

## Book Review

# The Argument Culture: Moving from Debate to Dialogue by Deborah Tannen, 1999

*Jim C. Duran*

*Far Eastern University*

## Introduction

When Deborah Tannen published her book, 'The Argument Culture' in 1998, it garnered a wide variety of readers. The book is about ending debates and settling disputes through dialogue in which all sides have to be given credence. Tannen supports the idea that disputes and conflict should be addressed by giving more space to all parties concerned and end the dualistic way of solving problems that permits only two sides to participate in the discourse. The Tannen argumentation for a third opinion—one which does not get trapped in the "either-or" dichotomy, is such an optimistic vision of stakeholders freely airing out opinions on issues. She oftentimes get too optimistic by not taking into account the realistic challenge of an inclusive multilateral talk about inherently difficult topics such as personality politics.

The first strong articulation in the book is the description of how political dialogue and mediated game-play in the United States are directed by the media, which always tend to get the advantage of having opposing views. Opinions on issues are oftentimes presented as adversarial, making the argument of megalomaniac political personalities two-sided. Tannen's work explains simply, without puzzlement, the matters of deeper antagonism in American political lives. Her thesis, 'The argument culture creates more problems than it solves, causing rather than avoiding damage,' is sensible and pragmatic in a way that it reflects political public discourse at present.

Encroachment in the political and media dialogue is most probably the *raison d'être* for intervention to solve social problems. In governance, unfortunately, political power is more important than the abstraction of ideas in countering social ills like war on drugs, politician's turf battles and the battle of the sexes. Abstraction of ideas has often been relegated to be the quality of heterogenous discourses. Tannen pursues the counter-discourse to this simplistic summation.

It is safe to say that politicking in the U.S. is stunning to a certain degree of merit but, at the same time, can be considered reckless because of propaganda tactics. The author's analytical approach presented by means of academic or scientific rigor of inquiry – supplying evidentiary warrant for each major claim she proposes. This makes her words, ideas and proposed resolution to argument culture a lucid critic to the culture of critique.

Allow me to quote Tannen:

This book is about a pervasive warlike atmosphere that makes us approach public dialogue and just about anything we need to accomplish, as if it were a fight (p.3).

The author cites several examples in the American setting, where the normalized argumentative tendency exists such as politics and gender. She discusses a wide range of topics and how they were handled and taken as news misinformation and half-truths by the press, in the lawyering commerce, the U.S. Congress and other American institutions and even in the monastic life of religious people. Tannen emphasizes that in seeking for the "truth", two-sided perspectives do not always lead to lasting resolutions. She is convinced that an expanded debate format is better for the public. In negotiating through disagreements, more oppositional views have to be engaged in an objective manner.

I also want to emphasize in this paper that there are cases that would explain a higher degree of argument culture in Philippine society affecting the courts, policymaking and the media. One example is the 'war on drugs'. Multilaterals are visible in the discussion of the government's anti-drug war which has a separate section in this paper.

In addition, Tannen's proposition of an ideal political dialogue in finding out truth through diplomacy and civil public dialogue can also be observed in the promulgation of the Bangsamoro Organic Law that is construed to give way to the drafting of principles of Federalism as a proposed form of government in the Philippines. Discourses on the Bangsamoro and Federalism are ripe with black-and-white arguments that give the public a limited pros-and-cons sense of their democratic options.

## **Freedom of expression and information**

Tannen's idea about the limiting effects of an argument culture can be rightfully placed vis-a-vis the Philippine milieu given the 1987 Philippine Constitution and other laws affecting the media and the people's right to expression and assembly.

Let me begin with the concept of 'freedom'. The freedom to inquire, uncover and investigate for the purpose of scrutiny and transparency especially in the government is as divine as life. It is an excruciating attempt for the Filipino public to exercise freedom of information through the passing of Freedom of Information Law (FOI) in Congress. It took more than a decade of unsuccessful legislative lobbying for it to become a law. With reproach and patriotism of the Filipino people, the bill (now a law), has been ignored by two previous presidents, President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo and President Benigno "Ninoy" Aquino III. In the case of the latter, he allowed the passing of the law to die in the House of Representatives.

It is important to point out though that it was President Aquino's priority legislative scheme when he was still a senator and when he campaigned for the 2008 Presidential Elections—to legislate and execute a firm thumbs-up on freedom of information. In his State of the Nation Address (SONA) on 27 July 2011, the Filipino public was awkwardly surprised by his obvious dismissal and withdrawal of support for the FOI by not even mentioning his plans regarding it.

At some point, he had the similar reasons with other previous presidents for not giving priority and focus on the approval and

implementation of the freedom of information bill, which may regard as an effective and efficient law. Critics would say that the FOI became one of the causes for the president's political downfall. The FOI was deemed conducive for manipulation, scrutiny and a forcible but clever maneuvering of media practitioners and citizen journalists against government officials.

This calls to mind Tannen's assertion that:

*One problem with polarized dualisms is that areas of overlap or similarity are obscured as we look only for points of contrast. Aspects of an issue---or of a person---that do not fit easily into one or the other polarity are rendered invisible or unacceptable (p. 219).*

Presidents before Duterte were also political animals—cunning, persuasive, and if I may, deceitful. They would prefer putting an iron hand to sustain their political career rather than face a miserable end. But the citizens were close enough to democratize more their political will and fight for their right to be informed of government transactions that led to the discovery of Priority Development Assistance Fund (PDAF) anomaly.

Duterte signed Executive Order No. 02 also known as Freedom of Information Program on the 23rd of July 2016 in Davao City, just a month after swearing in as Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces and President of the Republic.

The law provides all legitimate grounds for refusing access to information. It has also a built-in provision not to be expanded by other laws. Some important grounds for refusing to disclose information include legally-privileged information, information provided on a confidential basis (the disclosure of which would harm the commercial interests of the provider or reveal a trade secret and information). It also includes a ground for refusal to provide information, the disclosure of which would harm a public economic interest, such as management of the economy or the commercial interests of a public body.

Tannen warns the readers of a similar kind of scenario as she states that, *“The focus on conflicts results not only in neglecting to convey needed information but also in disseminating misinformation (p. 35).”*

This is where the FOI becomes misleading for me. On the one hand, it gives access to information. On the other hand, it gives exclusive protection in favor of certain types of information. Ironically, complex as the FOI already is, its conflicting provisions further disengage the public resulting in an increasing number of people not attempting to understand it at all.

## **The South China Sea Dispute**

Conversely, the geopolitical issue on South China Sea has tremendously cultivated a great deal of public discussions, in the Philippines, in Southeast Asia, in North America and in Europe. In Southeast Asia alone, the countries involved in the long-standing maritime row have crafted their own legal, economic and political propositions to arrange a somewhat ultimate resolution. However, in spite of an existing South China Sea Code of Conduct (COC), conflicting propositions continue to surface from the Philippines and the People’s Republic of China. Each country has its own interest in exploiting the resources of the South China Sea. Subsequently, the political dialogue becomes denser in the absence of unity. The recently held Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summits last November 2018 in Singapore and Papua New Guinea respectively, might represent a decent and diplomatic negotiation for the maritime row to be halted and proceed to an optimistic economic direction in the Southeast Asian Region.

One alternative that the Philippine government pursued to resolve the issue during President Aquino’s term was the filing of a complaint to the international arbitral court at the Hague, in the Netherlands. The latter eventually ruled in favor of the Philippines. Having a recognized body as third party to mediate, however, proved futile given that China undermined the international court’s decision. The Chinese government does not honor the ruling as ‘just’ and ‘historically correct’.

China is using its own legal and historical reference to support its claim over the South China Sea or West Philippine Sea. The international court's ruling was a foreseen solution with all its legalities but it had given unfortunate or little shade of hope in ending the dispute. The world is looking at the South China Sea setback in two different perspectives, the democratic-capitalist and the communist-socialist ideologies. Again, a very common trait in what Tannen labels as a constricting set-up expected to result in lasting resolutions.

This post-Cold War issue is again dividing continents and governments. More liberally democratic and capitalist countries like Japan, Australia, France and the United Kingdom gave out a stand favorable to the United States, which is seen as a primary reactor utterly against Chinese occupation in the South China Sea. Though, by any means, it is a Philippine ally, America's main objective is not primarily to protect and uphold the territorial rights of the Filipinos, but merely to show superiority and military might not just to China but to the whole world. By nature, the dynamics in the negotiations between the Philippines and China, with the US having no territorial obligation on the issue, have to be bilateral and intelligently become multilateral with other ASEAN countries claiming a portion of the South China Sea.

There is no constituted military front line (just yet) between China and the Philippines, but only exchange of arguments and justifications on their right to claim and build islands in the South China Sea. The administration of President Duterte is aiming for a bilateral agreement, which China is also trying to send as a meaningful and peaceful resolution, being two neighboring Asian countries. But no one really knows about the outcome of bilateral negotiations and if this could lead to the ultimate resolution because China has to prove its worth to the Filipinos. China has to prove that it will abide by its own drafted rules and be trustworthy. The international arbitral court's decision should be the Philippines last course of action in case bilateral agreements would not prosper and China has to consider that as a possible scenario.

Clearly, the societal, political and economic apprehensions of the Philippines amidst a globalized world are not only domestic concerns.

Geopolitics in the Asia Pacific region is changing, so the Philippines' stand on certain issues has to change basically for its welfare and interest.

In relation to the Philippine Rise, formerly known as Benham Rise, and the West Philippine Sea or South China Sea, the Philippines must have an upper-hand not only because it has sovereignty rights on the said territories, but it has to show determination and decisiveness in its legal rights. Being determined and decisive in its pursuit for bilateral agreement with China is part of an international obligation to democratically perform to the whole world. Geopolitical tensions and challenges come with opportunities that would lead to economic progress. The Philippines has the need to have collaboration and bilateral or even tripartite agreements with other countries like the United States, Japan, India and Australia to name a few, to avoid massive arm conflicts. Without geopolitical tensions, the Philippines will be a secluded country without a future which no one bothers to talk about.

One key factor against foreign transgressions that are solely driven by competition for resources and energy, growth of naval power and territorial claims is nonviolent dialogue supporting internationally accepted norms, to thereby win glory.

These arguments may be gleaned in Tannen's discussion:

At the heart of the argument culture is our habit of seeing issues and ideas as absolute and irreconcilable principles continually at war. To move beyond this static and limiting view, we can remember the Chinese approach to yin and yang. They are two principles, yes, but they are conceived not as irreconcilable polar opposites but as elements that coexist and should be brought into balance as much as possible (p. 284).

## **The Bangsamoro Organic Law and Federalism**

In the forefront of argument culture, there are many practical issues that each individual group must deliver. One part compares what is currently being done, from public administration to communication and henceforth, to policy science. Drafting laws are possible actions

that the government might take to resolve the issues relating to armed conflict in Mindanao and the struggle of ethnic minorities. One of those monumental solutions is the Bangsamoro Organic Law (BOL), which serves as policy alternative to the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao Act.

The BOL is a supplement to the Local Government Code of 1992. Its efficiency and success, at the macro level, may be augmented by Federalism. The proposed federal charter is the primary defense for secession. There is a long-standing development challenge in changing the centralized government set-up requiring a constitutional change. People's dignity, right to self-determination, uneven regional development and greater income inequality are the driving forces in the creation of the BOL, which may have foundations on the diversity of indigenous peoples (IPs) in Mindanao.

There are more than a hundred indigenous groups in Mindanao and many of them are in the *Bangsamoro* territory. Each tribe has a different demand and stake in the national government's economic and socio-political initiative. War and armed conflict in southern Philippines have been in place since the 15th century, so public discourse and domestic bilateral negotiations have been a roller-coaster of an experience for all peoples and ethnic groups affected in the struggle. The demands of armed groups like the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and indigenous peoples (IPs) have to be heard in the political discourse every now and then, giving them more participation in the economic progress. Mindanao, as we picture it, is divided by different faiths and ideologies but Mindanaoans share one common objective in the fourth industrial revolution—and that is, progress and being able to do well in comparison with other high-income countries. Alongside, the Philippine government's economic objectives in Mindanao can be attained by addressing individual group's demand and needs.

There is an appropriate dialogue happening at present to meet the needs of all the peoples in Mindanao. Civil Society, for its part, has to have a strong compassion and substantial bearing on the concerns of all Mindanaoans. A warlike argument culture in the governance

and institutions for the autonomy and establishment of regional governments is not apparently critical (at least for now) because of the positive socio-economic reasons and control of the state behind the project for socio-economic prosperity in the region.

## **Digital dictatorship and social media**

The extent of the argument culture varies at all levels in the social media scape in the Philippines. Some controversies like the political ruckus and bickering between Sen. Antonio Trillanes and Pres. Duterte seem to be a public relations nightmare characterized by an apolitical game-play of reputation building and blackmailing. Nonetheless, the intrigues or issues about insurgency and the progress of peace talks between the government and the National Democratic Front (NDF), fighting terrorism in Southern Mindanao and the Marawi crisis have more approval than opposition. The buzzword in real time democracy is largely part of the political and creative economy of communication called 'digital dictatorship'. The term was used by *The Economist* in an article published online in December of 2016.

Today, the world is portrayed in the social media and played by consumers as a complex community. Say, Singapore had initiated a platform solely designed for expressing grievances against corrupt government officials and more so to prevent disorganization in this small island country. The platform screens information collected which can be published or posted. In contrast, in the Philippines, self-expression of information content is the bigger concern. Creating a platform and controlling content only to present a peaceful and orderly society is not democracy.

In a study I presented at the National Chengchi University (NCCU), Taipei, Taiwan, titled, 'Philippine Democracy and Moral Disengagement in the Art of Digital Propaganda', I used theories of emergence and complexity (Duran, 2018). I concluded that within the bounds of chaos and complexity, as people become ordinary consumers of technology, every expression in the art of digital propaganda forms part of an orderly and interactive society. The Philippine experience on digital propaganda through fake news is approachable in its totality

because Filipinos can attest concurrence or dissention to any political misbehavior of public officials, elected or appointed. The bureaucratic system with the social media, as another tool instigating transparency and accountability, is taken as everybody's playground. It is not only for professional broadcasters, columnists and journalists to keep an eye on, now that not only the government, political parties and non-partisan groups can use social media, but also ordinary consumers of Facebook in particular. Political parties can now use social media to advance party interests, not merely for the public's interest. These social media consumers exercise their constitutional right of free expression in one way or the other, which was uncommon two decades ago (Duran, 2018).

Each individual has the right to access information in any means. Social media is now the primary source of data that consumers rely on. Banning Facebook in the Philippines, in a hypothetical armageddon scenario, is not only unconstitutional but it would undermine Philippine democracy, whether or not there is disinformation and misinformation emanating from unrestrained sources.

People critique and digest information. Liking, commenting and sharing information seriously or sarcastically, is the manner Filipinos use to proliferate fake news in social media. Media literacy may help individuals become more critical of digital content. Nonetheless, free expression, whether exercised rightly or wrongly, is an indication of a functioning democracy, albeit chaotic and limited (Duran, 2018).

As Tannen illustrates:

*Given the appeal of making others look bad, technology provides a rich source of ammunition: evidence that politicians are hypocrites if not liars because they change their positions overtime. Everything a politician says becomes part of an easily accessible public record, and it is just a matter of spending a few minutes with a database to find a flip-flop (p. 68).*

In the Philippine setting, a dialogue especially in the social media as platform may be a model venue of public dialogue. Its reality as an organized anarchy is a convenient place for micro level decision-making and collective participation in solving social troubles. It can

give the sense of encouragement to get involved in multilateral negotiations. Tannen warns the public though that the multiplicity in voices does not guarantee diversity in solutions. It might just be noise. But noise from many sources is better than noise from just two people talking.

## **War on Drugs and ‘Extrajudicial Killings’**

The issue on Duterte’s ‘War on Drugs’ has been the most morally divisive issue since Ferdinand Marcos’ Martial Law. It has placed the Philippines in the global human rights limelight. A public debate has far-reaching results because unlike other controversial issues, this government’s strong drive against drugs and criminality has impacted a lot on the common, ordinary citizens. On a positive note, this controversial initiative protects mostly the working-class citizens from becoming victims of heinous crimes.

Unsurprisingly, the debate is not just two-sided. The Supreme Court has limited jurisdiction on the arrest and killing of suspected drug users and dealers. Consequently, there is now a waning of the court’s credibility due to its passive stance on the war on drugs. While Duterte is enjoying high levels of popularity, the Commission on Human Rights (CHR), leftist partisan groups and the International Criminal Court (ICC) all take forward-looking but challenging steps in charging Duterte of crimes against humanity. But the most intriguing consequence of the drug war, perhaps, is how it continuously divides the Filipino public—from the government, the court, the masses and the middle class, to the many victims of extrajudicial killings, to people who, in one way or the other, benefitted from it, to the ones grateful for feeling safe. Both tongue-in-cheek and outright opposing reactions from the many victims, the Roman Catholic Church and the left-leaning groups all point out to how arguments surrounding Operation *Tokhang* and Operation Double Barrel further divided the country.

Again, the Philippine situation on narco-politics is an increasingly extreme consequence of weak economic shields and the country’s financial distress. For President Duterte, the arrest and killing of suspected drug users and dealers are intense implementation of

the rule of law that justifies police abuse. The Romans call this, *acusatascusata*, meaning, "it accuses you at the same time it excuses you"—doing the lesser evil to do the little good.

A warlike argument culture continues as the killings never stop, with the court having limited jurisdiction on the abuses committed during arrests and pursuit of alleged drug lords and pushers. Yet again, for Pres. Duterte, the war on drugs is either a fight in the kingdom of conscience or not at all. Clearly, by presenting two extreme options to the drug debate, Pres. Duterte wins the argument as reflected in his popularity. The public is convinced that, indeed, drastic though bloody actions can thus be allowed.

As Tannen foretells in her book:

*Though guilt or innocence---and the search for truth---may not be the point of the adversary system, it is very much the point for most citizens. The requirement to ignore guilt, innocence, and the truth for the sake of the law is deeply upsetting to many (p. 147).*

## **Concluding Remarks**

The argument culture fosters a climate of civility and diplomacy that is very selective of the weight, influence and relevance of a heterogeneous public's take on issues. It is indeed logistically difficult for everyone who wants to be heard especially the voiceless to be given equal chance to air dissenting opinions. The Constitution allows the freedom of thought and information in any means, by anyone. The exchange of rational or irrational arguments, concurrence and dissention of thoughts among individuals in social media and organizations is an everyday, minute-to-minute occurrence. Indeed, it is a human thing to communicate. It is seldom that one knows his/her ideas are foolish; when corrected, very few would admit they are wrong. So, the arguments continue in a vicious cycle because one would rather be right than be part of a solution.

In classical Greece, there is an old dialectic tradition that dates back from the time of the Sophists and Socrates. This tradition is called 'Eloquencia Perfecta' in Latin. This form of rhetoric and speech-making

was developed by the Jesuits in the 15th century, that up to this present time, is still used and studied in Catholic school monasteries. Perfect eloquence in public debates explains the right use of reason, expressing of thoughts into words and being able to communicate gracefully, in a way that people will be interested in. I am all for it, provided that the public is not merely lured by nice words and logical weaving and arrangement of thought but by a compassionate stance of also wanting to understand the other voice. This eloquence should not just be a boastful tendency to attack and demean the other or what Deborah Tannen terms as “agonism”, but rather to contribute to meaningful discourse that not only shakes arguments but also shapes solutions.

## Selected References

- Duran, J. (2018). *Philippine Democracy and Moral Disengagement in the Art of Digital Propaganda*. Asian Congress for Media and Communication (ACMC) Conference Proceedings, The College of Communication, National Chengchi University, Taipei, Taiwan, p. 75.
- Tannen, D. (1998). *The Argument Culture (Moving from Debate to Dialogue)*. Random House, Inc., New York, United States and Random House of Canada Limited, Toronto.
- The Economist. (2016). *Big data and government, China's digital dictatorship*. Retrieved from: <https://www.economist.com/leaders/2016/12/17/chinas-digital-dictatorship>.

## About the Author

**Jim C. Duran** is a member of the Board of Trustees of the Philippines Communication Society (PCS). He teaches photography, communication management and communication research at the Graduate Studies of the Department of Communication in Far Eastern University - Manila where he serves as its Coordinator. He earned a master's degree in Mass Communication in the same Univeristy. At present, he is completing his doctoral degree in Southeast Asian Studies at Centro Escolar University - Manila. Passionate about scholarly research, his move to write policy analyses is giving him another reason to persevere in exploring other areas of study such as

development communication, game theory, transnational cinema, political theory, and humanism. (Correspondence: jimduran10@gmail.com)