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Asian Perspectives

Democratic Decay and Disinformation in the Digital Age

By John Nery

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Disinformation in the digital age is “fake news” and more; it uses information technology to create, distribute, and amplify the power of networked lies.

Disinformation is old news; it has been in use ever since humans discovered the power of the lie.

Disinformation in the digital age is “fake news” and more; it uses information technology to create, distribute, and amplify the power of networked lies.

Democratic decay, the gradual deterioration of the institutions of democracy, is both a consequence of disinformation in the digital age, and the objective, the very bulls’-eye, of much of digital disinformation.

An Asian perspective on democratic erosion and digital disinformation can be useful in several ways: It can highlight the aggressive use of disinformation in the region’s history of colonialism, and indeed prove that disinformation was a preferred weapon of colonizing forces; it can help correct the America-centric focus of much of the existing literature, by demonstrating a greater variety in the scale and impact of disinformation in different media ecosystems; it can help focus attention on the fatal consequences of “fake news.”

Above all, an Asian perspective can help underline the role digital disinformation plays in hastening democratic decay.

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Pbr Boholst > Mayor Rodrigo Duterte for President!
Mar 22 at 6:12am · 🌐

POPE FRANCIS ON DUTERTE

"I was amazed by the fact that a politician who is aiming at the highest position could be this honest. It was a first encounter for me to see a politician being honest about his concerns for his country other than kissing my hands for the sole purpose of getting the support of the majority of the Catholic population... there's no need for an apology. I admire his honesty."

-Pope Francis



EVEN THE POPE ADMIRES
DUTERTE
AND SO DO THE FILIPINO PEOPLE

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A Long History

On July 20, 2007—some nine years before Duterte took his oath as president of Philippines, over 10 years before Donald Trump announced he was running for president of the United States—Merriam-Webster selected “disinformation” as its Word of the Day. The popular feature noted that the earliest use of the term was likely made in 1939, in a reference to a Nazi intelligence service, but acknowledged that for much of the 20th century the term was associated with *dezinformatsiya* (“misinformation”), after a department of the same name in the Soviet Union’s spy agency KGB¹.

In popular use, disinformation is commonly referred to as “fake news,” which is in fact only a subset of it. The contemporary familiarity of the term may have its roots in a November 3, 2016 article in BuzzFeed, by Craig Silverman and Lawrence Alexander². “How Teens in the Balkans are duping Trump supporters with fake news” revealed that young Macedonians were cashing in on a “digital gold rush” by publishing “sensationalist and often false content that caters to Trump supporters.” It was a blockbuster story, and a new rush to use the phrase ensued. “And thus began the modern—and internet-friendly—life of the phrase ‘fake news,’” the BBC writes³.

But months before, in March, Duterte’s supporters were already sharing a post on Facebook that purported to quote Pope Francis’ admiration for the presidential candidate’s “honesty.” The leadership of the Catholic church in the Philippines had to issue a disclaimer. The phrasing of its statement, however, revealed that, like many others at that time, it had not yet understood the organized nature of the disinformation⁴. “May we inform the public that this statement from the Pope IS NOT TRUE. It came from a satire piece and is a fake. We beg everyone to please stop spreading this and to please cease from maliciously using the Pope for political gains...”

The post (complete with an image of the Pope) was not “a satire piece,” but only one component in a coordinated campaign of false information, intended to deceive its audience⁵.

Seven of the 20 countries with the fastest growth in absolute number of Internet users are in Asia.

Today, “fake news” is often described or understood as digital. Even in Asia, the emphasis on digitally manipulated information, circulated through digital platforms like Facebook, for political gain or to profit from a digital gold rush, is a reflection of the times—and for good reason. Seven of the 20 countries with the fastest growth in absolute number of Internet users, in We Are Social’s January 2019 report, are in Asia. India leads the world with an additional 97.8 million users; three members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations added over 30 million in one year (Indonesia, plus 17.3 million; the Philippines, plus 9 million; Cambodia, plus 4.5 million). China is second fastest in the world, with an additional 50.6 million users.

JAN
2019

INTERNET GROWTH RANKINGS: ABSOLUTE GROWTH

BASED ON THE YEAR-ON-YEAR CHANGE IN THE TOTAL NUMBER INTERNET USERS IN COUNTRIES / TERRITORIES WITH POPULATIONS OVER 50,000

#	LARGEST ABSOLUTE GROWTH	▲ USERS	▲%	#	LARGEST ABSOLUTE GROWTH	▲ USERS	▲%
01	INDIA	+97,885,011	+21%	11	PHILIPPINES	+9,000,000	+13%
02	CHINA	+50,666,155	+6.7%	12	ARGENTINA	+6,801,754	+20%
03	U.S.A.	+25,379,895	+8.8%	13	AFGHANISTAN	+5,694,586	+142%
04	INDONESIA	+17,300,000	+13%	14	TURKEY	+5,027,251	+9.3%
05	IRAN	+16,241,877	+29%	15	CÔTE D'IVOIRE	+4,529,978	+69%
06	UKRAINE	+15,325,054	+60%	16	CAMBODIA	+4,500,000	+56%
07	TANZANIA	+14,560,898	+173%	17	GERMANY	+4,322,056	+5.8%
08	ITALY	+11,490,731	+27%	18	NIGERIA	+3,572,903	+3.8%
09	BANGLADESH	+10,158,000	+12%	19	SPAIN	+3,541,726	+9.0%
10	BRAZIL	+9,946,450	+7.2%	20	ALGERIA	+3,484,731	+17%

But it is crucial to pry one’s eyes away from the digital space long enough, to see that disinformation and its upstart spawn, “fake news,” do not need to inhabit the internet or submerge in social media to wreak consequential damage.

“If by ‘fake news’ we are talking about the distortion or the selective framing of facts, then I do not believe we are in new territory,” writes

the Malaysian scholar Farish A. Noor⁶. “There is a long history of this and it goes back to the beginning of the printing press and popular journalism in the nineteenth century.”

His instructive examples of deliberately slanted reporting, which “presented the non-Western Other in terms that were jaundiced or biased,” include the distortions and disinformation that justified the British role in the three Anglo-Burmese Wars between 1824 and 1885⁷.

Empires may have been built on information, but their power was often legitimized and reproduced through misinformation, distortion and outright lies as well. Again, the history of Southeast Asia is instructive here: when Britain turned its sights on Burma, the Kingdom of Burma was seen and cast in a decidedly negative light by colonial scholars and reporters.

News reports emerged and were circulated across the empire, about the alleged wrongdoings of the Burmese towards their own people and their neighbours. The popular theme at the time was the idea that Burma was a “belligerent power,” bent on becoming a dangerous “Asiatic empire.” Burma was referred to as “the Burman Empire” in maps and news reports, though the fact was that the real empire was Britain, and it was Britain that posed an existential threat to Burma, as it spread its power across much of northern India.”

“

If by ‘fake news’ we are talking about the selective framing of facts, then we are not in new territory.

(Noor's remarks at the Asian Journalism Forum in Singapore in 2007, on which his commentary on fake news was based, are even more pointed; among other qualities, they necessarily draw the disturbing parallels to the US-led invasion of Iraq.⁸)

Another example of the use of disinformation by colonizing forces, which Noor also references: In the last years of the 19th century and the first years of the 20th, United States newspapers deliberately mischaracterized Filipino revolutionaries and the revolutionary situation in the Philippines, helping create a climate of opinion in the United States that was favorable to colonial conquest and empire-building.

They were merely following the lead of an ambitious US government; President William McKinley's infamous rationalization for the American takeover of the Philippines was based in part on two false "facts" with pernicious consequences⁹: that Filipinos are "unfit for self-government," and that "there was nothing left for us to do but to take them all, and to educate the Filipinos, and uplift and civilize and Christianize them."



US President William McKinley

In reality, the Philippine revolutionary government was doing creditable work governing its territory, as the voluminous documents¹⁰ captured by the United States Army proved; and the largely Catholic population was already Christianized. Spanish proselytizers arrived in the Philippines almost a hundred years before the Mayflower landed in Plymouth Rock.

Government use of disinformation is not limited to colonial projects. After the end of World War II, many postcolonial regimes turned authoritarian, controlling the media and employing various forms of disinformation.

The Taiwanese experience, where political propaganda was the norm, should be uncomfortably familiar to Thais, South Koreans, Indonesians, Filipinos, and other Asians of certain generations. Writes Lihyun Lin, a professor of journalism at National Taiwan University¹¹:

“Such practice dates back to the island’s authoritarian rule by the Kuomintang party. During that time, Kuomintang influenced the island’s major news media to publish misinformation about its political opponents. By 1987, Kuomintang was able to control the news media through the use of wartime regulations (such as martial law) and through the manipulation of economic resources. As a result, content from major news media tended to toe the ruling party’s line and rarely covered the pro-democracy opposition movement (which, despite efforts to silence it, eventually led to Taiwan’s democratization).

“Following the 1979 Kaohsiung Incident (or Formosa Incident) during which police and troops brutally broke up a human rights demonstration, the Kuomintang-controlled media portrayed the human rights and democracy campaigners as “terrorists,” “traitors,” “instigators,” and labelled them a “mob,” endangering national security and social stability. Meanwhile, news reports neglected to show the violent actions of the police.”



Taiwan is now home to one of the freest media environments in Asia.

Taiwan has since democratized, and is now home to one of the freest media environments in Asia. But government interventionism in information ecosystems remains a real concern, across different Asia countries.

Governments are major perpetrators of disinformation.

Cherian George, Asia's preeminent media scholar, writes¹²: "Governments are major perpetrators of disinformation. As this practice interferes with people's right to receive the information and ideas they need, it can be considered a form of censorship. Disinformation is a common strategy of populist demagogues who try to subvert people's trust in verifiable facts and cultivate cynicism (including by demonizing professional media as 'fake news') so that policy debates and electoral contests are not based on reasoned debate but on personal charisma and tribal loyalties."

And disinformation doesn't need to travel through digital circuits. George, a Singaporean scholar in Hong Kong who has done extensive research on hate propaganda (which he calls "hate spin"), offers a useful reminder¹³: "hate propagandists are not as dependent on digital media as conventional wisdom suggests. Conservatively, I'd say that three quarters of conferences on the topic, books, journals, special issues that examine disinformation are focused on the internet."

He continues: "But so much depends on how we frame the question. If we start by asking, 'Does the internet help hate groups?' Of course the answer is going to be a resounding yes. But if we instead ask, 'How do hate groups work,' we actually get a subtly but I think importantly different answer. We'd realize that hate propagandists are not in fact going to be deterred if we deprive them of their internet toys. In many countries, talk radio, charismatic cable TV hosts do more to create intolerant echo chambers and filter bubbles than social media do. Face to face interaction within places of worship and study groups probably play a bigger role than online messages in cultivating religious intolerance."

He offers a chilling example of a government-backed disinformation campaign that uses but does not rely solely on digital media: the so-called "love jihad." As he explained at the Conference on Democracy and Disinformation in Manila, in 2018:

This is the conspiracy theory that Muslims in India are engaged in a plot to seduce away Hindu girls and forcibly convert them to Islam. This is supposedly part of a grand strategy to conquer India through a demographic revolution. Hindus now make up almost 80% of the population, but since Muslim men are allowed four wives, they will out-reproduce Hindus and turn Hindus into a subjugated minority, the line goes.

The theory is ridiculous, but it's no laughing matter. Muslim men have been lynched and put on hit lists in the name of defending Hindus against love jihad. Consensual marriages have been broken up and women forced to return to their families—so it's an attack not only on a religious minority by the majority community, but also on women's autonomy by the patriarchy.

This isn't just about family honor, though. The love jihad theory has been elevated from grassroots, homespun gossip to industrial-strength propaganda because of its utility in high-stakes elections. Hindu nationalist politicians belonging to prime minister Narendra Modi's party have used the love jihad hoax to incite deadly communal riots and solidify the Hindu base in the run up to elections.

The love jihad is both awful proof and tragic measure of the ancient power of the lie.



Digital media are not a prerequisite for disinformation. The most impactful disinformation campaigns in history have not depended on the internet.

The Digital Age has been described as a 'golden era for journalism'.

Novel Dimensions

It should be clear, then. “Digital media are not a prerequisite for disinformation. The most impactful disinformation campaigns in history have not depended on the internet,” George writes. “But the internet has added novel dimensions to the problem, such as reducing the influence of traditional gatekeepers (whether this has been a net plus or minus for truth-seeking is debatable), and enabling the harvesting of user data for highly targeted campaigns. ‘Computational propaganda’ uses algorithms and social media bots to influence public opinion.”

Julie Posetti, the Australian journalist-scholar who now heads the Journalism Innovation Project at the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, wrote an instructive overview—comprehensive, nuanced, magisterial—of the “convergent pressures that feed information disorder” in the digital age.

In the third chapter of the UNESCO handbook for journalism education and training, *Journalism, ‘Fake News’ & Disinformation*, she identifies 10 of these changes and challenges. “The Digital Age has been described as a ‘golden era for journalism’. Indeed, it has enabled access to significant data caches leading to ground-breaking investigative journalism, new models of cross-border collaborative reporting, and access to treasure troves of knowledge and diverse sources at a mouse-click. It has also delivered unprecedented, ongoing challenges and structural changes to the news industry. Journalism is ‘under fire’, facing a virtual ‘perfect storm’ of convergent pressures that feed ‘information disorder’.”

Among the 10 factors¹⁴ that together create a perfect storm,



Among the 10 factors that together create a perfect storm, five are especially relevant to the production or distribution of digital disinformation: computational propaganda; social media platforms collaborating with their audiences to produce news; public appetite for on-demand news; the removal of barriers to publication; and loss of trust in traditional media.



Internet intermediaries such as Google (including YouTube), Facebook and Twitter have given undue prominence to disinformation, because their algorithms favour user engagement over trustworthiness and equality.

five are especially relevant to the production or distribution of digital disinformation: computational propaganda; social media platforms collaborating with their audiences to produce news; public appetite for on-demand news; the removal of barriers to publication; and loss of trust in traditional media.

George argues in his disinformation primer that “Internet intermediaries such as Google (including YouTube), Facebook and Twitter have given undue prominence to disinformation, because their algorithms favour user engagement over trustworthiness and quality, and because their owners prioritise shareholder returns over civic outcomes. Facebook has allowed paying customers, including political parties that use disinformation, to exploit its platform in anti-democratic ways¹⁵.”

Early research work¹⁶ by Stanford University's Solomon Messing and Sean Westwood, published in 2012 and with an earlier iteration of the digital space in mind, remains a valuable resource for understanding the impact of social media on news consumption habits:

Social media shape the modern media landscape in two ways. First, because these websites and mobile applications display content from different news providers in a single location, users no longer need to select a news source; instead they select the story itself. This represents a fundamental break from past modes of news consumption wherein people habituated themselves to a trusted source...

Second, these developments allow people to utilize endorsements to assist in their selection of content even when they visit a traditional news source website directly because social recommendations also appear on the story's originating website.

In other words, social media allow users to choose story, not source; and social endorsements drive readership. These fundamental changes eventually led to the current practice of what Posetti calls curated "content streams—including content from news services, journalists and other reliable information providers—without mediation."

Social media allow users to choose story, not source.

Posetti notes: "As a result of distribution via 'trust networks' (users and peers), inaccurate, false, malicious and propagandistic content masquerading as news found increased traction. Researchers have discovered that both emotive content, and content shared by a friend or family member [are] more likely to be redistributed on social media."

The upside to lowered barriers to publication, or removing them outright, is anyone can publish and draw attention. The downside is exactly the same: anyone can publish and draw attention. The reduction in the influence of traditional gatekeepers that George refers to is an inevitable consequence.

In their introduction to *Journalism, 'Fake News' & Disinformation*, Cheryl Ireton and Julie Posetti recognize that "the 21st century has seen the weaponization of information on an unprecedented scale. Powerful new technology makes the manipulation and fabrication of content simple, and social networks dramatically amplify falsehoods peddled by States, populist politicians, and dishonest corporate entities, as they are shared by uncritical publics. The platforms have become fertile ground for computational propaganda, 'trolling' and 'troll armies'; 'sock-puppet' networks', and 'spoofers'. Then, there is the arrival of profiteering 'troll farms' around elections."

Social networks dramatically amplify falsehoods peddled by States, populist politicians, and dishonest corporate entities.

They draw the necessary conclusion:

The consequence of all this is that digitally fuelled disinformation, in contexts of polarisation, risks eclipsing the role of journalism. Even more, journalism based on verifiable information shared in the public

interest—a recent historical achievement that is by no means guaranteed—can itself become discredited when precautions are not taken to avoid it being manipulated. When journalism becomes a vector for disinformation, this further reduces public trust and promotes the cynical view that there is no distinction between different narratives within journalism on the one hand, and narratives of disinformation on the other.

This is a calamity for government based on the consent of the governed, because disinformation corrupts the high ideal of “informed consent.”

Disinformation is a direct assault on the democratic project.

The legal scholars Tom Ginsburg and Aziz Huq, in their *How to Save a Constitutional Democracy*, offer a cogent argument why “facts are common property” in a functioning democracy, and why disinformation is a direct assault on the democratic project.

“Democracy, in its ideal form, is a system in which parties compete on policies, preferences, and values. The possibility of a meaningful policy debate requires to some extent a common epistemic base for these contests But without the possibility of access to truthful facts, it is hard to see how governance or progress can ever happen. Democracy as a result depends to a degree not generally appreciated on neutral institutions to produce unbiased information and then to evaluate and disseminate it. Facts are common property; it is their implications that ought to be contested. Neutrality in the production of primary data is therefore a bedrock of democracy, while pluralism in the assessment and interpretation of such data enables and informs partisan competition. When both influential private actors and public figures undermine both the value of factual accuracy and also the public’s traditional sources of facts in favor of systematically misleading and erroneous sources, we think that the quality of democratic competition necessarily suffers. Similarly, when official sources of information and analysis are constrained or corrupted, the epistemic basis of democracy is threatened.”

Neutrality in the production of primary data is a bedrock of democracy.





Asian Case Studies

What is the Asian experience in disinformation?

Information Disorder in Asia, published by the Journalism and Media Studies Centre of the University of Hong Kong, provides an overview of the “misinformation ecosystem” in eight Asian countries: India, Indonesia, Japan, the Philippines, Singapore, South Korea, Taiwan, and Vietnam¹⁷. The overview research paper is only part of a longer, more comprehensive research project, but already it offers a strong corrective to the America-centric discussions on “fake news” and disinformation.

Project editor Masato Kajimoto writes: “We believe these case studies would also inform the broader global discussion and research on misinformation already in progress; in some areas, Asian countries lead the rest of the world in technology use. Mobile-only internet usage, heavy reliance on chat apps, the popularity of emojis and messaging app stickers—these are some of the phenomena we observed in the Asia-Pacific region a few years before they caught on internationally.”

Like an album of snapshots, the following passages from the eight studies reveal a different and dynamic scene:

- “Though Indians use a variety of social media such as Facebook and Twitter, the most favored means of communication seems to be the WhatsApp mobile messaging platform.”
- “Indonesians are avid social media and smartphone users, so it is not surprising that ‘fake news’ is spread among the three most popular platforms in Indonesia: Twitter, Facebook, and WhatsApp. In addition to social and messaging platforms, dubious non-mainstream news websites, known in Indonesian as media *abal-abal*, have traditionally been the purveyors of ‘fake news’; examples include VOA-Islam.com, Arramah.com, PKS Piyungan, all of which push hardline and militant Islamist propaganda.”
- “For the most part, media researchers and observers agree that Japan has not been affected by malicious or fraudulent news stories to the extent that they have roiled some

other neighboring countries in Asia, such as South Korea, the Philippines, and Indonesia ... Among the 36 countries sampled in the [2017 Digital News Report], Japan had the lowest percentage of people who share news online.”

- “Dubbed ‘the nation’s chief purveyor of fake news,’ President Rodrigo Duterte has emerged as a, if not the, major source or creator of state-level misinformation, disinformation and mal-information delivered in conventional platforms such as press conferences, interviews, and speeches, including the State of the Nation Address. He consistently plays loose with facts, especially in defense of his brutal war on drugs—the centerpiece of his domestic policy.”
- “In Singapore, online speech could be a mixture of both misinformation and disinformation, such as the content targeted at immigrants and racial minorities. In some instances, unsubstantiated rumors promote hate, intentionally or unintentionally [what scholar Carol Soon calls ‘corrosive speech’], among different social and racial groups.”
- “‘Fake news’ [in South Korea] primarily spreads through mobile messaging apps, such as KakaoTalk and Naver Band, and social networking platforms. Sometimes, ‘fake news’ also evolves into print media campaigns.”
- “Media academics and experts say online sites from mainland China disseminate false content as a political tool to undermine Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen’s government policies. Microblogging social networks such as Sina Weibo and an extremely popular social communication app throughout the region, WeChat, serve as tools to spread false information.”
- “[In Vietnam,] emerging news websites and news aggregators pose unprecedented challenges for mainstream media organizations and their senior management whose concern is how to manage the quality of information and how to protect their copyrights. On Facebook, YouTube, and Zalo, all kinds of content quickly spread without going through any licensing, editing, or censoring processes.”

Altogether, a variegated picture: some new colors in common (chat apps like WhatsApp and KakaoTalk are major conduits of false information); isolated hues (Japan’s lesser risk of susceptibility to “fake news,” print as a major platform for disinformation in South

Korea); and finally a few familiar tones (a foreign rival as source of disinformation, dubious websites, a Trump-like president, Facebook).

The consequences of “fake news” and other forms of disinformation in Asia have sometimes proved fatal.

In the 18 months between January 2017 and July 2018, the number of deaths in India caused by deliberately false information circulated on WhatsApp, such as the mob “lynchings” described in a key Wired story¹⁸, was estimated at 33. In the same period, there were a total of 69 incidents of mass, WhatsApp-provoked violence.

The human toll in Myanmar caused by disinformation that military operatives deliberately spread through Facebook may never be known; it may be impossible to track every murder, rape, or eviction.

But an investigative story in the New York Times captured the scale of the horror¹⁹. The Myanmar military had “turned the social network into a tool for ethnic cleansing, according to former military officials, researchers and civilian officials in the country.” The systematic campaign went on for years. “Human rights groups blame the anti-Rohingya propaganda for inciting murders, rapes and the largest forced human migration in recent history.”

More than 700,000 Rohingya have been forced to flee Myanmar, under hellish conditions. Given the extent of this Facebook-powered catastrophe, why didn’t the company simply shut down its operations in Myanmar?

The *Times* story exposing military abuse of the Facebook platform in Myanmar was based on interviews with five witnesses familiar with the black operations. Research conducted by scholars Jonathan Ong and Jason Cabanes for the Newton Tech4Dev Network²⁰, on “fake news” production in the Philippines, provides an in-depth look at how “an invisible machine” plugged into the country’s advertising, public relations, and media networks—“industrial in its scope and organization, strategic in its outlook and expertise, and exploitative in its morality and ethics”—is responsible for digital disinformation campaigns.

“Architects of Networked Disinformation” is a study that “uncovers the professionalized and hierarchized group of political operators who design disinformation campaigns, mobilize click armies, and execute innovative ‘digital black ops’ and ‘signal scrambling’ techniques for any interested political client.”

Of its seven key findings²¹, its outline of the three-tier structure of the invisible machine is the most revelatory:

Ad and PR strategists delegate political marketing responsibility. They rely heavily on the promotional labor of digital influencers (who have between 50,000 to 2,000,000 followers on Facebook and Twitter) and community-level fake account operators (who manually operate fake profiles to infiltrate community groups and news pages)–and very minimally on automated bots. While the ad and PR strategists are usually paid a lump sum by their political clients on a per-project basis, they subcontract work to influencers and pay them following PR industry standard matrices of reach and engagement. Community-level fake account operators are paid a fixed daily rate based on a set quota of online posts or comments. The incentive scheme that the strategists set for the influencers and account operators maximizes potentials for the signal boosting of communication messages that strategically use popular vernaculars resonant with populist public sentiments.

But its analysis of opposing dynamics in networked disinformation campaigns breaks new conceptual ground. “On the one hand, controlled interactivity aims for collective participation and cooperation among disinformation workers who are informed by a common script; on the other, volatile virality relies on these workers’ individual insight and creativity in translating a script into social media posts that achieve maximum, if uncontrolled, spreadability across decentralized networks of communicative exchange. Emotionally charged campaigns tapping into populist sentiments of anger and resentment may thus achieve their strategic goals, but inadvertently unleash uncivil expressions of misogyny, anti-intellectualism, and other forms of offensive speech into the public discourse.”

These twin dynamics of controlled interactivity and volatile virality explain much of the Philippine disinformation experience of the last three years.



We are programmed to enjoy spending time in 'echo chambers,' as it requires less cognitive work.



Democratic Decay

The incremental degradation of democratic institutions is a consequence of disinformation, digital or otherwise.

“Echo chambers ringing with false news make democracies ungovernable,” write Yochai Benkler, Robert Faris, and Hal Roberts in *Network Propaganda*.

The easy resort to so-called “filter bubbles” or echo chambers helps accelerate the circulation of deliberate deceptions. As Clair Wardle and Hossein Derakhshan explain in *Information Disorder*: “The most significant challenge to any theory of a shared public sphere is that humans, when we have a choice about who to connect with or not, tend to establish and continue relationships with people who have views similar to our own. We are programmed to enjoy spending time in ‘echo chambers,’ as it requires less cognitive work.”

Agents who are creating disinformation understand that, when people consume and share these messages, they will be doing so increasingly from inside these echo chambers, with no one to challenge the ideas ... agents target groups that they know are more likely to be receptive to the message. If they are successful in doing that, it is very likely the message will then be shared by the initial recipient. And, as research shows, we are much more likely to trust a message coming from someone we know, even if we suspect it to be false. This is why

disinformation can be disseminated so quickly. It is travelling between peer-to-peer networks where trust tends to be high.

Because these bubbles or chambers, when ringing with false news, raise questions about the alternatives to ungovernable democracy, antidemocratic forces also use accelerated disinformation to target, to effect, the incremental degradation of the democratic project.

The concept of “democratic erosion” describes this gradual process of democratic decline.

Ginsburg and Huq write:

The threats to liberal constitutional democracies in the twenty-first century can be sorted into two distinct types—each with its own mechanisms and pathways—depending on their speed. We call these types *authoritarian collapse* (i.e., the risk of a rapid, wholesale turn away from democracy) and democratic erosion (i.e., the risk of slow, but ultimately substantial unraveling along the margins of rule-of-law, democratic, and liberal rights).

We label the slow form of democratic decay a democratic erosion We define such erosion as a process of incremental but ultimately still substantial decay in the three basic predicates of democracy—competitive elections, liberal rights to speech and association, and the rule of law.

Importantly, erosion occurs only when a substantial negative change occurs along all three margins of liberal constitutional democracy. This is because it is only when substantial change occurs across all three necessary institutional predicates of democracy that the system-level quality is likely to be imperiled.

We define such erosion as a process of incremental but ultimately still substantial decay in the three basic predicates of democracy—competitive elections, liberal rights to speech and association, and the rule of law.

Disinformation undermines the ground on which these fundamental predicates of democracy rest—sometimes all at once. Cherian George’s research on hate spin provides an important pathway

for understanding the phenomenon. "I think existing and proposed measures against hate speech and fake news seem to be working with inaccurate conceptual models. They assume that we are dealing with discrete self-contained hateful messages that can be shot down sniper-like by prosecutors, moderators, fact checkers and other regulators. But that is simply not how the most harmful hate propaganda works. Instead, it takes the form of highly distributed multi-model, multi-message campaigns. What the public relations and advertising industries call integrated marketing communication."

As he told the Manila conference:

Thus, disinformation efforts are multi-platform integrated marketing campaigns with distributed and layered messages that have strong collective and cumulative effects. Their purveyors are extremely committed, and able and willing to pour money, time and creativity into their propaganda.

The messages that they sell may seem stupid, but it's a huge mistake to assume that the people behind them are. Combating them requires as much ingenuity and commitment as they themselves bring to bear on their work.

In the end, that is what democratic projects are really up against: the power, not only of the lie, but of the multi-platformed, integrated, ingenious, extremely committed liar.

About the Author



John Nery is a senior journalist in the Philippines. He writes an opinion column for the Philippine Daily Inquirer, and is a convenor of the Consortium on Democracy and Disinformation. He served on the executive board of the Asia News Network for five years, and is a member of the board of the World Justice Project. He was a Visiting Research Fellow at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies in Singapore and a Nieman Fellow in Journalism at Harvard University.

Endnotes

¹ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/word-of-the-day/disinformation-2007-07-20>

² <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/craigsilverman/how-macedonia-became-a-global-hub-for-pro-trump-misinfo#.op95xv35M>

³ <https://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-42724320>

⁴ <https://www.facebook.com/papalvisitph/photos/a.321295728024881.1073741828.321279424693178/566912616796523/?type=3>

⁵ After Mayor Rodrigo Duterte cursed out Pope Francis in November 2015, for allegedly causing an unexpected traffic jam when he visited the Philippines in January 2015, the presidential candidate's "voter preference" rating in the December survey crashed. It took about two months before Duterte's ratings resumed their rise. The wave of fake news stories in the first quarter of 2016 alleging papal support for the candidate was part of a transparently orchestrated effort to recover from the ratings crash.

⁶ <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/01296612.2017.1455623>

⁷ <http://www.nlb.gov.sg/biblioasia/2017/07/02/fake-news-since-when-was-it-news/>

⁸ "What I find interesting about the media coverage of the Anglo-Burmese Wars is how Burma was framed by the British media at the time. Certain tropes and metaphors became key literary devices that were repeated again and again in the British press. The one term that popped up again and again in a lot of the media reports then was the "Burman Empire." The "Burman Empire" was the adversary. Burma, an independent kingdom in Southeast Asia, was portrayed as something more than what it was—an "Empire." Burma was presented in the media as an "imperial threat" or menace, though the real

threat was the British Empire that was growing stronger by the day

“So here you have a very interesting case where Burma’s actions—like moving troops to the border, crossing the river, building fortifications—were reported accurately, but reported in terms that presented Burma as the belligerent party whereas actually Burma was on the defensive.

“This culminated with the very intense media campaign against the last kings of Burma, Kings Mindon and Thibaw, in the 1880s. In the British tabloid media in particular, caricatures of the Burmese emerged. The British media’s depiction of the rulers of Burma were stereotypical, filled with images of the “Burmese tyrant,” the “Burmese despot,” etc. One can see the way in which Burma was “talked up” and cast as a sort of aggressive power. I cannot help but notice historical parallels here, as in the way that Iraq was cast as an aggressive power in the prelude to the invasion of Iraq. The only thing Burma wasn’t accused of was having weapons of mass destruction.”

⁹ http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/disp_textbook.cfm?smtID=3&psid=1257

¹⁰ <https://ejournals.ph/article.php?id=5123>

¹¹ https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3134581

¹² <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1GcKAZgcF7ESYaeoFGZhBnK7Nbj0jvDoKcs22zUieq1k/edit>

Professor George updates this Google Doc from time to time. He thinks the second Bush administration’s “fake case for invading Iraq in 2003” was “the most consequential hoax of the 21st century.”

¹³ <https://www.ascmediarisk.org/2018/12/cherian-george-divisive-disinformation-and-the-hate-spin-dilemma/>

¹⁴The 10 factors Posetti identifies are worth listing in full:

- The rise of computational propaganda and the ‘weaponization of mistrust’
- The digital disruption of advertising, causing the collapse of the traditional business model for news publishing, and mass unemployment
- The failure of digital advertising to support journalism as a replacement for print advertising (Google and Facebook are now the main beneficiaries of digital advertising sales)
- Digital convergence transforming content-commissioning, production, publication and distribution, significantly increasing deadline pressure and leading to additional job losses
- Targeted online harassment of journalists (particularly women), their sources and their audiences
- Social media platforms placing audiences at the forefront of content discovery and distribution, and making them collaborators in the production of news (which offers many benefits but destabilizes legacy news media gatekeeping power and impacts on verification standards)
- Audience expectations of ‘on-demand’ news, mobile delivery and real-time engagement on social media further increasing pressure on news professionals facing diminishing resources in a never-ending news cycle
- News publishers struggling to hold onto audiences as barriers to publication are removed, empowering any person or entity to produce content, bypass traditional gatekeepers, and compete for attention—including powerful politicians seeking to undermine the credibility of critical reporting
- The limited impact and profitability of many new digital-only media start-ups filling the voids created by the failure of newspapers
- The erosion of trust in journalism and mainstream media organizations causing audiences to dissipate further, diminishing remaining profits and fuelling the spread of ‘information disorder’

¹⁵ His note continues: "Platforms are adjusting their practices. But the scale and complexity of the problem mean that improvements will be incremental and imperfect and may generate their own problems, such as blocking legitimate speech. Possible ways to push these companies include antitrust action, civil suits, and building better platforms."

¹⁶ <https://www.dartmouth.edu/~seanjwestwood/papers/cr.pdf>

¹⁷ https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3134581

¹⁸ <https://www.wired.com/story/how-whatsapp-fuels-fake-news-and-violence-in-india/>

¹⁹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/15/technology/myanmar-facebook-genocide.html?module=inline>

²⁰ <https://newtontechfordev.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/ARCHITECTS-OF-NETWORKED-DISINFORMATION-FULL-REPORT.pdf>

²¹ <http://newtontechfordev.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Architects-of-Networked-Disinformation-Executive-Summary-Final.pdf>

Scholars Edson Tandoc Jr., Zheng Wei Lim, and Richard Ling did an early comparative study of the different definitions of "fake news," in 2017. "Defining 'Fake News'" is an instructive read and an excellent place to start.

Sidebar

A necessary controversy: Defining “fake news”

Two years after Trump’s inauguration, three years after the start of Duterte’s presidential campaign, the controversy over the use of the term “fake news” to refer to the most familiar form of disinformation continues.

But it is a necessary controversy. As Claire Wardle writes: “Definitions and terminology matter. For the policy-makers, technology companies, politicians, journalists, librarians, educators, academics, and civil society organizations all wrestling with the challenges posed by information disorder, agreeing to a shared vocabulary is essential.”

The main objection to the use of “fake news” as a term is that it has now morphed into a phrase that can mean anything. Using it is an act of dismissal. (See, “Open letter to Grace Poe on ‘fake news,’” in the *Philippine Daily Inquirer*; January 30, 2018.) Weaponized by Donald Trump, the term has become such a common phrase it is now practically useless: If anything can be ‘fake news,’ everything can be ‘fake news.’ The phrase is transitioning from insult to cliché to punch line.”

The pushback against the use of “fake news” also comes in the form of a consistent refusal to accept the term. In this view, the term does not make sense, because the two words cancel each other out. In other words, it’s an oxymoron. If the news is a report about an event, then a false report cannot be considered as a type of news. “After all, news is generally defined as information or reports of recent or previously unknown events, which means it has to be true,” a primer for Singapore’s *The Strait Times* reads.

But this point of view rests on a category error. The term “fake news” does not in fact refer to false reports as a category of news; rather, it refers to deliberately false information that pretends to be news. “Fake news” is not a subset of the news; it is an entirely different universe, consisting precisely of made-up news.

The analogy to a fake Rolex that one can buy off the street may be instructive. No one who knows the circumstances will assert that

the fake Rolex is a type or subset of Rolex watches; that would be a basic logical mistake. Rather, the fake watch represents the antithesis of the genuine Rolex.

That is what “fake news” is—not a type of news, but precisely the opposite of what the news is.

There is another reservation against the use of the term: the principled refusal to use a concept and a name that, whether deliberately or not, devalues journalism. The Google News Lab lead for Asia Pacific, Irene Jay Liu, once offered an eloquent defense at a forum. “I choose not to incorporate ‘news’ in discussing misinformation, disinformation, propaganda and satire,” the former journalist said, “because this term doesn’t have any meaning and it also defames journalism. It is not news—it is just incorrect information.”

A well-known statement from Frank La Rue, an assistant director general at UNESCO, makes the same argument. “‘Fake news’ is a bad term primary because it is a trap. It is not news. Just the term generates mistrust of the press and of the work of journalists. Political leaders have started using the term against the press, which is especially serious. This is a crucial moment when we have to defend journalism. We have to promote a journalism of honesty, a journalism that is seen to build the truth.”

These well-meaning explanations are an example of the first reservation against the use of “fake news” as a term, that it can be used to mean anything, but it also illustrates a concern that preoccupy those invested in a healthy public sphere. The very term helps undermine the entire news-gathering and news dissemination enterprise.

This is a reality that journalists cannot escape from. When anything false that isn’t even remotely related to the news—such as an actor’s surgically enhanced face—is described as “fake news,” the real meaning of the term is not only rendered irrelevant; the meaninglessness of the use of the term also damages the news undertaking itself. It may be that each such use inflicts only an insignificant amount of damage on public perceptions of the value of journalism and on the profession’s credibility, but cumulatively, the consequences may well add up to something serious.

But defining a problem is a necessary step towards understanding it. When it refers to falsehood masquerading as news, the phrase represents an insidious danger to both the democratic project and the discourse that sustains it. It must be properly defined. Margaret Sullivan of the Washington Post has a spare, elegant definition: “deliberately constructed lies, in the form of news articles, meant to mislead the public.” For our purposes, the so-called 3-D formula is accurate and adequate: “It is a **deliberate** act of fabrication and manipulation; **disguised** to look, sound, feel like the news; designed to **deceive**.”



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