

## Research Article

# Journalists and Bloggers in the Post-Truth Era: The Political Economy of Philippine Online News Production on Facebook

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## Abstract

In a period of decaying public trust in media, disinformation propagation, and the increasing number of social media users, online editors and news bloggers are reinventing the process of packaging news and distributing content through Facebook and other digital platforms. The rise of audience metrics has changed the way online content producers think about their news consumers. News organizations and bloggers should remain credible in order to gain and retain readers.

This study examines how selected online editors and selected news bloggers produce and distribute news content on Facebook. It evaluates how they use the headlines, images, and story descriptions in boosting their credibility rating or trust factor. This research also discusses editors' and bloggers' appropriation of credible news content. Data were collected through key informant interviews with five selected online editors and five selected news bloggers.

Results reveal that traditional media influence the format, posting time, and content of its digital version on Facebook. News articles that are interesting, relevant, authentic, and ethical have high chances of being published compared to other stories. Likewise, the political views of the owner (or publisher) slightly influence the selection of contents but news producers counter these decisions to be fair.

**Keywords:** *social media, credibility, audience metrics, gatekeeping, mainstream media, fake news, disinformation*

## **Introduction and Rationale**

Filipinos spend an average of 3.2 hours daily on mobile to browse the web, play games, listen to music, watch videos, chat with friends, shop in online stores, and send emails (Garcia, 2015). The top online activity in the country is social media use, which accounts for 47 percent. In fact, there are at least 67 million active Facebook users in the country, making it the most popular social media platform nationwide (Camus, 2018). Likewise, news readers also use Facebook to consume news and to search for trending topics worldwide (Fallows, 2004).

## **Manufacturing Content on Facebook**

The growing number of online users has encouraged traditional news organizations to put up pages on social media to reach more readers (Singer et al., 2011). In effect, media organizations use the potential of Facebook to attract readers since most social media users spend more time on this social network (Kiesler & Eaton, 2009; Seward 2008; Chew, 2007). Through social media channels, the traditional media outlets inform and educate the public on various issues and events (Treadaway, 2010; Lewis, 2009; Martire, 2008) by sharing links of articles that can be found on their websites.

Since Facebook is the most visited website on the internet (Alexa, 2018; Google; 2018), online users who “like” or “follow” a media outlet will automatically receive news feeds. Furthermore, the technological developments in the newsroom have also encouraged online editors and news managers to monitor audience metrics after decades of disregarding the preferences of their readers (Loosen & Schmidt, 2012; Dick, 2011; Anderson, 2011; Boczkowski, 2010; Lowrey, 2009). Audience metrics refer to the readers’ demographics such as age, gender, and location. It also covers the audiences’ frequency of visit to a website, their time spent online, their reaction to news content (e.g., like, share, and comment), and their level of attention to a brand. In a nutshell, audience metrics help organizations understand the needs and wants of online users, and identify trending topics (Lovett, 2011). In fact, several studies have suggested that audience statistics

influence editorial judgments (Vu, 2014; Lee, Lewis & Powers, 2014; Anderson, 2011).

## **Newsrooms and Blogs**

Apart from media institutions, bloggers have also created news pages on Facebook to reach a wider audience. Similar to journalists, bloggers relay information to the public by posting content on social media. Both cover events and produce stories for online users. The difference between media practitioners and bloggers is that, the former report facts while the latter write mostly about their opinions. In the same vein, bloggers are independent while journalists work for news companies. While journalists play a vital role in society as “gatekeepers” by filtering and converting daily events into a “limited number of news articles” (Shoemaker, 1991), bloggers write anything under the sun such as life events, politics, arts, culture, history, travel, health, technology, advocacy, and public affairs. Media practitioners are also assigned to a beat, cover events regularly, and produce news stories daily, while bloggers just choose the events they want to cover and they are not obligated to produce articles every day. Reporters also had training in traditional reporting techniques, ethics, and media law while bloggers do not have formal training. Moreover, bloggers usually wait for reporters to publish stories before they can write about a certain issue or event since they have limited access to information. Generally, government agencies and private entities give data and statements to journalists. Hence, bloggers use Facebook and Twitter because these platforms are vital sources of news and they take cues from mainstream media outlets from these social media channels (Mackay & Lowrey, 2011; Kopytoff, 2011).

## **Disinformation in the Philippines**

Given the power of the internet to provide an unquantifiable amount of information, online users are facing the risk of being hoodwinked by people who produce and distribute “fake news” in digital platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. According to Chandran (2017), “fake news” has become a global phenomenon since most social media users trust information shared by friends without checking the facts.

Indeed, “fake news” was even hailed as “Word of the Year” in 2017 by Collins Dictionary due to its “ubiquitous presence” (Flood, 2017). Lexicographers said the usage of the term has increased by 365 percent since 2016 due to the repeated use of the expression by United States President Donald Trump, who labels news against him as “fake” (Hunt, 2018; Mateo, 2017). Journalists and editors, however, said the term is an oxymoron since two of the attributes of news are accuracy and truthfulness (Viray & Diola, 2017).

In the case of the Philippines, President Rodrigo Duterte often uses the term against his critics. An Oxford University study claimed that his camp spent \$200,000 or around P10 million on 500 “trolls,” who allegedly attacked critics and spread propaganda for him on social media in the guise of legitimate news articles (Bradshaw & Howard, 2017; Williams, 2017). After some time, Duterte admitted that he hired “trolls” to defend him and to attack his critics (Bencito, 2017). Similarly, some bloggers who support the administration have also continued to spread disinformation on social media. In response to Duterte’s crackdown on illegal drugs, they labeled the extrajudicial killings in the country as “alternative facts” (Keeton-Olsen, 2017).

Some pro-Duterte bloggers, including Esther Margaux “Mocha” Uson (Mocha Uson Blog) and RJ Nieto (Thinking Pinoy), were even appointed to government positions and hired as consultants. Uson, a former sexy star-turned-communications assistant secretary, drew flak several times for sharing and posting wrong information on Facebook. These include a photo of young Brazilian rape victim whom she claimed was a Filipina murdered due to the drug problem in the country (Elemia, 2016), a picture of soldiers whom she claimed were fighting the Maute terrorist group in Marawi but it turned out that the soldiers were not Filipinos but Hondurans (Bondoc, 2017), a post about students of St. Scholastica’s College whom she claimed were “forced” to join the protest against the Marcos burial at the *Libingan ng mga Bayani* but was belied by the students (Balancio, 2018), and a live video wherein she claimed that the Mayon Volcano was in Naga City, Camarines Sur instead of Albay province (Severo, 2018), among others. Meanwhile, Nieto was indicted in 2018 after the Pasay City Prosecutors’ Office found probable cause to charge him for the crime of cyber libel.

Nieto, who worked as a consultant for the Department of Foreign Affairs from July to October 2017, claimed in a Facebook post that United States President Donald Trump called Sen. Antonio Trillanes IV a drug lord (Santos, 2018). He also claimed that photojournalist Jes Aznar revealed the position of the soldiers who were fighting the Maute group in Marawi even after the Army denied this information (Morallo, 2017).

Nevertheless, veteran journalists and columnists have also been deceived by fake news sources. Yen Makabenta of *The Manila Times* wrote a column in 2017 that American Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley expressed support for Duterte and called on human rights advocates “to be [im]partial and not take political sides while dispensing their duties in any particular notion” (Makabenta, 2017). However, this story never happened and it turned out that the writer based his piece on a bogus website of Al Jazeera that contains grammatical errors (Syjuco, 2017).

In this case, the term “misinformation” may be more accurate than “disinformation” and “fake news.” According to Stahl (2006), misinformation can be defined as “accidental falsehood” or “honest mistake” while disinformation is associated with “deliberate falsehood” or “deceptive information.” Many online users use social media for semantic attacks by feeding other users with incorrect information and by damaging the credibility of an institution.

At present, misinformation and disinformation can be seen in different forms (Bueno, 2017) since it can be a meme, a baseless opinion, a misleading claim that seems to be based on facts, a photo or a video that is not related to the article. Wardle (2017) enumerated seven types of misinformation and disinformation on social media such as “satire or parody,” “false connections” (between headlines and photos), “misleading content,” “false context,” “imposter content” (when sources are impersonated), “manipulated content” (when genuine information is manipulated to deceive others), and “fabricated content” (a content that is 100 percent false).

In discarding false information, one must possess critical thinking skills (Cheyfitz, 2017). They should also check the sources of information since some online users pose as a legitimate news source by copying the brand of a news institution or by making a website or a news page using the name of a media company. In fact, several news pages on social media do not have any information in the “About Us” section and most of the time; it does not explain where the content came from. Similarly, some articles also contain dubious bylines and majority of “fake news” pages do not include the names of the authors.

According to the Center for Media Freedom and Responsibility (2016):

A news website should be accountable for what is posted on its page, and it starts with identifying the people behind it, as well as how they can be contacted so they can be asked to explain errors posted in their sites, among others (n. d.).

Ong (as cited in Bueno, 2017) also said “fake news” can be seen as “emotionally manipulative stories” rather than being factual. In a sense, these articles trigger news consumers into anger, disgust, or hate. Headlines that possess this quality are called “click baits” since the titles are too exaggerated to make the readers click and open the content.

## **The Age of Deception**

In a sense, bloggers and journalists are both fast when it comes to distributing content to the public since the internet has sped up the news publishing cycle. However, in spite of efforts to educate and inform audiences on various issues, journalists and bloggers sometimes fail to review the accuracy and veracity of information before publishing a content due to its competitive nature. Moreover, deception on the internet continues to be a serious concern as social networking sites are plagued by “fake news” that comes from individuals and groups posing as legitimate news organizations. As a result, many netizens have been duped by bogus news sources with issues ranging from bomb threats to political scandals. In general, the plethora of information on the internet puts into question the credibility of news sources (Mackay & Lowrey, 2011). In the age of post-truth, credibility rating or trust factor is important for news

organizations and news blogs to keep their readers and for them to survive. Thus, this research explores the production and distribution of news content on Facebook in the Philippines at a time when media professionals have to deal with accusations of bias and corruption. It also tackles how selected online editors and selected news bloggers use audience metrics to gain and retain readers.

## **STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM AND OBJECTIVES**

Since the internet holds immeasurable quantities of data, “there is less control and gatekeeping” in online media and anyone can publish articles on the web (Nozato, 2002, p. 5). Thus, as data encoded on the internet increases, the probability of determining what is fake from real decreases.

The main question of this study is: How do online editors and news bloggers produce and distribute news content on Facebook in the age of post-truth?

In view of the background and the rationale, this study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. How do selected online editors and selected news bloggers select content for Facebook?
2. How do the political views of selected online editors and news bloggers influence their choices of content for Facebook?
3. How do selected online editors and selected news bloggers use audience metrics in strategizing content for Facebook?
4. How do selected online editors and selected news bloggers boost their credibility rating or trust factor on Facebook in terms of:
  - a. headline (title),
  - b. image (photo), and
  - c. story description (caption)?

This study specifically aims to:

1. Define the process of selection of news content for Facebook based on the perception of selected online editors and selected news bloggers;

2. Expound how the political views of selected online editors and news bloggers influence their choices of content for Facebook;
3. Explain how selected online editors and selected news bloggers use audience metrics in strategizing content for Facebook; and
4. Discuss how selected online editors and selected news bloggers boost their credibility rating or trust factor on Facebook in terms of:
  - a. headline (title),
  - b. image (photo), and
  - c. story description (caption).

## **Political Economy of Communication**

The political economy of communication tackles power relations in the transmission of information from news producers to their audiences (Flew & Richard, 2014). Early European scholars have concentrated on the production, consumption, distribution, and exchange of wealth of individuals and society (Tzioumakis & Molloy, 2016). During the 1800s, German philosophers Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels added their critique on historical materialism and class analysis to the pool of studies related to the theory as classical political economy evolved with capitalism (Moul, 2005). A radical or critical approach in political economy theory has been traditionally associated with Marxism. Political economy, according to Marx, is “the study of the social relations, particularly power relations that mutually constitute the production, distribution, and consumption of resources” (Mosco, 2009, p. 2).

In the United States, Smythe (as cited in Wasko, 2014, p. 259) said the main objective of the application of the political economy theory to communication studies is to determine the impact of media institutions in different social settings. According to Murdock and Golding (1974), the “mass media are first and foremost industrial and commercial organizations which produce and distribute commodities” (p. 205-206). Hence, they defined the political economy of communication as the study of “communication and media as commodities produced by capitalist industries” (Wasko, 2014, p. 260). Ultimately, the political economy of communication covers social relations in the mass media system, communication technologies,

and the role of the state or the economic structure (Havens & Lotz, 2012; Winseck & Jin, 2011). In this research, the political economy of communication was used to explain the process of the production and distribution of news on Facebook in the age of new media as a new network or new society shapes its own power relations.

## **Gatekeeping**

Social psychologist Kurt Lewin coined the term “gatekeeper,” which refers to an individual or group that has the power to make decisions (McGinty, 1999). In the context of journalism and communication studies, David Manning White pioneered the use of the gatekeeping metaphor in news selection by looking at how newspaper wire editors decide which stories should be published. According to White (1950), newspaper editors are “highly subjective” in choosing the news articles and “reliant upon value-judgments based on the ‘gatekeeper’s’ own set of experiences, attitudes, and expectations regarding the communication of news”(p. 388). MacGregor (1997), however, said there are also other factors such as technical issues, audience interests, and editorial lines that influence the decisions of the online editors in selecting or discarding stories.

The advent of technology has unlocked digital news gates for professionals and amateurs since anyone with a cellphone can share photos and publish stories on websites and social media platforms. According to Roberts (2005), “the internet has turned solid ‘gates’ into little more than screen doors” (p. 2). Bennett (as cited in Schwalbe, Silcock, and Candello, 2015, p. 468) said new technologies have also enabled “government, politicians, public relations firms, terrorist groups, and sports and entertainment organizations to distribute visuals and other materials directly to the public as well as to media outlets.” Some researchers have also explored the use of “journalism-like techniques” by common people (Mortensen, 2011; Frosh & Pichevski, 2009). Most of them do not want to be reporters but want to contribute online through social media sites (Yaschur, 2012). Hence, several websites feature audience-to-audience sharing of

photos and videos across cultures such as YouTube, Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, and Snapchat (Rosen, 2005). These images in online media have dominated texts and Kress (2003) called this transition as “the broad move from the centuries-long dominance of writing to the new dominance of the image, and on the other hand, the move from the dominance of the medium of the book to the dominance of the medium of the screen”(p. 1).

On a separate note, Welbers et al. (2015) said monitoring audience metrics on news websites can “affect the gatekeeping process because it enables journalists to more accurately take the preferences of the audience into account”(p. 3). To date, most of the news websites in the Philippines consider the agenda of the audience through features such as “most read” and “most viewed” articles. In this study, the gatekeeping theory was employed to explain how online editors and news bloggers select news articles that will be published or aired the next day.

## **Source Credibility**

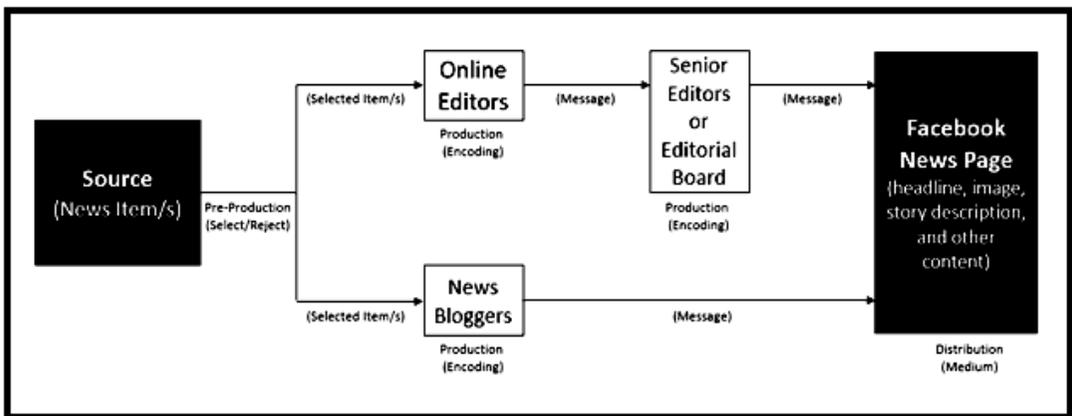
Given that the public has many options in accessing information, source credibility is the most vital consideration when it comes to the believability of news. Empirical studies on credibility flourished during the 20th century as scholars focused on the power of propaganda (Liu, Datta, & Lim, 2014). Social psychologists Carl Hovland and Walter Weiss (1952) studied how to persuade soldiers using wartime messages during World War 2. According to them, messages from more credible sources boosted the morale of the military than those communicated using sources with lower credibility rating. In 1951, the researchers noted in their empirical research that the “persuasiveness of a given message is strongly influenced by its source” (Lowry, Wilson, & Haig, 2014, p. 9). Their experiment revealed that same message content accessed by the audience in two different sources – trustworthy and untrustworthy source – are perceived differently. This simply means the “acceptance of a message depends on the qualities of the source” (Tellis, 2003, p. 181).

Hovland and Weiss (1952) suggested that “expertness” and “trustworthiness” are the two important characteristics of a source. According to scholars, expertness pertains to the credentials of the communicator (Grewal & Pechamann, 1998) and the ability of the source to deliver truthful claims (Tellis, 2003). Meanwhile, trustworthiness refers to “honesty, integrity, and believability” of the communicator (Shimp & Andrews, 2012). It is also defined as the “degree of confidence” of a speaker (Hawes & Glisan, 2015). In a nutshell, Hovland and Weiss (1952) explained that audiences tend to accept the message from a sender who is trustworthy and an expert in the field.

## STUDY FRAMEWORK

These theories are shown in the Conceptual Model in Figure 1.

This research is supported by theories and concepts in communication and journalism such as the political economy of communication, gatekeeping, and source credibility theory. In this model, a news item goes through pre-production wherein online editors (along with publishers and senior editors or the editorial board) and news bloggers select and reject articles. The selected items are assigned and given to the second layer of editors while news bloggers just write an article. During the production stage, the content producers encode meanings



**Figure 1.** *Conceptual Model*

according to their views after drawing dominant ideologies from society. The senior editors then check the work of the online editors and publish it after some revisions while the news bloggers simply post it on Facebook. This study, despite its limitations, examined the source's side of the communication spectrum and the online content producers' appropriation of credible news content on Facebook.

## **RESEARCH DESIGN**

This qualitative study used a descriptive design to obtain information from five selected online editors and five selected news bloggers. Key informant interviews were done to understand the editorial processes and approaches in producing and sharing news on Facebook. The researcher also employed this method since most of the studies about editorial procedures and audience metrics are quantitative.

### **Subjects and Study Sites**

The researcher limited the number of informants to 10 persons due to time and budget constraints. The study sought the responses of five online editors and five news bloggers who manage news pages on Facebook. Since the study sought the responses of the content producers, the researcher obtained enough opinion because the study is about the news-packaging process and content distribution. Likewise, the author chose Facebook as the study site since it is the most visited social networking site in the Philippines. Many people also go to Facebook to check the news. In addition, most news institutions use the power of Facebook to attract online users (Kiesler & Eaton 2009; Seward 2008; Chew, 2007).

### **Data Measures and Instrumentation**

The structured interview contains 33 questions. The 10 informants were asked about their age and sex to assess their demographic profiles. The author also inquired about the number of times they post a news article on Facebook and their familiarity with the other mainstream media pages and news blogs on Facebook. On a separate

note, the researcher asked the online editors and news bloggers if they monitor and use audience metrics. Finally, the author inquired about the news packaging routines and techniques of content producers on Facebook.

### **Data Gathering Procedures**

The researcher contacted and set interviews for five selected online editors and five selected news bloggers to learn about how they use audience metrics and how they package news using the headline, image, and story description. They were given consent forms before the actual interview. Likewise, their answers were recorded, transcribed, translated, and coded. Significant statements are culled from the interviewees.

### **Ethical Considerations**

The informants were informed of their rights before taking part in the study. Prior to the interview, the researcher gave the informants a letter of informed consent. It states that the participation of the informants in the study is voluntary, which means that they may refuse or withdraw anytime without any penalty. The participants were assured that their personal information would not be divulged in this study. Codes were used to conceal the identity of the informants, particularly the online editors and news bloggers.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **A. Editorial Decisions According to Selected Online Content Producers and the Influence of Advertisers**

Social media have made their way into influencing the gatekeeping process of news producers. One of the influences social media provide is connected to the *selection of stories on Facebook*. The majority of the informants do not post all news stories on Facebook. According to them, they only choose the “big stories” that are *interesting, relevant, authentic, and ethical*. Meanwhile, news bloggers said they usually check the news pages of mainstream media to get ideas on what they

should write for the day. Online content producers also treat their Facebook news pages as “teasers” for the news consumers. Meanwhile, a news blogger said he only posts pro-Duterte stories since thousands of supporters are following his Facebook news page. This is related to what Kaye (2005) said that political attachment is associated with an individual’s interest to visit blogs.



**Figure 2.** Example of a Partisan News Blog on Facebook

The informants said their business partners and sponsors influence their editorial decisions. As an example, some advertisers usually ask online content producers or the publisher to pull out a story if it contains negative information about them such as criminal and civil cases, blunders, and disasters. According to one of them:

For example, a fire happened in a mall and that mall is our biggest advertiser. We cannot write about it and we cannot mention the name of the mall because it is a potential risk to our advertising revenues. So, in a way, other news organizations won the game (OE5, personal communication, March 29, 2017, n.p.).

The informants said they only post the reactions or statements of their business partners instead of reporting the issue. Simply put, the advertisers influence editorial decisions. Meanwhile, online editors said consanguinity is also a factor in the selection of stories but since they follow the general journalism code of conduct, their decisions trump over these factors.

## B. Political Influences in Newsrooms and Blogs and Personal Biases of Selected Online Content Producers

Similar to what is observed in traditional media, the political views of a news organization tremendously influence the choices of online content producers for content on Facebook. According to news bloggers, it is important to disclose their political stand whether they are pro- or anti-Duterte. One of the informants expounds:

We make it very clear that we are a pro-Duterte page. We are a pro-Mindanao page and I do not think there is anything wrong with that. We are more honest than other news outlets. Once you understand our biases, (readers) now have the choice if they will continue reading or not. That was an editorial decision on our end to reveal who we are instead of pretending that we are not favoring the president even if it is obvious (NB3, personal communication, January 23, 2017, n.p.).

While the political views of the traditional media are evident when it comes to posting contents on Facebook, online editors and news bloggers still try to produce stories that are fair:

I believe it affects our choices but it also calls us to adhere to fairness. Our boss always tells us: "No biases especially in political stories." That is the most important thing for us (OE4, personal communication, February 18, 2017, n.p.).

Our publisher is anti-Duterte and sometimes his decisions are not aligned with the decisions of the editors. We need to balance it and set aside our biases since we are journalists (OE3, personal communication, March 1, 2017, n.p.).



**Figure 3.** Example of a Facebook News Post

According to them, stories should be neutral and accurate. In the same vein, newspaper and television editors do not interfere when it comes to manufacturing content on social media. There is autonomy when it comes to editorial decisions between social media and traditional media editors.

The informants also admitted that they have prejudices that might influence the selection of news stories for Facebook. Nonetheless, the biases are stark: There are layers of editors in newsrooms that contradict the biases of other news producers. They also use fair tone and accurate language since they want to avoid being labeled as “Dilawan” (anti-Duterte) or “DDS” (Die-hard Duterte Supporters). Meanwhile, news bloggers said it is important to disclose their political stand to gain and retain their readers.

**C. Audience Metrics’ Purposes and Other Online-Induced Behaviors by Selected Online Content Producers**

Audience metrics monitor the audiences’ interests and preferences. According to the informants, it guides them to know more about the readers; provides them with the top stories of the day, trends, and story patterns; and helps them monitor the performance of page administrators.

**Table 1.** *Reasons for Monitoring Audience Metrics on Facebook According to the Informants*

<b>Informants</b>	<b>Know more about readers’ interests and preferences</b>	<b>See top stories of the day, trends, and story patterns</b>	<b>Monitor the performance of the page administrators</b>
Online Editor 1			
Online Editor 2			
Online Editor 3			
Online Editor 4			
Online Editor 5			
News Blogger 1			
News Blogger 2			
News Blogger 3			
News Blogger 4			
News Blogger 5			

Audience metrics give them “a picture (of their readers)” since it provides the age, sex, and location of the online users and the time slots wherein they are considered “active.” It helps them determine how to frame a story with context and it allows them to connect and interact with the news consumers. These reasons have made online content producers embrace the use of audience metrics. It only means that modern technology continues to influence newsroom practices (Anderson, 2011; Singer et al., 2001).

The online editors said they used to overlook analytic strategies until they felt the need to boost the production and distribution process due to tough competition with other sources of news. The informants also said they have embraced audience metrics to reach a wider audience, to determine the content readers are likely to consume and to market themselves.

In spite of this, the work of online editors has become laborious since they do not have enough personnel to check the demographic profiles of the readers and respond to the comments of the online users. Online content producers are also pressured to produce more articles due to competition with other news sources (Usher, 2013). While news bloggers usually work on their own, mainstream media organizations hire an online editor or a social media manager to oversee the contents that are being posted by the social media team on Facebook and other news channels.

### **Time Allotment**

Since most audience analytics are free of charge, online editors are required to produce content and monitor web metrics while bloggers only spend 15 minutes to three hours since they are not obligated to check audience data. The use of third-party software is also common. While Facebook Insights is user-friendly and free of charge, the informants said they also monitor trending topics on Alexa and Twitter and audience metrics on CrowdTangle and Google Analytics. However, no newsroom surveyed in this study uses an original tool and they just rely on free software. Figure 4 shows an example of audience metrics on Facebook using a built-in software called “Facebook Insights.” It

records the performance of the news page and its competitors, the best performing news content on Facebook, and the number of likes, shares, views, recommendations, and engagements. Only online editors and Facebook page administrators can access this feature.

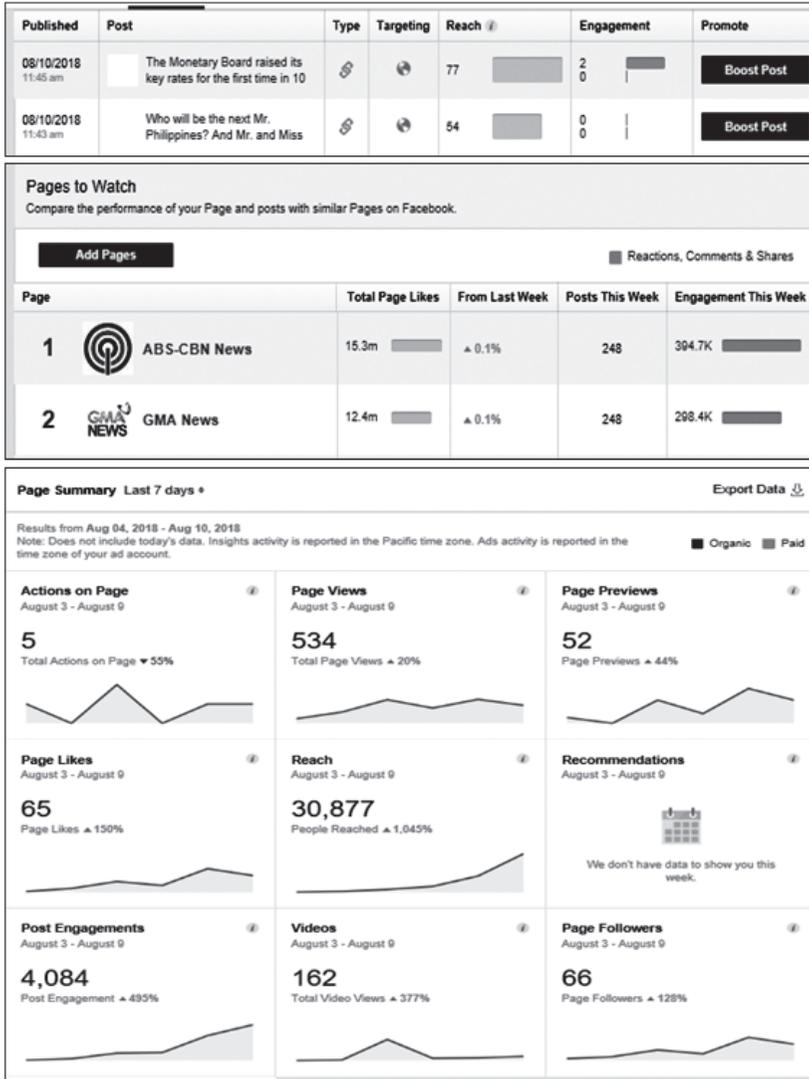


Figure 4. Example of Social Media-Generated Content Metrics Using Facebook Insights

## Best Posting Times

Strategizing content on Facebook is anchored on time. Social media provides online content producers access to the reading behaviors of their audiences. Online editors and news bloggers said the best time to post stories on Facebook is from 6 a.m. to noon and from 6 p.m. to midnight since most people check their news feeds during their free time.

“Heavy news” such as political news, business stories, opinions, and sports articles are published during daytime since most of their readers are men and they want to know what is happening in and out of the country. “Light news” like entertainment stories and lifestyle articles are then posted during nighttime since “Millennials” and female readers are active during this period. Their posting times are similar to the printing time in newspapers. A respondent said print media companies produce newspapers at night since the audiences will read it in the morning (NB3, personal communication, April 4, 2017, n.p.).

**Table 2.** *Best Times to Post Content on Facebook According to the Informants*

Informants	Morning (6 a.m. to noon)	Afternoon (noon to 6 p.m.)	Evening (6 p.m. to midnight)	Night (midnight to 6 a.m.)
Online Editor 1				
Online Editor 2				
Online Editor 3				
Online Editor 4				
Online Editor 5				
News Blogger 1				
News Blogger 2				
News Blogger 3				
News Blogger 4				
News Blogger 5				

Due to competition with other news sources, online editors publish breaking stories at any time of the day since most of the media content “are highly perishable and need immediate posting” (OE4,

personal communication, February 18, 2017, n.p.). Since audience metrics give online content producers an idea about the readers' news consumption, they post traffic updates for commuters in the morning and in the afternoon, and food and health tips in the evening. News articles are being re-posted at night in the Philippines in consideration of overseas Filipino workers and audiences across different time zones (OE2, personal communication, January 10, 2017, n.p.).

### **Needs and Wants of Active Audiences**

Six of the ten informants said they publish content that “they think” their readers should know and something that “they want” to be entertained with and/or informed about. As communicators, online editors and news bloggers should reach out to the readers or the content will be considered useless if they publish something and it does not attract the news consumers. This editorial behavior reveals how new media shape the relationship between online news producers and news consumers (Hermida et al., 2012), thus challenging online editors and news bloggers to balance the needs and wants of the readers (Gans, 2004). Moreover, while online content producers use news judgments and audience data in optimizing content on Facebook, they do not want the latter to overpower their decisions.

### **Competition with Other News Sources**

The number of views, likes, and shares in other news pages on Facebook affects the choices of online editors and news bloggers in terms of content. The online editors said they monitor the competition for content and check the stories that they do not have — thus seeing online metrics influencing the journalistic process and editorial judgment (Anderson, 2011). An example is publishing scoops and under-reported news content (OE1, personal communication, February 6, 2017, n.p.).

However, online editors admitted that they still use their “journalistic gut feeling” or intuition in choosing news stories. To balance it, they prefer applying data-informed decisions instead of data-driven

judgments (as also observed in Lee, Lewis & Powers, 2014; Anderson, 2011). Furthermore, the page engagements of other news pages do not affect their choices of news stories but it affects their posting times (OE3, personal communication, March 1, 2017, n.p.). Bloggers, meanwhile, get story tips and clues from the news media (Meraz, 2009).

### **Other Things Monitored on Facebook**

Aside from page engagements, some online content producers also monitor the comments of the readers. Most of the informants said the comments help them determine the quality of engagements or if the readers are “organic” (human) or “bot” (robots who usually post comments that are not related to the article). What is also being monitored are the moods or the sentiments of the readers. Aside from “Like,” Facebook enables users to choose new buttons – “Love,” “Angry,” “Haha,” “Sad,” and “Wow” – to express their feelings about certain issue or content.

### **D. Approaches to Boost Credibility Rating or Trust Factor and Audience Engagement on Facebook**

Online editors affirm that the headlines, images, and story descriptions are vital since news consumers check these features. According to them, the headline is the most important part of a content, followed by the story description, and the image. News producers are concerned with the way their readers access news and other content through cellphones.

Since most of the people are using Facebook’s Free Data, it allows online users to see only the texts. It does not show pictures and videos. In fact, Facebook users need to switch to “Data Mode” and pay charges to access the hidden contents. Apart from the reason that web browsing in the Philippines is expensive and it uses prepaid credits, most of the people in the country are using “Free Data” on Facebook since the internet speed in the country is slow and it takes minutes for the photos to load.

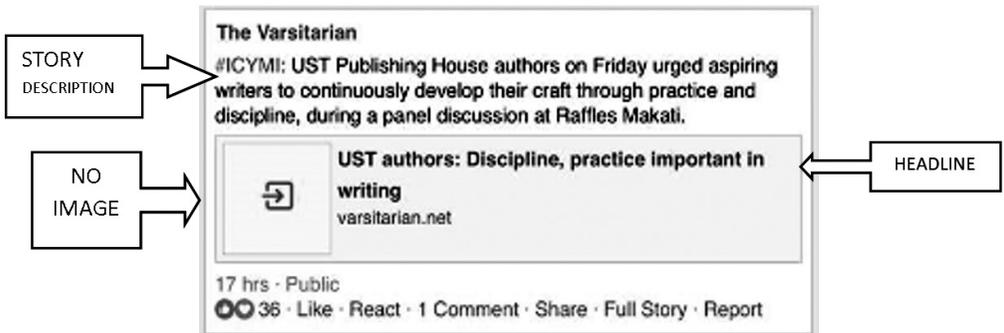


Figure 5. Free Data on Facebook

The informants explained that the “Free Data” layout on Facebook guides the readers to look first on the headline and the story description or the caption since there are no pictures. After getting the summary of the article through the headlines, Facebook users usually read the story descriptions to know more about the article and to confirm the thought they have processed. While photos are important since they give the readers a glimpse of the event or the issue, news readers do not anymore check the images while on Free Facebook since it would charge them a certain fee.

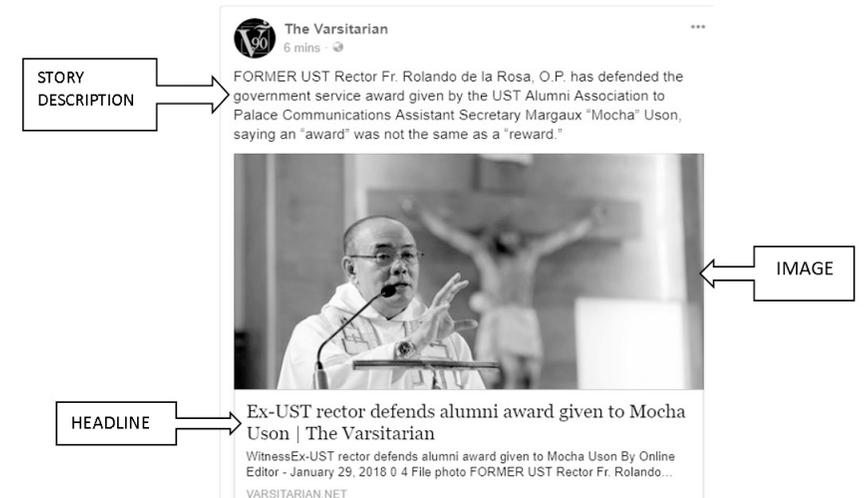
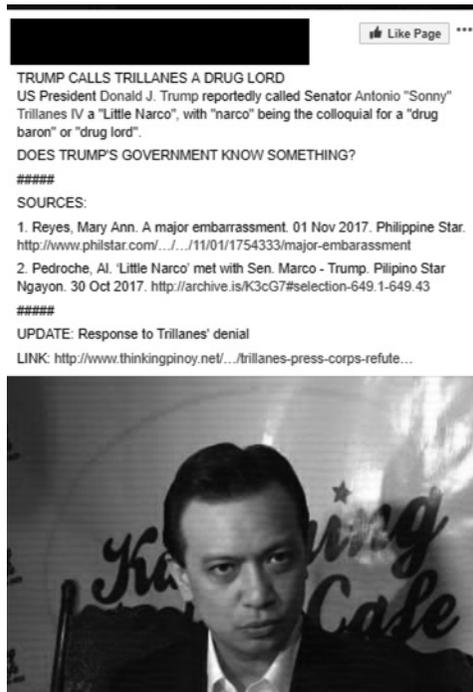


Figure 6. Sample News Content on Facebook

## Headlines and Click baits

All of the informants agreed that good headlines boost the credibility rating or trust factor of a news organization on Facebook. Most of the news consumers judge the content based on the title since it is one of the things that they see when they check their news feeds. Online content producers believe that people will “Unfollow” them if they post misleading headlines or click baits. The informants also said some Facebook pages are using click baits since they are after the web traffic.



**Figure 7.** Example of a Click Bait on Facebook

For news outlets, the informants try their best to be creative in writing headlines to attract news consumers. They said many readers react and call the attention of the editors whenever they see misleading headlines. News consumers see headlines as a gauge to determine if the story is legitimate or not. If they click it and the title does not match the story, the readers will include the news outlet in their list of fake news sources.

According to the informants, a good headline should be interesting and humorous, accurate and truthful, and short and crisp. Most online editors believe that a good headline should be accurate and truthful while most bloggers think that it should be interesting and humorous to grab the attention of the readers. The informants said a good headline should be fair. One of them noted that they avoid “sensationalized” and “click bait-y” headlines. He said they also avoid using jargons and technical terms.

### **Captions and “More”**

Same with the headlines, online editors and news bloggers also agree that story descriptions boost the credibility rating or trust factor of a news page on Facebook since it provides a summary of the story or content. It tells what the article is all about and it gives basic themes to report. Like headlines, captions or story descriptions are significant since it sustains the readers. If a news outlet is consistent in providing accurate captions, people would think that the news page is credible. In a nutshell, a story description can make or break a story like headlines. If it is not interesting, the readers will not read it.

All of the informants said a good story description should be striking and memorable. It should not be sensationalized. According to an online editor, if the caption is not catchy, they will not open the link. The informants also said the attention span of the readers is “very short” in such that they only read the headline and the story description.

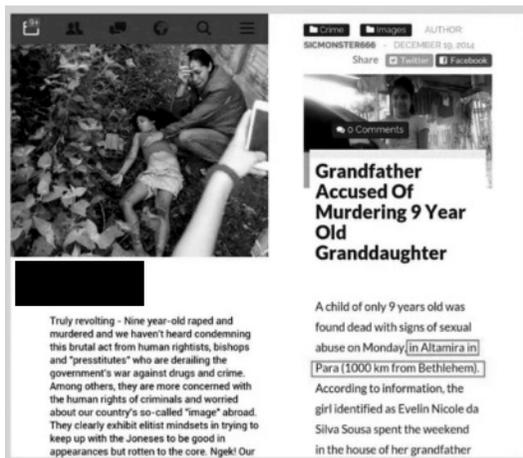


**Figure 8.** *Example of a Story Description with Wrong Information*

Likewise, captions should cover the whole story. It should be brief since people only read the first three sentences. According to online editors and news bloggers, a good description or a lead should not be more than 300 characters. It should be appropriate and it should reflect the nature of the content. Likewise, an online editor said the tone and language should be in consonance with the message the story wants to convey.

## Ethical and Manipulated Photos

The informants also agree that images boost the credibility rating or trust factor of a news outlet on Facebook. Online content producers said most readers, particularly the “Millennials,” like looking at photos instead of reading the story. They also said the photo should be connected to the text or they will also lose followers if it is manipulated and not related to the article, such as what is shown in Figure 9.



**Figure 9.** Example of a Manipulated Photo on Facebook

According to the informants, a photo should be catchy and emotive, factual and ethical, and related to the text. All of the informants agree that an image should be likable, memorable, unique, and appealing. They said that a picture should tell a story since it is worth a thousand words. It should capture the emotions of the audiences. Online editors and news bloggers also said photos should be connected to the story and the headline. It should be an “action photo” instead of a

“staged photo.” If the story is about President Duterte, online editors said they usually put a photo of him and not just the presidential seal. Meanwhile, the informants said the images should not be manipulated and it should not violate ethical guidelines.

## **News Values in the Post-Truth Age**

Accuracy matters for online editors and, unexpectedly, news bloggers who are not necessarily trained in journalism. The reason behind this is that many Facebook news pages are sharing false information.

Another important news value is *fairness*, which is one of the main tenets of journalism. Apart from presenting both sides of a story, online editors believe the editorial procedures and gatekeeping processes are important since there are layers of editors who counter the biases of the writers. They also check if there are factual errors in a news article.

*Ethics* is also a significant news value in the post-truth age according to online content producers since some people post obscene and gruesome content that are not suitable for younger audiences. This is why most of the informants believe that creativity is important in packaging the headline, the image, and the story description. For news bloggers, it is important to be transparent to the readers by means of sponsorship disclosure. Some interviewees also participate in writing workshops to boost their skills. Lessons from these activities are then, as some interviewees claimed, translated into their work online and on social media. News bloggers also write columns in newspapers and host radio and television programs to gain the trust of the audiences.

According to online editors and news bloggers, Facebook users will most likely “follow” a news page if it is accurate, fair, and ethical. However, they maintained that a huge number of followers do not necessarily mean that a news page is credible. Likewise, the informants explained that the number of followers also entails the kind of content the news page —and that page’s mother organization (which may not be entirely devoted to news) — is producing and distributing on Facebook. One of the online editors said they have many followers

because people like the network's actors. Another editor said readers do not anymore differentiate the content of a newspaper and a Facebook news page since they consider them the same.

The most important finding in this study is that accuracy has become the most important journalism tenet according to online content producers due to the spread of disinformation on Facebook. It is also worthy to note that accuracy is one of the attributes of news (Viray & Diola, 2017) and this has also been used as a determinant of perceived credibility in most studies (Kohring & Matthes, 2007; Meyer, 1998; Gaziano & McGrath, 1986). Furthermore, the rise of clickbaits should encourage scholars to conduct more qualitative researches about market-driven newsrooms and news blogs.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

This research explored the production and reception of Facebook news pages in the Philippines in the post-truth era and found that online editors and news bloggers value audience metrics since it serves as a guide for them to know more about the interests and preferences of the readers. In a way, this move has changed the practice of content producers since they are now concerned with their audiences and they use statistics to determine the needs and wants of the news consumers. In the same vein, the competition among news sources has become tougher, making the job of the journalists and content producers harder as well. News outlets monitor each other to check if they have the same content and if they have "outscooped" other news sources.

When it comes to the selection of news stories, online content producers do not post all of the stories on Facebook and they only publish the big stories of the day. News items that are interesting, relevant, authentic, and ethical have a higher possibility of being published than other articles. In general, the traditional media influence the format, posting time, and content of its online version. This means that the news packaging process of online media mirrors the production and distribution of content in print and broadcast media. Likewise, the political views of the owner (or publisher) of the

news page influence the selection of content for Facebook. However, online editors and news bloggers try to overpower the decisions of the publishers (or advertisers) to be fair. Furthermore, the consistency in posting accurate, fair, and ethical titles, photos, and story descriptions boost the credibility rating or trust factor of news pages. Accuracy is an important news value according to online editors and news bloggers since there are many news pages that are spreading false information on social media.

Ultimately, despite the limitations of this qualitative research, this study argues that while online content producers follow their gut feelings, they are becoming more open to the idea of using audience metrics in order to understand the needs and wants of the readers. It is expected that online editors and news bloggers in the Philippines will maximize the use of audience data as journalism becomes market-driven and commercialized. Mass media companies are now owned by conglomerates whose goal is to make profits instead of serving the public. The evolution of the media landscape should push researchers to conduct critical studies about power relations in newsrooms.

Future studies should look into the perceived credibility of Facebook news pages of government agencies since they are also sources of information for journalists and bloggers. Scholars may also investigate news consumption patterns among Facebook users since their attitudes and behaviors toward social media use remain unexplored. They may also study if Facebook users follow the recommendations of news producers.

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## Appendix A

### Interview Questions for Selected Online Editors and Selected News Bloggers

#### A. Demographic Profile

Age	Sex

#### B. Usage and Familiarity

<p>How many times does your news organization/blog post a news article/content on Facebook?</p> <p>—</p> <p>1=Once a Month 2=Once Every Two Weeks 3=Once a Week 4=Every Other Day 5=Once a Day 6= More Than Once a Day</p>	<p>I am familiar with the mainstream media (Inquirer, ABS-CBN, GMA, The Philippine Star, etc.) pages on Facebook.</p> <p>—</p> <p>1=Strongly Disagree 2=Moderately Disagree 3=Slightly Disagree 4=Slightly Agree 5=Moderately Agree 6=Strongly Agree</p>	<p>I am familiar with the news blogs (Thinking Pinoy, Mocha Uson Blog, Politiko, Pinoy Trending News, etc.) on Facebook.</p> <p>—</p> <p>1=Strongly Disagree 2=Moderately Disagree 3=Slightly Disagree 4=Slightly Agree 5=Moderately Agree 6=Strongly Agree</p>
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#### C. Questions on Audience Metrics

1. What is your concept of an audience (or for whom do you select news stories) on Facebook?
2. Who are your most engaged readers on Facebook in terms of age and gender?
3. Do you have a specific time slot wherein you post stories on Facebook for certain readers? Please enumerate the time slots and explain why. (Example: The New York Times posts political stories every 7 a.m. to cater to workers.)
4. Do you monitor audience metrics (number of likes, number of shares, page visits, page engagements, etc.) on Facebook? Why or why not?

5. Do you post stories on Facebook for the sake of the readers even if it is not newsworthy? Are you thinking about the news consumers by giving them what they want instead of what they need?
6. What are the dilemmas in monitoring audience metrics on Facebook?
7. Do you use any software in monitoring audience metrics on Facebook?
8. How many hours a day do you spend on Facebook to monitor audience metrics?
9. Does the number of views, likes, and shares in other news pages on Facebook affect your choice of news stories?
10. Do you post stories in real time and how do you re-package developing news stories?
11. Aside from the number of likes, number of shares, page visits, number of followers, and page engagements, what else do you monitor on Facebook?

#### D. Questions on Editorial Processes

1. How do online editors select (or reject) a story on Facebook and what are the reasons for choosing (or discarding) it?
2. Do you think business partners of the news organization affect your editorial processes? Was there a time wherein a business partner asked your news company to pull out a story?
3. Another news agency/news organization published a negative story involving one of your company's business partners; would you also do the same?
4. Does the category of news or the political stand of your news organization/outlet affect your choice of news stories on Facebook?
5. Do you feel that you have any prejudices that might affect your choice of news stories on Facebook?
6. Do headlines affect the perceived credibility of a news organization on Facebook? Why?
7. What are the characteristics or qualities of a good headline and a bad one?

8. Do images affect the perceived credibility of a news organization on Facebook? Why?
9. What are the characteristics or qualities of an interesting image and a bad one?
10. Do story descriptions or captions affect the perceived credibility of a news organization on Facebook? Why?
11. What are the characteristics or qualities of a good story description or caption and a bad one?
12. Rank the three elements (headline, image, and caption) in terms of importance and please provide an explanation.
13. Apart from the headline, image, and story description/caption, what else do you consider in grabbing the attention of the news consumers on Facebook?

#### E. Questions on Perceived Credibility of Online Media

1. What makes a news organization/outlet credible?
2. Do you think your news organization is credible? Why?
3. What does your organization do to remain credible?
4. Do you think the number of likes, number of shares, page visits, and page engagements are enough to determine the perceived credibility of a news page on Facebook?

## Appendix B

### Bio Notes of Selected Online Editors and Selected News Bloggers

#### Online Editor 1 (OE1)

OE1 works as an editor for a non-profit organization in Manila. He monitors Facebook news pages that disseminate false information and debunks them with factual evidence.

#### Online Editor 2 (OE2)

OE2 is the assistant manager/editor of a television network's social media team. He obtained his bachelor's degree at the De La Salle University.

#### Online Editor 3 (OE3)

OE3 manages the Facebook news page of a newspaper company in Manila where she also works as a desk editor. She finished AB Journalism at the University of Santo Tomas.

#### Online Editor 4 (OE4)

OE4 is the associate editor of an online newspaper. He manages their social media sites like Facebook and Twitter. He has been working as a journalist for more than 10 years.

#### Online Editor 5 (OE5)

OE5 works as a social media head and editor for an online newspaper. He obtained his MA Communication at the Polytechnic University of the Philippines.

#### News Blogger 1 (NB1)

NB1 is a multi-awarded blogger. She has been blogging since 2006. NB1 obtained her bachelor's degree from the University of the Philippines.

#### News Blogger 2 (NB2)

NB2 graduated from the University of the Philippines. He has worked for the Financial Times and the Philippine Blog Awards. He is a consultant for online reputation management.

#### News Blogger 3 (NB3)

NB3 is a blogger and communications consultant who has more than 25 years in public relations, advertising, brand development, and political consulting.

#### News Blogger 4 (NB4)

NB4 obtained her Journalism degree from the University of the Philippines-Diliman. She started blogging in 2015. Her interests include politics and foreign affairs.

#### News Blogger 5 (NB5)

NB5 established his blog site in 2015. He obtained his degree from the University of the Philippines. He is a former correspondent for a local newspaper.

## Appendix C

### Links of Screenshots

Figure 2. <https://www.facebook.com/Mochablogger/>

Figure 3. <https://www.facebook.com/ANCalerts/>

Figure 4. <https://www.facebook.com/business/news/audience-insights>

Figure 5. <https://www.free.facebook.com/varsitarian/>

Figure 6. <https://www.facebook.com/varsitarian/>

Figure 7. <https://www.facebook.com/TheThinkingPinoy/>

Figure 8. <https://preen.inquirer.net/58185/a-list-of-mocha-usons-fake-news-posts>

Figure 9. <https://www.facebook.com/IgnoreRantsInc/>

## **About the Author**

**John Evan P. Orias** is a reporter for Malaya Business Insight. He is a fellow of Bloomberg Initiative for Global Road Safety and the European Union-Philippines Justice Support Programme II. He covers the education sector, metro traffic, transport, crime, court, and political stories in southern Metro Manila. As a writer, he has won numerous awards in literary contests including the Gawad Ustetika. His literary works have been published in *Dapitan* (2013) and *Ustetika Folio* (2015). At present, he is taking his MA Communication at the University of Santo Tomas in Manila. (Correspondence: [evan.orias@yahoo.com](mailto:evan.orias@yahoo.com))