Foreword
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This issue of PCS Review comes at the end of an intense and exhausting election year. Inasmuch as critical scholars and political analysts have tracked the harms of digital warfare on social media, we have still failed to account for the costs of electoral war experienced in the context of friendships and families. 2022 is when political identities have become so hardened and taken for granted that communication across differences is now near impossible; blocking and canceling are normalized as healthy behaviors. As a result, our most intimate relationships in the heart of our homes are vulnerable to breaking down from political disagreement.

In my most recent study, co-authored with engaged junior scholars Rossine Fallorina, Jose Mari Lanuza, and Ferdinand Sanchez II, together with deliberative democracy scholar Nicole Curato, we conceptualize our collective problem as one of "parallel public spheres."[1] For us, "disinformation" sounds too narrow, even quaint, to capture the depth and profundity of our political and social divisions. If our shock and indignation were triggered six years ago by a president's toxic speech, or a notorious sexy blogger's misleading claims, now we observe radically divergent political realities constructed by two media-information environments that do not intersect. Whether identifying as "pink" or "red," each side gets to think of the other as gaslit or brainwashed. Each side gets their own choice of broadcast news outlet and partisan pseudo-expert that mirror back to them their political views. Each side views the other not as an opponent worthy of civil exchange but as an enemy to be shamed and vanquished. In other words, 2022 is when the political center has become hollowed out, even decried as a space for the dull or cowardly.

The study of information, media, and communications is central to engaging with the perplexing qualities of our parallel public spheres—as well as identifying the precious yet fragile opportunities for bridging divides. As educators and researchers of communication in the Philippines, we need to take up more space and take on more responsibility to lead public discussions about our media environments and offer concrete solutions to improve them. Now is when we must draw

upon our rich intellectual traditions–the critical study of subversive cinema, historical research of oligarchic media ownership, applied research on grassroots development campaigns, rich ethnographies of online subcultures–to make sense of the present moment and suggest what should come next.

For example, critical communication scholars could be among the wisest to caution against defensiveness and gatekeeping when discussing how we might improve our information ecosystem. Observe how the most vocal anti-disinformation advocates in journalism and civil society have been too busy caught up in hyping and externalizing strawman villains of this political moment: Facebook has been blamed in sweeping terms for "ruining democracy" in the country and beyond, Cambridge Analytica has been misleadingly hyped as unlocking powers of brainwashing for the Marcos campaign, and TikTok moral panics have played into all-too-familiar stereotypes about the "uneducated youth." Critical communication scholars would be the first to raise the alarm about the dangerous and disempowering technological determinism behind these claims. Technological determinism, the idea that technology is a dominant factor in social change over other sociological factors, has also seeped into how we talk about the omniscience of platforms[2] holding sway over their users' ideologies and voting preferences.

Communication scholars could be doing more to call out the reductiveness of technological and platform determinism in public conversations. Insofar as such discourses blame the less-educated, the poor, and younger generations for their gullibility as audiences of disinformation or for their responsibility as the primary producers of disinformation, then such expressions exacerbate the social divisiveness that populist leaders have stoked to their advantage. Worse, when liberals in the pro-democracy movement scapegoat "online trolls" as the newest version of the historically problematic "dumb voter" ("*bobotante*") trope, they affirm the populist publics' perception of liberals as elitist, hypocritical, and detached from everyday realities. Finally, when finger-pointing is too focused on external or technological villains, we might miss asking the more challenging questions of how to penalize the masterminds within local creative economies who design disinformation campaigns for profit.

In addition, we might fail to consider how liberal institutions, including academia and mainstream media, must prove ourselves as worthy of trust from the disenfranchised publics rather than assume that our institutional histories or professional titles should always do that work for us. As we discuss in our study "Parallel Public Spheres," and also the "troll whistleblower" podcast "Catch Me If You Can,"[3] we academics and journalists need to make our values visible, discuss our methodological choices, and invite readers and listeners into our process such that they may see us worthy of their trust.

Communication scholars and educators in the Philippines are also well placed to offer prescriptions on bridging parallel public spheres because of our discipline's positionality in the Philippine academy, as always-already in tension between theory and practice. None of us in Communication share a romanticized view of an ivory tower enamored by theoretical musings of old men; our traditions emphasize applied research, such as in development communication. In addition, we know that theories and concepts we teach in class must always have use-value for students to take forward in their undergraduate theses and industry-adjacent practice classes.

In this light, we should find the confidence to advise on practical interventions to improve our information ecosystem. For example, we can help design media literacy campaigns and experiment with new bespoke interventions. For example, how can we help design and curate conversation guides that help with depolarization and communication across differences, whether within the family or the community setting? How can we redesign our communication curricula and Media Law and Ethics classes to encourage ethics and accountability among our future advertising and public relations professionals, data analysts, and social media workers–beyond its traditional fixation on legal issues and solutions? How can we reframe mainstream fact-check interventions such that they do not talk down on audiences or shame easy villains and instead target chief disinformation architects? These are questions that communication educators are well-placed to address.

Communication educators also know too well that our undergraduate students–our discipline–is the primary pipeline of the country's media industry. The students we teach today are future public relations specialists, graphic designers, social media managers, and speech writers. As such, we too should allot time and space for intense soul-searching insofar as we must recognize that failures in our media ecosystem, and

the design and implementation of disinformation campaigns, are likely products of some of our former students.

As the study "Architects of Networked Disinformation" has argued[4], disinformation campaigns in the Philippines are designed from within our media and creative industries–often by people we know rather than "distant others." Confronting this harsh reality means we need more honest reckoning and soul-searching rather than moral displacement to the brainwashed "*bobotante*" nor determinist analyses about Facebook's all-seeing powers. Just as more thoughtful journalists have been asking what they could have done better, we communication educators need to ask how our research, teaching, and service need to engage with themes of ethics, complicity, and responsibility more centrally. We need to think more carefully about how to teach our students practical survival skills to help them get in and get through the cutthroat cultures of media industries and help model for them the courage needed to call out everyday corruption and exploitation.

Endnotes

[1] Jonathan Corpus Ong et al., "Parallel Public Spheres: Influence Operations in the 2022 Philippine Elections," Media Manipulation Casebook, October 28, 2022, https://mediamanipulation.org/research/unmasking-influence-operations-in-the-philippines.

[2] Robyn Caplan, Meredith Clark, and Will Partin, "Against Platform Determinism. A Critical Orientation. Data & Society (Data & Society, October 13, 2020), https://points.datasociety.net/against-platform-determinism-899acdf88a3d.

[3] https://open.spotify.com/show/0w7E2dq8JnoVDJaRyupM6i?si=9092ef1e73f94b3b

[4] Jonathan Corpus Ong and Jason Vincent A. Cabañes, "Architects of Networked Disinformation: Behind the Scenes of Troll Accounts and Fake News Production in the Philippines," ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst (Newton Tech4Dev Network, February 2018), https://scholarworks.umass.edu/communication_faculty_pubs/74/.

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