

Democratic Defense Against Disinformation: Sustaining Efforts After the 2022 Elections

Speech of Butch Abad

I remember a New York Times article in the run up to the May 2022 presidential elections describing the Philippines as a "Nourishing ecosystem for political lies". It further said that The Philippines was once described by a Facebook executive as "patient zero" in the global disinformation epidemic. And prior to this, I'm sure you remember the whistleblower, Chris Wylie, who exposed the Philippines as Cambridge Analytica's petri dish for interfering in and manipulating election processes in other countries. The fact that the country has earned such notoriety indicates that the problem of disinformation is not new; in fact, it may be firmly in place in our digital ecosystem, undermining our politics and pretty soon the other aspects of our lives.

Our failure to stem this problem early on has led to what UP fact-checker Tsek.Ph described as the "relentless and widening stream of falsehoods spewed out in multiple platforms and formats" in the May 2022 elections that was "unprecedented in Philippine history". "It closely resembled", Tsek.Ph went on, "what US-based think-tank Rand Corp calls the 'firehose of falsehood' strategy that is marked by high numbers of channels and messages and a shameless willingness to disseminate partial truths or outright fictions". It was indeed a heavy price to pay. If we allow this disinformation contagion to fester and spread further, the damage will not stop there.

Disinformation can undermine our democracy in so many other ways. As we saw in the recent elections, it can erode the concept of informed choice, which lies at the heart of credible elections, as voters are fed incorrect information mixed with false narratives and conspiracies. It can also hurt, as again we are seeing in the aftermath of the elections electoral legitimacy as the results and their fairness are questioned. As we shockingly observed in the recent US midterm elections, disinformation can polarize societies and distort public debates. Executive actions, legislation, appointments and foreign policy are all viewed through vastly contrasting perspectives with no clear referee of facts and evidence. The dire consequences: truth becomes subjective instead of fact-based, legitimacy is undermined and accountability difficult to exact.

Disinformation can be manipulated as an effective vehicle for both domestic and foreign anti-democratic actors to spread harmful narratives that exacerbate pre-existing social division and drive individuals to what are called counter-factual communities (or online communities of tens of thousands who produce content that not only tells you you are right but also builds a web of pseudo-knowledge that you can draw from to defend your belief no matter how misplaced or erroneous they are) or towards undemocratic alternatives, such as authoritarian populist movements or extremist organizations. Finally, it can undermine national security and effectively weaken one's country's foreign policy goals and partnership, as well as, promoting hostile adversaries. This is especially true in the tense geo-political situation we find ourselves in.

How should democracies respond to this multi-layered and rapidly evolving disinformation ecosystem that is particularly challenging to deal with?

In the near term, government, as it is being done in Europe and the US, can, in a limited way, establish task forces to monitor disinformation attacks, track false narratives and inform the public and policymakers. The objective is to coordinate activities to fight disinformation, alert policymakers and, as needed, liaise with social media and the media. Together with policymakers, government can also adopt legislative and regulatory tools to induce more transparency and accountability in the digital domain.

But what happens if government does not act or, as in our present predicament, is itself suspect? The private sector, multilateral agencies and academic institutions can work together to support civil society groups and media, such as Tsek.Ph, Vera Files and Rappler, who, through fact-checking, expose malicious activities and inform government and social media companies. In addition to fact-checkers, funding and technical support can also be extended to truth-seeking communities who emerge around specific issues, such as EJKs, ill-gotten wealth, martial law. They are groups of internet users heavily engaged in informing themselves with particular issues while guarding against manipulation by others, or being misled by their own preconceptions.

On top of supporting the growth of crowds of investigators who help build resilience against disinformation, support for a broader approach that help society develop the capacity to actively contribute to efforts towards transparency and accountability is also critical. Social media companies, for example, should be made responsible for preventing and getting ahead of malicious manipulation of their platforms. One initiative along this line is the digital media literacy programs that enable young people to engage positively with issues they face and then moving into online investigation. The program does not only empower them but gives them skills they can use throughout their lives.

The goal of all these efforts and initiatives is to enable a plurality of independent voices to unleash a "firehose of truth" to counteract the falsehoods propagated by malicious groups.

Over the long term, the challenge that lies ahead is even more difficult and complex. Due to the limited time, I can only stress that we must make our democracy_its institutions and processes more real and meaningful to our people. Serious inequities in the distribution of wealth and power, poverty and exclusion provide fertile ground for resentment and desperation. This condition in turn makes the poor and marginalized groups and communities extremely vulnerable to agitation and manipulation by extremist groups and purveyors of disinformation and false narratives.

Thank you.