

# PERSPECTIVE

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## Like, Subscribe and Vote: The Role of Political Influencers in the 2022 Philippine Elections and Beyond

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Twitter Page of one political blogger and influencer R J Nieto (Thinking Pinoy) at <https://twitter.com/thinkingpinoyph?lang=en>. Accessed on 11 March 2023.

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- Social media influencers are emerging political operators in Philippine elections, but unlike high-level strategists and low-level trolls, they occupy a ‘grey area’ in the political economy of influence operations.
- There are approximately 1,425 influencer accounts across YouTube, TikTok, Facebook, and Twitter identified to be part of influence operations in the 2022 Philippine elections, based on 18 multidimensional indicators.
- Influencers are hired based on their social capital, historical performance, and political notoriety. Premiums are provided to influencers who are open to switching camps and to those who double down during peak campaign periods.
- Influencers carry out varied functions in the post-election period, either to defend the policies of the candidates they electorally supported, conduct disinformation campaigns against political adversaries, or clash with previously allied influencers given the clashes between their politician-clients.
- At present, there is a clear and wide policy regulation gap with regard to dealing with political influencers and the disinformation they generate for political purposes.

## INTRODUCTION

Social media influencers have become mainstays in Philippine electoral politics. The 2016 campaign of Rodrigo Duterte was bolstered by political bloggers<sup>1</sup> such as Mocha Uson (Mocha Uson blog), RJ Nieto (Thinking Pinoy), and Carlos Munda (MindaNation), who were later appointed to government positions under the administration.<sup>2</sup> The Duterte government also legitimized influencers with presidential press accreditations, providing them the same access as professional journalists and media to events and personalities.<sup>3</sup> In the 2022 electoral cycle, Ferdinand “Bongbong” Marcos Jr. followed the same playbook for his presidential bid. Networks of digital influencers seeded authoritarian nostalgia emanating from the false legacy<sup>4</sup> of the dictator Marcos Sr. to prime voters for the promise of prosperity under another Marcos presidency.<sup>5</sup> Influencers also operated as political brokers of the Marcos agenda within social media communities, almost as impactfully as traditional political and media actors at certain points during the campaign period.<sup>6</sup>

In the Philippines, influencers are part of emerging and larger political influence operations that systematically promote propaganda to advance the interests of entrepreneurial political elites.<sup>7</sup> They are instructed by high-level strategists on the political message they need to promote, and the political posts they produce are then amplified by low-level trolls and fake accounts.<sup>8</sup> Unlike these other operators, influencers are *hypervisible* as they maintain public-facing accounts, engage broader audiences and interests, and monetize this visibility. More importantly, their political capital is not due to their expertise, position, or experience but to their cultural relevance in spaces outside and beyond politics.<sup>9</sup> This makes them both a critical entry point to uncover the political economy of influence operations and difficult operators to detect, given the greyness of their political interlocution.<sup>10</sup>

This article discusses the political economy of covert influence operations focused on influencers commissioned to partake in political campaigns during the 2022 Philippine Elections.<sup>11</sup> It maps the entanglement of social media influencers in electoral politics by (1) identifying the influencers engaged in covert influence campaigns within socio-technical networks using computational methods, (2) characterizing the political-economic relations between influencers and clients through qualitative field research, and (3) estimating the cost of commissioning them for political campaigns through economic modelling. We argue that the political influencers as contemporary but covert campaigners operate behind the veneer of political participation only to undermine it, given the political-economic system in which they function, that incentivises obscurity and manipulation. This article concludes by examining the post-electoral role of these influencers and the absence of clear policies to regulate their activities in social media and politics in the Philippines.

## MAPPING THE FIELD OF POLITICAL INFLUENCERS

Political influencers sit between two worlds—in politics and their role in bridging candidates and the voters, and in promotional culture with their commercial and brand engagements. This hybridity of political influencers informs not only our research approach but also our analysis of our empirical data.

Around 44,530 influencers took part in the 2022 Philippine elections since the filing of the certificate of candidates in October 2021. Using 18 multidimensional indicators that examine manipulative network, behavioural, and content characteristics of these influencers, a recent study<sup>12</sup> identified 1,425 influencer accounts across YouTube, TikTok, Facebook, and Twitter which reveal evidence of engaging in covert influence operations. These accounts scored high in multiple indicators, such as belonging to the same *co-share network* and repeatedly sharing from the same sources, having *post-recurrence* with high semantic similarity among posts within a given period, or containing references to *conspiracy and manipulation* based on a dictionary derived from fact-checked stories. Many of these influencers are on YouTube and TikTok, with 584 and 544 influencer accounts respectively. Not only are these platforms creator-friendly with their institutional partner programmes and monetization schemes, they are also platforms with less stringent content moderation policies and public oversight, given their algorithmic content feed.

The influencers identified to be covert political campaigners are not limited to the political field, or those known to cover topics related to politics and socio-economic issues, but also include influencers in other areas of interest. Most are ‘amateur’ commentator and curator accounts who share their take as ‘ordinary people’ on political issues and topics, with only subtle partisan leaning. Hyper-partisan influencers are accounts that explicitly promote a partisan camp by circulating the unofficial party line and responding to criticisms against their preferred candidates. Specific to TikTok are two types of influencers: the ‘*stan*’ accounts who portray politicians as ‘idols’ and their supporters as ‘fans’, glorifying candidates as larger-than-life spectacles, and the ‘*trending*’ influencers who stylize the politicians in accordance with the cultural ‘trends’ and vernacular taste of the platform. Like fake news operators in the alt-news and entertainment media, which unlike those that only ‘mimic’ professional news media, these identify themselves as alternative media sources through repackaging of partisan content as newsworthy. Mainstream influencers are those who have gained broad popularity on social media and now position partisan posts as ‘personal’ endorsements. The final type of complicit influencers is polarizing influencers; these mobilize absolute support for their candidate of choice, and launch uncivil attacks against opposing candidates and their supporters.

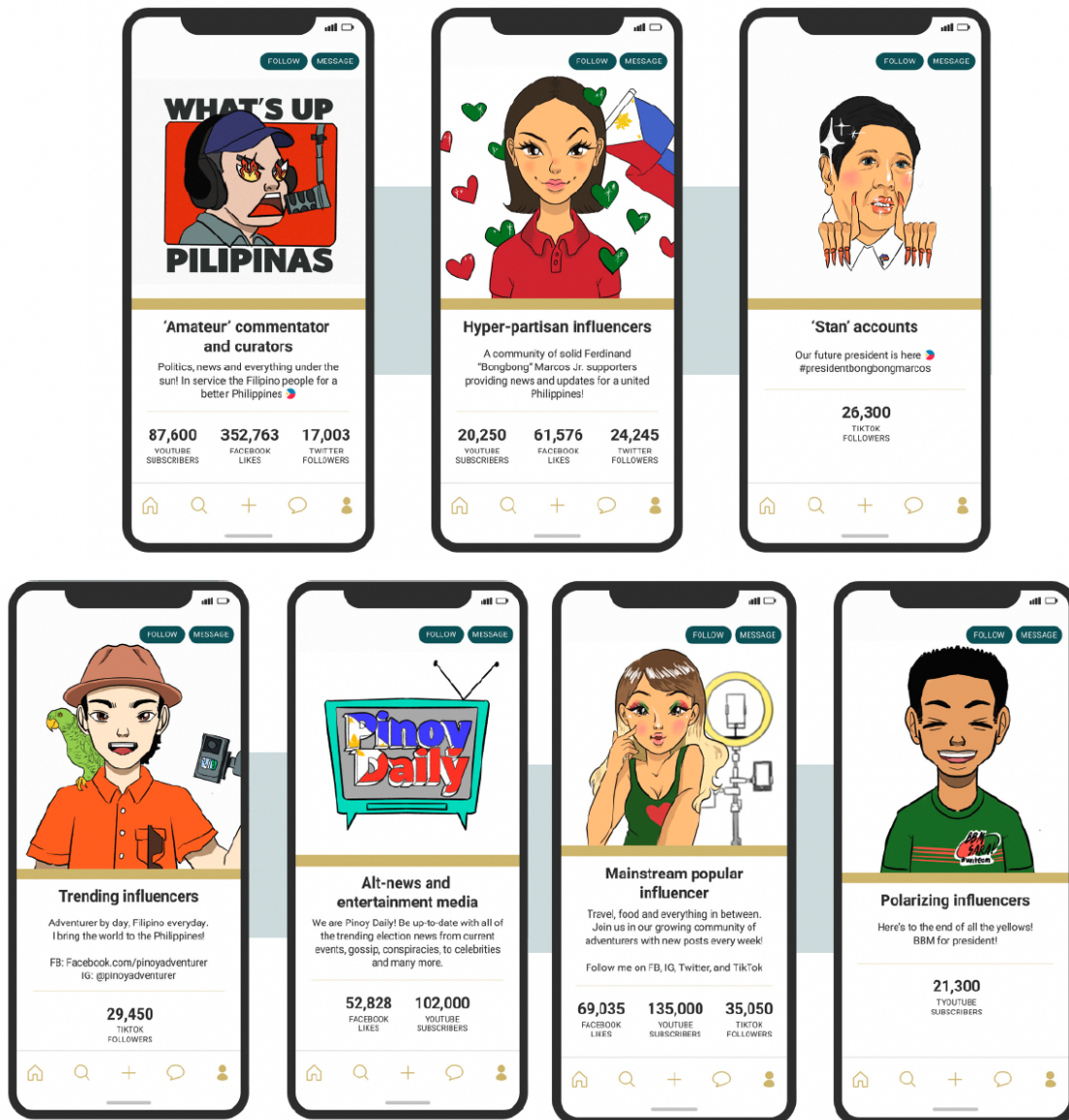


Figure 1. Covert political Influencer types exemplified as social media profiles, based on K-means clustering of 18 indicators (Gaw et al., 2022).

In the 2022 general elections, influencers were enlisted to campaign for candidates by intermediaries who may or may not have been directly involved in the above-board campaign operations. This ambiguity gives the political clients the plausible deniability of engaging in political influence operations. There is also no documentation of the transactions between the influencers and the intermediaries: no written contracts, non-disclosure agreements, or any documentary stipulation of the obligations of the parties. Communication is either in private messages on social media, which is inaccessible to media or researchers, or through discrete face-to-face meetings. The lack of concrete or traceable evidence not only emphasizes the underhanded nature of covert political influence work but also that there is a mutual understanding about the gains and risks of such engagement.<sup>13</sup>



Unlike its commercial counterparts, influencers in the business of political campaigns do not follow a standard rate card. There is no set pricing for influencers at different tiers of popularity, and most of the time, it is the influencers who set the amount for the work they render for their clients. While different factors influence these rates, social capital, political notoriety, and their ability to promote their clients' agenda emerge to be the consistent criteria that affect the pricing of influencer work. In some cases, premium is offered for influencers who are willing to switch camps or double down their campaigning during the peak of the campaign season. The length and scope of engagement also work differently for influencers who have established their footing in social media, and those considered micro-influencers who only have small followings. Big-name influencers often are employed under politicians' payroll and are committed to doing the politicians' bidding in an unspecified number of posts. Those who have a modest following are contracted on a per-trial basis. If their campaign posts 'click' with the intended voter segment, they are likely to continue to be commissioned for a longer period.<sup>14</sup>

These quantitative and qualitative data are the building blocks of political-economic assumptions about the political influencers and their involvement in political campaigns in the 2022 Philippine Elections. The extent to which the rates of political influencers are paid more or less than the commercial influencers across the board is unclear. It is estimated that the political spending on influencers for political campaigns ranges from PhP 600M to 1.5B (USD 10.9M to 27M). This first estimate assumes that most influencers are compensated per post, except for a few influencers who exceed a follower threshold (> 500,000 followers) and are assumed to be on a retainer contract. These estimates do not include the income earned by influencers from platform monetization. It has also not been possible to factor in other variables such as political ideology, reputational risk, and campaign roles, among others.<sup>15</sup>

## INFLUENCERS AS POLITICAL BROKERS

Politicians spend billions in advertising to reach mass audiences, but they ultimately rely on political brokers on the ground in local towns and *barangays* (villages) to convert this reach into possible votes.<sup>16</sup> These brokers tend to have strong social ties in the community, the cultural familiarity to appeal to the voters' sensibilities, and strategic skills to navigate local political relations.<sup>17</sup>

Influencers operate as contemporary political brokers in a hyper-mediatized political ecosystem. Their authentic performance as 'ordinary' people, their community-building skills, and their vernacular expertise of the platforms make them perfect intermediaries between politicians and voters in digital communities,<sup>18</sup> many of which are explicitly rooted in their locales. While candidates can directly engage with voters through their digital accounts, vlogs and live videos, influencers' non-elite position allows them to translate political messages into cultural narratives that resonate with the public. At the same time, influencers tend to have cultivated enough cultural status for them to exercise political capital in political discourses online to bridge the relations between national political figures and ordinary Filipino voters. For instance, earlier research documented YouTubers such as *Banat By* and *Maharlika* performing a brokerage role in promoting the anti-media agenda of the Duterte administration.<sup>19</sup> They were able to do this by establishing communities with hundred thousand viewers not only through their 'amateur' political commentary but also through their anti-establishment cultural brand. Their relatability as 'one of the people' transmuted into credibility

in opining both about day-to-day news stories and high-stakes political events, even for unpopular political position such as in the case of the franchise renewal issue of major broadcasting network ABS-CBN in 2020.

Traditional political brokers are known to work *for* politicians,<sup>20</sup> but influencers as emerging political brokers are more ambiguous about their political-economic relationship with candidates. Many influencers align themselves with politicians that advance the issues and policies that matter to them,<sup>21</sup> but a significant number are also involved in covert political influence operations.<sup>22</sup> This has been the case in the Philippines since the 2016 Duterte campaign, and these influencers have proven to be effective in performing brokerage for Duterte and helping him maintain his popularity throughout his administration.<sup>23</sup>

## CONCLUSION: POLICY ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

It was not a surprise that political influencers carried over their operations beyond electoral purposes. Under the Marcos Jr. administration, his own influencers have shifted gears toward promoting the vision and programmes of their client as president and chief executive of the country. However, unlike during the Duterte administration when influencers were allowed to be autonomous and flexible in their messages, the incumbent government has only retained a few influencers; many have not even been given official media access to President Marcos Jr.<sup>24</sup> Apart from this, the current political squabbles between the Marcos and Duterte dynasties have also translated to even nastier fights between their respective influencers. Previously united during the electoral campaign, these influencers are presently engaged in political combat that has further contributed to the toxicity of social media space in the Philippines.<sup>25</sup>

While the current “influencer wars” figure prominently in social media, clear and glaring policy gaps in social media regulation still exist. To the surprise of many, the Marcos Jr. administration is mulling possible policy interventions to combat disinformation.<sup>26</sup> Beyond social media literacy, it remains to be seen whether this includes addressing the political economy of the “influencer industry” in the country. There is little time though. If clear policy regulations are not put in place within this year, it certain that influence operations will shape the midterm elections next year.

Side by side with policy action is the need for more research. Critical to this research agenda is emphasizing that influence operations through brokerage is work, and brokers are expected to gain from their mediation, which in the case of the 2022 elections, amounts to millions and billions of pesos, based on estimates. The culture of political patronage in the Philippines also historically shows that these exchanges are not only or always financial but also come in the form of political appointments and favours,<sup>27</sup> exemplified in both recent and early histories. Future research needs to trace these strings of relations and transactions by regarding influencers as (potential) political brokers. Influencers should be examined beyond the veneer of participatory culture and the obscurity of influence operations, if mechanisms are to be developed to govern these complicit political operators.

## ENDNOTES

Note: This article primarily draws from the research report “Political Economy of Covert Influence Operations in the 2022 Philippine Elections” by Fatima Gaw, Jon Benedik A. Bunquin, Samuel I. Cabbuag, Jose Mari H. Lanuza, Noreen H. Sapalo, and Al-Habbyel B. Yusoph, in partnership with Internews.

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<sup>2</sup> Natashya Gutierrez, “State-sponsored hate: The rise of the pro-Duterte bloggers.” *Rappler*, August 18, 2017, <https://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/in-depth/178709-duterte-die-hard-supporters-bloggers-propaganda-pcoo/>.

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<sup>10</sup> Soriano and Gaw, “Platforms, alternative influence”.

<sup>11</sup> Gaw et al., “Political Economy of Covert Influence Operations”.

<sup>12</sup> Gemma Mendoza, “Networked propaganda: False narratives from the Marcos arsenal”, *Rappler*, November 22, 2019, <https://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/investigative/245540-networked-propaganda-false-narratives-from-the-marcos-arsenal/>.

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