Speech

The Shape of Harm

(Keynote Delivered at the Philippines Communication Society Annual Conference on Misinformation and Media Manipulation on 18 March 2019 at the Philippine Information Agency Auditorium)

John S. Nery
Philippine Daily Inquirer and the Consortium on Democracy and Disinformation

We meet a mere three days after the horrifying attacks on the mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand—the shock has not yet worn off, the depth of human suffering has yet to be fully plumbed.

What seems clear now is that the world has just experienced what we can call an act of perlocutionary terrorism. Borrowing from the philosopher J. L. Austin, a perlocutionary act is classified by the "… consequential effects upon the feelings, thoughts, or actions of the audience, or of the speaker, or of other persons …"

Austin was classifying speech acts, or more specifically what he called effects of speech, but I am not the first person to say nor will I be the last one to claim that terrorism is also a statement: It is violence as political or ideological statement.

What makes the attacks in New Zealand even more repulsive is that, at least one, the attack on the first mosque, was designed and executed as a made-for-media spectacle. As the Washington Post tech reporter Drew Harwell tweeted: "The New Zealand massacre was livestreamed on Facebook, announced on 8chan, reposted on YouTube, commentated about on Reddit, and mirrored around the world before the tech companies could even react."

The violence was meant to have consequential effects upon the feelings, thoughts, or actions of a specific audience scattered across the world: white supremacists, both full-fledged or incipient. It was meant to persuade them, to move them to action. It was, chillingly, meant to inspire imitation. The statement was crafted to be shared and retold. In that sense, it was perlocutionary terrorism.

I hope I will not be misunderstood. When I focus on the aspect of this statement. I do not mean to minimize the human suffering inflicted on the Christchurch victims, or to deny the horror of the violence, or to diminish the responsibility, the savagery, of the mass murderers. (The considerations would be the same, if we were to discuss, for instance, the bombing of the Jolo cathedral only last January, which killed 23 persons and wounded 95.)

But the theme of this year's annual conference of the Philippines Communication Society is media manipulation. Among other consequences, the massacre in New Zealand has updated the textbook example of how, exactly, the media can be manipulated.

Taylor Lorenz, who covers technology for the Atlantic, parsed "the violent rhetoric" just hours after the massacre. "Early Friday, a number of unverified social-media posts surfaced, along with a bizarre manifesto posted to 8chan, rich with irony and references to memes. Together, the posts suggest that every aspect of the shootings was designed to gain maximum attention online, in part by baiting the media."

She identifies different sorts of bait.

1. "The shooter live-streamed the attack itself on Facebook, and the video was quickly shared across YouTube, Twitter, and Instagram."
2. "Before committing the act, he shouted, 'Remember, lads, subscribe to PewDiePie,' a reference to Felix Kjellberg, who runs YouTube's most subscribed-to channel." (Lorenz also notes: "By forcing Kjellberg to acknowledge the attack, the shooter succeeded in further spreading the word about the crime to Kjellberg's tens of millions of followers.")
3. "Significant portions of the manifesto appear to be an elaborate troll, written to prey on the mainstream media's worst tendencies." (Lorenz provides examples, including this: "He claims that Spyro: Year of the Dragon, a video game, taught him ethno-nationalism and that Fortnite taught him to "floss on the corpses," referring to a viral dance move from the

game. These absurd references are meant to troll readers."

4. "The shooter also credits the far-right personality Candace Owens with helping to 'push me further and further into the belief of violence over meekness.'" (Lorenz notes: "this reference might be meant to incite Owens's critics to blame her.")

Unfortunately, many took the bait.

Elias Groll of "Foreign Policy" made a quick list: "In the hours following the shooting, the global media has broadcast this material far and wide. The British tabloid the Sun posted excerpts of the shooter's video on its homepage, and the Daily Mail provided its readers with a link to download the manifesto. The US cable outlet MSNBC displayed the manifesto prominently on air and quoted from it."

Even more terrifying: Facebook announced on Twitter on Saturday that in the first 24 hours after the massacre, it had removed 1.5 million videos of the attack, including 1.2 million "blocked at upload."

Talk about scale. That means some 300,000 videos of the attack were successfully uploaded to Facebook and seen and shared, before they were removed. That's an extraordinary number of social media fish, biting on deliberately poisoned bait.

Two months before the New Zealand massacre, and about two weeks before the twin bombings in Jolo, I was assigned the following topic: "Misinformation and Media Manipulation."

It is important that all of us who have a stake in the matter agree on a common language. I will use the building-block definitions offered by Claire Warble and Hossein Derakhshan in their work "Information Disorder"–in part because they are the result of a lengthy and rigorous process of research and revision and reasoning, and in part because the definitions make intuitive sense. Thus:

1. "Mis-information is when false information is shared, but no harm is meant."

2. "Dis-information is when false information is knowingly shared to cause harm."
3. "Mal-information is when genuine information is shared to cause harm, often by moving information designed to stay private into the public sphere."

I must apologize, then, for breaking the alliterative order of the topic assigned to me, "Misinformation and Media Manipulation," because we are not so much concerned with misinformation but, rather, with disinformation and mal-information. That is, our focus is on the harmful use of information to shape stories in the media. Our real topic, in other words, is "Disinformation and Mal-information in Media Manipulation."

There are several ways to define media manipulation. The Data and Society Research Institute has done pioneering and influential work studying the problem; its Media Manipulation Initiative is based on a definition that is both expansive and limited: the use of "the participatory culture of the internet to turn the strengths of a free society into vulnerabilities, ultimately threatening expressive freedoms and civil rights."

More:

"From social movements, to political parties, governments, dissidents, and corporations, many groups engage in active efforts to shape media narratives. Media manipulation tactics include: planting and/or amplifying misinformation and disinformation using humans (troll armies, doxxing, and bounties) or digital tools (bots); targeting journalists or public figures for social engineering (psychological manipulation); gaming trending and ranking algorithms, and coordinating action across multiple user accounts to force topics, keywords, or questions into the public conversation. Because the internet is a tool, a tactic, and a territory—integral to challenging the relations of power—studying the new vulnerabilities of networked media is fundamental to the future of democracies."

As I said, both expansive and limited. Media manipulation is understood as a hijacking of media narratives to undermine democracy itself. But this understanding is limited to the "participatory culture of the internet."

I can understand why this focus is necessary. But, especially in the Philippine context, it is insufficient. We must define media manipulation as involving not only digital and social media, but what we call, quite quaintly, traditional media.

We should do this for at least two reasons.

First, the Philippines is not in fact a "Facebook nation." Or, rather, it is not yet one. Instead, it is, from a media perspective, two nations.

The latest We Are Social report, released in January 2019, estimates that some 76 million people in the Philippines are connected to the Internet; that's a 70-percent internet penetration rate. Impressive, but consider the number who are NOT internet-connected. The estimate is at least 30 million people—that's equivalent to the total population of New Zealand AND Australia, combined.

To focus only on the manipulation of digital and social media in the Philippines is to ignore the impact of other media, especially TV and radio, on a large number of Filipinos.

The We Are Social reports for 2016 and 2017 show a large jump in the number of the internet-connected in the Philippines. They allow us to make an estimate of the number of the internet-connected, and thus of the size of the social media audience, at the time of the May 2016 elections. From 48 million social media users in January 2016, the total jumped to 60 million in January 2017. If we were to make the reasonable assumption that the increase in the number, 12 million, was evenly placed throughout the year, then in May 2016 the number of social media users in the Philippines would have been around 52 million.

It would NOT be a reasonable assumption to think that all 52 million turned out to vote. In the first place, a large number of the internet-connected population in the Philippines, around 8 million, are youth below voting age. Secondly, a considerable number of those voters without an internet connection must have voted too. If the same ratio was reflected in the voter turnout, then some 48 percent of the 45 million voters who went to cast their ballots, or over 21 million, were not internet-connected.

The point of all this: I do not think that Rodrigo Duterte won the presidency in 2016 because of social media. The numbers do not add up. I do not mean to suggest that his strong social media game did not help him; it did. It must have. But not to the extent that his social media influencers claimed immediately after his victory. That claim, to borrow a term his influencers made familiar, is "bias."

(If you were to ask me to choose the most important media-related factor for his victory, I would say it was the three official debates, and his performance in them. But I was involved in the planning and production of these debates; without verification, my view may only and also be "bias.")

Second reason: The Philippines is a postcolonial country—and indeed in some aspects it is not as "post" as it ought to be. But our colonial experience—famously summed up by Nick Joaquin as three hundred years in a Spanish convent and 50 years in Hollywood, to which we can add three years in a Japanese concentration camp—was enabled in part through older forms of media manipulation.

All colonial experience is. In our case, there are very many examples to choose from.

Let me animate this discussion with visual proof. I will highlight a few cartoons from an extraordinary book, "Cartoons of the Spanish-American War," that was published in January 1899—a month after the Treaty of Paris was signed, with Spain ceding the Philippines to the United States, and a month before American soldiers in the Philippines found a pretext to start the Philippine-American War.

These cartoons were drawn by "Bart," or Charles Lewis Bartholomew, for the Minneapolis Journal. And it was the Journal that compiled and published the cartoons in book form.

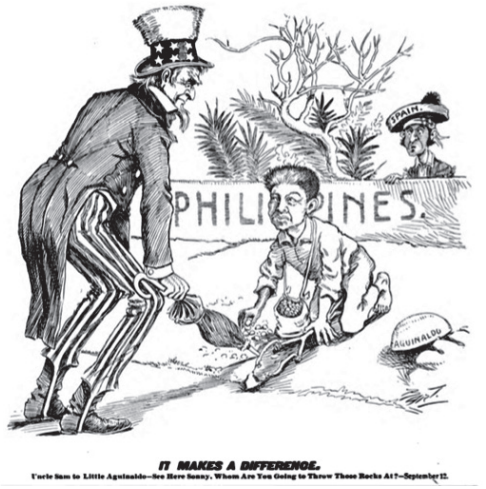
The first one strikes a characteristic note: The Philippines, like Cuba and Hawaii (and in other cartoons, Puerto Rico), are little savages—here depicted, a couple of months after George Dewey demolished the ancient Spanish fleet in a stage-managed battle, as looking forward to the American Independence Day. The message is clear: These territories are peopled by uncivilized and infantile tribes; they need American guidance.

Screen Shot 2019-03-17 at 7.46.01 AM.png

The second cartoon shows the adult United States looking down on the "poor little Philippine savage," while Cuba and "Porto Rico" are now little children wearing grown-up clothes.

Screen Shot 2019-03-17 at 7.47.29 AM.png

The third, published three months before the Treaty of Paris is signed, and at a time when the US and the Philippine government under Emilio Aguinaldo are still nominally allies, reflects the American "fear" that Aguinaldo was gathering arms not only to continue fighting Spain but perhaps eventually the United States too. Note the hierarchical relationship: a kneeling Aguinaldo, the term "Little Aguinaldo," and Uncle Sam's condescending line "See here, Sonny …"



Screen Shot 2019-03-17 at 7.49.31 AM.png

The last cartoon shows the other side of the media manipulation: The narrative does not dwell on the smallness and the savagery of colonizable peoples; instead, it connects American colonial ambitions with its own war of independence in 1776 against the British and the convulsions of the American Civil War., starting in 1861.

Screen Shot 2019-03-17 at 7.45.01 AM.png

What do these cartoons tell us? That the American press in the late 19th century and the early 20th subscribed to the views of or were manipulated by government publicists and the propagandists of American expansion. That even today the Americans call the Philippine-American War a mere insurrection or insurgency shows that the effects of media manipulation can last a long time.

We can hear the eerie echo of the Spanish-American War and then the Philippine-American War in the manipulation of American and British media in the run-up to the invasion of Iraq in 2003. But let's not dwell on that.

Closer to home, we have our own examples, our own experience, of media manipulation. Let us zero in on just one: President Duterte's so-called narcolists. As even the police have had to admit, these narcolists cannot form the basis of criminal charges. To date, only administrative cases have been filed—and even those may not be able to meet the

much lower threshold of proof required in administrative proceedings. As it has done before, the Duterte administration has illegally shifted the burden of proof from the government to the hazily, lazily, haphazardly accused.

It is clear that the narcolists have a symbolic role—they are a statement, designed to reinforce the administration's overarching narrative about the so-called war on drugs.

What can the Philippine media do to blunt the harm that the narcolists cause, to both journalism and democratic institutions? Three principles for action: restraint, restraint, restraint.

The Data and Society Research Institute has a useful metaphor we can use as a cautionary reminder: the oxygen of amplification. Attempts at media manipulation are fires which feed on the oxygen of amplification which traditional media and digital and social media often unwittingly provide.

The Institute also warns us that "violent antagonisms [are] inherently contagious." The potential for so-called copycats, or in the case of the narcolists, of policemen and vigilantes reading them as license to kill, is high.

Not least, much of the insidious power of media manipulation lies in the graphic images or suggestive text that are designed precisely to circulate. In the case of the narcolists, the mere naming of the alleged accused or the posterizing of their images already creates real harm.

For these and other reasons, it is the responsibility of the media, and of the citizens who also now perform their own gatekeeping role, to guard the gates zealously, to remind each other about the harmful shaping that media manipulation makes possible, and to always be on the lookout for anything that might assume the shape of harm.

About the Contributor

John S. Nery is a journalist. He is a columnist of the Philippine Daily Inquirer and a convenor of the Consortium on Democracy and Disinformation. (Correspondence: jnery@inquirer.com.ph)