RESEARCH ARTICLE

Hoaxford's Candidate: Political Memes as an Empowering Response to "Dying Democracy"

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ABSTRACT

This paper engages with the idea that democracy is dying because of social media – an idea prevalent in mainstream Philippine political discourse. The idea is problematic because it paints a hopeless and deterministic picture of media's effects and use within Philippine society and obscures possible interventions that citizens can undertake through social media platforms, the use of memes as critical discourse being one example.

To support the argument, a critical discourse analysis was undertaken on a manually constructed opportunistic corpus focusing on the case of then presidential candidate Bongbong Marcos Jr.'s false claim that he is a University of Oxford graduate, and the memes and discourse it produced. The sample includes over one-hundred and twenty thousand comments drawing from news reports posted on Facebook by the Philippines' top two mainstream outlets (i.e., ABS-CBN and GMA) and some critical citizens who grabbed mainstream media attention (i.e., Tarantadong Kalbo, the Oxford Philippines Society, and the nuns from Religious of the Good Shepherd). This analysis is anchored and guided by critical culture, meme, and participatory democratic theory.

While memefication can be used both to reinforce political misinformation and further prevent actual civic engagement from happening, affirming mainstream discourse to an extent, meme discourse can be also be used to make citizens aware of false narratives and expand the scope of citizen democratic participation. The paper concludes by arguing for a more nuanced approach towards disinformation, highlighting the need to incorporate a broader sociocultural understanding in viewing

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both the problem and possible interventions. It argues for the inclusion of citizens and citizen practices alongside institutional approaches as they can serve as key allies to fighting back against disinformation.

Keywords: *Philippine politics, political memes, mediated democracy, Facebook, democracy in the digital age.*

Facebook – Home of Memes and Disinformation

Democracy and social media are fundamentally incompatible. This is a conclusion one might come away with if they listen to the ongoing discourse by academics, tech advocates, and mainstream broadcast news agencies. For instance, CEO of Philippine online news site Rappler and Nobel laureate, Maria Ressa, recently reiterated her 2019 claim during her Nobel Prize acceptance speech – social media platforms, as an amplifier of fake news and disinformation, make it impossible for citizens to reliably determine facts from falsehoods. This, in turn, makes it impossible to have well-informed democratic participation and civic engagement (Abarro, 2021; Tsakilis, 2019). Survey data in the Philippines suggests that her countrymen agree, revealing that most surveyed Filipinos believe both fake news is widespread on social media and that most news found on social media is fake (Philstar.com, 2018). Former Global Head of Elections Integrity Ops for Political advertising at Facebook, Yael Eisenstat, corroborates the idea, claiming that social media companies "...are antithetical to the concept of reasoned discourse" because they are incentivized to engender hate and lies on the platform as user-engagement fueled by these emotions generate the most profits. She also felt that conversations with fellow citizens was more stress inducing than her time dealing with suspected terrorists overseas because of how polarized and radicalized people were becoming due, she claimed, to the effects of social media (TED, 2020), emphasizing the breakdown of civil discourse. The whistleblowing of former Facebook product manager, Frances Haugen, and evidence presented to the U.S. Congress has further entrenched the narrative towards this direction. The documents revealed that Facebook was aware and was actively hiding internal research revealing how its algorithms amplify misinformation (Bond & Allyn, 2021). A whistleblower from the now-scandalized 'political consulting' firm, Cambridge Analytica, described how they used Facebook data to exploit and target users' inner demons for the purposes of helping Donald Trump win the U.S. presidential election and winning the Brexit campaign (Cadwalladr & Graham-Harrison, 2018). Analysis from Buzzfeed News has also argued that hyperpartisan Facebook pages, which has grown as large as mainstream news pages, consistently fed false information to their followers, creating a 'new and powerful force in American politics and society' (Silverman et al., 2016). Lastly, Western mainstream news headlines have taken on this framing of social media, especially Facebook, as a threat to democracy (e.g. Stankiewicz, 2019) setting how the disinformation conversation is framed in public discourse. Though advocates for change against disinformation still remain hopeful, Ressa for instance has been described as a 'merry-warrior [with] energy that never lets up' despite reporting no good news (Antrim, 2022), and Philippine academics believe social media plays a key role in the fight against it (Quilinguing, 2019), pessimism is prevalent, especially after the results of the 2022 election (Obordo et al, 2022).

In short, whether because of social media algorithms, a lack of government oversight, the callous disregard of profit-driven social media owners, or outside political groups who take advantage of social media's vulnerabilities to manipulate the masses – there are several reasons to think that democracy is at risk due to the effects of social media disinformation. More importantly, these conversations have been framed by traditionally influential voices both within and outside social media companies (i.e., prominent journalists, high-ranking former Facebook employees, governments, mainstream news), which in turn places the response and its direction in their hands. While they are still fighting for social media platforms free from disinformation, this hope is overwhelmed by the negative coverage and results associated with the effects of disinformation.

Initial social media disinformation research in the Philippines has taken on a similar framing - focusing on an analysis of platforms, networks, and the content media platforms produce in order to advocate for possible interventions. Gaw, Cruz, and Pineda, for instance coins the term meta-partisan news in describing a network of 'news' channels that self-produces, self-endorses, and self-references partisan political narratives by both appropriating and perverting news elements to advance politically manipulative discourse (as cited in Rappler, 2022). Bunquin et al. (2022), on the other hand, demonstrates how non-political Facebook pages were being used to transmit disinformation from partisan sources. Early encounters with disinformation in the 2016 elections also revealed how pro-administration politicians benefit more from its presence than opposition candidates (Chua & Soriano, 2020) emphasizing disinformation's use against the public. Later encounters during the 2022 Philippine presidential election, moreover, revealed that the amount of disinformation has gotten worse, due to a 'firehose' strategy of flooding social media with disinformation content (Chua et al., 2022).

Under discussed in the above narratives are the users themselves – the people most affected by disinformation. Because of the heavy emphasis on control and manipulation from above or on institutional responsibility, there is hardly any in-depth mention of user practices on social media with regards to democratic participation in the face of disinformation. Moreover, terms such as 'fake news,' or 'disinformation,' have yet to be widely defined in the mainstream and are hard to disambiguate from content such as political public relations, memes, or satire. A survey cited by the Philippine Star, for instance, merely asks if participants have encountered 'fake news,' without going into further detail on what that meant, much less what participants did about it nor giving an operational definition of fake news (Philstar.com, 2018). A similar question asking if social media content changed people's political stances (Patag, 2018) did not clarify what type of content changed the political stance nor did it interrogate the circumstances surrounding the change of political view, nor the types of political views or stances changed. Moreover, the survey did not interrogate other pertinent questions such as were the users generating fake news themselves, have been the ones spreading them even if inadvertently, or doing so on purpose (e.g., when passed along to a friend for discussion), missing more possible nuance from which to understand social media and user disinformation dynamics.

Another closely related issue to this dynamic is how social media practices translate to practices in the physical world. On one hand, there are those who would claim that the hate and violence engendered on social media does not stay on social media but translates over to physical practice (Abarro, 2021) contributing towards the dissolution of the public sphere and a shared sense of the sensible. Events such as when a man brought an assault rifle into a local restaurant to 'investigate' an online conspiracy theory about child sex trafficking in a local pizza shop, which he saw from social media, provides examples supporting that idea (Siddiqui & Svrluga, 2016). On the other hand, there are also those, such as Eisenstat, that believe in the power of people to form mutual grounds for understanding in face-to-face contexts through listening and empathy. However, she also believed that this ability was overwhelmed by the effects of social media (TED, 2020) emphasizing its complicated impact on democratic political practices.

Research that does explore the effects of social media on users' political experiences reveal mixed results. In one survey, it was found that the more Filipino youths used social media, the less politically active they were. Although they were in a good position to access and make use of social resources, the surveyed respondents’ low political participation could partly be explained by a lack of communication with others (Bunquin, 2020). Some research have found that despite finding no correlation between social media exposure and political awareness, there was a significant increase in ‘radical political participation[1]’ the more users were exposed to social media (Ibardeloza et al., 2022). Others have found that social media exposure on political science students, while not enough to change political behavior, could still be an important and transformative force in these students’ lives (Flores et al., 2022). Research that explores disinformation actors themselves, on the other hand, while revealing some glimpses into their lives, motivations, and strategies, still emphasizes its structural and institutional aspects and an institutional response (Ong & Cabañes, 2018; Block & Riesewieck, 2018).

One possible avenue that seems ripe for inquiry, in short, is detailing and understanding how people in democratic countries interact with and respond to social media disinformation.That said, how should one approach the phrase, ‘social media and disinformation is killing democracy?’ Critical disinformation research, has argued that the picture is not as simple as the top-down narrative suggests. Research done on the United States 2016 election reveals that relatively few people are exposed to disinformation (Allen et al., 2020; Grinberg et al., 2019; Guess et al, 2019) and production is highly concentrated on a few platforms (Grinberg et al., 2019; Guess et al, 2019; Nelson & Tajena, 2018). Research interrogating possible changes in the 2020 U.S. election revealed a lessening of citizen exposure and concentration of exposure to disinformation on social media platforms (Hancock et al, 2022) – similar findings have yet to be researched and published within the Philippine context.

Some propaganda researchers, moreover, believe that “…the fundamental mistake of the ‘internet polarizes’ narrative is that it adopts too naïve a view of how technology works and understates the degree to which institutions, culture, and politics shape technological adoption and diffusion patterns (Benkler et al, 2018, p. 8). Some, are critical against the focus of disinformation by the ‘liberal establishment,’ arguing that the focus on reinstituting liberal gatekeepers to regulate ‘fake news’ ignores the sociopolitical problem of why many would be led to believe disinformation in the first place (Adler-Bell, 2022). Through this view, media and the disinformation circulating on them are not understood as an isolated and all-powerful poison but rather a component of the greater sociocultural milieu in which it operates; disinformation construction being shaped by the social media context and its actors and vice versa. These observations echo the findings of early propaganda theorists who, while originally holding similar fears about the effects of television and radio on public discourse, eventually found that media did not disrupt the societies in which they were being used as users had multiple ways to process and resist media messages for themselves. Rather than disrupt societal outlooks, they found that these technologies reinforced the already existing status quo (Baran & Davis, 2013, p.22).

Admittedly, however, the situation is different from the early 1930s and tech companies have more ways now to collect data and mediate customers unbeknownst to them (Royakkers, et al, 2018), at least changing the balance between institutional control and citizen agency. While it is undeniable that mediation is in a state of expanded ubiquity and pervasiveness never before seen prior to the digital age, it is argued that there is space to explore mediated hegemonic-citizen dynamics. In fact, it is exactly because the situation is both radically different and emotionally charged that there is a stronger need, now more than ever, to take a step back and thoroughly assess the situation. Initial research on the oppositional use of disinformation, co-opting hashtags to reach opposing audiences (Liponhay & Alis, 2022) highlight how it is possible for citizens to act on disinformation, not merely be deceived by it.

This paper argues that the idea that 'democracy is dying because of social media and disinformation' is problematic because it engenders a hopeless, deterministic picture of media's effects and use within Philippine society and obscures possible interventions that citizens can undertake in response. It mainly tries to answer the research question: 'Is there more that citizens can do to resist disinformation on social media?'

Through an analysis of one particular social media practice, specifically the creation of political memes in response to a particular piece of political disinformation, this paper aims to not only answer in the affirmative but also details the dynamics of this response. Moreover, this paper aims to provide some arguments as to why citizens could prove to be valuable allies in the fight against disinformation. At the very least, it is hoped that media practitioners and policy advocates would include them as an integral part of the solution.

Subsequent sections of this paper are divided in the following way: first, the methodology, scope and framework of the work is discussed in more detail. In agreement with Dueze (2011), Filipino people, culture, and society are intertwined within social media, meaning to say social media interventions should not be separated from the user. Second, a literature review of meme-related research and theories is undertaken, beginning broadly first then moving towards Philippine-specific research. Then candidate Bongbong Marcos Jr.'s lies and the Facebook conversations and memes it generated is then analyzed in the third part. The paper concludes with observations and discusses future avenues for further social media and disinformation research.

Definition of Terms, Scope, Methodology, and Conceptual Framework

Limiting the scope of inquiry, this paper focuses on one social media practice, specifically the creation of political memes on Facebook in response to political disinformation and disinformation actors, and the discourse surrounding this generated within a particular Philippine context, the 2022 presidential election. The discourse focused on is based on the lie that then Philippine presidential candidate, Bongbong Marcos Jr., perpetuated by consistently claiming that he was a graduate from the University of Oxford.

This paper applies a discourse analysis on a corpus of over 104,000 Facebook comments compiled from the coverage of mainstream news outlets surrounding the topic (primarily ABS-CBN News(a), 2021; ABS-CBN News(b), 2021; GMA News, 2021), and the comments on posts made by prominent individuals commenting on the matter (primarily Tarantadong Kalbo, 2021; Oxford Philippines Society, 2021; Religious of the Good Shepherd, Philippines-Japan 2021). In constructing the corpus, these six posts and the comments responding to them available on March 2022, comprise the totality of the corpus. Inputs were manually inputted in Microsoft Excel tagged by Source, Post/Comment, Multimodal, Links to external source, Concordancers, and Theme. Source refers to one of the six posts while Post/Comment distinguishes between the original post and comment. Multimodal is a tag used to track if a comment was multimodal, tracking only images, GIFs, images with text, stickers, and emojis. Videos, sounds and profile pictures were not included in the corpus as these were beyond the researcher's capacity to consistently transcribe. Emojis were transcribed using their name as it appears on Emojipedia.org for the sake of consistency (e.g., [Red Heart], [Green Heart]). Images, on the other hand, were transcribed by verbalizing what was seen on the image. Images with text integrated on them and comments accompanied by images or GIFs were transcribed in a similar way (e.g., GIF image 1: KAY LENI KAMI [Philippine Flag behind and yellow background]; BBM pa rin gusto nmin...[man with brown beret and crooked teeth laughing]). Links to external source tracks if a comment hyperlinked to something else – only used on the main six posts in order to include the corresponding news articles from the mainstream news outlets into the analysis. Concordancers, or keywords which appear alongside other texts, were heuristically determined based on the researcher's personal understanding of the political discourse at the time (e.g., Leni, Marcos, BBM, Duterte, pink, solid, [pink heart], [red heart], [green heart], anak, tatay, paninira, 4x40, are example concordancers). Lastly, themes were annotated by analyzing the frequency of particular concordancers (e.g., BBM [red heart] [green heart] is marked as [BBM support]).

This corpora is best described as a sample opportunistic corpora – sample in that it covers only a specific type of language [use] over a specific period of time and opportunistic in that it represents nothing more nor less than the data that it was possible to gather for a specific task (McEnery & Hardie, 2012, p. 8, 11). Given the politically charged nature of the topic, a skew in themes became readily apparent (i.e., there was more [BBM support] and [Opposition insult] in general and more was found on mainstream news sources compared to the posts by prominent individuals). The findings cannot be generalized nor does it claim to accurately reflect the Philippine population's overall online political practice. It merely reflects responses found on these six posts.

A discourse analysis is employed because it is a critical interrogation of the politics of meanings and the construction of certain truths within structural and agentive positions that define the place of both institutions and individuals in society (Giddens, 1984 as cited in Aguirre, 2016). Further, Carole Pateman's conception of Participation and Democratic Theory is employed in discussing online participatory democratic practices. It is characterized by its focus on the effects of engagement in democracy upon both those individuals taking part and the wider society in which democratic action is situated. It is transformative, in that citizens engaged in democratic activities, both formal/institutional and informal, shape their individual behavior and promote their capacity and knowledge to effectively engage in the political system. Moreover, through participation, individuals can also shape democratic institutions and have more control over the whole process (Dacombe & Parvin, 2021).

In short, the methodology is employed to understand user agency and practice as it relates to the peculiar structural reality of Facebook and democracy in the Philippines.

Respecting the ethical guidelines of internet research (Franzke et al, 2020), all data cited in this work is one publicly available on Facebook. Following a deontological approach to ethics, however, identifying information especially in the case of individual users were de-identified. Meaning to say, although quasi-public fora, such as a Facebook comments section, entail no privacy based on the technical realities of the platform, there was an attempt to respect privacy as much as possible nonetheless. As that translates to this work, identifying information such as names were omitted whenever possible and actual comments cited here were paraphrased or discussed as falling under a group of themes, making it more difficult to link a statement back to a particular Facebook profile. Following Facebook's protocols against automated website scrapping (Brunz, 2018 as cited in Franzke et al, 2020: p.12) a manual compilation was done – potentially introducing human error in the transcription. What was compiled is limited to the aforementioned posts and comments meaning no further inquiries about an individual (e.g., checking their profile or if they made any related posts in other groups) was conducted in an attempt to respect individual privacy and as to guard against unnecessary judgements. Statements with judgement (e.g., Bongbong Marcos and his family have lied to the public) are only stated in light of supporting evidence.

The coverage of ABS-CBN and GMA is defined as mainstream following the idea that these two television companies are the biggest networks in terms of audience reach and perceived influence to shape public opinion. Though traditional print actors have migrated their news content digitally and one outfit, Rappler, has been finding success, ABS-CBN and GMA is still considered as the country's most dominant players (DaangDokyu, 2020; Estella & Löffelholz, 2019). Survey data supports this idea, finding that the top Filipino source of political news was television (91% of respondents citing it as their primary source, followed by radio at 49%, then the internet) (Macaraeg, 2021). 'Prominent individuals' were identified as those that were making mainstream news headlines themselves through their commentaries on the issue (e.g. GMA News, 2021, Villaruel, 2021 respectively) or have made mainstream news headlines through their online political practice (e.g. Tenedero, 2021). In the case of the latter, their content directly commenting (Tarantadong

Kalbo, 2021) on the matter and the comments that generated was the only content included in the corpus.

To get an initial idea on what topics and themes were getting attention, comments were first organized by 'Most relevant' in order to see which posts had the most engagement through emoji reactions. Initial themes and patterns were then recorded. The 'All comments' filter was then applied in order to access replies that Facebook filtered out in order to arrive at a fuller picture of Facebook discourse about this topic. Memes, and the discourse surrounding them, was chosen as the primary unit of analysis because of the prominence of the phenomenon as a form of citizen engagement. In a sea of repeating texts and emojis, the images stood out in stark contrast. Some comments, moreover, only made sense in relation to an existing meme (e.g., [rather than] 40x4). Memes, due to its treatment by scholars as explained later on, is treated as a form of popular culture. A literature review of facts related to Marcos Jr.'s lie was also conducted in order to better situate the online discourse in relation to the historical and physical one.

The Philippine context was chosen, as compared to other contexts which feature heavy use of disinformation, because it seemed uniquely promising given that it is a country where social media is considered a fundamental force on society as a whole, this fact being exacerbated by the placing the country's citizens in the longest home lockdown (See, 2021). At the time of writing, the country is also on the verge of experiencing its second 'social media election,' one where more political actors have been seen making heavy use of the platform and disinformation (Quitzon, 2021) thus providing ample amounts of data. As the researcher had no means to truly disambiguate which comments were made by actual citizens as opposed to those made by disinformation actors,[2] there is no attempt to distinguish between authentic or inauthentic social media practice and this work operates on the assumption that this has become a feature of dealing with online Philippine political and disinformation discourse.

In an effort to approach this complication, the analysis of memes as a form of popular culture within this work is primarily informed by the ideas of Antonio Gramsci and Stuart Hall. From Gramsci, his view that popular culture is a site of struggle between the 'resistance' of subordinate groups and the forces of 'incorporation' operating in the interests of dominant groups in employed. Popular culture here is not imposed from on high by the powerful nor does it come from a romanticized idea of 'the people' from down below, popular culture is a terrain of exchange and negotiation between the two. The texts and practices of popular culture move within what Gramsci calls a 'compromise equilibrium' – a balance that is mostly weighted in the interests of the powerful. The process is historical (labelled popular culture one moment, and another kind of culture in the next), but it is also synchronic (moving between resistance and incorporation at any given historical moment) (Gramsci, 1971 as cited in Storey, 2018: p. 10). From Hall, his idea that popular culture is a contested site for political constructions of 'the people' and their relation to 'the power bloc' is employed:

> '*The people*' refers neither to everyone nor to a single group within society but to a variety of social groups which, although differing from one another in other respects (their class position or the particular struggles in which they are most immediately engaged), are distinguished from the economically, politically, and culturally powerful groups within society [*the 'power bloc'*] and are hence potentially capable of being united – of being organised into 'the people versus the power bloc' – if their separate struggles are connected. (Bennett, 1986: p. 20 qtd. in Storey, 2018: pp. 11; emphasis mine)

Combining both understandings, both 'the people' and 'the power bloc' do not refer to a single homogenous group but are defined only in relation to the struggle happening within the terrain of popular culture; in our case the political meme. Because both actor groups are fluid, it results in the creation of an ever shifting and changing political discourse – one that allows and invites the endless possibility for rebuttal and contestation. The aim by employing these concepts is to capture the sense of dynamism that Philippine social media actors have employed in relation to online political messaging. As some studies (e.g. Guanzon, 2022; Liponhay & Alis, 2022) demonstrate, opposing citizens will use the messaging and themes of supporters in efforts to breakthrough opposing 'echo chambers.' In short, authenticity of actors cannot be verified, in part because of social media's affordance to allow users to remain anonymous and in part because discourse actors' positions are fluid – dominant in one context but a minority in the next. However, this is not to say that themes and patterns cannot be observed when analyzing a discourse of ever shifting actors and messages. It is underscored that by tracking text in relation to contested discourse and actions people take to support a particular side, this can generate insights as to how people politically interact with one another within social media.

The Meme, More than just Funny Images

Understanding Memes as a form of Discourse

Memes as a notion have changed overtime and have found prominence in online popular culture as one of the primary means of communication on the platform. In 1976, Richard Dawkins originally conceptualized the meme as any idea that replicated itself within the culture of a society (Dawkins, 2006). He conceptualized the meme as the cultural analogue to the gene and believed it to be the primary way people shared cultures and built up communal understandings with one another. He argued, however that both genes and memes were primarily interested in the proliferation of the individual rather than seeking to better the species. The selfish meme, he rejoined, need not be wholly self-interested and can be transcended by humanity with deliberate effort (Dawkins, 2006: pp. 209-210). In simpler terms, even before the internet age, memes were associated with this idea of both being spreadable and having to be critically engaged in, should the goal of humanity really be to better society rather than privileging individuals and individual ideas. The idea is that though people can form cultures around memes[3], none of these were inherently beneficial to society overall.

Limor Shifman (2014) was one of the people to start articulating a difference between physical meme practices versus what internet memes had become. Departing from the Dawkins' conception, Shifman was observing internet memes notable for its mostly visual nature – an image with short text. Shifman noted three main attributes of the digital meme: (i) its gradual propagation from individuals to society, (ii) its reproduction via copying and imitation, and (iii) its diffusion through competition and selection. Reproduction occurs via the processes of mimicry (e.g., making image B with the aesthetic consideration of image A) and remix (e.g., taking elements of image A and transposing it into new situation C). Remixing, she argues, is central to the digital meme as that is what allows it to spread through several contexts and be edited by different individuals. Digital memes, furthermore, are different because the creators of the meme are made to operate through the performative self because of the internet's affordances. In this case, uploaders become both the meme's medium and its message (Shiftman, 2014: p. 30). The meme then, thanks to simplification and digital technology, has dramatically increased the pace and reach of its spread and the role of the users.

To summarize the difference, if Dawkins' meme encompasses all of human culture and was replicating itself in a domineering way [this over that], the digital meme, on the other hand, is better understood as saturating itself within different contexts [this, everywhere] through the processes of remix and reproduction. Spread can happen, therefore, by invoking only particular elements of the original meme, which can be far removed from the original context (see Bowers (n.d.) for an example of Garfield being recognizable despite taking on the form of different Pokemon). Saturation by being defused, moreover, while not totalizing is not passively done either as it still has to compete for attention against other memes in the overall discourse. Put simply, it takes a certain level of user engagement for memes to spread and its influence is never truly fixed. Lastly, because of the performative nature of the digital medium, it has transformed the meme spreader as part of the meme itself, highlighting that both the spreader or their role of spreading can also be the subject of subsequent memes. Memes, in other words, are very much about the people who use them as much as what they present.

Bradley Wiggins (2019) adds another layer in his understanding of the meme in that he incorporates the interaction with the computer as necessarily part of digital culture. People have to navigate not just others and the ongoing discourse, but also the affordances of the digital platform. Put concretely, details such as image size (e.g., horizontal Facebook posts are ideally 1,200 x 630 pixels) and platform moderation rules inform the construction of digital memes. Critically, he adds that participation by different actors is unequal given that some people have better access to digital spaces than others (Wiggins, 2019: pp. 21-22), underscoring how power relations and subject positions also inform how memes are created and accepted. It is through these intersections of people, power, memes, and machines that discourses are carried out on digital spaces.The discourse, Wiggins contends, must necessarily be grounded in ideology; which he defines as a system of knowledge and behaviors which constrains what is possible and delineates what is marginal (Wiggins, 2019 p. 24). Therefore, internet memes should be understood, he argues, as discourses in action. Memes are ways for people to actively create and carry conversations, just as much as they are ways to stifle others.

Applying the insight that people are also equally memes, it is argued that in the moment the meme is used, the act positions people into assuming a particular identity within the discourse while simultaneously creating an identity tied to that position. If one shares a pro-Marcos meme, for example, it is not hard to imagine them being linked to the said dictator by someone else in response. Ultimately, doing a just analysis of memes needs to take into account a consideration of ideology, semiotics, and intertextuality.

Political Meme Research – Gaps and Insights

It is with this respect to this background that other initial papers covering political memes abroad (e.g., Bulatovic, 2019; Kulkarni, 2017, McLure, 2016) and in the Philippines (e.g., De Leon & Ballesteros-Lintao, 2021; Pontillas et al., 2020; Calimbo, 2016) can be said to have gaps that need to be addressed. One such gap is how memes were predominantly defined by their humorous aspect. By conceiving of memes as being primarily humorous or satirical as a means of communicating information (e.g., Bulatovic, 2019 and Kulkarni, 2017), for instance, this has excluded other kinds of political memes and political meme use. For instance, a prominent neo-Nazi wrote an internal document for the alternative-right movement stating that laypeople should not be able to tell if they were joking or not. They wanted the ability to downplay their hate speech as just a joke or 'meme' in some instances, but also have it serve as an affirmation of identity and as a means for communicating plans for others in the know (Marantz, 2019: p. 5). Moreover, this assumption, Marantz argues, allowed disinformation actors to have their once fringe ideas creep into mainstream American discourse, which allows them to prominently shape it in favor of Trump – in plain view yet underappreciated by most. Philippine research though better in this regard (e.g., memes as humorous, intertextual, and propagandic in De Leon & Ballesteros-Lintao, 2021; memes as humorous yet aggressive rebuttals of political elites and their narratives Calimbo, 2016) have missed out on cases where meme formats are used more to convey political information.[4]

Another gap in the literature is how memes are conceived limited to a particular form (i.e., as pictures with text) or connected to a particular group of users (Gen-Z in the case of Pontillas et al., 2020). In the former case, it leaves out the insight that other components of the meme (i.e., just the text or a particular element, a particular theme, or the people as part of the meme as McLure, 2016 points out) can serve as the body of another comment, mixed into regular discourse. In the latter case, defining internet users and memes to a particular group by not clarifying how they sampled their content, obscures the range of actors that can use internet memes. Some work (McLure, 2016), lastly, are preliminary in their scope. In short, there is more to be done with respect political memes and their intersections with disinformation.

Philippine political meme research consistently find that memes can be used as a means to discuss about larger sociocultural disinformation narratives. As Calimbo finds for instance, people were using memes to ridicule and resist the narrative of *Daang Matuwid* [The Straight Path]. In line with greater theoretical research, elements for meme analysis do not include just the instance itself but also incorporate its context and its uses. Research that incorporates context have proven to be fruitful with respect to disinformation user processing. For instance, research found that people responded to political memes differently compared to memes that were perceived as non-political. While non-political memes were being discounted as 'simple jokes' and were being taken more light-heartedly, Huntington (2017) found that people had more feelings of aversion when viewing political memes; the arguments found in these memes more scrutinized. This, she concluded, was indicative that people recognize when political memes were going beyond the mere telling of jokes even though they did not find said memes effective.

To summarize thus far, it is in this context of Facebook and disinformation as a destroyer of democracy where this work must place the analysis of this set of Philippine Facebook political memes and the practices surrounding them. Over several years, several prominent figures, both internationally and locally, have highlighted the negative effects of social media as a tool for hegemonic actors to manipulate its citizens and how it is being used to undermine democracy. Proponents of this idea further emphasize that the knowledge and attitudes found on social media can both isolate and radicalize societies. It is not denied that there is some truth and data to support this. However, in overemphasizing just technology and its most powerful actors, the framing of this problem backgrounds people and their practices, therefore limiting other avenues to arrive at a solution. To try and better understand social media's place alongside democratic practices, it is argued that there is a need for more theory-driven and empirically grounded research.

Drawing from the ideas of Gramsci (1971) and Hall (2009), the term popular culture is understood as a terrain of struggle which defines 'the people' and 'the power bloc.' This leads to an understanding that both the discourse and its actors are fluid in nature and thus constantly shifts as the discourse unfolds. From meme theorists, the ideas of Shifman (2014) and Wiggins (2019) are employed. Shifman (2014) articulates that the affordances of digital media allow for an increased pace and reach of meme participation. Moreover, she emphasizes that the user is just as much the medium and message as the meme itself because of the pronounced performativity aspect of the internet. Wiggins (2019), on the other hand, views memes as discourses in action – discourses which must be analyzed with respect to ideology, semiotics, and intertextuality. Though both thinkers referred to memes which were primarily visual accompanied by text, Dawkins' (2006) conception of meme as referring to any idea is employed in the analysis.

Through a literature review on political memes, both internationally and locally, gaps were found with respect to the research. These gaps primarily were in limiting the conception of the meme, in form, content, and use. This has led to consequences and omissions both in theory and in practice. Existing works, however, have highlighted that memes have been used by citizens to critically engage with existing hegemonic narratives. As the subsequent section demonstrates, while the findings affirm the fears found in the destroyed democracy narrative, it also affirms how memes can be used in contesting disinformation narratives.

Hoaxford's Candidate

Historical Context – Origins and Reactions to Marcos Jr.'s 'Alma Matter'

Then Philippine presidential candidate, Bongbong Marcos Jr. (Junior[5] henceforth), claimed that chief among the qualifications that make him fit for the presidency is that he is a graduate from the University of Oxford, England. Post-internet, the issue first became a part of mainstream news discourse when Rappler was fact-checking then Senator Junior's resume. Even back then, he maintained that his resume and the representation of his educational background was accurate (Vitug, 2015). This fraudulent representation of his credentials, Rappler noted, is reminiscent of his father and former dictator's fake World War II medals and, in fact, the Oxford lie originated during the dictatorship era. Documents left behind when the Marcos family fled the country revealed several correspondences that detailed that the late dictator knew Junior was failing during his time at Oxford and the extent with which Senior used the resources of the state to cover it all up. Being unable to pass his preliminary examinations, Junior stayed at

Oxford at least until 1978 in order to secure a special diploma in social studies. Although the special diploma was an award taken mainly by non-graduates (Ariate et al, 2021) this served as the basis for the Marcos family to claim that Junior graduated from Oxford.

Responding to the dictator's narrative, however, a group of Filipino students studying in Oxford released a statement on Facebook challenging the '...misinformation relating to the academic qualifications of Ferdinand "Bongbong" Romualdez Marcos, Jr.' Here they reiterate the explanation that was articulated by Ariate, et al (2021), affirming that the special diploma Junior received was not equivalent to a bachelor's degree nor did he ever graduate from the college. Moreover, these students released the statement claiming it was in aid of public discourse in the hopes of preparing Filipino voters for May 2022. They also expressed that disinformation prevents Filipinos from exercising democratic rights in a fair and meaningful way (Oxford Philippines Society, 2021).

Shortly after, Junior's resume was suddenly changed to reflect 'Special Diploma', replacing the 'Bachelor of Arts in Political Science, Philosophy, and Economics' line (Manabat, 2021). Junior's press release team also made a public announcement, presumably responding to the Oxford Philippines Society's Facebook post. "We stand by the Degree confirmation which was issued by the University of Oxford. It is up to anyone to question or challenge this with the said university if they so please," Marcos' chief of staff Atty. Victor Rodriguez said (qtd. in Gonzales, 2021). And challenged further it was, with citizens 'bombarding' Oxford with emails asking about Junior's degree. In one report, "a Facebook user alleged that he directly contacted Oxford's registar's office since lots of online Filipinos "are highly skeptical of Rappler's report..." (Malasig, 2021) showing how social media users were moved to action by media events. Furthermore, various people were showing screenshots of the replies that they have received from Oxford on various social media platforms, further adding fuel to the story and demonstrating how social media users were using the platform to both respond and push the narrative forward. The final installment of this latest resurfacing was when a Facebook group, Religious of the Good Shepherd Philippines-Japan, released an image of a letter dated in 1983. The same query asking if Junior's degree was real or not was also asked by a sister of the faith, with the response being exactly the same as it is now (Religious of the Good Shepherd, Philippines-Japan, 2021).

Though the lie originally started during the dictatorship, a time long before the internet, both mainstream and social media discourse revived and amplified the narrative as talking points both for the 2016 and the 2022 election. Through the revival, the issue has become as much of a social media phenomenon as it is a political phenomenon in that regular social media users were able to participate and drive the narrative through Facebook comments and memes, with the clear and express intent to sway public opinion to vote one way or the other. Also noticeable is the amount of sustained anti-disinformation discourse Junior's tale generated. Across several decades and for several days during the 2022 election period, rebuttals against Junior's credentials were happening – is this not proof that participatory democracy is still alive and well? With several concerned citizens, in the Philippines and abroad, using social media to both call-out political fraud and help prepare their fellows for the upcoming election, it is apt to say that a struggle is ongoing at the very least.

Fears – Reified Discourse through Memes

Another way to read the situation, democracy is dying proponents would counter, is that why is there still a need to address a nearly forty year old issue, already proven false time and time again? Further, how can an already elected senator of Philippines still get away with publically faking his credentials and still enjoy both popular and institutional support? Various comments surrounding the story and the memes found within them are the reason people feel that democracy is dying – although there is publicly visible clamor, consequences are few and far between. Just using the comments found on GMA News (GMA News, 2021) coverage of the Oxford Philippines Society statement, as an example, and sorting by 'Most Relevant,' for instance, the top comment, with around one thousand reactions and one hundred and eight replies[6], immediately calls the media report biased and vows to vote for Junior still. If one expands the replies to that statement, although there are some people defending the coverage and trying to uphold the legitimacy of the coverage, it reveals even more accounts expressing the same support for Junior's presidency. Another example, with over two-thousand six hundred reactions and five-hundred forty-six replies, begins by wishing media company Rappler a stroke. Moreover, the commenter (i) claims that they already know he is not a graduate, (ii) then proceeds to refer to another candidate's failed interviewed (Leni Robredo's), before (iii) finally backtracking by citing an article listing Marcos as a notable alumni of Oxford, once again affirming its relevance to Junior's presidential identity. Expanding on the failed interview meme, many other comments will be found reiterating '40x4 =1,600' as a meme emphasizing how his poor opposition only leaves Junior as the right choice. This is a reference to another piece of false information about Junior's most prominent opponent, Leni Robredo, which originated from an edited video presenting the seeming gaffe. In actuality, someone removed the Vice President saying 10 prior to 40x4 causing the error ([halelangit], 2021) and yet the meme lives on as supposedly representative of Robredo.

Most of the rest of the comment sections goes on and on in this way, reiterating the same themes and sentiments: We already know; it does not matter; we'll still vote for him; the opposition is more of a failure; reporting is biased; but also he did go to Oxford still; Junior has other equally impressive [fabricated] achievements anyways. Among the themes and meme-related practices, it is the (i) volume, which drowns conversational spaces such as the comment section by paid internet trolls (Chua et al., 2022; Quitzon, 2021; Chua & Soriano, 2020), and the (ii) persistent oversimplification and/or mischaracterization of reality through reified discourse which have people believing in the democracy is dying narrative. There is no talking to trolls, as they do not participate in the discourse in good faith. It becomes hard to convince non-trolls if fact-based evidence is branded as fake if several fake sources outnumber the factual ones. Within the dataset specifically, evidence that was happening was observed when similar messages were repeating in frequency as concordances were checked (e.g., BBM [red heart]).

This, alongside survey results showing Junior as the top presidential pick (e.g., Mercado, 2021), Facebook groups with thousands of members supporting him, and people marching in the streets, claiming to be a silent majority (Espina-Verona, 2021) seems to be strong evidence to show that truth has failed in the Philippines. Civic discourse seems impossible to achieve given how Junior supporters do not want to be reached out to and only want to impose their views onto others. Reiterating Ressa's point of view, "A lie told a million times becomes a fact" (Ressa, 2019), emphasizing the disconnect between facts and political practice as engendered by social media affordances.

Here, it can be seen how exclusionary online spaces can be. Reasoned and authentic discourses, and the evidence that engender that discussion, seems to be regularly drowned out by bad faith as moderation practices are not robust enough to keep up. The sheer amount, coupled with the idea of having to deal with fake people makes it feel daunting and futile to engage and correct the lies – why bother when no one is going to listen anyways? Furthermore, even if a democracy-is-dying proponent acknowledges that struggle and counter-narrative remains a possibility on online spaces, they can point to a clear incongruity between the factual content itself, the article correcting disinformation in this case, and the types of conversations that become prominent in the comments section – two different worlds with two different realities.

Resistance – Counter-discourse through Memes

That is not to say that the situation is hopelessly one-sided. Counter-memes to this narrative also exist and are used in circles against Junior. By circles, it is meant that it is prominently on spaces outside mainstream Facebook news posts where popular culture as a struggle really comes into prominence.

An analysis of the comments of the online comic that this article's title comes from makes this clear. Explaining it in brief, the comic depicts a diploma asking a nervous Junior where he got his degree from, Hoaxford or Oxfraud[7] (Tarantadong Kalbo, 2021). Through memefication, we find that not only is the reality of the situation plainly stated, contrary to the candidate's framing, it also claims the narrative power away from the pro-lie supporters.

Searching the comment section of this post again under 'Most Relevant' though, this yields the same pro-Junior discourse presented in the previous subsection. However, what also becomes more pronounced is that there are more commenters not only affirming the message of the comic but also generating new memes about the situation. For example, one plainly states that Junior is just the son of a corrupt politician and adds that he is 'an Oxfraud major in tallano gold scam;' Tallano gold referring to Marcos supporter's claims that Junior will revitalize the Philippine economy using the hidden gold his family supposedly owns, but only if elected. Another commenter Photoshopped a fake diploma from the 'University of Recto' having earned the title of College Drop-out (Onnad, 2021), referencing the well-known diploma mill of the Philippines. Lastly, another meme is notable, because it both chastises the use of memes by Marcos supporters, listing them down (e.g., 4x40, *Dilawan* [Yellows]) but also turns the supporters into the meme themselves because, as the post claims, they can only hurl shallow insults while being unable to deny the Marcos family corruption (De Vera, 2021).

Meme-Talk – Intertwining Fear and Resistance

As can be seen in both pro and anti-Marcos examples, we can see that memes are intertextual. In one sense, they are intertextual because they incorporate the ideas of the other, either pro-/anti-Marcos, in the process of forwarding the narrative in their own way. This is an example showing how discourse across tribes/political lines are possible through memes. In another sense, memes are intertextual not just because they refer to the discourses found on social media but because they draw from and are also embedded within the greater Philippine sociopolitical context. It is argued that memes are appealing to communicate in and only make sense because they both (i) incorporate prominent notions of Philippine practices and (ii) expand upon what is possible in societal imagination (e.g., Recto can now fake foreign degrees not just local, thermometers being the better candidate because at least they have degrees). Both pro- and anti-lie instances are also clearly ideological, diametrically opposing one another (i.e., truth and honesty matters in leaders versus it does not) and are clearly fighting for the spotlight within these online spaces just as much as they are projecting a particular way people should view Philippine politics.

Through the act of memefication and co-optation, the ongoing anti-truth discourse can be made visible to all while still undermining its effects, emphasizing the unfixedness of the message and the ability of even the worst lies to be a reason that communities mobilize. This presents us with a picture of memes that are more nuanced. Rather than simply affirming one's own identity as part of the pro-/anti- group, it acknowledges and incorporates the points of the other and once again shows that listening and understanding is still possible in online discourses. While it is granted that pro-Marcos supporters can flood the discourse by just repeating lies over and over, memefication and its practice shows a possibility that citizens have of not only breaking away from that but also neutralizing it within citizen-held spaces.

Another observation is that it is within these spaces of prominent, yet non-institutionally mainstream, actors, the comment sections are not fully saturated by disinformation floods. It is in citizen spaces where we find a richer variety of memetic discourse. Not only might a variance in memetic discourse serve as a possible indicator for determining paid versus more authentic engagement, it also points to a possible solution to combat propagandic practices in civil practice – having more citizens engaging in political discourse and making it easier for them to do so, either by systematically protecting these or by giving citizens more effective moderation tools. Assuming that the targets of paid trolls mostly cover traditional and critical institutions, a decentralization and proliferation of decentralized critiques could prove an effective reply against disinformation campaigns. Moreover, a decentralization of critique could be a chance for critics to make it more relevant and responsive within their respective contexts. For instance, when covering Facebook misinformation campaigns, John Oliver's research team argued that disinformation was easy to debunk in English because of the sheer number of institutions and people speaking the English language able to have the means to debunk the information. However, the same disinformation translated into another language was left untouched given that there were less people Facebook could rely on to flag disinformation content (LastWeekTonight, 2021). In short, more active citizen participation in this case could serve as a check against the killers of democracy. In addition, Oliver also asked citizens to create messages incorporating memes and the visual rhetoric Facebook groups operated in as a possibly effective way of reaching those communities.

However, this shift to increased community participation diminishes the idea that traditional media institutions are the gatekeepers of truth and calls for a reimagining of their role in democracy – an idea that might be hard to accept given it seems counter-intuitive to institutional logic, and certainly one that requires further examination. Similar to when citizen journalism was first debated upon, it will be promising to see how the rise of social media influencers and prominent social media groups will further force already established media institutions to rethink themselves assuming the goal is really to better democracies through media practice. With reported plans by the incoming administration to legitimize vloggers while 'reviewing media coverage policies' on presidential events (Ranada, 2022) and the takeover of ABS-CBN's frequencies by administration allies (Rey, 2022; ABS-CBN News, 2022), it is acknowledged that there is a very real reason to worry given that there is also visible evidence of disinformation networks tightening its grip in the country. Moreover, pessimistic feelings are prevalent since the victory of now President Junior (see Obordo et al., 2022 for sample accounts). Should citizens be counted upon to lead the charge against disinformation and this administration, institutional actors should think of ways to not only increase morale but also sustain affect.

Rather than having prominent opinion leaders, perhaps it could be possible for ordinary citizens to form collectives which approach and respond to disinformation as a community. Citing research once again, there seems to be indication that ordinary citizens are already doing this in an effort to combat paid trolls (Guanzon, 2022; Liponhay & Alis, 2022; De Leon & Ballesteros-Lintao, 2021; Pontillas et al., 2020; Calimbo, 2016). This also coincides with findings that a lack of political participation, despite increased political access, is due to lack of communication (Bunquin, 2020). Forming communities of participatory governance could potentially be a viable way to sustainably engage in Philippine democracy. Should the affordances of social media make it easier to participate politically, just as how meme generation was made simple by meme template websites and made traceable with an ever updating repository such as KnowYourMeme.com, it is believed that this would lead to more hope yet for democratic practices within digital spaces.

Affirming previous works, citizen practices do seem to have some impact, given that pro-administration officials are still forced to respond after collective action. Further research can look into defining more concrete metrics as to what constitutes effective participatory democratic action, can delve further into how such online practices change institutions and institutional practices, and explore how other, non-traditional means of democratic practice can be used for citizen resistance against disinformation. The findings of such works can potentially compliment existing calls for institutional change within the Philippines and can help develop a vocabulary to better understand and counteract political disinformation. Such alternatives, it is argued, are necessary given the present administration and their allies' insistence to stick to their narratives despite several evidence to the contrary. Considering evidence, it is believed that calls for institutional change will continue to fall on deaf ears while many suffer the consequences in the meantime, necessitating interventions in the immediate future.

Beyond the Meme – Conclusion and Final Thoughts

To summarize, it is demonstrated through the Hoaxford online discourse that memes are another way to participate politically in online spaces. In the case of Philippine popular culture, the struggle between 'the people' and 'the power bloc' (e.g., journalistic media and anti-Marcos citizens versus established politicians, paid internet trolls, and pro-Marcos citizens) is alive and well. Who the people or the power is (i.e., questions of authenticity or which side is right) need not be defined as both sides can and have claimed that they are the ones fighting the good fight against the other who they see as trying to force a narrative upon them. A more productive analysis of the phenomenon to focus on should look into the contested discourse itself and how the discourse partly shapes the political actions of the people involved. Though it is acknowledged that political participation on social media is not equal, paid internet trolls can and have been known to drown out a topic with a repetitive narrative with no hope for further discussing, there are other places for discussion outside traditional news posts both on- and offline. In these spaces, such as the comment sections of non-establishment prominent commentators, a variety of counter-discourse is readily accessible. This not only presents an anti-thesis to pro-Marcos discourse but also incorporates it in a way which infantilizes pro-Marcos supporters – memefying them in memefying the issue. In short, the lie repeated does not necessarily make it fact. Whether this creates further participation or further segments citizens into their respective echo chambers will remain to be seen, as it is unclear if there are incentives for one side to seek out and meaningfully engage with those who share opposing views on online spaces. Should spaces for discussions in good-faith increase, however, it should bode well for realizing a reality in which social media complements participatory democracy within that particular society.

There is, however, a place in which emphatic and good-faith listening can already happen and that is through quotidian conversations with friends, families, and neighbors. If the argument is that digital hate can translate into physical practice, it is argued that democratic physical practices can also translate back into digital discourse given the two are more intertwined than the 'democracy is dying' framing would have us believe. A powerful example of this is when Robredo supporters gave out water and snacks to Marcos supporters during the latter's caravan. Captioning the post with the hashtag #MasRadikalMagmahal (It is more radical to love) (LB for Leni, 2021) allowed these citizens to actively frame for themselves how they want their political stances to be viewed and how these stances can go beyond tribalism politics. In their work, Benkler, et al (2018) found that the propaganda feedback loop, a dynamic which reinforces media messages which conform to the worldview of its members, is able to dig its roots in a media ecosystem that already wants to incorporate such a loop, rather than be the cause as to why truth is distorted (p. 79). In their words, "The fundamental challenge [in dealing with the democracy dead idea] is not purely or even primarily technological. It is institutional and cultural; which is to say, ultimately, political (Benkler et al, 2018, p. 38; words in brackets mine) and as such, we should also consider solutions to the problem beyond just policing content on social media platforms or leaving it solely in the hands of media practitioners, policy makers, and tech giants.

This work does not deny that there is a need to increase institutional social media moderation and to better protect the freedom of the press from constant threat – these are definitely integral in forming the solution that addresses disinformation. However, lies and falsehoods will continue to spread if solutions still omit citizen participation and do not address the existing problem culturally. Increased citizen participation in democratic processes, both on- and offline, can be a possible solution. In order to realize this however, policymakers and agents fighting for democratic practice should at least include citizens in the solution – avoiding conceptualizing them as people merely manipulated into supporting the existing hegemony.

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About the Author

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Endnotes

1 The authors did not define 'radical participation,' although acts such as voting and signing petitions were listed as radical (p. 54).

2 Ong & Cabañes (2018) detail how disinformation actors intentionally adopt different personas in order to target groups differently.

3 Dawkin's original conception included things like Philosophy or art, a conception much more expansive than its present understanding.

4 De Vera, 2021 is an example of a meme that straightforwardly call outs pro-Marcos memes.

5 Not only does this serve to shorten Junior's name, it also allows me to disambiguate Junior-specific references or references which pertain to his family practice and context at large (e.g., Pro-Junior referring to him vs Pro-Marcos referring to his ancestry).

6 All numbers are estimated and may have changed when they were first checked on March, 2022.

7 Both words a portmanteau of Hoax and Oxford, and Oxford and Fraud respectively.