

## Essay

# Of Interactions, Interpretations, and Participations: Perspectives on a Die-Hard Duterte Supporters On-line Group

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It came as a form of surprise when I got a Facebook (FB) notification during the last quarter of 2017 that I was “joined in” by an FB group. By this, I mean being listed to be part of the group without prior knowledge about it nor any formal invitation from any of its members. I was not given the option of declining the “invitation”. I simply took this “being joined in” as a feature of any “public” FB group.

The group basically functions as a virtual forum of the so-called *Die-Hard Duterte Supporters*, or also known as *DDS*. The acronym had numerous interpretations aside from what I refer to in this paper, starting out from the so-called *Davao Death Squad* which according to a Mindanao correspondent is “a vigilante group believed to be responsible for over 1,000 summary killings of suspected criminals here in the Philippines since 1988” (Nawal, 2015, par. 2 lines 1-3) and with which had alleged ties with President Rodrigo Duterte way back when he was the mayor of Davao (Nawal, 2015, par. 3 lines 1-2). This 2015 news article also took notice of how different Facebook groups have added new meanings to the acronym, *DDS*. Nawal (2015) mentioned of Duterte-supporter groups named “*Duterte Defense Squad*,” which was created in 2011 with the byline, “to defend the mayor against criticisms”; *Digong Duterte Supporters-Registered Nurses Group*, which pushed for the Duterte-Poe tandem in the 2016 elections; *Duterte’s Destiny is to Serve the Country* described as a group that “carries all sorts of things about Duterte”; and *Digong Duterte Swerte*” (Nawal, 2015).

Not that I go to the extremes of pointless hatred and utter barrage, but I know that I am the last person one should consider as a die-

hard supporter of the President Rodrigo Duterte, let alone this administration. Looking into the first few posts of this particular group I was joined in, my reflex was either “flight or fight”. Instinct told me to stay for a while and look through this window, certainly not of opportunity, but of curiosity or sheer chutzpa. I realized in the long run that one needed a lot of patience and will power to stay lucid in this kind of online environment, especially when one is trying to advocate for media and information literacy.

As a scholar, I am aware of the ethical implications of looking into these things covertly, but I believe that to maintain the criticality and the naturalness of the observations, I had to stay on neutral grounds. The experience of being inside the group was almost like flanerier, if one were to compare the social media/on-line group to a more tangible “off-line” community. I share the same sentiments with Stephen Graham (1998) in using a spatial metaphor for this cyberspace experience since “the expanding lexicon of the Internet – the most well-known vehicle of cyberspace – is not only replete with, but actually *constituted* by, the use of geographical metaphors” (Graham, 1998, p. 166). Knowing the very nature of the “people” that I observed in the community, I maintained the position of a flaneur at this point – carefully strolling through what seemed to be an endless alley of ideological backlash against my own ideological sensibility. I took note of the minutiae of the experience and, at the same time, felt my subjective repulse of the loudness of this “other” voice – a voice that seemed to dominate all the voices within the group and it was blatant in its pursuit of a singular truth. This “other” voice reverberated within this community. It also took advantage of moments when it could signify power and control over all the other voices it was substantially “othering” from within the confines of the FB page. It depicted a frightening echo chamber that I felt could dissipate one’s courage to go against the grain. I barely succumbed to this other voice: I heard everything, and it was difficult, exhausting even, to try to come to terms with it. I could imagine the plight of those who submissively listened and continue to listen.

Allow me to give you a picture of my daily stroll in and with this group.

Every day, I dealt with my Facebook feed which seemed like from the far ends of the information spectrum – on one hand, there were the fact-checking sources and media outfits and, on the other, there were pieces that were mostly baseless but had proven to engage the majority of the 250,000-plus followers that the group had at the time I was “in” it. The posts ranged from as simple as one bearing the photo of the youngest daughter of the President, Kitty, with the caption, “ilang likes para kay Kitty Duterte? [how many likes do we give for Kitty Duterte?]”; a meme with the text, “if you don’t stop lying you’ll grow up to be an ABS-CBN reporter” with a caricature of a woman disciplining a child; a video of a random couple fighting in a public place; edited photos of all the known critics of the President and the administration; detailed shared posts like “ANG TIWALA NG PILIPINO KAY PRES. DUTERTE AY HINDI NABABAWASAN LALO PA LUMALAKAS!!!!” [Filipinos’ trust on Pres. Duterte never wanes, it gets stronger instead]”; a caption “isa ka ba sa naniniwala sa ating mahal na pangulo.. #kami ay sumusuporta sa iyo [are you one of those who believe in our president #wesupportyou]”; a meme with the text “Solid Duterte pa rin ba kayo? Bakit?? [Are you solid Duterte supporters? Why??]”; another caption, “Like and share this page for more updates”; and a video titled, “Duterte Has Given Away P3.23M of His Salary to Needy People Since Winning the Presidency”.

You get the picture.

Interestingly, this community constantly fed on the dichotomy of the *ka-DDS* versus the *Dilawans* or who it fondly called the *Yellowtards*. If one did support or was critical of the President and the administration, he or she was automatically labelled as *Dilawan*/*Yellowtard*, and in a manner that was below-the-belt or derogatory. To further provide a succinct explanation of the etymology of these terms, it would be good to refer a bit to how “yellow” as a popular symbol has made its way into the arena of political meaning-making in the country.

In the Philippines, the color yellow, or a yellow ribbon to be exact, has almost always been associated with the Aquinos –from the late Senator Benigno “Ninoy” Aquino, Jr., late President Corazon “Cory” Aquino, up to the former President Benigno Simeon “Noy-Noy” Aquino

III. The 1970s hit *Tie A Yellow Ribbon 'Round The Ole Oak Tree*," a song about a man who is asking his beloved to perform the gesture as a sign that she still longs for him" (Meruenas, 2009, par. 2 lines 1-3) became a "symbol of protest" when "anti-Marcos protesters adopted the song and the yellow ribbon theme as a gesture of support for Mrs. Aquino's husband Benigno Aquino Jr. upon his return from exile in 1983" (Meruenas, 2009, par. 2 lines 3-5). From this point on, the Aquinos and their staunch supporters have associated themselves with this symbol. The pejorative *yellowtard* is a combination of the terms "yellow" and "retard", implicating the lack of logical sanity to see how the current administration is changing the country for the better.

As an attempt to make sense of this community and how the ubiquity of dominant ideologies maneuvered within quotidian details, I took note of patterns and recurring instances that appeared to contribute to the meaning-making within the group.

### **Online Media Outfits of their Own**

One could immediately notice that there was a huge number of "sources", whose interactive articles took the form of the "mainstream media", the very same media that the group members were always throwing rocks at. Supporters would always argue in posts and comments about mainstream media being "biased". I could not wrap my head around the irony that although the members were keen on criticizing mainstream media, they were at the same time firm supporters of "organic" information sources that did not provide much verifiability and accountability. However, if the tone of the mainstream news was leaning towards the kind of truth they believed in, it was also shared, but skewed to put less focus on the critiques that the articles contained. An extreme case would be the proliferation of mainstream videos (news and features alike) that were "re-edited" by these self-proclaimed credible Duterte news sources. These videos would blatantly discard the "critical" context of their original source, wholly invalidating all the journalistic efforts of the original content creators. One time, I thought, "*tamang* cognitive dissonance [this is your right kind of cognitive dissonance]".

## ***Polemic and Hate***

The on-line community I was able to have access to was filled with hate for the most part, especially towards those who criticize the president and the administration. The members' favorite word to describe or to use against the rebuttals of the so-called *dilawans/yellowtards wastae* or shit. It was surprising to witness exchanges between the extreme ka-DDS and the "detractors" in the group. These detractors were netizens who purposely joined the group to post criticisms against Duterte and his allies. In spite of some of these netizens not identifying with any political partisanship, they would automatically be labelled as *dilawan/yellowtard*. Inside this community, there were only two kinds of identities: those who were pro-administration/Duterte or ka-DDS and the anti-administration or the *dilawan/yellowtards*.

There were *yellowtards*, and obviously the "detractors" and the minority in the group, who would try to be rational about the issues discussed and would even share articles and pieces from the "mainstream media" in an attempt to stir conversation threads towards reason. Unfortunately, almost all the members/supporters would always be quick to shame those people and gun them down by attacking their physical looks, physique, gender, and even using other personal and private information to ridicule them. Most of those who got involved in this exchange ended up with their own "memes" and with their personal details found in their social media account's profile being used to threaten them. I was quite stunned with the violence in all these. I only read words and visual texts, but they rendered an aura of dangerous homogeneity characteristic of angry mobs ready to throw in fatal explosives.

There were also those who tried to use the language of the majority of the supporters to point out what was wrong and unjust with what they believed in – also using curse words, resorting to name-calling, among others – which seemed like a desperate move to start out a rational dialogue. It looked rational because the building of an argument would sometimes appear on-point following a logical sequence of thought process comparable to a philosophical theorem. I would say, there was much effort given to these "arguments".

## **“After Hours” and Other “Entertainment” Contents**

I also witnessed an influx of pornographic video posts during the wee hours, a combination of Facebook Live videos and canned videos posted by several members, mostly men. These provided entertainment in what already seemed to be a carnivalesque space. There was a considerable number of instances when I tried to view these videos, only to discover that they were indeed porn materials, and that hundreds to thousands were also viewing the pieces on different occasions. Aside from these, there were also videos and links posted where one can watch movies or TV series, old and new, via online streaming.

## **A Plethora of Memes**

Almost everything was “memefied” in this page. The “memeworld” was also shared by other *ka-DDS* sites, and thus, the cycle of affirmation of the *ka-DDS*’ superiority continued to thrive. The discourses created from these memes ranged from commentaries on current issues, proliferation of the dominant notions within the group, to blatant attacks to those who pointed out the inconsistencies of the administration. The memes proved to be a quick medium of making these points across, in a manner that was relatable, down-to-earth, and tactless. In a way, the memes were a repository or the spokespersons of what the members were trying to say.

## **Crowdsourcing and OFW On-line Confessions**

I found it interesting that the Facebook page also had an appearance of having a direct line to the President or to Malacañang. There were numerous posts referring to calls for help, mostly lobbying for those who suffer severe illnesses and those who deal with different forms of injustices. There were also videos about Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) wanting to “go back home” due to the dire conditions and the hapless violent tirades of their foreign employers. Aside from the said themes, more videos from the OFWs were filled with the dominant discourse on how this administration is succeeding in mobilizing the country towards lasting progressive change, aside from the usual

derogatory remarks against the *dilawans/yellowtards*. Given that the main and active administrator of this page is an Overseas Filipino Worker – as per the person’s details shown publicly, together with all the memes that this person created to show intense and immense support to the President – posts and conversations revolved within the same dominant ideologies, within the same “voice”.

### **Thoughts Further Down the Line**

There were numerous challenges in my attempt to be on track in what I strongly wanted to be an objective observation of this group. At a time when alarming numbers of trolls and bots infiltrate the cyberspace alongside the unfortunate normalcy of fake news, misinformation, and disinformation, I knew I had to articulate something. I did not know it would be academic in tone. I only knew I had to assess my experience with a perspective that would not just leave me helpless.

Having been immersed in this group, and the other groups that became accessible through this, magnified several thoughts and memories of propaganda of “yore”, pun intended. With the Internet and the World Wide Web today, the deemed public, not just journalists, have become ‘insiders’ in the Philippine political arena. On a broader scale, greatly involving the prevalence of “influencers” and even people from the administration resorting to tongue-lashing and vitriol on-line and off-line, Stanley Cunningham’s (2000) elaboration on government propaganda is worth examining again:

Government propaganda is always a ‘disservice’ to democracy because ‘it plays upon perplexity; it cultivates confusion; it poses as information and knowledge; it generates belief systems and tenacious convictions; it prefers credibility and belief states to knowledge; it supplies ersatz assurances and certainties; it skews perceptions; it systematically disregards superior epistemic values such as truth, understanding and knowledge; it discourages reasoning and a healthy respect for rigor, evidence and procedural safeguards; it promotes the easy acceptance of unexamined belief and supine ignorance (p.6; as quoted by Baran & Davis, 2012, p. 79).

It has been such a feat to try to stay sane in the constant presence of murky reasonings and sweeping arguments. To think, these are not

just encountered within the *ka-DDS* groups but also within groups that proudly identify themselves as the “other”, as the *dilawans*, except that the former groups have been pervasive and consistent with their “branding” and “logic.” Despite Facebook’s initiatives on taking down pages and accounts that have violated the said platform’s policies, groups like this continue to thrive, and questions can still be raised as to the authenticity of interactions within these on-line communities. I would like to believe that on-line communities like this foster the kind of democratic space that we want and basically need. People are somehow free to share their thoughts and opinions, air their immediate concerns, and even be critical of others. As Mike Crang (2000) has noted about the nuances of virtual communities:

The circulation of knowledge and information, leading occasionally to informed discussion, seems to offer some parallels (Stone, 1991, as quoted by Crang, 2000, p. 308) to a civil society where agency is grounded in interaction, not a presupposed collective identity (Jones, 1997, p. 30; as quoted by Crang, 2000, p. 308),

Even if I my observations revolve around one on-line community only, the breadth and depth of information about the complex and complicated interactions, interpretations, and participations were already telling of themes and stories that somehow reflect what people crave for – lasting progress, real action, peace, and unity. These ideal notions have gone through numerous mythologizing and re-mythologizing; and now, more than ever, have instead polarized public opinion and collective consciousness.

It would be interesting to look further into this phenomenon and to cull more relevant literatures that can expound different ideologies and discourses. The texts in these on-line communities are polysemic, and can be sources of various analysis and synthesis, especially when these texts fall prey into historical revisionism and propaganda which can already be seen and felt during these times. Backward notions also must be pointed out, most especially about gender surfacing in threads treating violence, harassment, and oppression as non-issues. As for these communities formed on-line, I share the same thoughts with Tobias Boos (2017) about the cyberspace as a place for communities, emphasizing local and global contexts, and how this



trait of the cyberspace affects identities, relationships, and information. This observation is specifically significant now with the allegations of controlled information or misinformation and media manipulation coming from different parts of the globe:

form or maintain themselves online, and offline communities may go online. How people live together in online environments appears to be very similar to how they live in offline environments, but it has been suggested that global contexts matter even more there because the content on the WWW can be accessed by many people, from all over the world, instantaneously (Boos, 2017, p. 30).

Living at a time where proof of the current administration's "spin doctors" almost displayed without embarrassment and as underestimation of the public's ability to engage in intellectual discourse. Likewise, there is an increasing attack on our collective memory, making it more difficult to not feel blatantly disrespected. However, many attempts to invalidate these suppositions of injustice and disrespect have been persistent. In the words of Todd Gitlin (1991), people have become (and continue to be, I believe) "cognoscenti of their own bamboozlement" (as quoted by Baran & Davis, 2012, p. 77).

It is our differences that this "other voice" is trying to take power from, while at the same time obliterating any forms of dissent, let alone logic. The following statements, which I have initially shared in a reflection paper I submitted in an M.A. class (Atis, 2018), reflect my specific viewpoint in line with this. I share the same sentiments of Linda Martin Alcoff's (2006) *Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self*. I go by this simple but insightful explanation when thrown with a polarizing notion of differences:

...it is the refusal to acknowledge the importance of the differences in our identities that has led to distrust, miscommunication, and thus disunity... When I refuse to listen to how you are different from me, I am refusing to know who you are. But without understanding fully who you are, I will never be able to appreciate precisely how we are more alike than I might have originally supposed (Alcoff, 2006, p. 6; as quoted by Atis, 2018).

In the same paper, I have noted that it is within these lines of concepts and discussions that I realize how discourse and power can be creative.

Identities can be created. Unity can still be achieved by accepting that we are more alike than different when we see through all the identities that we embody; rather than forcing ourselves to conform into, fitting a peg within square holes when we very well know we are round pegs. This is also the context where I understand complicity and resistance, and that we are, in most cases, both complicit and resistant. It is not that we endorse binaries, but it is with using and, and not or, that we can find more potentials – that we push from within.

I personally was not able to interact and “participate” in this on-line community, but through the experience of simply minding all the information that has been shared and to try to put myself in the shoes of those member/supporters, I found myself further judging my own viewpoints and navigating through tangled concerns of democracy, agency, impact, and identity -- points that I have yet to learn from and discover as I try to continue treading this deemed paradoxical and endless alley of discourse-making.

### **Ethical Considerations**

This piece contains highly subjective points and positions as my reflection of the experience I deemed as “accidental” and, in the beginning, even annoying. However, I was called to unravel all the ideological ripples significant in learning about such a nuanced space and ubiquitous place. The exact name of the group is not mentioned here to avoid putting the community in a bad light or unnecessary limelight and maintain a level of critical thinking towards political groups in social media. The observations were done covertly; thus, sample posts, profiles, and statuses were described instead of given visual examples. I disclose that inside the group, I was part of the “other” voice. However, outside, I am a voice refusing to be bound in either-or political binary.

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