

How strongmen influence digital narratives in the age of COVID-19:

The Case of Rodrigo Duterte

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In February 2020, Philippine President Rodrigo went on national TV and cursed at the new coronavirus. He said he was looking for the virus and wanted to slap it¹.

That was a time when the Philippines, a country of 105 million people, was not reporting new COVID-19 cases, except for that of a visiting Chinese woman, who tested positive in late January, and her male companion who died in early February. It was the very first recorded death from the virus outside China².

This brief period two months ago proved to be the calm before the storm. As of May 2020, the Philippines has more than 10,700 cases and at least 719 deaths, figures that are among the worst in Southeast Asia³.

To this day, Duterte, known for his fiery speeches and rambling late-night press conferences, still talks tough like he could just scare the virus away.

¹ Lopez, V. (2020, February 10). *Duterte says Philippines can defeat threat of 'p---inang nCoV'* GMA Network (website).

<https://www.gmanetwork.com/news/news/nation/725532/duterte-says-philippines-can-defeat-threat-of-novel-coronavirus/story/>.

² May, T. & Ramzy, A. (2020, February 2). Philippines reports first coronavirus death outside China. New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/02/world/asia/philippines-coronavirus-china.html>.

³ Luna, F. (2020, May 10). COVID-19 tally continues to rise with 184 new cases. Philstar.com. <https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2020/05/10/2013068/covid-19-tally-continues-rise-184-new-cases>.

But as he, and many like-minded leaders, should have realized by now, dealing with a pandemic of this magnitude will require a much more complex approach. The raging pandemic, the scale of which we have not seen since the Spanish Flu of 1918, puts health systems to test, with scientists racing to develop a vaccine and a cure, while countries struggle to flatten the infection curve in the meantime.

It's also a test of leadership⁴, especially for populist regimes where powerful rhetoric is no match for the killer virus.

In the Philippines, the administration of Rodrigo Duterte is under increasing pressure to contain the fast-spreading disease. Social media-crazy Filipinos are making full use of this digital platform to criticize Duterte's leadership—or the lack of it—at this crucial time.

Such is the advantage of a country where people spend an average of 10 hours a day on the internet, the most by any country⁵, and around 79 million Filipinos have social media accounts⁶. It's not hard to imagine how worked up they can get when their leaders don't deliver. Complaints over delayed mass testing, inadequate personal protective equipment, and insufficient food and cash aid for the poor are amplified online.

While the streets of Luzon, the largest island in the Philippines and home to 57 million people, are generally quiet and empty during the lockdown, there's furious traffic and no social distancing online as far as opinions about the pandemic are concerned.

⁴ Rasheed, Z. (2020, April 2). COVID-19 pandemic is testing world leaders. Who's stepping up? Al Jazeera. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/04/covid-19-pandemic-testing-world-leaders-stepping-200402201221844.htm>

⁵ Philippines tops world internet usage index with an average 10 hours a day, 1 Feb 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2019/feb/01/world-internet-usage-index-philippines-10-hours-a-day>,

⁶ Global Digital Report 2019 (2019, January). <https://wearesocial.com/global-digital-report-2019>.

Much of the criticism is, of course, directed at Duterte himself.

Here is a leader, who, while claiming to champion federalism, has resorted to a highly centralized approach to dealing with the COVID-19 crisis. He told local governments to “stand down” and strictly follow guidelines set by the central government when one city sought innovative ways to transport its medical front liners early during the lockdown⁷.

But while he has surrounded himself with capable managers, mostly retired military generals, Duterte is seen as the problem. His public statements are often compared with those of such leaders as Justin Trudeau of Canada for their lack of clarity and coherence, no matter how hard his spokesmen try to “interpret” him afterward.

To many Filipinos, Duterte is miserably failing in his biggest leadership test yet.

His supporters are well aware of this emerging narrative, and the fact that his overwhelming popularity won’t last long if he continues to mismanage the crisis. So they try to control the narrative, tapping his vast army of paid trolls, the same bunch that helped him in the presidential election 4 years ago⁸, and the same group activated to manage controversies that came after.

One strategy is to flood Facebook with uniform posts produced and propagated by a single source, using the so-called “copy-and-paste” approach. It was used to counter comments ridiculing Duterte over an unintelligible remark he made in early March.

⁷ Tomacruz, S. (2020, March 20). ‘Stand down’: Duterte orders LGUs to follow IATF orders on Luzon lockdown. Rappler (website). <https://www.rappler.com/nation/255214-duterte-orders-local-government-units-follow-orders-luzon-lockdown>.

⁸ Bradshaw, S., & Howard, P. (2017). Troops, trolls and troublemakers: A global inventory of organized social media manipulation.

When asked by a reporter in a televised interview if the Philippines had enough testing kits in case of a surge in COVID-19 cases, Duterte went on a rambling discourse about health centers, the bubonic plague, and witches burned at stake. The statement made no sense, fueling speculations about his physical health or even mental health condition⁹.

In response, his troll army unleashed uniform Facebook posts saying they “pitied” the President because he “looked so overworked.” “He may not be perfect, but he truly loves” the Philippines, according to the engineered post.

A similar post, slightly reworded, surfaced later on in response to criticisms against another Duterte press conference on COVID-19.

This was not unexpected.

A University of Oxford study¹⁰ revealed that Duterte had spent \$200,000 for a team of 400 to 500 “keyboard warriors” to post in his favor and attack his critics online. Experts describe this tack as “patriotic trolling.”

Of course, the weaponization of social media for political ends did not begin with Duterte. The Philippines has been described as “patient zero” for online disinformation, with industry players exporting their services to neighboring countries such as Cambodia¹¹.

⁹ Malasig, J. (2020, March 10). ‘The Kit’: Duterte’s ramblings at COVID-19 press conference are now creative poems. Interaksyon (website). <https://www.interaksyon.com/politics-issues/2020/03/10/163897/the-kit-duterte-ramblings-at-covid-19-press-conference-are-now-creative-poems/>.

¹⁰ Bradshaw, S., & Howard, P. (2017). Troops, trolls and troublemakers: A global inventory of organized social media manipulation.

¹¹ Roper, G. (2019, November 19). Patient Zero: PH creative, digital workers being used to spread disinformation. ABS-CBN News. <https://news.abs-cbn.com/news/11/19/19/patient-zero-ph-creative-digital-workers-being-used-to-spread-disinformation>.

The elections in 2016 became a playground for what a study described as “networked disinformation,” whose chief architects involved advertising and public relations executives under contract with politicians¹².

One such strategist was quoted in the study as saying: “The only difference is that you’re a high-class prostitute in advertising, but in political marketing you’re a low-class prostitute.”

Such initiatives are also seen more recently in efforts to sway the narrative away from public dismay over Duterte’s handling of the COVID-19 crisis.

In March, Congress passed a law dubbed “Bayanihan To Heal as One Act.” “Bayanihan” is a Filipino word referring to a community’s heroic and collective action in times of need. The law grants President Duterte additional powers to deal with the pandemic by realigning items in the national budget to provide food and cash assistance to low-income families.

But the legislation also came with a rather disturbing provision, not found in the original proposal, but inserted by legislators later in the deliberations. It imposes a jail term and a fine of nearly \$20,000 on anyone caught spreading “false information” about the COVID-19 crisis on social media and other platforms¹³.

Many were concerned about the chilling effect of this provision on free expression and legitimate criticism. True enough, the government soon unleashed the full force of its law enforcement agencies to go after supposed violators.

¹² Ong, J. C., & Cabañes, J. (2018). Architects of networked disinformation: Behind the scenes of troll accounts and fake news production in the Philippines. Newton Tech4Dev Network.

¹³ Republic Act No. 11469. <https://www.officialgazette.gov.ph/2020/03/24/republic-act-no-11469/>.

Among the first to be arrested was a public school teacher whose Facebook post expressed her frustration over the lack of food aid from village officials¹⁴. Later, police brought in an artist who made a sarcastic post about the widespread infection in her community¹⁵.

Philippine authorities warned of more arrests during the final stretch of the community quarantine until the end of April. Lockdown measures will be implemented, “martial law-style,” with more soldiers deployed in the streets, while police conduct “cyber-patrolling” for those spreading fake news online.

Curiously, the Philippines’ own foreign secretary inadvertently spread false information on Twitter. He retweeted a photo of a crowded market in Manila supposedly showing people violating the quarantine with impunity. Manila’s mayor later informed him that it was an old photo—fake news, in short¹⁶.

But unlike several ordinary Filipinos arrested and charged, the Cabinet official got a gentle reminder to be careful with sharing information online. It’s yet another narrative that the Duterte administration has created – a double standard where the law applies more strictly to the common people, while flexibility is accorded to others.

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<https://www.rappler.com/nation/256157-teacher-son-arrested-without-warrant-general-santos-city-facebook-post-coronavirus>.

¹⁵ Mayol, A. (2020, April 19). Cebu artist jailed for allegedly spreading ‘fake news’ on COVID-19. Philippine Daily Inquirer (website).

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¹⁶ Marquez, C. (2020, April 18). Viral video of crowded Divisoria market an old video—Manila gov’t. Philippine Daily Inquirer (website).

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