Democracy under Threat:
Post-Truth Politics and Democracy in the Philippines

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Abstract

Today, the political landscape where boundaries between fact and fiction have been blurred have extended to reach the regions of the Global South, like the Philippines. In this growing traction in search for truths, this paper investigates the intersections between post-truth politics, social media, and democracy in the Philippines. First, it will argue that the technical conditions for the rise of an omnipresence of (dis) information has supported the post-truth environment in the Philippines. Second, the paper will further argue that post-truth, as it takes place in the Philippines today, mobilizes what we will call as the paradox of disinformation-based "truths" (DBTs). DBTs result from post-truth's tendency towards alternate truths which ironically blur the lines between truth and falsity. DBTs will be traced through the political discourse propagated by both state and non-state actors. Through critical discourse analysis aided by distant (digital) reading, it will analyze the Facebook pages of the National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict (NTF-ELCAC) and the tandem presidency of Ferdinand Marcos Jr. and Sara Duterte. What characterizes the Philippine situation today is the widespread proliferation of DBTs that, on the one hand, potentially challenge the democratic exercise of reflection and discernment and, on the other hand, tend towards authoritarian consolidation. Democracy is threatened both by the incapacity to discern and the institutional and state-initiated efforts to consolidate authoritarianism.

Keywords

Democracy, Narratives, Politics, Post-truth, Technology

Introduction

The Philippines' political landscape is in a constant state of change. After periods of intrusive propaganda under colonization, imperial power dominance, and domestic authoritarian regimes, Filipino political society finds itself "chasing for truths" that Filipinos need to know and understand. The colonial and imperial eras disturbed the public's mind in understanding collective identity, which in turn harmed the prospect of social cohesion leading to deep-rooted class divisions, civil unrest, colonial mentality among the elite, and state-sponsored violence. These attitudes have actually been amplified in contemporary times where the rise of authoritarian figures into power has inflicted further marginalization and oppression on citizens, and the rise of the wealth gap between classes in Philippine society. Hence, authoritarian regimes have operated by exploiting the weaknesses of the oppressed to serve elite interests. Since the end of the Ferdinand Marcos Sr.'s regime, the country has been in a continual and seemingly never-ending struggle for a stable democracy that embodies social justice, the rule of law, and that upholds the sanctity of objective truths (Quimpo, 2005).

The start of the Fifth Philippine Republic ushered in an era of "neoteric" politics that transcended novel approaches, developments, and trends. On the one hand, democratic politics in the Philippines have evolved beyond conventional approaches, with political participation becoming more diverse and multifaceted as political dynamics and behavior transcends conventional political participation platforms, which now includes fluid and more complex arenas of social media technology moderated modalities. These new tendencies and approaches have emerged, where the public has increasingly engaged with digital platforms, social media, and grassroots move-ments as new avenues for political expression and activism. This shift reflects a broader global trend where technology and social media have become powerful tools for political mobilization by entrenched political elites, particularly in regions with histories of authoritarianism (Tandoc, 2020). Despite the potential of greater plurality and more direct democracy in the new internet-based forum, challenges remain as the political landscape continues to be shaped by the enduring influence of elite interests and the lingering effects of past regimes (Curato, 2017). Consequently, the pursuit of a truly democratic society that guarantees equal participatory citizenship, recognizes the importance of social justice, and prioritizes the rule of law is an ongoing struggle, deeply intertwined with the nation's complex historical and political context (Rocamora, 1998).

The interplay between historical injustices and contemporary political dynamics has also given rise to a complex Filipino media landscape, which includes the conventional written media and mass media. Media has long been a battleground where narratives of power and resistance collide. During the colonial and authoritarian periods, the media was often co-opted by those in

power to propagate state-sponsored narratives, suppress dissent, and maintain control over the populace. In the post-authoritarian era, while there has been a resurgence of press freedom, the media continues to face significant challenges, including ownership concentration in the hands of a few elite families and political interference, which compromises the objectivity and independence of journalism (Panol, 2000). Moreover, the rise of digital media and social media platforms has further complicated the media landscape, introducing new challenges such as the spread of misinformation, disinformation, and the weaponization of social media by political actors to influence public opinion and elections (Tandoc, 2019). Despite these obstacles, the media continues to play a crucial role in the ongoing struggle for democracy, providing a platform for marginalized voices and holding those in power accountable. The battle for truth and justice in the Philippines is thus not only fought in the political arena but also in the realm of public discourse, where the media serves as both a tool and a battleground for shaping the future of the nation.

This article will investigate the intersection between post-truth politics and democracy in the Philippines, focusing on how these dynamics are shaped and propagated by both state and non-state actors. The article will argue that today's social media potentially supports a post-truth environment, through what the article will explain as an omnipresence of (dis)information. Moreover, the article will further argue that the technical aspects for the proliferation of an omnipresence of (dis)information has also supported the propagation of alternate truths that blur the lines between truth and falsity. We will call this post-truth paradox as disinformation-based "truths."

This article has used critical discourse analysis to deal with the narratives and commentaries from social media posts through a distant (digital) reading approach. Through the software *Antconc*, the article analyzes posts from the Facebook pages of the National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict (NTF-ELCAC) and the presidential tandem of Ferdinand Marcos Jr. and Sara Duterte and trace how disinformation-based "truths" are discoursed. The article elucidates how post-truth politics in the Philippines not only erodes the public's ability to discern truth, but also, skews their opinion to favor government supported perspectives which serve to further consolidate authoritarian power. Consequently, democracy in the Philippines faces a dual threat: the erosion of truth discernment capabilities and the systematic, state-driven efforts to entrench authoritarianism.

Post-truth in the Global Landscape: Conception and Growth

The term post-truth politics has gained traction especially amidst its challenge to democracy. Post-truth is defined as the blurring of lines between truth and lying as well as with fact and fiction (Keyes, 2004). In 2016, the term post-truth was identified by Oxford Dictionaries as the Word of the Year when political developments in the West seem to have been driven by

public opinion shaped by the growing dominance of emotional appeal rather than of objective truth (BBC News, 2016).

The conception and growth of post-truth politics can be understood as a response to the increasing complexity of modern political life, where objective facts and empirical evidence have lost their primacy in public discourse. Instead, emotional appeal and personal belief have taken precedence, leading to what is termed "post-truth" politics. This shift is exemplified by the rise of what some scholars call "careless speech," a rhetorical style that deliberately creates confusion and undermines democratic debate by promoting misinformation and disinformation. This phenomenon is not just a consequence of political maneuvering but is also deeply rooted in structural changes in the media landscape, where the proliferation of digital platforms has allowed disinformation to spread rapidly and widely without the gatekeeping functions traditionally performed by established media outlets (Hyvönen, 2018).

Moreover, post-truth politics is also linked to a broader epistemological crisis that challenges the very nature of truth and knowledge in society. This crisis is characterized by the relativization and naturalization of truth, where facts are no longer seen as objective realities but as products of power, history, and perspective. This has led to a situation where conspiracy theories and alternative facts gain traction, undermining the foundations of rational discourse and paving the way for authoritarian ideologies. The interplay between these epistemic challenges and the political environment has created a fertile ground for the growth of post-truth politics, which not only distorts reality but also destabilizes democratic institutions (Schindler, 2020). The moral and political implications of living in a so-called "post-truth" era are profound, as the erosion of trust in facts not only affects public policy but also social cohesion. The rhetoric of post-truth, which often involves labelling opponents as irrational or morally compromised, exacerbates social divisions and hinders the possibility of consensus or constructive dialogue (Hannon, 2023).

Countries around the world have adopted various strategies to confront the challenges posed by post-truth politics. In Europe, for example, the rise of post-truth has been linked to a deterioration in political dialogue between states, as misinformation and disinformation erode trust and make constructive engagement increasingly difficult. The European Union has recognized the need to restore a functioning security dialogue, which has been severely disrupted by the spread of false narratives and the manipulation of information for political ends. Efforts to counteract post-truth in this context include initiatives aimed at promoting transparency, enhancing media literacy, and restoring public trust in traditional institutions of knowledge production (Arnaud, 2019).

In China, the government's approach to dealing with post-truth has been particularly aggressive, especially in the context of international public opinion warfare during the COVID-19

pandemic. The Chinese government has actively worked to counteract negative portrayals in the global media by promoting alternative narratives that emphasize its successes in managing the pandemic. This strategy involves not only controlling the domestic narrative but also influencing international perceptions through state-sponsored media and digital platforms. The Chinese approach highlights the use of post-truth as a tool of statecraft, where the manipulation of facts is used to enhance national prestige and undermine the credibility of adversaries (Yan and Wu, 2021).

Other than China, some countries have sought to address the post-truth phenomenon by strengthening regulatory frameworks around information dissemination. This includes efforts to combat the spread of fake news through legal measures, such as the introduction of penalties for the dissemination of false information and the implementation of stricter content moderation policies on social media platforms. The balance between protecting the public from misinformation and upholding democratic freedoms remains a contentious issue in many democratic societies (Sushpanova, 2019).

The rise of post-truth politics poses significant threats to the functioning of democratic societies. One of the most concerning aspects is the erosion of epistemic autonomy, which refers to the ability of individuals to critically assess information and make informed decisions. Post-truth tactics, such as the use of gaslighting-a manipulative technique that aims to disorient and confuse individuals-can severely undermine this autonomy (Hoggan-Kloubert & Hoggan, 2023). By introducing false narratives, discrediting critics, and denying plain facts, post-truth politics leaves individuals isolated and unable to distinguish between reliable and unreliable sources. This not only weakens the foundation of democratic decision-making but also makes the public more susceptible to authoritarian manipulation (Rietdijk, 2021).

Particularly through social media, post-truth exacerbated the polarization and fragmentation of societies. The digital environment, where information spreads rapidly and unchecked, has created echo chambers that reinforce existing biases and deepen divisions within the public. The proliferation of fake news and the normalization of alternative facts have made it increasingly difficult for democracies to function effectively, as the shared basis of factual understanding necessary for constructive debate and decision-making erodes (Petricone, 2021).

Post-truth Politics and the Omnipresence of (Dis)Information

There has been substantial research into how digital technology and social media have enabled the rise of a post-truth political environment. Tetiana Kovalova and Olena Yevtushenko (2022, 112) describe how post-truth politics has been enabled by the "rapid development of multimedia technologies." Nora Martin (2017, 41) advances the claim that post-truth is largely a

result of the "changes in the news milieu in the digital age." Danna Tessier (2020, 18) contends that the rise of post-truth has been "exacerbated by the increase and exponential impact of information technology." Several others (Giusti and Piras 2021; Kalpokas 2018; Visvizi and Lytras 2019) also share the view that the current post-truth political environment is largely a result of the developments in digital technologies.

Forms of socio-political organization are, to a certain extent, influenced or determined-depending on the tradition one affiliates oneself with - by the degree of technological development. Philosophers of technology have argued how technologies are not only not neutral but also constitutive of society's ways of being. Their technicalities oftentimes tend their users towards specific ways of being that incline towards or determine socio-political forms. For example, Don Ihde (2004, 42) developed the notion of "latent telic inclinations" where instruments or technologies tend to "favor certain rather than other directions." A distance learning mediated through transistor radios can be cited as an example. The technicalities of the transistor technology tend to support a pedagogy with a unidirectional or monological rather than a dialogical communication (Imbong 2021). The dangers that come along with such a technology require a non-democratic form of organization and intervention where only an elite few decide over the matter concerned, if only to keep those dangers at bay.

Likewise, social media has supported what can be called as the omnipresence of information. It is a truism to say that there is a deluge of information on the internet today and social media alone. Facebook, the social media platform, founded in 2004, is saturated with massive yet conflicting flows of information. One can differentiate the amount of information generated, distributed, and circulated between transistor-enabled communication on the one hand, and the internet-enabled on the other hand. The transistor follows the one-to-many flows of communication as characterized by radio and television (Auerbach, 2023). With the development of the internet, it provided the possibility for a large-scale many-to-many flow and feedback of information. Furthermore, the development of smartphones has augured an era of being always online, always reachable. Unlike the transistor era where information sources are localized in bulky devices at home, the internet-enabled smartphone universalized the possibility of not only everyone sharing, receiving, and feedbacking information at once but also doing these functionalities virtually anywhere and everywhere in their internet-enabled portable and powerful devices.

The concept of the omnipresence of information can be better understood by employing David Auerbach's notion of the *meganet*, that is "a persistent, evolving, and opaque data network that controls how we see the world" (Auerbach 2023, 45). It is persistent because it is never offline and never being reset. Further, it also has the "ability to respond to changes and update itself,

keeping in sync with the world" (Auerbach 2023, 45). Its evolving character is manifested through the incessant modifications resulting from the interaction of millions of programmers, users, and even artificial intelligences (AI). Finally, it is opaque because it is difficult and frequently impossible to gauge why the *meganet* behaves in a particular way.

Social media is a clear example of what can be called a *meganet*-a vast, living system that never truly sleeps. Take Facebook, for instance. Even if you log yourself out or delete the app entirely, the platform continues to operate, to pulse with life. Billions of posts, comments, images, and reactions continue to circulate, mutate, and multiply. It doesn't pause for you; it doesn't wait. It's always on. What makes it fascinating is how it constantly reshapes itself through the ceaseless interactions of its users-humans, bots, corporations, and algorithms all feeding into a single, ever-growing network. Every like, share, or repost tweaks the ecosystem, altering what rises to visibility and what fades into digital obscurity. Yet, for all its activity, social media remains profoundly opaque. No single actor-no user, moderator, or even the platform's engineers-can claim complete control over what thrives or dies within it. Its movements are unpredictable, emergent, and often beyond human grasp, making it less a tool we use and more a phenomenon we participate in.

The crucial components of a *meganet* discourse are its velocity and virality. Velocity and virality refer to how *meganets* are designed to only allow fast and unreflective thinking. For Auerbach, *meganet's* velocity is one of reactive and quick judgment rather than reflective and slow thinking. The distinction between fast reaction and slow reflection can be compared to how Walter Benjamin distinguished *Erfahrung* and *Erlebnis*. The philosopher of technology Andrew Feenberg (2023, 8) developed these concepts, explaining that *Erfahrung* is an "experience shaped by a deep relation to reality," as opposed to *Erlebnis* which is a mere "momentary response to passing sensation." *Meganet* or social media is designed to enable a kind of unreflective yet networked velocity similar to an *Erlebnis*-like experience. One can see this clearly in Facebook's feedback function called the "reacts," referring more to an immediate and unreflective response to what is fed online. For Auerbach (2023, 50), the speed allowed through feedbacking and reaction has overtaken "traditional forces whereby institutional players make studied decisions and regulate collective human behavior by acting in reasonably consistent and predictable manners."

The technicalities and functionalities enabled by *meganets* and powerful computing devices have made the storage, retrieval, distribution, and feedbacking of information not only efficient but also possible virtually everywhere. Scholars such as Kalpokas (2018), Kovalova and Yevtushenko (2022), Martin (2017), and Tessier (2020) have observed an 'information overload' in different post-truth political environments. The omnipresence of information in the form of its overload has weakened if not compromised society's capacities to discern truth from falsity

(Tessier, 2020). Kalpokas (2018, 33) distinguished the Information Age then from the Experience Age today, arguing that the former has produced the information overload while the latter has produced an "attempt at dealing with [information overload] through an effective criterion." A post-truth political environment characterized by an omnipresent information, according to Kalpokas (2018), has placed at a disadvantageous position slow and elaborate reasoning while favoring that which immediately invokes emotional appeals. In post-truth politics, truth and falsity enter a zone of indistinction, or at the very least, their distinction is rendered unimportant (ibid.) or their boundaries blurred (Giusti & Piras, 2020) as alternate truths can be fluidly constructed. Such an incapacity and indistinction further fuel the most viral and appealing content, regardless of its veracity. In this regard, the omnipresence of information can also mean the omnipresence of disinformation in the form of alternate truths.

The *meganet*-supported social media, with the dynamic interaction of powerful machines, engaged actors, and persistent connectivity and contents, provides the technical conditions for an omnipresence of (dis)information. The extensive, massive, and persistent reach of *meganet*-supported political campaign discourse today makes disinformation omnipresent. While disinformation or the spreading of fake news could be traced as far back as the pre-printing era, then through the printing and up to the broadcast eras (Hanley & Munoriyarwa, 2021), the way disinformation is organized and spread today is technically different compared to the past. One does not need to wait, sit, and enjoy the comforts of the home, like the era of the television, to be a receiver of disinformation; today, the "home" functionality is virtually transported and integrated to every social media platform and device feeding an infinite amount of content to its individual users located everywhere and anywhere. The technical arrangements today occasion the possibility of disinformation being widespread. In the Philippines, this is evidenced by what Media Studies scholar Ma. Diosa Labiste (2022) observed as a "widespread" distribution of disinformation in the country to disinform Filipinos.

Nonetheless, these technical arrangements are likewise taken advantage of especially by political actors, including those with ambitions for the highest political offices. This section will investigate both state and non-state political actors that have taken advantage of these arrangements to further their agenda: the National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict (NTF-ELCAC) and the supporters of the presidential tandem of Ferdinand Marcos Jr. and Sara Duterte. By tracing what we call as disinformation-based "truths" in the discourses from Rodrigo Duterte to the campaign and when President Marcos Jr. assume power, the article put to scrutiny how disinformation-based truths characterizes the post-truth political environment of the Philippines today-where half-truths and complete falsehoods are reinforced and legitimized through discourse

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to become "true". We further argue that the construction of these truths could either flow from the state or from what is made to appear as non-state actors.

Counterinsurgency Disinformation through Terror-Tagging

The NTF-ELCAC is the government agency taking charge of the so called "whole-of-nation approach" to the Leftist insurgency in the country, popularly identified as 'communist.' The "whole-of-nation approach" policy was initiated in December 2018 by Rodrigo Duterte's Executive Order No. 30. Two sets of Facebook posts are digitally analyzed through the software *Antconc*, one during the period of R. Duterte's administration and another during Marcos Jr.'s administration. The table below summarizes the comparative quantitative data of the two sets of NTF-ELCAC's Facebook posts. As of this writing, the NTF-ELCAC Facebook page has 194,000 followers.

Table 1 Comparative data between two sets of NTF-ELCAC posts in Duterte and Marcos regimes

Category	January 7, 2020, to June 30, 2021 (under the Duterte regime)	June 9, 2022, to February 28, 2023 (under the Marcos Jr. regime)
Total number of days	540	264
Total posts	422	685
Total reacts	652202	207244
Total shares	450721	93685
Total comments	52634	16720
Total number of engagements	1,155,557	317,649
Average posts per day	1	2
Average engagements per day	2,140 (1.1 % of 194,000 followers)	1,203 (.62% of 194,000 followers)
Average engagements per post	2,738 (1.41 % of 194,0000)	464 (.23% of 194,000 followers)

By observing the quantity of its engagements, one can see the aggressive activity of the NTF-ELCAC in both the R. Duterte and Marcos Jr. regimes. According to the leading social media management platform Hootsuite, a Facebook post with more than 100,000 followers has an average engagement rate of .05% (Newberry, 2023). With engagements that range from .2 percent to more than 1 percent, the NTF-ELCAC has reached more than the average rate of engagement, signaling the massive extent of its reach to the wider public.

The NTF-ELCAC has been notorious for its campaign of terror-tagging. Terror-tagging is the systematic process of maliciously identifying or associating an individual or a group as a terrorist. As observed by Hapal and Serafica (2021), terror-tagging is primarily instigated by the state through its concerned agencies and amplified by a propaganda network that distributes terror-tagging contents. They have traced how the NTF-ELCAC is at the center of this networked distribution of terror-tagging contents (ibid.). Activists, progressive organizations, universities, and revolutionary groups are terror-tagged by this network with the aim of not only vilifying their work and aspirations but also justifying atrocities committed against them.

Table 2 Top 20 terms used by NTF-ELCAC in Facebook in a set of comparative data during Duterte and Marcos regime

January 7, 2020, to June 30, 2021 (under the Duterte regime)		June 9, 2022, to February 28, 2023 (under the Marcos Jr. regime)	
Terms	**Frequency**	**Terms**	**Frequency**
NTF-ELCAC/ELCAC/NTF	1330	NTF-ELCAC/ELCAC/NTF	677
New People's Army/NPA	977	Peace/Kapayapaan/Pangkapayapaan	480
Communist Party of the Philippines/CPP	782	Development/Kaunlaran/Pangkaunlaran	427
Executive Order/ EO	655	New People's Army/NPA	346
People	602	Philippines/Pilipinas	314
Terrorist/s/ic	482	Communist Party of the Philippines/CPP	289
Government	450	National Democratic Front/NDF	260
National Democratic Front/NDF	449	Pagsusulong/susulong	214
Communist	387	People	187
Philippines	283	Nation/Bayan	186
National	272	Terrorist/Terrorism	186
Army	261	Live	182
Armed	233	Government/Gobyerno	175
Law	222	Communist	141
Children	217	Service/Lingkod	132
Makabayan	213	Children/Youth/Kabataan	128
Indigenous	195	Alamin	124

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Table 2 Top 20 terms used by NTF-ELCAC in Facebook in a set of comparative data during Duterte and Marcos regime (Cont.)

January 7, 2020, to June 30, 2021 (under the Duterte regime)		June 9, 2022, to February 28, 2023 (under the Marcos Jr. regime)	
Terms	**Frequency**	**Terms**	**Frequency**
Filipino	178	Social	123
Country	175	Kasangga	117
Party	171	Youtube	117

Terror-tagging is constituted by two interdependent layers of association: the association of the activist with the communist and the association of the communist with the terrorist. The interdependent layers of association aim to establish the logic that activism = communism and communism = terrorism. This is called anti-terror logic. It structures the counterinsurgency discourse of the NTF-ELCAC made omnipresent through the technicalities of social media. As a structure, all terror-tagging discourse and contents, no matter what the subject of vilification is, follow its logic. The table below shows the top 20 terms used by the NTF-ELCAC in its two separate sets of Facebook posts.

The term terrorist/ism/ic is among the top twenty terms for both sets of Facebook posts, together with the alleged terrorist communist groups - CPP-NPA-NDF - and their supposed front organizations. Terror-tagging targets organizations, institutions, individuals, and even liberal democratic principles. The table below illustrates some examples of how entities are terror-tagged.

Table 3 Sample statements of terror-tagging against various entities

Date	Entity terror-tagged	Statement
30 November 2020[1]	Makabayan[2]	President Rodrigo Roa Duterte backs claims of the Armed Forces of the Philippines in identifying the party-lists and organizations represented by the Makabayan bloc… as fronts of the terrorist [CPP-NPA-NDF].

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[1] https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=389918602446530&id=113896963382030

[2] Makabayan bloc is the alliance of different partylist organizations in the Philippine congress. The bloc has been authoring progressive bills and laws and has forwarded calls for socio-economic and political reforms. It has also been consistently terror-tagged by state agencies and elements.

Table 3 Sample statements of terror-tagging against various entities (Cont.)

Date	Entity terror-tagged	Statement
16 February 2020[3]	University of San Carlos	These [Lumad students] were taken and hidden in the retreat house of the Catholic university, the University of San Carlos in Cebu City without their parent's knowledge nor consent. And it was here that they were treated like slaves for over two years. It was here at the University of San Carlos that the radicalization of these minors that started in the terrorist training camp, Salugpungan Ta Tano Igkanugon, continued.
24 June 2022	Leni Robredo	Ka Angel Reyes, a former CPP-NPA-NDF urban infiltrator for youth, students, workers, and [indigenous peoples], affirms that Leni Robredo's political machinery was, and continues to be, a foundation for communist-terrorist groups' recruitment of youths.
29 May 2020	Academic freedom	Where we differ with the Chancellor [Sanchez of the University of the Philippines Los Baños (UPLB)] is in his interpretation of what those freedoms mean in concrete practice under concrete conditions. If freedom of dissent means not just tolerating, but actively promoting, the propaganda of self-acknowledged enemies of the State, we have to differ. And if academic freedom means providing cover for the recruitment of our impressionable youth into armed movements that have been branded as terrorist not just by the Philippine state but others as well, again we have to differ.

There are three characteristics of disinformation that can be observed from the examples of terror-tagging above. First, the claims of the NTF-ELCAC rest on unfounded claims, many of which are even debunked by the government itself. For example, the case that dragged the University of San Carlos (USC) into the counterinsurgency narrative, which alleged the trafficking of ethnic Lumad students by volunteer teachers and Lumad leaders, was eventually dismissed by the Provincial Prosecutor of Davao del Norte (ABC-CBN News, 2021). After being terror-tagged by the NTF-ELCAC, those arrested for allegations of trafficking were cleared and released from detention. However, terror-tagging had already worked to disinform the public.

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[3] https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=440357187402671&id=113896963382030

Second, terror-tagging confuses rebellion, in this case meaning to challenge the *status quo* through, often direct, political activism, with terrorism. The armed movements mentioned in the 29 March 2020 post - where the youth were supposedly recruited and the University of the Philippines Los Baños (UPLB) was allegedly among the recruitment sites - refers to the *armed* rebellion of the communists. But even a regional trial court, in dismissing the petition of the Department of Justice to proscribe the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) as a terrorist group, has distinguished rebellion from terrorism (Bolledo 2022). The conflation of rebellion with terrorism, again, produces a disinforming narrative. As Hapal and Serafica (2021) described, the terror-tagging discourse propagated by the NTF-ELCAC has unfortunately made the issue of insurgency bigger than what it truly is. It has repercussions to the reinforcement of a highly militarized and authoritarian "whole-of-nation approach" to counterinsurgency (Africa 2019; Imbong 2023; Mongaya 2023).

Third, political actors and activists among the government's formal opposition advancing progressive alternatives and reforms, as in the case of the Makabayan bloc and former vice-president Leni Robredo, tend to be the ones to be terror tagged. This campaign of vilification aims to discredit the terror-tagged entities along with their visions of reforms and alternatives. With a seriously vilified opposition, democracy is threatened, and alternatives are foreclosed for fear of being terror-tagged.

Counterinsurgency disinformation constructs and disseminates its own version of "truths": that universities - especially those known for their progressive and pro-people stances - are breeding grounds for insurgency recruitment and accomplices of armed insurgency, that rebellion immediately constitutes terrorism, and that the members of the political opposition are terrorists. These disinformation-based counterinsurgency "truths" (DBCTs) have been significantly pushed through social media, given how the NTF-ELCAC has aggressively used Facebook as an effective communication and feedback platform. But what is more alarming with these DBCTs is how they not only effectively weaken the political opposition but also confuse the aims of a counterinsurgency program.

Firstly, these DBCTs blatantly vilify the political opposition, whether the radical left (e.g. the CPP), the liberal tradition (e.g. Robredo), or social institutions (e.g. universities). Political scientists have long argued for the crucial role of a political opposition in sustaining a healthy democratic space. From the more classical liberal conception of John Stuart Mill on the significance of tolerating opposing opinions (Mill 2005) to the more recent elaboration of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe on how democracy should be founded on radical conflicts/contradictions (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001), the opposition should be seen not just a part of but in fact the very condition for democracy to work. The political opposition is the *conditio sine qua non* of democracy. The deployment of DBCTs undermines the opposition in a post-truth political environment erodes the very substance of a working democracy: the political opposition.

Secondly, DBCTs confuse the aim of counterinsurgency as the mere neutralization of supposed terrorists while ignoring the causes of such violence and deliberately being evasive on the more important issue of advancing peace based on social justice. For example, the NTF-ELCAC during the regime of Duterte mentioned the Comprehensive Agreement for Socio-Economic Reforms (CASER) only twice in the span of eighteen months of its Facebook posts. The present Marcos Jr. regime has tried to differentiate itself from the previous belligerent Duterte administration by producing peace/*kapayapaan*-centred discourses in its social media, having 480 peace/*kapayapaan* mentions in the period of Facebook posts concerned. Nevertheless, the concept of peace propagated in their discourse is accompanied by terror-tagging and framed with an annihilative and militarist approach to achieving it. For example, in its 14 June 2022 post, the NTF-ELCAC appears to sympathize with peasants asserting their rightful ownership of lands within Hacienda Tinang. It said that "we, at the NTF-ELCAC, stand united with the farmer-beneficiaries of Hacienda Tinang and their families. We cry out for justice. We cry out for peace." But just immediately after that, it condemns "any and all forms of *Bungkalan* activities being undertaken by the CPP-NPA-NDF and by their front organizations." *Bungkalan* refers to the collective effort of peasant-beneficiaries to till idle lands. The peasants tilling the lands within Hacienda Tinang, despite being the rightful beneficiaries, were still terror-tagged by the state. Their and their supporters' arrests prompted a probe from the Commission on Human Rights (CNN Philippines Staff, 2022).

What political scientists of the Philippines have described as the problem of 'elite democracy' in the Philippines, as the root cause of social unrest and political violence, could be addressed by way of genuinely undoing its structural causes. The peace talks, through its framework of reforms under The Hague Joint Declaration of 1992 (Government of the Republic of the Philippines and the National Democratic Front of the Philippines, 1992), could be one arena for elite democracy to be undone (Pinches, 1997; Quimpo, 2005). But DBCTs, informed by terror-tagging, advances a discourse that unfortunately is based on disinformation, making it harder for ordinary citizens to have an informed opinion on matters that concern the peace talks and their relationship with the need for democratic reforms and how the latter could potentially address the perennial problem of elite democracy.

The Appearance of Grassroots-Initiated Truths and the Consolidation of Power

Among the Facebook pages that actively campaigned for the Marcos Jr. and S. Duterte tandem presidency is the Bongbong Marcos-Sara Duterte 2022 Facebook page. It had its first post last May 11, 2018, four years before the 2022 elections. As of writing, it has 132,000 followers. This section will analyze the posts of the page from May 14, 2021, to July 30, 2022. This time frame covers the year prior to the national elections to one month after Marcos Jr. took the oath of office. The table below summarizes the quantitative data of the said Facebook page during the timeframe.

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Table 4 Quantitative Data of Bongbong Marcos-Sara Duterte 2022

Category	Quantity
Total number of days	442
Total posts	470
Total reacts	77,951
Total shares	77,939
Total comments	73,983
Total number of engagements	229,873
Average posts per day	1
Average engagements per day	520 (.39% of the 132,000 followers)
Average engagements per post	489 (.37% of the 132,000 followers)

Like the NTF-ELCAC page, this page's engagement is above the .05 percent average engagement for pages with more than 100,000 followers (News, 2021). This means that the Bongbong Marcos-Sara Duterte Facebook page also has an above average rate of engagement. What sort of information was distributed through the Bongbong Marcos-Sara Duterte 2022 Facebook page? The table below lists the top 20 terms frequently used by the Facebook page.

Table 5 Frequent Terms in Bongbong Marcos-Sara Duterte 2022 Facebook page

Rank	Term	Frequency
1	BBM	464
2	Marcos	423
3	President/Presidente	396
4	Duterte	273
5	Sara	250
6	Bongbong	182
7	Pilipinas/Philippines	159
8	People	136
9	BBMisMyPresident	133
10	Country	118
11	BBMSara	115
12	Uniteam	107
13	SaraIsMyVP	100

Table 5 Frequent Terms in Bongbong Marcos-Sara Duterte 2022 Facebook page (Cont.)

Rank	Term	Frequency
14	MarcosDuterte	98
15	Presidential	94
16	Years	90
17	Mayor	89
18	PRRD	88
19	BringMarcosBack	85
20	ProtectMarcosJr	84

A Facebook page intended for an electoral campaign would most likely mention self-referential terms. But the self-referring terms in this Facebook page is framed in what appears to be a grassroots-initiated discourse. The grassroots dimension of this discourse refers to how several of the posts are made to appear as the actions not of the page administrators (like the NTF-ELCAC Facebook Page) or state-actors but of ordinary individuals. The discourse attempts to construct four truths: the glory of Martial Law, the humanity of culprits, and the continuity of a legacy. The table below illustrates the aforementioned constructed "truths".

Table 6 "Truths" of glory, humanity, and continuity

Date	Type of "Truths"	Statement	Author
18 June 2021[4]		Much of what had been said against the 1972 Martial Law was fiction.	Juan Ponce Enrile
13 April 2022[5]	Glory	If I were to turn back the time, I'd wish Martial Law was not pulled out. Philippines would have perhaps been more prosperous. There would have been less OFW's and poverty. Maybe Philippines could have turned out to be as positively stable as the UK. These are only my thoughts. I have my freedom of expression and don't try to suppress me.	Ellery-March Geronimo Torres

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[4] https://www.facebook.com/sabong2022/posts/pfbid02Gv9zymNCxeKAsAvGWGRZHjqbvAKkvU1iQCiezgcNp3Npb4ZBf6bYJGfYCPoGREcpl

[5] https://www.facebook.com/sabong2022/posts/pfbid02i56mPjTxeLVVWrd2GyvBNb2gctWy4NYUmREnKKy84vnNKS5TcMhfbEZKFJ59v1Fcl

Table 6 "Truths" of glory, humanity, and continuity (Cont.)

Date	Type of "Truths"	Statement	Author
01 July 2022[6]	Humanity	He [Marcos Jr.] takes his oath, and I can see the heaviness of his newfound responsibilities etched on his face as he repeated the words of his oath. He waves at everyone cheering him after he shook the hand of the person who swore him in. And you can see him taking deep breaths and blowing it out. So natural, so human, and so real. He knows what he is up against and he knows what is expected of him.	Jenny C. Aquino
16 April 2021[7]		I asked myself, why would you hate a man [R. Duterte] who risked his life for the good of this country? Why would you hate a simple and honest person like the president? And, why would you hate a man who fought illegal drugs, criminalities and corruption?	Alon Calinao Dy
10 May 2022[8]	Continuity	After [R. Duterte's] leadership, people have realized that we can be a great nation again if given a great leader like [Marcos Jr.]. And the sweetest assurance here is that [Marcos Jr.] will follow and improve [Duterte's] legacy.	Kib Beriong
22 October 2021[9]		My personal choice is to have a [Marcos Jr. and S. Duterte] tandem as president and [vice president] respectively. It secures the continuity of the road [R. Duterte] already paved for us and for it to keep moving forward. It defeats the darkness that could come if we pursue an agenda of pitting one against the other. They need to be a team.	Jenny C. Aquino

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[6] https://www.facebook.com/sabong2022/posts/pfbid0mj5jEghgSQeVxuefJpYXuw1kyNKcfJ5zMbbbKhDL1Ma A3HV57J5WaHYW64ji5aAPl

[7] https://www.facebook.com/sabong2022/posts/pfbid0mVRQpBHdvRfLZhDiRoF91dotZsVemYRWAfHGC rG3t16cNFYdzPSSDKeXLu3KKykql

[8] https://www.facebook.com/sabong2022/posts/pfbid0fA3n4p57CET5kub3t8jcqBL3EBGASaUVsVNJfbad HaUZ7dUrndRJ4uyYK1j7huVwl

[9] https://www.facebook.com/sabong2022/posts/pfbid02gGUKSkkfCAMiraWQKHsShkWqKdsLgMXWhUv2kk9u GcBQGdUCraWkHYe2nkBqVebol

The discourse of glory is an attempt at a revision of conventionally accepted historical facts in favor of constructed "truths." It pushes the narrative of progress and development under Marcos Snr. and a prosperous Philippines, if only Martial Law had never been lifted. Strangely, the narrative of prosperity includes the fantasizing of a situation where there are less Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs), a policy which was ironically initiated and institutionalized by Marcos Sr. himself (Maca 2018). It even "fictionalized" aspects of the dictatorial regime of Martial Law to support this narrative of prosperity. Fantasizing and fictionalizing are what sustains the "truth" of glory.

The discourse of humanity refers to how Marcos Jr. - the unrepentant son of the dictator Marcos Sr. - and R. Duterte - the instigator of the drug war, conducted from 2016 to 2022, with estimates ranging between 6,252 (the official figure) and 30,000 dead - are depicted as ordinary human beings with all their natural vulnerabilities and cheerfulness on display. Or if not stressing their humanity, the discourse may instead portray these authoritarian figures as leaders who have had to sacrifice their humanity for the greater good; in a heroic act of fighting for a higher cause, e.g. the war against illegal drugs and criminals. The portrayal of humanity is invoked to fantasize a messianic figure ready to abandon the comforts of human nature and who selflessly embrace the heavy responsibility of redeeming humanity itself. What sustains the "truth" of humanity is the revelation of a perverted form of self-sacrifice for a messianic cause.

The discourse of continuity under the Marcos Jr. regime depends upon the narrative of sustaining the earlier supposed greatness, achievements, and legacies of the R. Duterte regime. The narrative portrays that such greatness can only be assured if a figure such as Marcos Sr., the heir to a former strongman and decisive leader, is elected as president to follow and improve the supposed legacy of R. Duterte. Further, the narrative depicts the tandem presidency of Marcos Sr. and S. Duterte as a requirement for such a continuity, a tandem presidency whose functional future has already been put into doubt after the collapse of the precarious unity between the two former allies. Aside from the fact that the "truth" of continuity in reality has been difficult to actually sustain, it also falsely depicts a unity/tandem as strong, which in actuality is precariously founded on a hollow political expediency, which aims to avoid meaningful reform and maintain the *status quo*.

The discourse or "truths" of glory, humanity, and continuity in the Philippines play a significant role in fostering a post-truth political environment. As these "truths" aim to persuade and mobilize an electorate in support of the forces that produce these "truths," we call these disinformation-based electoral "truths" (DBETs). Below is a table that summarizes the "truths" and the disinformation from where DBETs are based.

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Table 7 Discourses of "Truths"

Discourses or "truths"	The disinformation as basis	The reality
Glory	The fantasy of a prosperous Martial Law-like situation where there were less Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) than in reality.	The reality then was the "dismal performance" of the economy (De Dios, 2015). The labor export policy was even initiated by Marcos Sr himself.
Humanity	Leaders transcending their humanity to embrace a higher messianic role, like saving the people from drugs and criminality.	In the case of Duterte, there was nothing messianic in the many collateral deaths that amounted to the killing of innocent civilians. Because of this, a case of crime against humanity was filed against him at the International Criminal Court.
Continuity	The portrayal of a great legacy that needs to be sustained through the unity of two strongman political dynasties and the tandem presidency.	The reality is a "mixed economic reform legacy" which has been criticized for failing to address "key inequity, governance, and policy implementation issues" and which also "weakened the rule of law" and exacerbated the effects of a pandemic (Tuano et al., 2024). In another account, the tandem presidency represents the continuation of the reality of a "bloody legacy" (BBC News, 2022).

These narratives, driven largely by mass communication, social media, and political rhetoric, contribute to reshaping public perception, often at the expense of objective truth. This phenomenon can be analyzed through various lenses, including the institutional and technological factors that enable post-truth politics, as well as its impact on recent democratic elections in the country. In the Philippines, institutional and technological factors have converged to create an environment conducive to post-truth politics. The institutional factors include the weakening of traditional media gatekeepers and the politicization of media institutions (Thorson & Wells, 2015). This erosion of journalistic standards allows for the proliferation of biased and distorted narratives, which are often presented as factual reporting. Moreover, the lack of robust fact-checking mechanisms and the absence of strong regulations against misinformation have allowed false or misleading information to circulate widely.

The rise of social media platforms has revolutionized the way information is disseminated and consumed. The Philippines is among the Southeast Asian countries with the highest number of social media users, with 92 million in 2022 or 18.4 percent of the 500 million active social media users in the region (Khan & Chua, 2023). Many of these users unquestioningly treat as authoritative unverified source content they consume from social media platforms. These platforms, driven by algorithms that prioritize engagement over accuracy, tend to amplify sensationalist content, including distorted and polarizing narratives. This creates echo chambers where users are repeatedly exposed to information that reinforces their pre-existing beliefs, further entrenching post-truth politics. The role of influencers, bloggers, and unofficial political commentators in shaping public opinion through social media cannot be overstated. These actors often engage in the discourse of distortion and polarization by spreading biased interpretations of events or outright falsehoods. The humanization of political figures through carefully crafted social media personas also plays into this, making leaders appear more relatable and trustworthy, regardless of the factual accuracy of their statements.

The 2022 presidential election in the Philippines provides a recent and telling example of how post-truth politics can shape democratic processes. The campaign period was characterized by the pervasive use of social media, where distinctions between factual reporting and opinion were frequently obscured. Central to the discourse was the narrative of continuity-the idea that electing a particular candidate would ensure the preservation of the previous administration's policies. This narrative extended beyond policy matters, merging with emotional appeals and the humanization of candidates, who were depicted as rightful heirs to a legacy of governance despite the contentious aspects of that legacy (Webb, 2022). Historical revisionism, especially in relation to the Martial Law period under Ferdinand Marcos Sr., emerged as a prominent feature of the electoral discourse. Narratives that downplayed or denied the human rights violations and corruption of that era circulated widely, reframing it as a time of discipline, prosperity, and national order (Pangalangan et al., 2018). Such revisionist accounts played a crucial role in reshaping collective memory and influencing public perception of the Marcos family, ultimately contributing to the electoral victory of Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos Jr. The election was likewise marked by deep polarization, with divisions running across political, social, and generational lines. The rhetoric on both sides often adopted extreme moral framings, reducing the contest to a struggle between good and evil rather than a deliberation over policy or vision (Tatcho, 2021). Social media further intensified these divisions, serving as an arena where emotionally charged and polarized discourse often replaced rational debate.

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Critical Reflections on Post-Truth Political Dynamics

In the contemporary political landscape, post-truth politics has emerged as a defining characteristic, particularly in the Philippines, where it intersects with the resurgence of authoritarian tendencies. This dynamic is shaped by a complex interplay of political power, social order, technological manipulation, and the strategic use of narratives by various agents (Feldstein, 2021). The phenomenon of post-truth politics in the Philippines cannot be understood without examining these elements, which collectively contribute to the erosion of democratic principles and the consolidation of authoritarianism.

Political dynamics in post-truth environments are deeply intertwined with the exercise of power, where controlling the narrative becomes as crucial as controlling institutions. This has been manifested in the ability of political leaders and their allies to shape public discourse by blurring the lines between truth and falsehood. The political elite, leveraging both state and non-state actors, have effectively utilized social media platforms to propagate narratives that serve their interests, often at the expense of empirical truths (Tatcho, 2021; Cosentino, 2020). This has been particularly evident in the recent electoral processes, where historical revisionism and the distortion of facts have been used to rehabilitate the image of the Marcos family, thereby facilitating their return to power. The ability to control and manipulate narratives has thus become a critical aspect of political power in the post-truth era, enabling leaders to maintain control even in the face of widespread opposition.

Social order in this context is maintained through a system of patronage that rewards loyalty to the dominant narrative (Cosentino, 2020). The close ties between political leaders and influential media entities work together to disseminate state-sponsored narratives while suppressing dissenting voices. This patronage system extends beyond material rewards, encompassing symbolic capital such as social recognition and legitimacy. Those who align themselves with the dominant narrative are elevated, while those who challenge it are marginalized or vilified. This dynamic has been particularly damaging to the democratic process, as it creates an environment where public discourse is dominated by a few powerful voices, leaving little room for genuine debate or opposition (Ragragio, 2021).

Critical in this study, technological manipulation plays a crucial role in sustaining post-truth politics. The advent of social media has revolutionized the way information is disseminated, allowing for the rapid spread of both factual and misleading content (Tatcho, 2021). In the Philippine case, social media platforms like Facebook have been instrumental in the spread of disinformation, with political actors using these tools to amplify their narratives and drown out opposing viewpoints (Ragragio, 2021). The technical architecture of these platforms, driven by algorithms that prioritize

engagement, has further exacerbated the problem by creating echo chambers where users are exposed primarily to information that reinforces their existing beliefs. This has not only deepened societal divisions but also undermined the public's ability to critically evaluate the information they receive.

Conclusion

In the complex and evolving landscape of the Philippines, where post-truth politics intersects with the resurgence of authoritarianism, democracy is under threat. The convergence of political power, technological manipulation, and the strategic use of narratives has reshaped the fabric of public discourse, undermining the foundational principles of truth, justice, and democratic governance. This dynamic has facilitated the consolidation of power in the hands of a few, particularly through the strategic deployment of revisionist histories, the blurring of fact and fiction, and the systematic suppression of dissent. What emerges from this study's analysis is an understanding of how the omnipresence of disinformation, amplified by the very technologies that once promised to democratize information, now threatens to erode the public's ability to discern truth from falsehood.

The Philippines offer a critical case study in the global phenomenon of post-truth politics, where the boundaries between reality and narrative are increasingly blurred. The article positions a distinction between truth and post-truth narratives that is central to understanding the dynamics of post-truth politics. Truth narratives are grounded in empirical evidence and logical reasoning, while post-truth narratives prioritize emotional appeal and personal belief. Post-truth narratives have been used to rewrite history, particularly regarding the Martial Law era under Ferdinand Marcos Sr. These narratives downplay or outright deny the human rights abuses and corruption of the period, instead presenting it as a time of national prosperity and order. Such revisionist history has been critical in shaping public perception and facilitating the electoral success of Marcos Jr., highlighting the power of post-truth narratives in reshaping reality. Agents in post-truth politics, including politicians, media figures, and social media influencers, play a pivotal role in crafting and disseminating these narratives. These agents engage in a range of activities from peddling disinformation to persuading the public with emotionally charged rhetoric and arguing to silence opposition.

The manipulation of social media, the rebranding of historical figures and events, and the strategic use of polarization have all contributed to a political environment where emotional appeal often poses as empirical evidence to post truth politic in the country. The spread of post-truth politics undermines the very foundations of democratic governance by eroding the public's ability

to engage in informed debate and make rational decisions. The rise of post-truth politics has coincided with a resurgence of authoritarianism, where the manipulation of truth is used to legitimize the concentration of power in the hands of a few. This has created a political environment where democratic institutions are weakened, public trust in the media and other traditional sources of information is eroded, and the space for genuine political opposition is significantly diminished.

The dynamics of post-truth politics in the Philippines, characterized by the manipulation of narratives, the maintenance of social order through patronage, the tyrannical use of technology, and the strategic deployment of post-truth narratives by political agents, pose a significant threat to democracy. As these dynamics continue to evolve, they risk further entrenching authoritarian tendencies and undermining the principles of truth, justice, and democratic governance in the country. Now, the real challenge, therefore, is not only to recognize these dynamics but to actively engage in efforts to counteract their corrosive effects. This requires a multifaceted approach that includes strengthening democratic institutions, promoting media literacy, and fostering a public sphere where truth and reasoned debate are valued over sensationalism and manipulation. The future of democracy in the Philippines-and indeed in many parts of the world-depends on the ability of societies to reclaim the spaces where truth and justice can flourish, even in the face of overwhelming disinformation and authoritarian pressure. The battle for verifiable, objective truth is not merely an abstract or academic concern but a vital component of the struggle for democratic governance. In this fight, the role of each citizen, journalist, and scholar becomes crucial in upholding the values that are essential to a just and equitable society. The resilience of democracy in the Philippines will depend on the collective efforts to resist the fascination of post-truth narratives and to champion the cause of truth.

Disclosure of Interest

We declare that we have no conflicts of interest in this research.

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