

PERSPECTIVE

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Stronger Social Media Influence in the 2022 Philippine Elections

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One of the many social media sites on the Philippines 2022 Presidential Elections – “Election 2022 Philippines Group” on Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/620176091924911>

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Social media will play a prominent role in the campaign strategy of candidates in the upcoming 2022 elections due to the increasing reliance of Filipinos on social media and the face-to-face restrictions associated with the pandemic.
- While there is no one model of successful social media campaigning in the Philippines, previous presidential campaigns exposed unconventional uses of this technology and its susceptibility to disinformation.
- The rapid evolution of new types of social media limits the ability of the government to monitor, regulate, and prevent social media applications from sowing fake news related to the 2022 elections.
- The regulatory and transparency deficits inherent in social media technology today stem from outdated and/or non-existent Philippine electoral laws and regulations which should be addressed through policy reforms and new legislation by the next administration.

INTRODUCTION

While the May 2022 Philippines national and local elections will be the first to be held under a global pandemic, its outcome will likely be shaped by social media. The 2016 presidential contest was already widely considered as the first mainstream “social media election” in the Philippines. In that election, Rodrigo Duterte swept into office with the help of what appeared to be an “army” of dedicated social media followers.¹ Scholars of Philippine politics attributed the victory to the Duterte campaign’s savvy use of social media to the point of spreading fake news.² However, to say that Duterte’s victory was solely because of his savvy social media strategy exaggerates the power of virtual manipulation during that time and ignores the symbiotic relationship between online fervour and grassroots political mobilisation.³

Reliance on social media in the campaign strategy of candidates is expected to rise given the increased usage by Filipinos of this technology, and the physical restrictions imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic. While it remains doubtful that a candidate can win the presidency through a successful social media strategy alone, there is a realisation that this type of technology is becoming an indispensable part of the contemporary electoral “political machine”.⁴

Experts argue that social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, etc., were not intended for political purposes at the outset. But as IT technologies evolved, many have noted their potential for political mobilisation.⁵ Driven by profit, big social media firms have taken advantage of how users share their information, including their political ideologies, opinions, and policy viewpoints. It is now fairly established that disinformation has become rampant because of its power to harness emotive reactions and therefore gain more engagement from social media users. Social media algorithms built within the technology itself seem to fit well with the nature of electoral campaigning.⁶ In other words, social media and electoral campaigns seem to make a perfect match; one serves the profit motive of tech companies and the other the wish of candidates and parties to garner votes.

The Philippines is an appropriate site to examine the mobilisation power of social media during an election campaign. This article argues that the 2022 election campaigns so far have displayed increasing utility of social media as a highly evolving information and communication technology which at the same time addresses some of the contact limitations imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Election campaigns so far have also exhibited a more intense and varied use of social media to sow disinformation and fake news to either support or undermine certain candidates. Unfortunately, these concerns can currently not be addressed, given the inadequate regulations and the absence of a specific law that regulates social media use in electoral campaigns in the Philippines.⁷

This article proceeds by discussing research related to the 2016 presidential elections, during which Rodrigo Duterte was able to clinch victory through an unconventional social

media strategy. It then provides the features of the social media landscape in the country as well as the various new channels and ways in which disinformation is spread virtually. This paper concludes with some insights on how the gaps in social media regulation and policy can be addressed in the future.

THE 2016 PHILIPPINE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS: THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

The key debate in the 2016 elections is whether social media helped Duterte win. In one study, analysis of Facebook activities and comments on the public pages of the five major presidential candidates—Roxas, Poe, Santiago, Duterte and Binay—confirms that Duterte’s online fans were the most active, engaged and networked.⁸ Moreover, a careful analysis confirms that Duterte’s social media fans were uniquely zealous, aggressive and unrelenting in their support for their candidate, as well as in their criticism of his opponents.

This type of digital behaviour seems consistent with the actions of paid trolls and influencers. Indeed, there was already ample evidence that at least some of the pro-Duterte social media traffic was generated by influencers, bots, and foreign entities.⁹

Table 1: 2016 Presidential Elections Facebook Campaigns

	Likes	Likes Change*	Ave PTAT**	Posts	Comments per post	Shares per posts
Duterte	2.9M	+99%	410,044	73	2,068	11,292
Santiago	3.6M	+9%	217,230	228	612	797
Poe	3M	+40%	306,942	244	1,145	580
Binay	2.7M	+42%	176,833	509	1,007	644
Roxas	1.4M	+15%	152,839	199	2,907	1,989

Note: *Likes Change = the percentage increase in likes in the posts from the start and the end of the official campaign period. **Average People Talking About This (PTAT) = average number of people interacting (posting, commenting, liking, sharing) per each post. It is a main measurement of interactivity used in social media analytics.

Source: Sinpeng, et al. 2021, p. 359.

Unlike far more social media savvy candidates such as Poe and Santiago, Duterte’s own social media presence was relatively anodyne, his messaging was minimal, and his rhetoric on Facebook was far more reserved than the “thuggish” behaviour he exhibited at actual campaign rallies. According to the study by Sinpeng et al., “Duterte’s Facebook engagement was a textbook example for ‘how not-to-do online campaigning.’ He wrote in third person and barely posted any original content.”¹⁰ Looking at Table 1, Duterte’s official Facebook

page had the least number of posts among the candidates; but his posts were noticeably the most shared and commented by Filipino Facebook users.

A 2017 survey of Filipino Facebook users provided more evidence on how engaged Duterte's supporters were in the virtual world. It revealed the distinctiveness of their online passion for Duterte; his supporters made up their minds earlier than supporters of other candidates, voted as groups, and were also the most likely to join offline rallies.¹¹ In the end, this online support communicated through the keyboards of computers or keypads of mobile phones found its way to the electoral precincts and was translated into votes sufficient to deliver the presidency to Duterte.

Was Duterte's successful Facebook campaign organic, voluntary and authentic or was it purely driven by disinformation, hired trolls and bots? So far, evidence points to a combination of these two assessments. As Sinpeng et al. argued, "it is quite likely that Duterte's trolls and influencers were driven by both material incentives and ideological enthusiasm for Duterte."¹² But to paint Duterte's astounding electoral victory simply as manufactured shows a lack of appreciation of the very porous boundary between manufactured and authentic online support.¹³

What is more disturbing are some indications that Facebook has become a major source of information about Philippine politics. In that same 2017 survey, 85% of respondents "agreed" or "strongly agreed" that Facebook was *Important*, 70% thought Facebook influenced their vote, and a staggering 83% reported their *Trust* in Facebook to be "some" or "most of the time". Those who supported Duterte were also far more likely to consider Facebook as *Important*, *Influential* and *Trustworthy* than the supporters of other candidates. The same study concluded that "Duterte supporters were more likely to share, like, comment, and post positively about Duterte and negatively about other candidates."¹⁴

The 2016 elections seem to be a "prequel" for the succeeding years during which the Philippines has become a globally prominent site for fake news. The Duterte administration would soon benefit from a keyboard "army" of social media warriors who zealously defended the president, undermined his political opponents, and promoted his allies, including Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos, Jr. who is currently the frontrunner for the 2022 presidential elections.¹⁵

THE CURRENT SOCIAL MEDIA LANDSCAPE IN THE PHILIPPINES

While it remains to be seen whether a social media strategy can trump the conventional electoral campaigning model, it is expected that candidates and parties will nevertheless ramp up their use of social media. This is already apparent in the current engagements of the leading presidential candidates on social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. As recent studies and polls point out that more Filipinos are now more than ever connected with these apps, spend more time with them than before, and use them to get

political information and possibly cues for their voting behaviour, unwarranted, unregulated, and downright unethical uses of social media present critical perils to electoral integrity in the Philippines.¹⁶

According to the 2021 *We are Social* survey, there were 73.91 million internet users in the Philippines, a 6.1% increase from the previous year, which was attributed to the Covid-19 pandemic. Internet penetration in the Philippines stood at 67.0% in January 2021. What is confounding is the finding that there were 89 million social media users in the Philippines in 2021, an increase of 22% from 2020. The number of social media users in the Philippines was equivalent to 80.7% of the total population. The difference between internet users and social media users implies that many Filipinos have multiple social media accounts. To digital researchers, this likely means that some users engage in troll-like behaviour or that some of the social media accounts are fake and/or are non-humans or bots.¹⁷

Bypassing Facebook, YouTube rose in 2021 to become the top social media platform in the country (see Table 2).¹⁸ Possible explanations for this include the easier accessibility of YouTube due to telecom networks offering cheaper deals to users as well as the fact that the platform’s content is mainly videos rather than text when compared to Facebook. Video content is easier to consume, share and propagate to a user’s network. Finally, YouTube has not been relatively active in addressing disinformation within their platform.¹⁹

Table 2. Most-Used Social Media Platforms in 2021

Social Media	Percentage
YouTube	97.2
Facebook	96.8
Facebook Messenger	92.1
Instagram	73.4
Twitter	62.7
Tiktok	48.8
Pinterest	39.1
Viber	36.9

Source: *We are Social* Report 2021.

The Philippines is also the top country where respondents admit that they follow social media “influencers”. While the global average is a mere 22.1%, 51.7% of Filipino survey respondents use influencers as a major source of information, even on politics and the elections. This reliance on “influencers” reveals that Filipinos value personalities and individuals more than legitimate institutions such as media, academe and even civil society organisations as their social media intermediaries. Without proper vetting verification standards and without credible reputations, the access being given to influencers to produce content has further contributed to the spread of disinformation.²⁰

ISSUES AND FUTURE PROSPECTS

The impact of social media will be more evident in the 2022 Philippine national and local elections to be held on 9 May 2022. Given the restrictions posed by the Covid-19 pandemic, candidates have relied more on social media for their campaigns and voters have tapped these applications as their source for news and other election-related information. Here are some expectations on the possible role of social media in the upcoming polls:

- *Disinformation will be more prevalent.* While previous elections focused more on candidates and parties, it is expected that disinformation will affect other aspects of the electoral process. Like electoral exercises in other countries, disinformation can be applied to the electoral process, casting doubt on the outcomes of the elections. Wrong information deliberately crafted can also suppress voters from casting their ballots on election day.²¹
- *The current pandemic lends more critical importance to social media.* Given their ability to rapidly spread information, social media has been a powerful tool of communication during the pandemic. However, the lack of an effective regulatory regime within the country has allowed social media apps to spread disinformation about pandemic situations in voting precincts and other important sites. At present, the country's election commission admits that without a law regulating social media campaigning, their ability to detect and sanction disinformation is severely limited.²²
- *The toxic nature of electoral campaigning is intensified by social media.* As the algorithms of social media apps like Facebook feed users with more content that they want, to maintain or increase engagement, it is unavoidable that pernicious polarisation between the Marcos and Robredo camps will dictate the 2022 election campaign. At present, some candidates like Robredo are already being painted as communists, terrorists, and other labels used by the Duterte administration to designate candidates as enemies of the state.²³
- *Micro-targeting allows for pieces of disinformation to cater to specific voter groups.* As data breaches in social media apps become more common (e.g., Cambridge Analytica data harvesting), there is now a possibility of a more complex social media strategy that targets specific voter groups. Micro-targeting appeals to the trigger points of voters that may nudge them to campaign for/against a specific candidate and even influence their choice on voting day. The scandal surrounding the 2018 data breach of Cambridge Analytica reveals that data from 1.17 million Filipino Facebook users have been illegally harvested and could potentially be used for the 2022 elections.²⁴
- *The threat of foreign interference and influence looms large in the 2022 elections.* Like the elections in other countries, the 2022 elections could be exposed to foreign-induced or supported interference. This is a credible and dangerous threat that jeopardises the elections as the sovereign expression of the Filipino electorate. As the Philippines is

walking a tightrope in the great power competition between the US and China, there is a temptation to influence the 2022 elections to benefit the big powers.²⁵

Considering these challenges, regulation of social media use must be diligent, decisive, and consistent. Even if the country's Commission on Elections can put in place a clear policy on social media campaigning, implementation may face its own challenges. Regulation must also keep up with the latest trends that place disinformation in a totally different level, for example the use of "deep fakes" or computer-generated videos which "make it appear that a particular personality is saying or doing something that he or she didn't actually say or do".²⁶ In addition, the proliferation of fake news has now moved from social media apps like Facebook and Twitter to messenger apps like WhatsApp, Viber, Facebook Messenger where posts or messages are not as publicly shared as the usual apps. This is a clear blackhole in social media regulation.²⁷

Regardless of the outcome, the 2022 elections should push the next administration to prioritise policy reforms and new legislation that will seriously address disinformation in all its different manifestations. This should be part of the political and electoral reform agenda of the new government.

ENDNOTES

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