POLITICAL GASLIGHTING OF TROLLS UNDER THE DUTERTE REGIME

Abstract

When communication in social media platforms is used as a means for political control, it allows for a culture of truth manipulation and historical distortion to exist. The creation of troll armies as part of the government operations in countering critics and dissidents alike was to engage them in futile discourses. Composed of digital influencers, fake accounts, and algorithmic bots, their goal is to seemingly inflate Duterte's supporters, while also practicing a messianic culture in public opinion. Examining the psyche of online political trolls during the Duterte regime, this study explores how disinformation campaigns thrived through the social phenomenon of political gaslighting. Danah Boyd's concept of "attention hacking" elaborated how trolling is used as a psychological warfare against information in digital media spaces. Through a psychological approach, this study discusses the culture of influence, how trolls have the power to manipulate narratives to a convincing degree, which eventually translates to additional voter support. Rather than showing the large comprehensive network of trolling, this study contributes to the moral particularities and justifications that understands the developments of their interpersonal relationships as online political trolls. As the strategies of political deception in populism continues to advance, the troll presence and impact welcomed a wide support base of Duterte that carried over after his regime, which argues trolling as a propaganda

used as a response to arguments and grievances, as well as to form beliefs, sentiments, and opinions.

Keywords

Online Trolling, Disinformation, Political Gaslighting

Overview

Rappler CEO Maria Ressa admitted that as early as October 5, 2014, her team informed the public regarding a wide presence of "fictitious social media resources" whose intention is to infiltrate online conversations (2016). Related to Duterte's triumph was even before the 2016 national elections, Rappler reported that Davao City had been listed as one of the most engaged online communities in the Philippines (Ressa 2016).

Since 2016, the Partido Demokratiko Pilipino – Lakas ng Bayan had an organizational budget of $200,000 and a 400 to 500 staff capacity to run an online troll army with 92.5 million Filipino active social media users (Bradshaw and Howard 2017, p. 21). The creation of troll armies as one of the Philippine government's political communication strategies further boosted the presence and impact of former President Rodrigo Duterte's populist presidency. Their participation in social media discussions using various tone and speech styles were eventually utilized to create disinformation campaigns that greatly affected the Filipino people's knowledge of Philippine history and their manner of engaging in the electoral system.

Various studies have elaborately laid out their motivations and intentions for trolling, yet one cannot generalize these, given their agential capacity, diverse backgrounds, and hierarchies that make the whole trolling culture unpredictable (Cabañes & Ong 2018, pp. 25, 64). While trolls mostly engage in rational political discussions online, they inject emotions, which appeals

more especially for the working and low classes. These people lurk in social media platforms on a daily basis not only because for its easy accessibility, but it allows them to understand the current political situation according to what is handed to them by algorithms and levels of engagement.

Primarily, their task is to control and divert public behavior against the propaganda of left-leaning individuals and groups. Their performance of psychological operations through posting and commenting dynamic narratives ensured their advantages amid the information age. As much as they are likewise enthusiastic within these online spaces, trolls have their way of victimizing these online users when producing fake news, conspiracy theories, clickbait content, and bandwagon propaganda.

From these tactics, Duterte was casted in a light as a straightforward and simple politician with a solid political will for the people, which diverted his supporters from what he truly is – a human rights violator, misogynist, and a corrupt politician. Meanwhile, his enemies are branded as the liberal elite seeking government positions for their personal interests. This kind of perspectival shift in political branding shows how critical and fragile online spaces are for the history and future of Philippine politics.

When Populism constructs its "people"

Populism is widely exhibited in Philippine politics even before Duterte took his presidential seat. However, during the 2016 campaign period, this was further practiced when his pronouncement of the government's war on drugs was to affirm the program timeline and repeat his goals within three to six months, which eventually struck the Filipino people. His gimmicks, such as his vocal and unfiltered responses are one of his attempts of keeping his political power intact.

Julio Teehankee identified this as "performative populism," where the participation of the people is fused with and emerges from a strongman leadership (2017, p. 52). This performance

attempts to unite the majority until the people identifies with their leader, while the leader exhibits a cult-like behavior controlling the direction of their reasoning. From this tactic, Duterte created an online crowd that are willing to distribute his political stances in a manner that the ordinary masses can understand and follow.

Known as trolls, Duterte found a way to perceive as if the progressives and masses who dissent are smaller in numbers. Composed of half-truths and invented data, trolls developed a "contrived mythology" about Duterte's personality and state successes (Miller 2017, p. 54). Their propaganda in social media platforms consists of creating content that further increases their visibility, while taking advantage of the latter's vulnerabilities in the information ecosystem.

During April 2016, Duterte was branded as the "undisputed king of Facebook conversations" because he was involved in 64% of all electoral-related conversations (Etter 2017). As Duterte's campaign team maximized the social media's potential, the Rappler team created a "Shark Tank" database where they found out these messages to be linked back to 12 million pro-Duterte pages and accounts (Etter 2017). According to the former ABS-CBN Sales Chief and Duterte's social media manager Nic Gabunada, he built the online network with a budget of PHP10 million and started with 500 volunteers, which eventually increased their network up to 800,000 members (Ressa 2016). In March 2019, Facebook revealed that they removed 200 pages and accounts created by Gabunada (Rappler 2019).

Likewise described as the country's "troll-in-chief," Duterte maximized the ability of a troll army to influence and shape user behavior and attitude (Palatino 2017). The content is pertained to as "astroturfing," where trolls share their invented narratives as if they came from the demands of the minority and the marginalized (Bradshaw and Howard 2017, p. 11). According to a confessed troll, they attempt to instigate arguments in defense of Duterte, where their impersonation ranges from a "concerned netizen to [a] struggling OFW" (Caruncho 2016).

Contextualizing Political Gaslighting in the trolling culture

According to a report by a US organization named Freedom House, the Philippines is included in the 30 countries worldwide that allows manipulation of information posted online (Palatino 2017). In 2020, PHP8.28 billion in the national budget was allocated for "opaque intelligence and confidential activities," which significantly increased from PHP1.49 billion in 2015 (Ramirez and Thomas 2022). Provided this budget, trolls are used to amplify political discussions in social media platforms. While the trolls expressed their anxieties over the prevailing illegal substance consumption in the country, consequentially, the people exposed to this phenomenon longed for a strongman who is vocal about social order, as well as eradicating the issue during Duterte's first presidential year.

As trolls delivered the drug war issue with urgency, online communities were captured for its relatability factor, which led them to think that without Duterte enacting those solutions, their families and the country are at risk against drugs. The efficiency of this act was told in an interview, where an unnamed psychologist from the University of the Philippines was working with public relations firm to advance the mind conditioning capabilities of trolls (Caruncho 2016). Another renowned communications strategist, Armand Dean Nocum, admitted that their strategy is to infiltrate "convergence points," where popular topics are actively talked about (Almario-Gonzales 2017). Labeled as "digital gerrymandering," they intentionally engage with their targeted content because social media algorithm places the most shared, liked, or commented in the top section, which are the only ones picked up by site visitors (Boyd and Caplan 2016). Nocum asserted the effectivity of "third party endorsement" because ordinary users rely "comfort in numbers [and] credibility in numbers" (Almario-Gonzales 2017).

Danah Boyd characterized this as "attention hacking," where trolls lurk in viral posts in mainstream social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, and Youtube, for wider circulation of their content, as well as an attempt to influence public opinion and affect political

discourse (Marwick and Lewis 2017, p. 26). Victims who lack access or resources for fact-checking initiatives fall for content that is viral, engaging, and sensational. This shows how trolls use attention as their most valuable asset, given the internet is a stockpile of various information.

One notorious post is from Peter Tiu Laviña, Duterte's campaign spokesperson, wherein he released a statement against drug war critics who did not dissent about an assaulted and murdered nine-year-old girl (Ressa 2016). However, what was controversial here was the posted photo that was taken in Altamira, Brazil during December 2014 (Ressa 2016). Such misleading content exposes how easy it is for the government to propagandize, paving way to worsen the political division among the people.

This type of provocation is an example of political gaslighting, a form of psychological warfare well-used using power and persuasion in distributing information (Boyd 2017). It is typical that the gaslighting process include **confusion, lying, deception, isolation, denial, accusation,** and **manipulation** (Rietdijk 2021). Optimizing content is all about monetized attention, hence the emotionally-driven posts. Trolls can further popularize their messages until their victims question their reality. Discussions on drug war presented false narratives to anyone in social media, which misled and disoriented them with the real statistics and victims.

The political gaslighting tactic take advantage of vulnerable audiences because they produce a power dynamic where the gaslighted struggles to be confident or independent enough to challenge narratives. Its process either include controlling the whole situation to stop conflict or denying events while also denying accountability. In this case, the propaganda on drug war deflected the estimated extrajudicial killings data from local and international human rights groups, focusing instead on historical distortion and sowing fear against civilians.

The power bestowed upon trolls deliberately allowed for disinformation to thrive while downplaying the Duterte regime's lawless violence. Despite first-hand accounts about the drug

war, the consequences affected public opinion until historical facts and evidence-backed reports of critics, journalists, and traditional news media were doubted. Eventually, this led to a "public cognitive breakdown," destabilizing public memory and the already settled matters because of their truth-twisting act on a massive scale (Naraharisetty 2021).

Trolls assisted in normalizing daily killings flashed in the news and underlined a positive outcome for people who would easily embrace an authoritarian regime. People's online familiarity with the drug war rendered the issue tolerable by receiving repeated false narratives from impersonated grassroots supporters. According to Natascha Rietdijk, political gaslighting is pervasive and "often used defensively" in order to discredit their opponents, until the facts they know are obscured (2021, p. 8). This disorientation then enables loss of self-trust, hence the yearning for a strongman leadership.

At the end of 2021, the sociological phenomenon of political gaslighting under the Duterte regime resulted to a strong approval rating of 72%, eventually leading to Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos' presidential win (Ramirez and Thomas 2022). The rampant disinformation campaigns online revealed how fragile history is. A month before the 2022 national elections show that 95% of false claims were in favor of Duterte, while 92% were in favor of Marcos (Chua et. Al, 2022). This data proves how the online sphere can be an alternative information ecosystem for an authoritarian populist regime.

Do Not Feed the Trolls?: The Vulnerability of Digital Media Spaces

The real drug war data is still unknown to majority of the people because of the discrepancies among the government and human rights groups. Weeks before the end of his presidential term, Duterte blatantly admitted his incapacity to end the Philippines' drug problem, more so confessed that his promise was only a "campaign hubris" (Corrales 2022). Amnesty International reported more than 7,000 were killed during his first six months in 2016, whereas

the estimated data from 2016 to 2022 were raised up to 30,000 deaths (Wong 2022). Still, what the trolls spread are vilified narratives, leaving the "nanlaban" accounts as the usual endgame of all victims.

With the increasing cases of trolling, major news media outlets lose their credibility in the long run. Nocum describes it as the "Big Bang effect," where controversial troll posts are reported in the "tri-media," particularly in ABS-CBN, GMA, and Inquirer (Almario-Gonzales 2017). This negative effect inevitably blurs the people's political consciousness of the country's real and current situation.

As social media interface is continuously framed as if the feed or dashboard is personalized, these platforms control the information flow and condition the people's thinking until they are polarized from the truth (Abi-Heila 2018). Abi-Heila argued that online reality is "more nuanced" because of filters and algorithm (2018). Constant exposure to these types of troll-generated posts homogenize news consumption, which are crucial in determining user participation. People now prefer to interact with like-minded people, which in turn allows them to establish their own online realities and boundaries.

The chilling effect of Duterte's strongman leadership normalized state-sponsored groups that utilize social media platforms as an echo chamber of their controlled narratives. When they repeat what they believe, eventually people will pick up the truth that they are highly likely to interact with. Digital media spaces control online users to places they can incentivize them. In this kind of environment that revolves in organizing, Ressa warned that "the first casualty is the truth" (2016).

As another Marcos regime enters, his decision to not participate in the International Criminal Court investigation shows all the answers that there is regarding his stance on human rights. With disinformation campaigns slowly erasing a long brutal history of torture,

disappearances, and killings, strongman leaders leave an impression about how people's welfare

can be easily compromised, subjecting the very notion of democracy on the line.

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