Matney, Ryan Fox, "The Tactics & Tropes of the Internet Research Agency," New Knowledge, https://cdn2.hubspot.net/hubfs/4326998/ira-report-rebrand_FinalJ14.pdf

85   Vernise Tantuco, "WATCH: Don't let 'experts' online fool you: Here's how," Rappler, December 24, 2018, https://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/in-depth/219316-steps-do-not-let-experts-online-fool-you

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The Daily Sentry often cited Garrie in issues concerning geopolitics, with the following titles typically associated with this name: geopolitical expert, Eurasia expert, UK geopolitical expert, international political expert, foreign political expert, foreign expert, UK political expert, foreign expert and writer, Asian geopolitical expert, trade expert, political analyst expert, political analyst, UK political commentator, and just plain "expert."

Garrie is a contributor to globalresearch.ca, geopolitica.ru, and eurasianaffairs.net – all segments of the disinformation networks connected to the IRA and Russia. A Russian IP address is traceable from the last two sites.

Following President Duterte's visit to Russia in May 2017, the Philippines and Russia's communication offices forged, among others, a partnership in information dissemination.[86] Duterte's entourage included Presidential Communications Operations Office (PCOO) Secretary Martin Andanar, former singer-dancer and then PCOO assistant secretary Mocha Uson, and bloggers Rey Joseph Nieto and Carlos Munda.

In hearings about the 2022 budget of the Presidential Communications Operations Office (PCOO) senators have asked for the records of 1,479 PCOO contract of service employees on the suspicion that they are working as internet trolls following adverse findings of the Commission on Audit. Yet, despite this and the fact that messaging in many pro-administration pages, groups, and channels often tended to mirror public statements made by the President and his key allies, the Duterte administration has repeatedly denied employing trolls.[87]

86   Pia Ranada, "PH, Russia sign 8 agreements, including extradition treaty," November 14, 2017, https://www.rappler.com/nation/ph-russia-sign-bilateral-agreements

87   Eimor Santos, "Senators seek records of 1,479 PCOO workers suspected to be trolls," CNN Philippines, https://www.cnnphilippines.com/news/2021/9/16/pcoo-contract-of-service-employees-trolls.html, September 16, 2021

Persistently seeded metanarratives attacking mainstream media reduce trust and cause audiences to follow hyper-partisan social media influencers who are perceived as "alternative information sources"

Apart from mainstream media, social media in general was mentioned often as an information source by respondents to the focused group discussions. One of the participants from the Leyte FGD said that he often refers to bloggers, since news organizations don't cover everything that's happening. This is what the participant specifically said:

> *"Tanan impormasyon nga ako nakuha gikan jud sa social media like GMA news ug ABSCBN. Pero karon mas nag-focus ko'g kuha sa information sa mga blogger kay naa may ubang ginabuhat sa gobyerno nga dili ipakita sa news."*

> (I get all my information from social media like GMA news and ABSCBN. But I focus now on getting my information from bloggers because there are too many things being done by the government that were not covered by the media.)

This response echoes one of the metanarratives that were repetitively raised against news organizations as described in the section of the information cascades. As discussed above, media groups are typically attacked for "hiding the truth" and for not reporting on supposed accomplishments of the current administration as well as of the Marcos regime.

In analyzing the information operations against the press, Rappler found that over-all, attacks against journalists and media groups come in various forms: articles, comments, messages, and even in video and live streaming services. These are typically launched by a combination of real people, including well known social media influencers but also make use of fake accounts or anonymously-managed pages.

Journalists are often shamed in public in posts often rife with misogyny, gendered attacks, sexualization, hate. Many commentaries online justify or wish for violence and real-world harm upon journalists concerned. In some cases, it is not just the journalists who are targeted. Supporters, family members, and friends are targeted as well.

The message often deflects blame in relation to public scandals or malfeasance in government. The attacks often involve repetitive messaging aimed to undermine credibility, break down trust. More often than not, it appears that the public—not the individual journalists themselves-are the target of the attacks as the journalists themselves are rarely directly tagged in many of these attacks.

This clearly has an impact on public perception. One FGD respondent from Leyte said he assumes that everything he sees is misinformation. "I weigh them all to know what sources are truthful because there are blogs that can provide context to issues covered in different news sites. Also the way they present the news, I can already tell from there".

One source he frequently cited was pro-Duterte social media influencer Trixie Cruz-Angeles as a credible information source. Cruz-Angeles has been flagged a number of times for posting false or misleading claims.[88]

This second respondent also indicated in the survey that he does not believe that press freedom is under threat in the Philippines. He said he supports the drug war. Further, he thinks martial law is good for the country.

All studies before 2016 indicated a larger trust in media as compared with government and other institutions. This changed radically in 2017, a year after the attacks ramped up. Influence operations against news organizations effectively worked to tear down trust. The truth tellers are targeted to create confusion, sow distrust.

This became evident in the results of the EON Group's 2017 Philippine Trust Index study. EON's 2017 study found – when it looked at public sentiment and conversations on social media – that 83% had a negative sentiment toward the media. EON's study also showed that a majority of online conversations about the media involve government-related issues, often in the context of government personalities lambasting the media.

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88   Cruz-Angeles has been flagged a number of times for making false claims on her Facebook page. These are some samples of claims she has made: "VERA FILES FACT CHECK: Palace social media consultant makes misleading claims on Senate probe into ex-Comelec chair Bautista," June 6, 2018, https://verafiles.org/articles/vera-files-fact-check-palace-social-media-consultant-makes-m; and "VERA FILES FACT CHECK: Former PCOO social media consultant, netizens revive 'dextrose' photo of Isko Moreno that needs context," June 14, 2021, https://verafiles.org/articles/vera-files-fact-check-former-pcoo-social-media-consultant-ne

Lack of trust in mainstream media when coupled with lack of familiarity with how platforms work coupled with exposure to "alternative sources" of information online could make digital audiences vulnerable to disinformation. It does not help that on digital, it is possible for online content sources to shift focus and even change their names.

In the Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2021,[89] it was the news groups that have been the primary target of attacks, ABS-CBN and Rappler, which were the hardest hit in terms of drop in trust ratings. Both newsgroups fell by four points in their trust scores according to the Reuters report, and yet in terms of reach, they're in the top 4, showing exactly why they were targeted.

Respondents to the key informant interviews who were chosen because they were less exposed to digital were more predisposed to trust mainstream media. Below are some examples of responses to the KIIs along these lines:

- An interviewee from Leyte believes that if he hears something from both TV and radio, then it's most likely true. "*Oo kay usa nako tuohan ang isa ka balita, ako man bansay-bansayon kung asa'y tinuod ug makita man pud na sa TV ug radyo kung tinuod ba ang balita nga nikalat.*"[90]

  (Yes, [I think I am able to get reliable information] because before I believe in any news story, I weigh things first on whether it's truthful. If what was spread gets to appear in TV and radio, that's most likely correct)

- An interviewee from Metro Manila said that he trusts the news he gets from TV are accurate because he can confirm the same news from the newspaper.[91]

- Another interviewee from Metro Manila said, "*Base sa aking experience simula pa ako'y nag-aaral, may bahagyang katotohanan sa TV, sa newspapers lalo na sa broadsheet, di ako masyadong tumitingin sa tabloid kasi nandiyan ang mga exaggerated news, namimili rin*

89   Nic Newman et al., "Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2021," Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2021, accessed August 9, 2021, https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2021-06/Digital_News_Report_2021_FINAL.pdf.

90   IEA KII Leyte, Interviewee 2, August 8 2021, conducted by PACE researcher

91   IEA KII NCR, Interviewee 1, July 21 2021, conducted by PACE researcher

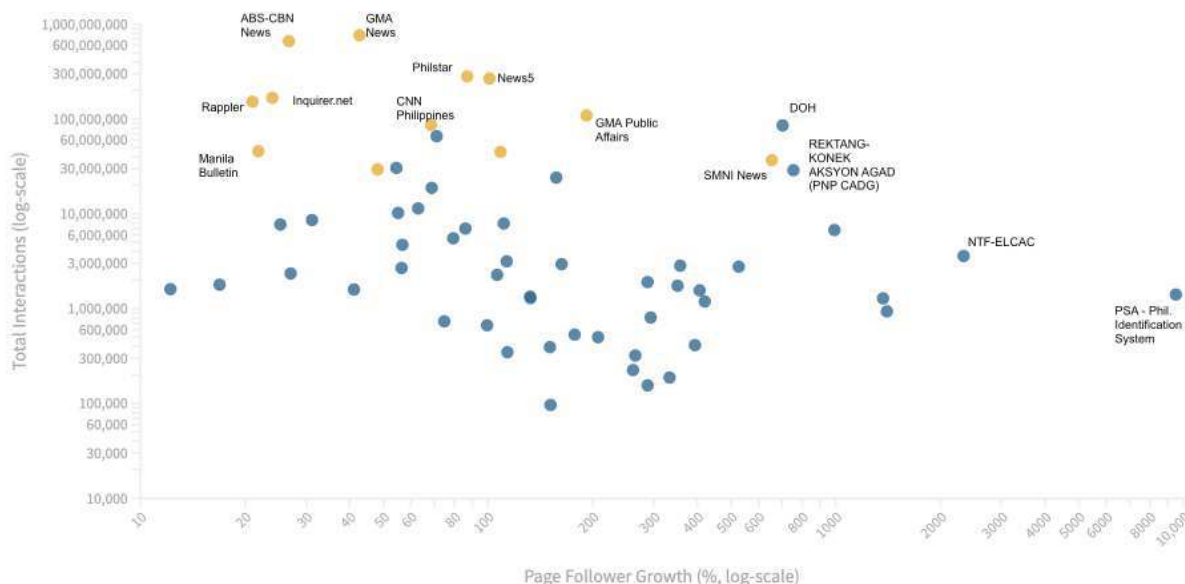*naman ako kapag ako'y nagbasa ng broadsheet. Nakikita ko yung mga taong may authority, yung mga manunulat. Malaking bagay sa akin yan. Dun lang ako naniniwala. 90% ng inilalalathala ay aking napapaniwalaan din naman."*[92]

(Based on my experience, since the time I was still studying, I think there is some truth on television, in newspapers, especially the broadsheet. I don't really look at tabloids because they contain exaggerated news. I am choosy when it comes to my preference in newspapers. I see the writers with authority. That's a big deal for me. I only believe in these people. I think around 90% of published articles are believable and true.)

- An interviewee from Cebu believes that he is able to get reliable information since he listens to traditional media. "I can get reliable information because I always listen to the traditional media," she said.[93]

- An interviewee from Cotabato said it's better to use different sources on the radio, TV, or newsletters to get information. "*Tama naman din po ang info na nagagather, for me it's way better, if you're using newspaper o radio, wag ka nang makinig ng isang channel o wag ka ng magbasa ng isang article, newsletter about dun sa issue. Nakikinig po ako sa ibat ibang channel ng radio o TV., and sa newsletter… nagbabasa po ako ng iba't ibang articles*".[94]

(The information I gather is also correct. For me, it's way better, if you're using newspaper or radio, or rather you don't listen to only one channel or read only one article, or newsletter about the issue. I listen to different radio stations, TV channels, and newsletters … I read different articles.)

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92   IEA KII NCR, Interviewee 3, conducted by PACE researcher

93   IEA KII Cebu, Interviewee 5 , August 13 2021, conducted by PACE researcher

94   IEA KII Cotabato, Interviewee 5, August 4, 2021, conducted by PACE researcher

Government and politicians are among the gainers in the digital space. In some cases, they have edged out mainstream news orgs and media as the trusted sources of information

During the pandemic, people were exposed more to official government channels because the platforms boosted these channels particularly with respect to content related to COVID-19. The scatter plot graph below compares follower growth and volume of interaction of news pages vs government-owned pages.

Growth of media organizations and government agencies 2020-2021

The following shows a summary of top media organizations and government agencies found in Sharktank's database. Using Crowdtangle data, each page's total interactions and follower growth were tracked from January 1, 2020 to September 30, 2021, approximating the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

https://public.flourish.studio/visualisation/7470611/

It is worth noting that some FGD participants expressed trust in information coming from government officials, generally saying that so long as information comes from official sources, it is enough. Below are some examples of responses along these lines:

When asked if he thinks he gets enough reliable information on the issues tackled, a participant from Cagayan de Oro (CDO) said he trusts information as long as it comes from the government.

> "*Para sa ako, wala. Wala, kay para sa ako, wala koy pake if nakoy enough information because gisalig ko na mana sa mga people or the—katung taong na-assign, I mean, designated ana or the implementing bodies*"[95], he said.

> (I don't care if I have enough information because I trust it to the implementing bodies or the assigned people…)

> Further, when asked to clarify if he has reliable sources of information to make an opinion or judgement regarding the issues discussed, the participant said, "*I think it should be coming from government agencies nga kuan—para sa akoa, wala. Wala koy resource about ana.*"[96]

> (I think it should be coming from government agencies. For me, none. I don't have any resources about that.)

A participant from Cotabato had a similar response when asked the same question.

> "*Kailangan siguro… pag reliable o kilala masyado ang sources ang nagbibigay ng info, example sa War on Drugs - ang nagbibigay niyan is more on sa gov't o police, so kung galing sa kanila yung mga sources, siguro maniniwala ka doon. Pero kung sa socmed na nagpapakalat ng ganon, siguro para sa akin hindi sya reliable, o hindi tugma na binibigay nila sa topic na gusto kong malaman.*"[97]

> (If the sources are reliable or well-known, the ones who provide the info, for example in the War on Drugs - the one who provides that is more on the gov't or the police, so if the sources come from them, maybe you will believe that. But if it's socmed that spreads it, maybe for me it's not reliable, or it doesn't match what they give to the topic I want to know)

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95   IEA FGD Cagayan de Oro, July 16, 2021, facilitated by PACE researcher

96   IEA FGD Cagayan de Oro, July 16, 2021, facilitated by PACE researcher

97   IEA FGD Cotabato, July 25, 2021, facilitated by PACE researcher

In the Leyte focus group discussion, participants talked about getting information about the drug war straight from the local government, particularly from the local City Information Office (one of the participants is a City Information Officer). During the discussion, the City Information Officer talked about programs being offered for drug addicts, such as providing livelihood opportunities for them. This could be one of the reasons why some participants in the area think favorably of the drug war, while perhaps not considering that the programs mentioned are not applicable to the entire country, where the situation is much different, to say the least.

This appears to have affected general perception of the war on drugs. Reports from one local government in relation to their specific programs were taken as representative of how the war on drugs was conducted in general all over the country.

This is misleading at best. These rehabilitation efforts were not implemented nationwide. In some locations, those who surrendered were just asked to dance the Zumba.[98]

This specific case emphasizes how stories can be taken out of context and out of proportion in today's Philippine information ecosystem. In the case shared above, the magnitude of a small local program for drug addicts was applied to the participants' notion of the issue on a larger scale.

While isolated programs are hyped up to represent the entire war on drugs, lack of reports about these rehabilitation programs in the mainstream media were then attributed to bias on the part of mainstream press. Indeed, one FGD participant expressed his concern on how news about War on Drugs covers more of the killings and not the rehabilitation efforts.

> "...On war on drugs, I wondered why news was so focused on (the) killing(s) but seldom on the rehabilitation efforts towards drug surrenderees. I also realized that it was way easier to kill than to rehabilitate."[99]

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98   Richard Paddock, "In the Philippine drug war, little help for those who surrender," September 5, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/06/world/asia/in-philippine-drug-war-little-help-for-those-who-surrender.html

99   IEA FGD Leyte, July 17 2021, facilitated by PACE researcher

The same participant said that he has seen news in their locality about how former drug users were given the chance to learn different livelihood programs. When asked what he thinks about the war on drugs, the participant said he supports it. "I agree with the war on drugs. The problem lies with the people who continuously engage in this despite that this is unlawful and that the police are very much into this issue."[100], he said.

Another FGD participant from the area echoed this concern and said that there should be more news about the government's rehabilitation efforts for drug users.

> "...*Mas ipakita pa sana ang rehabilitation na nagawa ng gobyerno sa mga drug users", the participant said, when asked how content he has seen around the war on drugs affects his perception on the issue.*[101]
>
> (... There should be more media coverage about the actions of the government in rehabilitating the drug users)

Amplified by the platforms, this blind trust in government online sources, makes audiences vulnerable to disinformation. As illustrated in the analysis of the information cascades, social media chatter about the drug war tended to favor the administration and attack critics and the press. This was illustrated in the case study on the attacks against Leila De Lima, the SEA Games case study, and the ABS-CBN case.

The current administration and personalities linked to it have already been exposed a number of times for their massive use of propaganda and disinformation techniques online. Government channels are also used for disinformation, as well as attacking critiques and democratic institutions.

In its most recent takedown, Facebook identified[102] officials of the Philippine military as the administrators of dubious pages used to sow false claims and attack activists.[103] Rappler's

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100   IEA FGD Leyte, July 17 2021, facilitated by PACE researcher

101   IEA FGD Leyte, July 17 2021, facilitated by PACE researcher

102   Nathaniel Gleicher, "Removing Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior," Facebook, September 22, 2020, https://about.fb.com/news/2020/09/removing-coordinated-inauthentic-behavior-china-philippines/

103   "Facebook removes inauthentic assets linked to the Philippine military," DFRLab, September 23, 2020, https://medium.com/dfrlab/facebook-removes-inauthentic-assets-linked-to-the-philippine-military-b61f9a38cb4a

investigation, which led to the takedown, revealed that these dubious pages were being amplified by official police pages.[104]

Findings from a follow-up research on this showed extensive use of official channels to push out propaganda, outright lies, and even to amplify attacks against critics of the government (eg. red-tagging and police pages being used to attack Sarah Elago).[105]

The network map above shows Facebook pages and groups amplifying content related to red-tagging and activism. Pages and groups cluster together when they share content from the same sources. The cluster in blue is the main cluster — mainly pushing out harmful red-tagging content and anti-activist propaganda. Not how the clusters became denser starting in 2018, caused by the increased connectedneess of the nodes, showing increased networked behavior.

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104   Rappler Research Team, "With anti-terror law, police-sponsored hate and disinformation even more dangerous," Rappler, https://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/investigative/anti-terror-law-state-sponsored-hate-disinformation-more-dangerous, August 13, 2020

105   Don Kevin Hapal and Raisa Serafica, "New war: How the propaganda network shifted from targeting 'addicts' to activists," October 3, 2021, https://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/investigative/how-propaganda-network-created-online-environment-justifies-shifted-killing-activists

The representatives of the Makabayan Bloc — Arlene D. Brosas of GABRIELA, France L. Castro of Alliance of Concerned Teachers (ACT), Eufemia C. Cullamat of BAYAN MUNA, Sarah I. Elago of KABATAAN, Ferdinand Gaite of Bayan Muna, and Carlos Isagani T. Zarate of BAYAN MUNA are high-ranking members of the Communist Party of the Philippines-New People's Army-National Democratic Front (CPP-NPA-NDF) whose purpose is to weaken and destroy the government to overthrow democracy and establish communism.

These entities have no shame in using government means to weaken the government itself. It is only right to remove [Makabayan bloc's] masks and face public judgement. Let the Filipino people judge you based on who you truly are — not what on what you pose as.

This is dangerous considering how much these "official sources" have grown because of the pandemic and their increased relevance to the public. The media, which has the functional role of verifying and correcting dubious claims online, is unable to match the reach of the government, which not only has a network of "official sources" but is supported by state-sponsored machinery that funnels their content into online communities.

Targets of online disinformation and smear campaigns pushed out through government channels and its propaganda network are unable to fight back because they're unable to match the reach of their attackers, which are growing their reach even further as their relevance to the public increase because of the pandemic.

This network illustrates the reach of the Facebook pages of Karapatan and NTF-ELCAC, the former a human rights organization constantly being the target of red-tagging attacks from the latter.
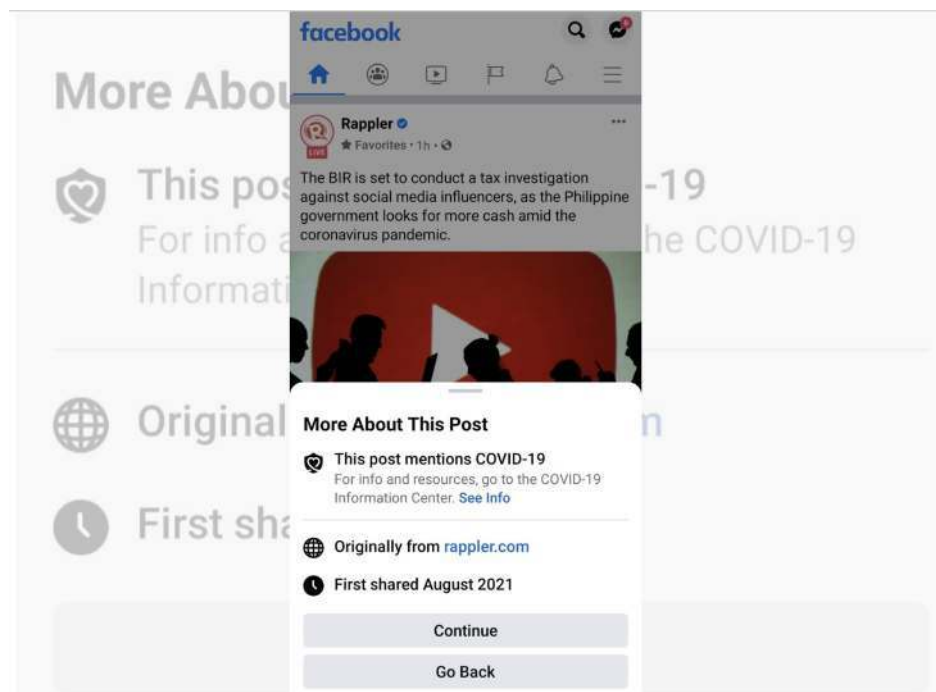
Through incoherent policies, neglect, and focus on engagement, platforms allowed disinformation to proliferate while diminishing the reach of news media.

Facebook (pages and groups), TikTok and YouTube are among the common platforms mentioned by FGD participants where they spotted falsehoods and disinformation messages around issues covered by the study.

Indeed, while these platforms claim they have programs to fight disinformation and did launch programs along these lines, they have clearly abetted the rise in disinformation in the Philippines through incoherent policies and a general focus on optimizing for the purpose of increasing engagement.

This is particularly evident during the pandemic when, purportedly to counter misinformation about COVID-19, platforms decided to boost official information sources. Facebook, in particular, introduced friction in the sharing of all stories (including those from verified mainstream media) if they mention COVID-19.
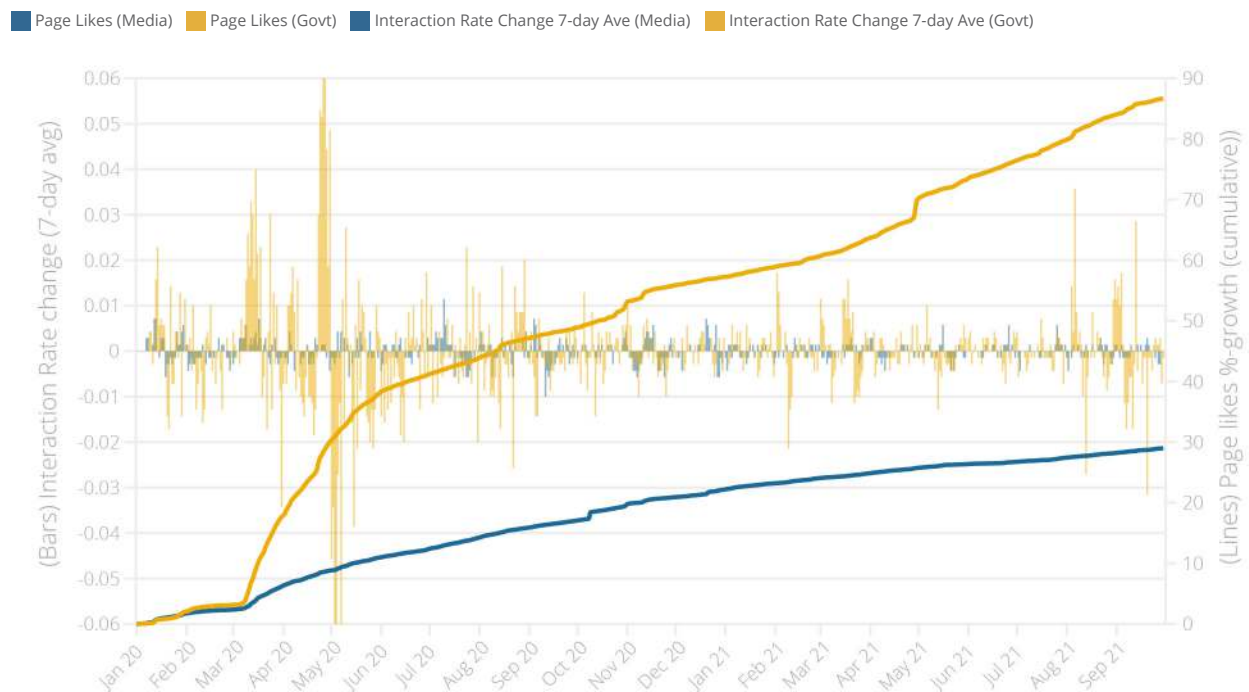
The modal above appears when a user shares any content that includes the keyword COVID-19 on Facebook. As the graphic above shows, this includes content that may not be health-related.

The link "see info" links to the website of official sources such as the Department of Health. This diminishes the capabilities of news organizations to provide checks and balances to government messaging in the space during a crisis.

The graph below shows cumulative growth of government pages vs media pages during the pandemic. Interaction rate translates to how engaging the posts of the pages are, while page likes is a rough approximation on the pages' audience that receive regular updates. Sudden spikes in interaction rates but with low page like growth may be attributed to occasional viral posts reaching a broader audience.

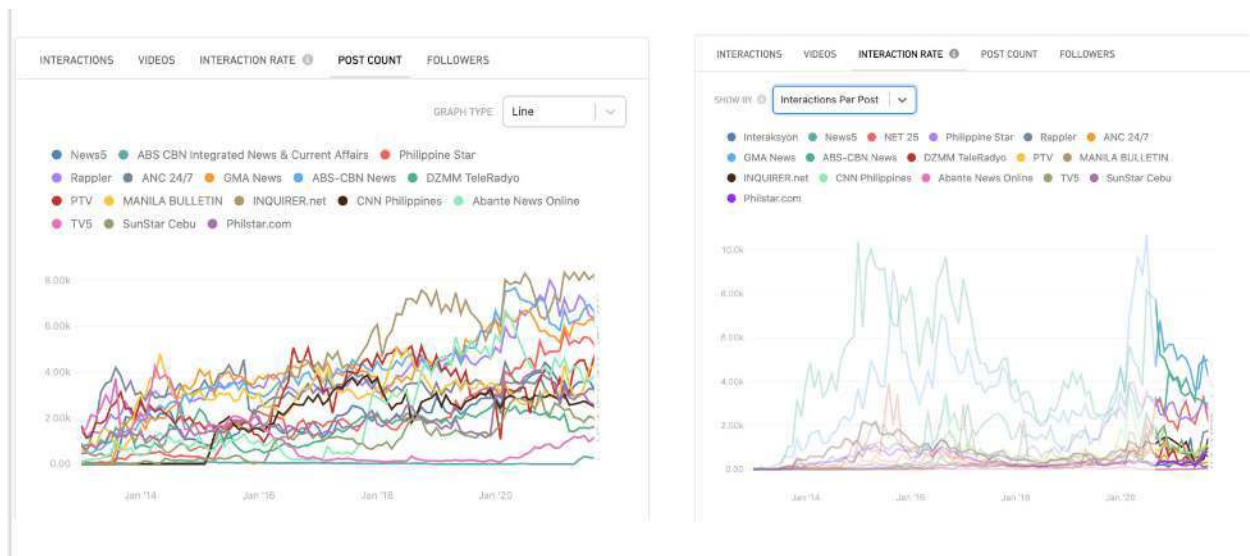## Page Likes of Government Agencies and Media Organizations

The following shows the growth of Facebook pages of selected government agencies and media organizations in the Philippines from January 1, 2020 to September 30, 2021. The bars show the daily interaction rate change (as a 7-day moving average) while the line charts show the cumulative increase of the page likes (expressed as a %-increase).

After assiduously courting news publishers to invest in native content on their platform, Facebook shifted its algorithms to prioritizing friends, family, and what Facebook described as "other core values" beginning in 2016.

These changes affected the reach of pages across the board, regardless of type and increased the reach of individual accounts and groups. This had a detrimental effect on the reach of many news organizations. Besides the fact that they now compete for virality with other actors focused on entertainment and novelty, news organizations are also forced to be sensational as well, to get boosts from the algorithms.

The graphs below compare posts made by the top 20 Philippine news pages on Facebook against interactions per post from these same pages from 2013 to 2021. As the graph indicates, news sites continued to invest their efforts into creating content for Facebook. However, interactions per post dipped significantly between 2016 to 2019 and only picked up in 2020, when the pandemic hit. This pick-up in interactions only happened for a few months, however. Interactions have since dropped to almost the levels of the lowest points between 2016 to 2019.

While news organizations suffered in terms of reach, disinformation continued to proliferate unchecked because administration-aligned social media influencers merely shifted messaging and propaganda to groups and user accounts.

Yet Facebook showed that it could implement targeted responses to programmatically counteract viral misinformation. As an emergency response to an uptick in viral misinformation in relation to US elections results in November 2020, it implemented an algorithm fix which boosted trusted news sources.[106] This algorithm fix was eventually rolled back.[107] However, the fact that it was able to do this shows that Facebook has the capacity to turn up fact-based, evidence-based content if it chooses to.

Facebook is not the only platform plagued by disinformation, YouTube is likewise under fire for failing to stop vaccine misinformation, conspiracy theories, and historically revisionist content on its platform. As of the third quarter of 2020, YouTube is already the top social media platform in the Philippines according to data from Statista.

Unfortunately, YouTube has also been a laggard when it comes to addressing disinformation. For instance, Rappler's own research has found that urban legends about the Marcos family's wealth continue to proliferate on YouTube because they do not violate YouTube's community guidelines. These video, which include fantastic claims that the Marcoses own a million tons of gold and that the gold came from clients who used to rule the prehistoric Maharlika kingdom, legitimize their alleged ill-gotten wealth, changing public perception, and are now paving the way for a to return to power.[108]

In a more recent story, Rappler also reported on how some YouTube channels build their audiences using celebrity content and then shift to political content midstream.[109]

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106   Kevin Roose, Mike Isaac and Sheera Frenkel, "Facebook Struggles to Balance Civility and Growth," The New York Times, November 24, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/24/technology/facebook-election-misinformation.html.

107   Kim Lyons, "Facebook rolls back 'nicer' News Feed that boosted mainstream publishers," The Verge, December 17, 2020, https://www.theverge.com/2020/12/17/22180259/facebook-news-feed-change-post-election-publishers-misinformation.

108   Vernise Tantuco, "YouTube's unclear policies allow lies, disinformation to thrive," Rappler, April 15, 2021, https://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/in-depth/youtube-unclear-policies-allow-lies-thrive-online-on-ground

109   Loreben Toquero, "Red flag for 2022: Political lies go unchecked on Youtube showbiz channels," September 22, 2021, https://www.rappler.com/nation/elections/political-lies-unchecked-youtube-showbiz-channels-red-flag-candidates-2022

A recently published study by Mozilla Foundation reveals that YouTube's algorithm recommends videos that violate its own policies.[110] Researchers at Mozilla analyzed around 3,362 videos that around 37,380 YouTube users found to be "regrettable." They found that about a fifth of reported videos fall under what YouTube's rules classify as misinformation, and a further 12 per cent spread COVID-19 misinformation, say the researchers.[111]

110   Chris Stokel-Walker, "Youtube's algorithm recommends videos that violate its own policies," July 7, 2021, New Scientist, https://www.newscientist.com/article/2283354-youtubes-algorithm-recommends-videos-that-violate-its-own-policies/

111   "Youtube Regrets: A crowdsourced investigation into YouTube's recommendation algorithm," Mozilla Foundation, https://assets.mofoprod.net/network/documents/Mozilla_YouTube_Regrets_Report.pdf, July 2021

Conclusions and recommendations

Without a doubt, digital media will have a significant influence on the Philippine May 2022 elections. While new COVID-19 cases are dropping and quarantine rules are easing up, the emergence of new variants means that campaigning will largely be online and on social media.

Given that content is tailor-fit and personalized, ordinary citizens need to be involved in policing this space. The bottom line is this: by its very nature, social media cannot be monitored the way traditional media is. This is a media environment that requires more eyes and more vigilance. Ordinary citizens and voters will need to be more discerning and involved in assessing and monitoring content (about candidates and the electoral process) published on their own social media feeds.

General recommendations

Advocacy groups need to recognize that the key to solving the disinformation problem is the social media platforms themselves. Algorithmic amplification of lies is at the heart of the disinformation problem. The solution should also be in addressing malign algorithms that amplify hate and disinformation for the sake of increasing time on site.[112]

Persistent attacks have clearly crippled the Philippine press and critical action needs to be done in this respect. Some recommendations in relation to this:

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112   Jeremy Merrill and Will Oremus, "Five points for anger, one for a 'like': How Facebook's formula fostered rage and misinformation," October 26, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2021/10/26/facebook-angry-emoji-algorithm/

- Platforms, civil society, the academia should promote credible news sources that can serve as key sources of verified information about candidates and the electoral process;

- It is important to support efforts around media and information literacy and fact-checking. A significant part of efforts should go into helping the public understand the role independent journalists and newsrooms play in a healthy information ecosystem. This is critical to rebuilding trust.

- Support also needs to go into exploring further action, including available legal options in relation to protecting journalists against online attacks. This needs to go beyond training on digital security and needs to take into consideration the most urgent threat: attacks against reputation.

- Support should also go to funding investigations and in-depth reporting around gut issues that will serve to illustrate to audiences the value of an independent press in a democracy.

Election-related recommendations

In relation to the elections, campaigning in the Philippines is governed by the Fair Elections Act, which imposes limits to the amount of space a candidate can use or purchase for advertising and campaign propaganda materials. Even publishers are required by this law to report on political ads paid for by candidates and their supporters.

The complex, networked, and decentralized nature of political campaign activities on social media makes monitoring campaign expenditures in the digital age challenging. How does one track spending on troll farms, information operations?

For the Commission on Elections (Comelec) and election watchdog groups, we reiterate this list of recommendations:

- Transparency is key. Platforms need to be pressured to share data critical to monitoring the elections effectively. Given that much of political conversations on social media are not in the form of traditional ad placements, data shared should not be limited to advertising data. Given that the Comelec and most watchdog groups do not have the capacity to monitor these new public spaces, support must be given to a new breed of watchdogs that can help monitor these spaces.

- Traditional media, as well as their online properties, have been required to submit reports about candidate placements in their platforms. The Comelec needs to take into consideration the online equivalents of these in regulations while being cognizant of the unique dynamics of social media. For instance, beyond tracking traditional online advertising, guest-posting by candidates in pages and groups should be treated as ad placements. Volunteer activity needs to be taken into account in the context of the possibility that some of these might be paid engagement work.

- It is important to publicly repudiate candidates who use disinformation tactics in order to win. Watchdog groups have said that fake news should be considered as a form of electoral fraud.[113]

- The Comelec has also said that spreading fake news about the polls is an election offense.[114] Enforcement of this needs to take into consideration the fact that most black propaganda is circulated by false accounts or anonymously-managed pages.

- In 2019, the Comelec required candidates to declare their official pages. This is clearly not enough as it has been illustrated that many pages used for black propaganda are

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113 Sofia Tomacruz, 'Fake news' should be considered form of election fraud, says watchdog,' Rappler, December 7, 2019, https://www.rappler.com/nation/politics/elections/2019/218420-fake-news-should-be-considered-election-fraud-kontra-daya

114 Norman Bordadora, Spreading fake news on polls, an election offense punishable by imprisonment — Comelec, Rappler, March 13, 2019, https://www.msn.com/en-ph/kids/other/spreading-fake-news-on-polls-an-election-offense-punishable-by-imprisonment-%E2%80%94comelec/ar-BBUIppe?li=AAb280R&%2525252525253Bocid=iehp

anonymously managed. On March 7, 2019, the Commission released a list of candidates who have complied with the rule. They did not, however, publicly release the list of official social media assets of candidates. Release of this data should be required.

- Particularly in relation to black propaganda and troll farms, candidates should consider engaging lawyers who can file the necessary legal requests with respective platforms and authorities as necessary to unmask personalities behind troll accounts responsible for dubious pages sowing disinformation.

To address algorithmic amplification of disinformation, the Comelec, the media and watchdogs should consider collectively engaging with social media platforms for structural reforms between now and May. They should also be actively engaging with lawmakers in order to introduce needed laws that will allow for more transparency and accountability on the part of social media platforms that operate within the Philippine territorial jurisdiction.

We are in a state where institutions and advocates could leverage evidence of the online wasteland of the past six years to push hard for reforms and impactful actions on the part of social media giants like Facebook and YouTube.

Finally, the media and advocates should ensure that disinformation becomes an election issue raised with candidates in various stories, debates, fora, and other venues during the campaign season.

Ultimately, the buck stops with the candidates and political parties. Beyond asking candidates for their stand on the issue of disinformation, the media should hold candidates accountable for disinformation that their respective camps circulate and propaganda that benefits them.

Beyond monitoring the actual voting and the vote count, these are critical steps to promoting a free and fair elections in May 2022 in a world now dominated by social media and whose outcomes can, unfortunately, be shaped by technology.