

# Off the Streets and On the Web: Directions for Digital Politics Research in the Philippines

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## ABSTRACT

Responding to citizens' increasing use of social media and digital modes of communication, researchers worldwide have widely examined how much these platforms influence political processes. In particular, much work has focused on what forms of political participation and behavior are enabled by digital technologies and whether these platforms contribute meaningfully to citizens' empowerment across online and offline political spheres. As such, the current article provides an overview of central trends evident across three decades of digital politics research while also situating the contributions of Filipino scholars within an international context. To support this analysis, the present discussion synthesizes theoretical accounts and empirical studies across almost thirty years of scholarship, which have been undertaken from communication and media studies, political science, psychology, sociology, and other allied disciplines. Considering trends across decades, these studies demonstrate a general shift away from questions on the usefulness of the internet for political processes toward recognizing these platforms' capacity to support citizen and government activities and eventually warnings about the threats to democratic stability that modern information ecologies can amplify. Drawing attention to these trends, the overview presents directions that can be prioritized for future investigations and applications, especially noting the growing yet limited scope of local work. Above all, given the country's dual state as one of the world's leaders in internet and social media usage as well as disinformation and political influence operations, more encompassing research programs and interventions are encouraged to respond to the capacity of digital technologies to both strengthen and undermine democracy.

Keywords: *digital politics, democracy, social media, political behavior, Philippines*

### Democracy in the Digital Age

Citizens' active engagement in political processes and institutions is important for a resilient and well-functioning democracy (Bühlmann & Kriesi, 2013). The emergence of computer-mediated communication technologies, social media, and similar digital platforms was then anticipated to provide citizens with more means to become politically engaged in developing a digital democracy (Gilde de Zúñiga et al., 2010). The COVID-19 pandemic may have hastened this shift due to health-related restrictions over offline political activities, thus driving citizens to use digital platforms (Kowalewski, 2020).

Diamond (2010) argued that these platforms can serve as liberation technologies that widen the public sphere in democratic societies (or develop one within authoritarian regimes) by minimizing participation costs (e.g., time, effort, and financial resources) while providing citizens a means to seek information, ensure government performance and accountability, and mobilize others toward collective action. In contrast, Lorenz-Spreen et al. (2023) warned that while democracy benefits from digital media when these foster inclusion, participation, and exposure to diverse opinions, it is also threatened when platforms amplify disinformation, polarization, and inequality in representation.

The Philippines is not an exception to these paradoxes: It has one of the world's largest online populations, which spends among the longest average time online and on social media worldwide (We Are Social, 2023) while also relying more on online sources for news (Newman et al., 2023) despite the country's internet connections being among the slowest and most expensive internationally (Mirandilla-Santos et al., 2018). Similarly, concerns have been raised regarding the country's cybercrime and cyber libel laws, which can be used to target political opponents indiscriminately, thus encroaching on freedoms of speech, assembly, and of the press on which political engagement is predicated (Cox, 2021; Ramota, 2013). Moreover, recent efforts to digitize government services (e.g., the Philippine Identification System ID) must be considered against the precarity of digital security in the country (e.g., data breaches: Commission on Elections in 2016, Philippine Health Insurance Corporation in 2023).

Filipino scholars also diverge in their evaluation of the democratic impact of digital platforms. For instance, Arguelles (2020) observed that Filipino youth are exploring novel digital means of political involvement instead of being apolitical and disengaged. Conversely, Marcaida (2020) found that digital activism is somewhat stigmatized among college students due to its capacity to heighten awareness about social issues but with limited expansion toward more consequential actions.

With the internet and social media becoming increasingly accessible to citizens and prominent in their daily interactions, it is imperative to examine how these platforms both empower and exclude citizens in democratic processes and participation (Farrell, 2012; Labor & San Pascual, 2023). Citizens do engage in political affairs through means such as political communication and expression, civic engagement, electoral and party involvement, activism and protest, and potentially illegal uses of technology for political reasons (e.g., hacktivism; Ekman & Amnå, 2012; Theocharis, 2015; Waeterloos et al., 2021). The question, then, is: to what extent do digital platforms support or undermine citizens' engagement in these processes?

### Foreign Trends, Local Directions

Responding to the political circumstances discussed above, I aim to achieve three objectives in this article: By (1) providing an overview of foreign research on digital politics and (2) evaluating the achievements and limitations of current scholarship in the Philippines within this global context, I then (3) identify gaps and provide recommendations for future investigations and interventions. While there have been previous efforts to examine the potential of digital technologies for political influence in the Philippines (e.g., Cox, 2021; Ramota, 2013), the current article presents the first extensive synthesis of local work.

Through this article, I argue that local research on digital politics has shown significant progress across the years (primarily in terms of published studies), with these being representative of various disciplines and methodological traditions (i.e., both quantitative and qualitative), relevant to local social and political contexts (e.g., disinformation research), and responsive to global technological trends (e.g., investigating emergent social media). However, despite these achievements, much remains to be done so that local efforts will match the extent of international scholarship—an endeavor that becomes necessary given the central nature of digital technologies and social media in Philippine society and politics. Crucially, local investigations will gain more impact and utility when these are systematically translated into interventions for civil society, government, and other relevant sectors.

To map the state of digital politics research in the Philippines, I use a knowledge synthesis approach called the scoping review (for comparison against similar methods such as systematic reviews and meta-analyses, see Grant & Booth, 2009, and Sutton et al., 2019). This method is used to integrate literature originating from different fields or methodological approaches, define the scope of current work, especially when the research area is novel or complex, and identify gaps in the literature which can then be addressed in future theoretical

or empirical studies (Noble & Smith, 2018; Whittemore et al., 2014). As will be made evident below, this method is particularly appropriate for the Philippine context, given the largely nascent and diverse state of local research in this field.

The studies (e.g., journal articles, book chapters, academic white papers) discussed below were retrieved from various academic databases (e.g., EBSCOhost Academic Search Complete, Google Scholar, PsycNET, PubMed (NCBI), Scopus) using the search string (*online OR internet OR “social media” OR ICT OR digital OR computer*) AND (*politic\* OR democra\**), following Siddaway et al.’s (2019) guidelines. These keywords cover political behavior and processes, democratic governance, institutions, and similar topics; retrieved studies were included in the analysis after evaluating their abstracts and full texts to see if they fit within the scope of the listed keywords. The *Philippines* was added to restrict the search to studies concerning local digital politics. Database searches were initially conducted in March 2019 and updated in February 2020, January 2021, July 2023, and December 2023.

Drawing from the trends evident in the retrieved research, I extensively discuss the current scope of local work: The 74 articles included attest to the need for more relevant studies. Notably, articles were published roughly equally between local and international outlets, primarily from communication/media studies and political science (see Table 1; also Table 2 for year ranges). As will be discussed, political science and public administration dominated the first decade because of the initial focus on the use of technology for democracy and government in general. Moving into the second decade, communication/media scholars led other fields in exploring the role of social media in citizens’ daily political activities, especially by emphasizing digital information, collaboration, and participation. This trend carries over into the current decade largely due to the centrality of disinformation research and corresponding media literacy and regulation approaches.

Meanwhile, the selection of foreign articles (i.e., discussing the results of studies based on data from countries other than the Philippines) presented here is by no means exhaustive because the current breadth of research far exceeds the scope of the article (for example, see the number of studies included in the meta-analyses by Lorenz-Spreen et al., 2023, and Oser & Boulianne, 2020). Instead, I restrict the discussion to articles that are agenda-setting in their own right by introducing a central concept, developing a theory or paradigm, or advocating for a perspective that continues to hold great influence on present accounts of digital political influences. This selection aims to demonstrate significant trends and issues identified in foreign literature, which then serve as a benchmark for the directions, achievements, and limitations of local research efforts.

Table 1  
 Characteristics of Reviewed Local Studies

	Elusive Effects	Citizen Connections	Destabilized Democracies	Total
<b>By Publication Outlet</b>				
<b>Journal Articles</b>				
<b>Local Journals</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>61</b>
<i>Kasarinlan</i>	4		5	4
<i>Malay</i>		3		3
<i>PCS Review</i>		6	3	9
<i>Philippine Political Science Journal</i>		2		2
<i>Plaridel</i>	1	2	2	5
Other local journals	4	3		7
<b>Foreign Journals</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>31</b>
<i>Media Asia</i>		2	2	4
<i>The Electronic Journal of Information Systems in Developing Countries</i>	2			2
Other foreign journals	5	13	7	25
<b>Book Chapters</b>				
Ateneo de Manila University Press [L]		4	1	5
Routledge [F]		2	1	3
University of Santo Tomas Publishing House [L]		1		1
		1		1

<i>Academic Reports and White Papers</i>	Elusive Effects	Citizen Connections	Destabilized Democracies	Total
Internews [F]	1		7	8
NATO Strategic Communications			3	3
Centre of Excellence [F]			1	1
New Mandala [F]			1	1
Newton Tech4Dev Network [F]			1	1
The Asia Foundation [F]	1			1
University of the Philippines Diliman [L]			1	1

<b>By Primary Discipline of Article</b>	Elusive Effects	Citizen Connections	Destabilized Democracies	Total
Communication/Media Studies	3	16	16	35
Computer Science	1			1
Gender Studies		2		2
Philippine Studies		3	1	4
Philosophy	2	1		3
Political Science	2	8	4	14
Policy/Public Administration	7	1		8
Psychology		3	1	4
Sociology	2	1		3
<i>Total</i>	<i>17</i>	<i>35</i>	<i>22</i>	<i>74</i>

*Note.* Figures refer to unique articles. Only journals with at least two articles included in the review are reported separately to aid in the readability of the table. For outlets of book chapters and reports: L = local, F = foreign. Italicized figures for journal articles indicate subtotals across local and international journals.

### Three Decades of Digital Politics Research

Reading through the literature, it becomes evident that Filipino scholars respond to prevailing international academic, social, political, and technological contexts in their approach to investigating digital politics. Noting this trend, I discuss how digital technologies influence citizens' democratic engagement as reflected across three decades of digital politics research. The three succeeding sections focus on each of these decades (summarized in Table 2), which I named based on the general trend of studies prevalent within them: (1) the search for the elusive effects underlying digital technology's relevance for political processes, (2) the citizen connections formed and maintained through online platforms, and (3) the threats faced by destabilized democracies that are caused or amplified by such technologies.

I use the decades as an organizational framework to demonstrate that both foreign and local research priorities align significantly with international technological and political trends (see Table 2, first column), mainly through (1) how current technologies simultaneously enable and restrict what actions can be done with them (i.e., the shift toward more multimedia-capable platforms), and (2) how the state of democracy globally motivates research that aims to understand its stability and decay (i.e., decreased support for democracy and increased prevalence of nondemocratic regimes; Hyde, 2020). Simultaneously, research trajectories can resurge in interest across time, albeit with the most critical theoretical work being established in the originating decade.

Nevertheless, as demonstrated in the subthemes I identified under each decade, especially for the Philippines, countries pursue more specific research agendas relevant to their local contexts. In the succeeding sections, I reflect on these considerations in my discussion by summarizing the key themes that mark foreign research in each decade before noting pertinent developments and efforts to engage with foreign work in local studies.

Notably, foreign scholars began initial investigations (i.e., from the mid-1990s when households began to gain access to public internet services) on the influence of digital technologies on democracy and political behavior motivated by the observation that citizens were becoming less politically involved going into the 2000s (Delli Carpini, 2000; DiMaggio et al., 2001; Putnam, 1995). Online platforms were then seen as a viable means of reversing this trend by serving as spaces for developing citizen relationships. Filipino researchers followed this direction through research efforts beginning in the early 2000s.

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Table 2

*Digital Politics Research: Contexts and Trends*

Social, Political, and Technological Developments	Conceptualization of Online Political Behavior	Antecedents of Online Political Behavior
<b>Decade of Elusive Effects</b> ( <i>mid-1990s – mid-2000s</i> )		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Decreasing traditional political participation</li> <li>● Greater accessibility of the internet</li> <li>● Email, listservs, message forums</li> <li>● www.elagda.com (2000) and EDSA 2 (2001)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Offline vs. online participation: initial distinctions (Anduiza et al., 2009)</li> <li>● Information-seeking: news sites, blogs (Valenzuela et al., 2009; Xenos &amp; Moy, 2007)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Participatory inequalities, digital divide (Nam, 2011; Roberts &amp; Hernandez 2019*; van Dijk, 2006)</li> <li>● Online-to-offline spillover (Bimber &amp; Copeland, 2013; Boulianne, 2009)</li> <li>● Online social capital (Balmes &amp; Tomboc, 2002*; Valenzuela et al., 2009)</li> </ul>
<b>Decade of Citizen Connections</b> ( <i>mid-2000s – mid-2010s</i> )		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Social media, video-sharing sites</li> <li>● Online electoral (e.g., Obama 2008), civic campaigns (e.g., Kony 2012, 2012 SOPA/PIPA protests, ALS Ice Bucket Challenge 2014)</li> <li>● Philippine Million People March (2013) organized through social media</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Political participation across online platforms (Gibson &amp; Cantijoch, 2013)</li> <li>● Dimensions of online political participation (Theocharis, 2015; van Deth, 2014)</li> <li>● News usage (Boulianne, 2018; Chae et al., 2019; David et al., 2019*)</li> <li>● Second-screening (Vaccari et al., 2015)</li> <li>● Cognitive elaboration (Eveland, 2004)</li> <li>● Political communication and discussion (Lee, 2017)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Exploring mediators and mechanisms (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2014; Keating &amp; Melis, 2017)</li> <li>● Citizen communication mediation model (Lee, 2017)</li> <li>● Political efficacy (Marcaida, 2020*), interest (Ladia &amp; Panao, 2023*)</li> </ul>



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Social, Political, and Technological Developments	Conceptualization of Online Political Behavior	Antecedents of Online Political Behavior
<i>Decade of Destabilized Democracies (mid-2010s – present)</i>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Global rise in populism and authoritarianism</li> <li>● Black Lives Matter, Hong Kong Protests, #MeToo</li> <li>● Facebook–Cambridge Analytica Scandal</li> <li>● COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2023)</li> <li>● Philippines: ABS-CBN closure (May 2020), Anti-Terror Law (July 2020)</li> <li>● Frances Haugen testifies in US Senate about Facebook algorithms, safety issues (June 2021)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Trolling, canceling (Brady et al., 2020; Powell, 2015)</li> <li>● Disinformation (Pennycook &amp; Rand, 2021), influence operations (Fallorina et al., 2023*)</li> <li>● Digital media literacy and fact-checking (Chua &amp; Soriano, 2020*; van der Linden, 2022)</li> <li>● Digital protests, social movements, network mobilization, and collective action (Lonkila et al., 2021)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Problems of online deliberative democracy (Kozyreva et al., 2020; McKay &amp; Tenove, 2021)</li> <li>● Hyperpartisanship, polarization, echo chambers (Freelon et al., 2020)</li> <li>● Surveillance, censorship (Lonkila et al., 2021; Roberts, 2020)</li> <li>● Importance of structural and political contexts (Barnidge et al., 2018; Fallorina et al., 2023*; Shah et al., 2017)</li> </ul>

*Note.* Research priorities fluctuate and resurge in interest outside their primary decade, thus using year ranges. Citations refer to examples of representative work for each trend listed; studies with asterisks are publications on Philippine digital politics.

Finally, synthesizing these decades, the article’s closing section integrates proposed research and program recommendations, emphasizing those of a multidisciplinary character given the centrality of the internet and social media in various facets of political processes.

### The Decade of Elusive Effects

In the first decade, foreign researchers found that digital activities had elusive effects on offline political behavior. At the same time, local scholars emphasized the more fundamental impact of digital and democratic divides on online access and representation.

#### ***Foreign Trends: Online Social Capital and Spillover***

In this decade, online political behavior was conceptualized primarily as discussion, community-building, and volunteerism afforded by text-based platforms (e.g., forums, message boards; Min, 2007), which require low internet speeds and multimedia capability. Studies typically investigated two effects: the outcomes of internet usage on participation across online platforms and

whether online engagement leads to offline activities (spillover effects; Anduiza et al., 2009). Indeed, when used for information-seeking, greater internet access predicts voter turnout and non-electoral participation (Xenos & Moy, 2007). Similarly, such platforms provide low-cost avenues for political deliberation, thus motivating citizens to discuss current affairs with others (Stanley & Weare, 2004). These online interactions can promote offline participation by developing online social capital, political trust, and political efficacy (Valenzuela et al., 2009). Correspondingly, Balmes and Tomboc (2002) emphasized that online social capital fosters individual (e.g., increased knowledge), social (e.g., community organization, participation, and action), and ideological empowerment (e.g., social movements), which facilitate Filipinos' greater integration into social and political affairs.

Conversely, online platforms enable citizens to be more active in politics while simultaneously inhibiting others from participating due to their mixed capacities as a source of political information (diverging in accessibility and quality), as a medium for communication (differing in audience size), and as a virtual extension of the traditional public sphere (potentially overrepresenting the interests of some groups over others; Papacharissi, 2002). Similarly, other researchers found platform-restricted effects where online activities lead more to same-platform digital political engagement (Puig-i-Abril & Rojas, 2007), reinforce those who are already active in offline settings (Livingstone et al., 2005), or fail to produce any mobilization altogether (Krueger, 2006).

### ***Local Directions: Digital Divides and E-Governance***

The most substantial criticism against the democratizing potential of digital technologies is the digital divide: In the Philippines, women, speakers of languages other than English or Filipino, lower-income groups, blue-collar workers, indigenous peoples, individuals with lower educational attainment, older citizens, and rural residents tend to have lower digital access and literacy (Alampay, 2006; Portus, 2015; Rashid, 2016). Even if these barriers are overcome, discourses in online public spheres are still disproportionately controlled by political elites who already exercise great power in offline settings, thus decreasing the representation of ordinary citizens and social minorities (democratic divide; Best & Krueger, 2005; Nam, 2011; van Dijk, 2006).

Drawing these findings together, the resource and civic voluntarism models jointly argue that citizens' involvement in political affairs is predicated on their access to and mobilization of demographic (e.g., financial, educational), psychological (e.g., efficacy), and social resources (e.g., organizational membership, social capital; Brady et al., 1995); the latter two can also be fostered through competencies and relationships developed online (Oni et al., 2017). Therefore,

following these models, local research efforts that map the state of digitalization in the country must be regularly completed to ensure that programs for improved telecommunication infrastructures are targeted among disconnected populations (e.g., based on social class and location), thus improving their access to online social and political spaces. However, research at a scale useful for nationwide technological planning remains limited (as an example, see the 2019 National ICT Household Survey by the Department of Information and Communications Technology (DICT), 2020), with even less work available that focuses on the use of online platforms for political reasons (e.g., use of and attitudes toward news: Chua et al., 2021) or evaluations of Filipinos' competencies in undertaking such activities (e.g., Alampay, 2006; Portus, 2015).

Nevertheless, extant studies demonstrate the feasibility of using technology, particularly for e-governance programs in the Philippines. For instance, as early as 2000–2001, local government units (LGUs) across the country started adopting online platforms (e.g., websites, email) to provide information and respond to questions about their services for citizens (Alampay, 2002; Rye, 2002). Simultaneously, the national government has started exploring the development of policies and regulatory bodies concerning information technology to foster public service delivery, procedural transparency, organizational competitiveness, and citizen representation in governance (Lallana et al., 2002). Social media also proves beneficial for public communications, especially during emergencies. For example, LGUs use Facebook to locate households needing rescue and coordinate calamity response efforts during typhoons (Congjuico, 2014, 2017).

At the same time, government workers are affected by the same digital divides as other citizens, with employees of LGUs based in metropolitan central offices reporting greater availability of computers and higher literacy in using applications and the Internet compared to their counterparts in rural and upland areas (Remular, 2010). Therefore, recommendations for regular competency mapping and infrastructure improvements are also called for here, especially to maintain and enhance the online initiatives that these offices have established.

Similarly, with the investigations above noting the importance of government support for e-governance initiatives, follow-up studies on the relationships between the government, technology, and civil society are crucial, especially in light of recent efforts to regulate online behavior (e.g., laws on cyber libel and cybercrime; institution of the DICT, SIM card registration). Moreover, these studies have demonstrated only the feasibility of instituting e-government initiatives; in turn, evaluations of their effectiveness are necessary to ensure the sustained responsiveness and appropriateness of such programs (e.g., comparison of digital technology and democracy across Southeast Asia: Alami et

al., 2022; government website assessment: Khalid & Lavilles, 2019; functions of e-government: Ortuoste, 2015).

While more local research is needed to evaluate and advance the effectiveness of e-government and digital access initiatives, previous work provide clear directions for our studies and interventions. In particular, Roberts and Hernandez (2019) argued that for Philippine digital democracy and citizenship to be maximally inclusive, we need to remove barriers against the availability (e.g., lack of infrastructure in remote areas) and affordability (e.g., data costs) of internet access (i.e., digital divides) as well as enhance citizens' awareness of (e.g., perceived usefulness and relevance), ability for (e.g., digital literacy), and agency over (e.g., efficacy) digital technologies (i.e., democratic divides).

Ultimately, the internet opens opportunities for networking and reduces costs, which enhances social capital, political participation, and diversity; concurrently, inequalities in internet access and usage replicate the social, political, and cultural divides that define offline communities (DiMaggio et al., 2001). Similarly, Sy (2001, 2002) contended that the digitalization of Philippine society can foster a national and representative democracy while warning against Filipinos being misguided into adopting colonial and exclusionary notions of technological development.

Summarizing the findings of this decade, both locally and internationally, online platforms neither undermine nor substantially enhance citizens' civic and political participation. Thus, they lower costs for information-seeking and low-stakes activities while doing little to motivate more consequential actions (see meta-analyses by Bimber & Copeland, 2013; Boulianne, 2009).

### The Decade of Citizen Connections

The second decade saw foreign efforts to elucidate the nature of citizen connections through taxonomies and models of political behavior, alongside parallel local investigations of specific forms of participation in various social and political contexts.

#### ***Foreign Trends: Political Communication and Participation***

Whereas the first decade focused on political behaviors brought about unreliably by news consumption and political expression through primarily text-based platforms, the second decade followed citizens through social media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, YouTube comments), which offered more synchronous and multimedia modes of information sharing and communication. For example, the connective and communicative functions of these platforms enable participation through electoral activities (Vitak et al., 2011), local community engagement (Wicks et al., 2014), political group membership (Conroy et al., 2012), citizen

journalism (Kaufhold et al., 2010), protest (Hara & Huang, 2011), and political networking (Tang & Lee, 2013). Political discussion, interest, and efficacy are consistent mediators of social media effects on political engagement (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2014; Keating & Melis, 2017). Local studies that used these constructs to predict Filipinos' political participation found similar effects (David et al., 2019; Ladia & Panao, 2023; Marcaida, 2020).

Moreover, through second/dual screening, citizens become active media consumers who encounter political information through both traditional (e.g., television, radio, newspapers) and social media, learn more about social issues, use these platforms' networking functions to discuss politics, and eventually intensify their participation across platforms (Vaccari et al., 2015). Accidental/incidental exposure to news while browsing for non-informational purposes (e.g., entertainment) benefits online political participation, especially for those uninterested in politics (Valeriani & Vaccari, 2016). Given that the use of political information shows consistently positive effects for later engagement (Boulianne & Theocharis, 2020), local studies on intentional and incidental news usage will be beneficial since Filipinos tend to use traditional and digital media roughly equally for both news and entertainment purposes (Chua et al., 2021).

These findings suggest the feasibility of an inclusive digital democracy, with citizens widely using digital platforms' informational, communicative, and collaborative functions. In fact, due to their greater access to and reliance on digital platforms over the years, citizens have become agentic consumers of political information and producers of media who express their opinions through their online networks (see meta-analyses by Boulianne, 2018; Chae et al., 2019).

This notion of citizen agency contrasts with traditional media effects models, which employ linear mechanisms that predispose political action as a direct consequence of news consumption, mainly through media framing and agenda-setting (Valentino & Nardis, 2013). In particular, the citizen communication mediation model contends that face-to-face and digital political discussions mediate media use and political engagement (Lee, 2017). Similarly, the cognitive mediation model emphasizes that citizens elaborate on political information by considering their previous knowledge, values, motivations, and similar beliefs before taking action (Eveland, 2004).

Ultimately, foreign work has moved from establishing how citizens use online spaces to participate in politics (for example, see the taxonomies proposed by Theocharis, 2015, and van Deth, 2014) to interrogating such participation's effectiveness. As such, researchers have debated whether digital technologies merely imitate offline behavioral repertoires or afford citizens new activities (replication hypothesis) and, as a consequence, whether such technologies permit

a variety of activities as diverse as their offline counterparts (differentiation hypothesis) (Gibson & Cantijoch, 2013). Therefore, it is a question of whether digital technologies mobilize citizens from nonparticipation or low-stakes participation toward committed engagement across platforms or reinforce the involvement of only those who are already engaged in the first place (Nam, 2012).

### ***Local Directions: Forms and Antecedents of Online Political Engagement***

Although still limited, a growing number of local works investigate replication–differentiation and mobilization–reinforcement processes. For instance, David (2013; David et al., 2019) found that Filipinos (especially the youth) use social media to seek information about and discuss politics. Through news-seeking and discourse, netizens become empowered to meaningfully participate in politics thus motivating them to join civil or activist organizations, contact government officials, and become more involved in democratic processes across platforms.

Consequently, researchers have established that Filipino citizens increasingly participate in various online-supported political activities. Among the political behaviors that have been examined, more discursive and communicative forms of participation include blogging and commenting to express opinions about social and political issues (Bautista & Lin, 2015; Espiritu, 2014; Javier, 2022; Ladia, 2023; Macaraan, 2021; Mirandilla-Santos, 2011; Rodriguez, 2017), joining online political groups (Atis, 2018), sharing information and encouraging turnout during elections (Murillo & Porley, 2017; Pablo et al., 2014), and creating digital parodies or memes which signify political contention through ostensibly benign humor (Andrada, 2011; Barrios, 2021; Ramos, 2019; Ramota, 2013; Suarez, 2022). Additionally, global social responsibility (e.g., volunteerism, political involvement, environmental action; Lee et al., 2016, 2017), electoral campaigns (Karan et al., 2009; Ladia & Pano, 2023; Nieva et al., 2022; Teehankee, 2010), and social movement participation (e.g., for women’s, indigenous peoples’, and LGBTQIA+ rights; Abbott et al., 2023; Agojo et al., 2023; Arguelles, 2020; Baker, 2018; Cox, 2021; Diaz et al., 2018; Labor & San Pascual, 2022; Marcaida, 2020; Pineda, 2022; Soriano, 2014) represent more committed forms of multi-platform political activities.

As such, while it is evident that local researchers have substantially investigated what political processes citizens use digital technologies for, further explorations on how these domains and behaviors interact with or relate to each other are still needed to match foreign theorizing on replication and differentiation effects (in contrast, see the syntheses by Sta. Maria & Diestro, 2009, and Sugang, 2006, of Filipino offline political repertoires). Moreover, turning to mobilization and reinforcement effects, it can be inferred that Filipinos use online platforms to

engage in both familiar and novel forms of participation, primarily through civic, electoral, and activist modes. However, most citizens are also at risk of being restricted to low-effort and uncommitted activities, which typically have limited sustained impact on offline politics (cf. Chayinska et al., 2021); those who are committed to high-effort activities tend to be participative already regardless of platform (e.g., Diaz et al., 2018; Pineda, 2022). As Ong and Cabañes (2011) contended, although digital technologies provide spaces for immersion in social issues through political awareness and discussion, these actions still need to be translated into impactful engagement through active forms of participation (for a discussion of slacktivism, see Lanuza, 2015).

Therefore, if the objective of digital democracy is to increase and strengthen the involvement of citizens in politics and democratic processes, then we must conduct more studies that can surface the dispositions, beliefs, and motivations that enable such participation. For example, local scholars have identified social media and news usage (Abbott et al., 2023; David et al., 2019), activeness in online social networking (Lee et al., 2016, 2017), political ideology and efficacy (Marcaida, 2020), and political knowledge and interest (Ladia & Panoa, 2023) as predictors of political involvement across platforms. By targeting these mechanisms through appropriate initiatives (e.g., citizenship training), we can mobilize Filipinos from initial representation in online political discourses to more consequential actions across online and offline spheres (cf. Gastardo-Conaco & Quiñones, 2015).

### The Decade of Destabilized Democracies

As evidenced by work in the third and current decade, international efforts to address factors destabilizing democracy converge on the individual- (foreign) and structural-level (local) dynamics of polarization, disinformation, and partisan fragmentation.

#### ***Foreign Trends: Polarization, Hyperpartisanship, and Disinformation***

In recent years, the internet has remained a significant influence—if not an overwhelming force—on politics and democracy (Freelon et al., 2020). Online platforms enable citizens to organize social movements that might not have the same amount of impact without them (e.g., the 2010 Arab Spring protests, 2012 *Black Lives Matter* movement, 2013 Philippine Million People March, 2014 Hong Kong Occupy Central protests, 2017 *#MeToo* movement, 2018 Yellow Vests protests in France). Meanwhile, the Philippines saw two faces of the internet during the COVID-19 pandemic: how online platforms can foster collective responses (e.g., community pantries) as well as amplify threats to democratic governance (e.g., rejection of evidence-based health protocols, red-tagging; Atienza et al., 2020).



At present, digital news sources are rapidly displacing traditional media (Chua et al., 2021), thus promoting information accessibility but with the potential of compromising citizens' political knowledge due to increasing demands for cognitive resources amid a deluge of information (Thorson et al., 2020). Similarly, hyperpartisan media and online polarization widened rifts in society as echo chambers reinforce ingroup beliefs while filtering out disagreeable digital content (Barberá et al., 2015; Colleoni et al., 2014; Shah et al., 2017). Digital platforms also provide citizens spaces to express dissent, call for accountability, and seek redress for grievances, but with a risk of excessive shaming and calling out, undermining constructive deliberation (Brady et al., 2020; Powell, 2015). Moreover, threats to privacy and freedom of expression are increasingly salient as more cases of surveillance and censorship are reported mainly in threatened democracies (Lonkila et al., 2021; Roberts, 2020). Furthermore, while disinformation has been a longstanding concern (Lewandowsky et al., 2017; Pennycook & Rand, 2021), the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated how severely information disorders and the disinfodemic can propagate (Posetti & Bontcheva, 2020). As Kozyreva et al. (2020) emphasized, these issues (particularly disinformation) are concerning because of their "resulting threat to the rationality and civility of public discourse—and ultimately to the very functioning of democratic societies" (p. 118), particularly of the deliberative and participatory kinds (McKay & Tenove, 2021).

### ***Local Directions: Citizen Empowerment and Multisectoral Approaches***

Addressing these circumstances, researchers across countries are actively developing interventions that could defend citizens against disinformation (van der Linden, 2022), help them seek and discuss information contrary to their stances (cross-cutting exposure; Feezell & Jones, 2019; Min & Wohn, 2018), and promote civil discourse against unrestrained moral outrage (Roos et al., 2020). Similarly, Filipino scholars are examining the effectiveness of fact-checking initiatives against false information (Chua & Soriano, 2020), as well as underscoring the importance of online moderation and community norms to decrease uncivil interactions (San Pascual, 2020) and threats against activists and opposition groups (Guillermo, 2021). Local research recognizes how citizens can actively frame news articles (Orias, 2018), shape the resulting discourses (Rodriguez et al., 2020), and consequently correct arising disinformation (Curato et al., 2021; Gliban, 2021; Suarez, 2022) through their involvement as bloggers, social media commenters, or citizen journalists.

Conversely, the continued exposure to and circulation of misinformation can decrease voting behaviors (Mendoza et al., 2024), increase polarization while decreasing the ability to distinguish true from false information (Deinla



et al., 2022), and ultimately weaken democratic participation and stability in the country (Arugay & Baquisal, 2022). Therefore, seeing how entrenched networked disinformation and influence operations are in Philippine politics, a more comprehensive range of targeted initiatives (e.g., digital literacy, platform regulation, investigative reporting) is needed to combat these structures (Ong et al., 2022).

Essentially, while the first two decades focused on general effects and antecedents underlying online–offline interfaces, the present decade invites researchers to situate their work and interventions within the social and political climates that affect political behaviors. As evidenced by work from other countries, structural conditions such as national levels of freedom of expression (Barnidge et al., 2018; for a comparison between the Philippines, Thailand, and Indonesia, see Iannone, 2022) and regime type (e.g., authoritarian vs. democratic state; Lonkila et al., 2021) are distal yet equally consequential determinants of both online and offline political activities. Therefore, local studies such as Ong and colleagues' (Ong & Cabañes, 2018, 2019; Ong et al., 2019, 2022) comparisons of political influence operations across Philippine election cycles from 2016 to 2022, Bunquin et al.'s (2022) analysis of shifting political communication practices during the 2022 elections, and others which look at disinformation networks through the lenses of labor and political economy (e.g., Cruz & De La Cruz, 2023; Ong & Tapsell, 2022) fill this niche, thus opening pathways for future studies with a similar scope.

Crucially, with democratic backsliding being a salient threat to societies worldwide (Waldner & Lust, 2018), it is worth anticipating what approaches (e.g., big data and corpus analysis on YouTube comments: Uyheng et al., 2021; Facebook posts: Mendoza et al., 2023; Google searches: Jetter & Molina, 2022) and applications (e.g., multisectoral responses to disinformation: Fallorina et al., 2023) Filipino researchers will contribute in parallel to foreign efforts.

### **Conclusion: Prospects for Philippine Digital Democracy**

Although each decade of research widened our understanding of the connections between digital technologies and politics, additional research and interventions are needed to usher in an inclusive digital democracy for the Philippines. As the discussion presented, we have made initial progress in response to prevailing circumstances within each decade.

The first decade began exploring the interfaces between online and offline political spheres despite the digital and democratic barriers that divide citizens. In response, Filipino researchers emphasized the need to improve the country's technological infrastructures (e.g., in rural and geographically isolated areas)

and citizens' digital literacy, thus addressing access and ability limitations that prevent equitable representation in online political spaces (Roberts & Hernandez, 2019; Sy, 2002).

Meanwhile, the second decade represented cautious hopes that online platforms can serve as democratic spaces for society-wide political participation. This was demonstrated through research on what citizen and government activities are fostered by digital technologies and what factors enhance their effectiveness. While local studies have established the utility of digital technologies for political communication, civic and electoral participation, and social movements, the democratic impact of these platforms can still be improved. These include their use for efficient public communication (e.g., during calamities; Congjuico, 2014, 2017), accountability-seeking by connecting citizens to officials (Ortuoste, 2015), e-governance (e.g., online government services, citizen participation in lawmaking and budgeting; Alami et al., 2022; Alampay, 2002), and citizen collaboration and collective action (Cox, 2021).

Finally, the third decade underscores how digital technologies can bolster democratic resilience and upheaval. In this regard, foreign work on individual-focused disinformation initiatives (e.g., debunking, prebunking) is complemented by local efforts that revisit academic, journalistic, and interventional practices (Bunquin et al., 2022; Fallorina et al., 2023) to account for the political influence operations and hyperpartisan media ecologies where information and communication are situated.

To complement these achievements and directions, Philippine digital politics research can benefit from three recommendations related to methodology and research practices, as evident in foreign studies. First, our understanding of Filipinos' political behaviors online is advanced significantly through the variety of methods we employ across both quantitative (e.g., regression analysis: Ladia & Pano, 2023) and qualitative approaches (e.g., focus group discussions: Agojo et al., 2023). Focusing on quantitative-leaning studies, digital political influences (e.g., mobilization/reinforcement effects) have been established and replicated in foreign research through longitudinal methods (e.g., multiple-wave large-sample panel surveys; Chayinska et al., 2021; Lorenz-Spreen et al., 2023). As such, local studies using similar research designs (in contrast to the current practice of cross-sectional medium-sample surveys) are needed before we can decisively evaluate how well these trends apply to Filipinos.

Second, local work is responsive to globally shared technological and political contexts. Still, the pace of our research production is trailing behind our foreign counterparts (e.g., theorizing on the mechanisms underlying digital effects on politics). It can be observed that some of the foreign studies cited above came

from researchers affiliated with standing research collaborations (e.g., Boulianne & Theocharis, 2020) or were conducted regularly in time for consequential political events (e.g., electoral panel surveys: Gibson & Cantijoch, 2013). We can already find local models for similar research arrangements (e.g., Bunquin et al., 2022; Ong et al., 2022), so a turn toward such practices can foster advancements in timely and programmatic knowledge generation and synthesis for the country (e.g., theoretical reviews, longitudinal studies, meta-analyses).

It is also notable that local research efforts have largely been in parallel to (and at times, independent of) work in other countries, with initial efforts to engage in global conversations in progress. On the one hand, the divergence in local and foreign research agendas must be reckoned concerning the Philippines' unique technological, cultural, and political circumstances. For instance, local studies which investigated the persistent digital divides in online engagement (Alampay, 2006; Portus, 2015) and e-government service availability (Alampay, 2002; Rye, 2002), the variety of unique social issues for which such participation is deployed (e.g., women and gender issues: Baker, 2018; Soriano, 2014), and the development of disinformation interventions mindful of current political-economic processes (e.g., Ong & Cabañes, 2019) attest to how research in the Philippines needs to prioritize more urgent local concerns. On the other hand, much can be gained when Filipino digital politics becomes more attuned to global research trajectories because of what we can learn from (e.g., comprehensive models of political behavior) and contribute to (e.g., disinformation and influence operations) international work in the field. Current local efforts which develop frameworks to address digital and democratic inequalities (e.g., Roberts & Hernandez, 2019; cf. van Dijk, 2006), integrate various forms of political participation (e.g., Marcaida, 2020; cf. Theocharis, 2015), and synchronize individual and institutional approaches to influence operations (e.g., Fallorina et al., 2023; cf. Shah et al., 2017) demonstrate initial forays in this direction.

Furthermore, the constraints that prevent Filipino researchers from engaging in large-scale and highly time-sensitive research (as recommended in the first and second points above) should be viewed within the economic prerequisites of the research enterprise. In other words, the recommendations above will become more readily adopted when financial and human resources for research become more accessible (Bernardo, 1997) and when researchers across regions of the country (e.g., those who publish research in English versus underrepresented local languages; Ong & Ochoa, 2022) and from the Global North and South (including the Philippines) are given equal space to contribute to knowledge production on digital politics (Amano et al., 2023; Silan et al., 2021).

Third, the field of digital politics naturally draws from various fields, given the scope of research questions and applications it encompasses. However, local researchers across disciplines have mainly worked independently of each other. Given the centrality of digital divides, citizen disengagement, and disinformation as threats to Philippine democracy, multidisciplinary and multisectoral approaches are required to match the scope of problems being resolved (Ong et al., 2022). As we have seen in the third decade, these collaborations are possible and now necessary to integrate individual- and structural-level approaches to digital politics.

Amid the multitude of questions we have left to answer, it is evident that we are no longer asking whether the internet has any impact on politics but why it has the influence that it does—and how it can be leveraged to support Philippine democracy.

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