

This is the preprint version. Please cite the published article:

Soriano, C. R. R., & Gaw, M. F. (2022). Broadcasting anti-media populism in the Philippines: YouTube influencers, networked political brokerage, and implications for governance. *Policy & Internet*, 1– 17. <https://doi.org/10.1002/poi3.322>

Broadcasting anti-media populism in the Philippines: YouTube influencers, networked political brokerage, and implications for governance

Abstract

This article interrogates platform governance and accountability amid the growing role of influencers in constructing political discourses, and particularly, in the intermediation of anti-media ideological frames through their embeddedness in networked assemblages. We deploy the concept of ‘networked political brokerage’ to examine the socio-technical relations among influencers, the platform, and its users, and how this dynamic assemblage engages in the intermediation of anti-media populism. The study draws from a critical examination of the network and discursive tactics deployed by Filipino YouTube influencers who advance partisan political commentary and deceptive narratives to delegitimize mainstream media institutions through issue network analysis concerning the franchise denial and eventual shutdown of the Philippines’ oldest media network, ABS-CBN. We problematize how influencers engage platform affordances and cultures of use to enable, amplify, and fortify the brokering of their political agenda within a larger network of political actors, while eliding accountability. Through the mutually affirming relationship of content creators and the platform, networked hyper-politicized contents gain visibility and galvanize anti-media rhetoric. Ultimately, the article raises concerns on the social consequences of networked political brokerage and offers a framework for how governance and policy discussions can treat the functioning of such networked political influence.

Keywords: influencer, YouTube, anti-media populism, networked brokerage, governance, regulation

In digital participatory cultures, influencers become the icons of the ordinary person gaining an expressive voice, challenging traditional and institutional sources of information and knowledge (Burgess & Green, 2018; Abidin, 2017). Influencers who thrive on social media platforms have traditionally been studied in the context of lifestyle and entertainment, yet the

analyses of their role in advancing political discourses is also gaining traction (Laaksonen, Pantti & Titley, 2020; Lewis, 2018, 2020; Abidin, 2019, 2020). Influencers' ordinariness and relatability attract audiences by offering political wisdom from lived experience and political opinion from the masses. In this vein, they take advantage of the media ecosystem to set agendas, propagate ideas, and even influence news frames.

Alongside the rise of social media influencers is the global growth of 'anti-media populism' (Krämer, 2018). Discourses that express hostility towards the media coincide with the global movement of right-wing populism that deems media institutions as representatives of the elite (Krämer, 2018; Schultz, Wirth & Muller, 2018). Media hostility is articulated through a discursive repertoire aimed at undermining the claims to accuracy, neutrality, and ethics that underpin professional journalism's identity and legitimacy. This growing anti-media rhetoric has been observed in multiple countries and regions, including Asia (Bhat & Kalyani, 2020), the United States (Marwick & Lewis, 2017), and Europe (Schultz et al., 2018). In the Philippines, the non-renewal of the broadcasting franchise of ABS-CBN, the oldest and largest media broadcast network in the country, is a culmination of the recurring attacks towards media organizations and the intimidation of journalists through legal circumvention, direct threats, and defamatory interlocution.

This article interrogates platform governance and accountability underlying the growing role of influencers in constructing political discourses, and particularly, in the intermediation of anti-media ideological frames in democracies through their embeddedness in networked assemblages. It is situated in the midst of the dialectical tension between, on the one hand, revitalizing civic engagement and broadening the democratic communicative space (Thorson et al., 2013) and on the other hand, their contribution to political dis/misinformation (Lewis, 2020),

promoting media-hostile rhetoric (Marwick & Lewis, 2018), and mainstreaming harassment, extremism, and hyper-partisan discourse (Lewis, Marwick & Partin, 2021). Much of the extant literature on influencers and micro-celebrities examines them as individual units of analysis who perform along the logics of visibility, branding, or community building (Abidin, 2017; Raun, 2018). How they are emplaced in the dynamics of networked political processes that allow them to shape social and political discourses in more dynamic ways has been the focus of recent research and remains to be fully understood (Abidin, 2021; Laaksonen et al., 2020; Lewis, 2020; Marwick & Lewis, 2018).

Our piece contributes to this special issue by attending to the role of influencers in networked political spheres and their consequences for democracies, reflecting on the complex governance questions this dynamic surfaces. Engaging the concept of ‘networked political brokerage’ (Soriano & Gaw, 2022), we draw from a critical examination of the tactics deployed by selected Filipino YouTubers who advance partisan political commentary, deceptive narratives, and defamatory interlocation to advance hostile rhetoric towards media institutions. Using network analysis and discourse analysis to analyze the issue network of the ABS-CBN shutdown, we problematize how influencers engage platform affordances and cultures of use to enable, amplify, and fortify the brokering of their political agenda within a larger network of political actors, while eliding accountability. Through the mutually affirming relationship of content creators and the platform, we will show how networked hyper-politicized content gains visibility and galvanizes anti-media rhetoric.

Scholarly analysis of the problematics of networked political influence tend to be situated in mature Western democracies (e.g., Marwick & Lewis, 2017; Lewis, 2021; Cabanes, 2020). Considered “Southeast Asia’s oldest democracy” (Teehankee & Calimbahin, 2020), the

Philippines is an interesting case because of the growing role of influencers and alternative influence networks inserting themselves as alternatives to mainstream media (Cabaner, 2020). We also focus on YouTube not only because it is the most popular social network used in the Philippines (We are Social, 2020) but also due to its unique affordances that normalized the construction of “epistemic communities” (Utz & Wolfers, 2019) influential in shaping political knowledge.

Ultimately, the article raises concerns on the social consequences of political brokerage stirred by YouTube’s complicity and its inadequate regulatory mechanisms that shape and allow the transgressive ways influencers circumvent moderation. More broadly, this project helps interrogate the quandary about public accountability arising from the capacity of influencers and social media platforms to construct and curate political discourses that have long-term implications for democratic spaces and institutions. It offers a framework for how governance and regulatory discussions should regard influencers as central actors within such networked political spheres that cut across normative boundaries of digital platforms, internet cultures and media systems.

Social media influencers and networked brokerage on YouTube

Introduced as a platform that allows ‘ordinary individuals’ to broadcast themselves and demonstrate ways of cultural and personal expression (Burgess & Green, 2018), YouTube became the television where people can create their own ‘channels’ and attract ‘subscribers’. This quickly birthed ‘influencers’ (Abidin, 2015) who amassed significant viewership and following on the platform that also simultaneously facilitated the growth and diversity of content from the personal to the political, and to the complex intersections of both. Through influencers,

YouTube is increasingly a political sphere that blends propaganda and political persuasion, celebrity culture, and local political cultures through political actors and their intermediaries.

There are two relevant clusters of literature relevant to the interrogation of influencers' role in political interlocution: influencer-focused and platform focused research. Influencer-focused research unpacks the nature, discourses, and discursive styles that they advance to obtain following and traction. This includes how influencers build their own networks of followers by using branding, creative audio-visual modalities, and community building strategies while displaying authenticity and accessibility (Abidin, 2017, 2019; Raun, 2018; Lewis, 2020). Influencer-focused approaches, however, may render conversations about policy and regulation onerous because self-presentation, aspirational labor, and relationship-building techniques are perceived as self-directed and neutral aspirations in the creative media economy.

There is also a growing range of platform-focused research that examines the governance logics, affordances, and mechanisms of platforms that drive political discourse, including shaping new forms of influence (Lewis et al., 2021; Laaksonen et al., 2020). YouTube has several embedded features to facilitate varying scales of media presence and social interaction such as its 'regimes of visibility' (Bucher, 2018), 'ranking cultures' (Rieder, Matamoros-Fernández, & Coromina, 2018), and mechanisms for interaction (Khan & Vong, 2014). Importantly, YouTube's 'cultural logics' encourages 'social learning' where various forms of serious content, including those that are politically inclined, become entangled with entertainment styles of presentation that make them palatable (Lobato, 2016, p. 357). YouTube's architecture and algorithms also facilitate the networked connection of content creators as well as among subscribers, viewers, and visitors (Khan & Vong, 2014; Burgess & Green, 2018; Lewis, 2021). Extant research has also pointed out how YouTube appears to privilege native content

over mainstream media that in turn rewards content creators who stir up controversy with significant visibility (Laaksonen, et al., 2018; Rieder, et.al., 2018).

Earlier work on ‘networked political brokerage’ characterized the mutually affirming relationship between YouTube’s governance mechanisms and ‘alternative political influencers’ practices in building political narratives through and within a network of algorithmically-sanctioned videos (Soriano & Gaw, 2022; Laaksonen, et al., 2020; Raun, 2018). While investigating the content, branding, and engagement strategies of influencers on the platform is crucial, this body of research highlights YouTube’s political role and its implications to public discourse through an analysis of the networked relationships afforded by the platform. In this paper, we draw from this concept of networked political brokerage to understand the mutually affirming roles of influencers and the platform within a socio-technical process of constructing and advancing anti-media populism on YouTube.

Populism’s anti-media discourse

Amid the growing body of research theorizing populism throughout the world is the rise of theoretical and empirical works characterizing the nature of and the techno-social infrastructures that support anti-media populism (Krämer, 2018; Schultz et al., 2018). One common strand in the analysis of populism denotes its emphasis of the binary between elites and ordinary people, stemming from decades of exclusion (Bhat & Kalyani, 2020; Baldwin-Philippi, 2019; Gerbaudo, 2018) whether by virtue of state politics or global capitalist regimes that cascade into local institutional infrastructures. Anti-media populism discourses across the globe are increasingly shared and amplified on social media using the same schema of elite versus the people, not only by politicians but by influencers. By regarding media as part of the overall ruling group and system that is unable to represent the people’s will, anti-media populism

expresses the belief that the “totality of the mainstream media intentionally conceals events” and “suppresses common sense opinions that deviate from those of the elite and that are not ‘politically correct’” (Krämer, 2018, p. 11-12). A discursive condemnation of “political correctness” that hides “truthful discourse” corresponds to a hostility against cultural elites, including mainstream media institutions that are maintained by an educated middle class of gatekeepers upholding the “professionalism of journalism” (Krämer, 2018).

Central to populism’s vision of “the people in the center” are notions of authenticity and amateurism (Baldwin-Philippi, 2019, p. 378). This implies not only the kind of claims-making that speaks for the interest of the people, but also by “speaking as the people” with the rawness and ordinariness of their interlocution (Gerbaudo, 2018). This establishes the connection of the rise of influencers to anti-media populism. While some influencers speak for the establishment, influencers can also serve as spokespersons of the critique of established structures and values of dominant culture. Social media platforms emphasize the same, with YouTube romanticizing ‘broadcast yourself’ and reinstating its agenda of empowering the ordinary person as a legitimate political interlocutor (Burgess & Green, 2018; Soriano & Gaw, 2022). Baldwin-Philippi (2019) argued that studying technological performance in populism necessitates investigating this interaction of technological and human agency in the construction of anti-media populist discourses.

Anti-media populism may be construed as a consequence of media institutions’ failure to represent themselves as legitimate bastions of democracy and representatives of the concerns of ordinary masses. Indeed, the anti-media populist impulse represents unmet political and representational aspirations in a democracy. However, as Govil and Baisha (2018) argue, populist technoculture inaugurates a new form of coding politics where attempts to mobilize

resentment towards the elite can “operate under the aegis of a single autocratic figurehead” (p. 69). In this study, we will show that anti-media populism that is crystallized by influencers through networked political brokerage advances content as “speaking for the people” in its criticism of elite media, but it can also act to reinforce the interests of the populist state. As the affordances of social media transform the autocrat into the everyman, or “every influencer” for that matter, the fantasy of participatory culture can shield influencers—as political brokers—from their role of linking “the masses” with political elites.

Governance and regulation of platforms and influencers

It is crucial to interrogate the governance and regulatory implications of this mutually interacting relationship between platforms and influencers in shaping political discourse, and particularly, in promoting anti-media populism. Gorwa (2019b, p.2) outlines platform governance as a concept that pertains to the systems of rules and norms created through layers of relationships that structure “interactions between key parties in today’s platform society.” These relationships can also create “conditions for ordered rule and collective action” that facilitate cooperation to prevent abuses (Gorwa, 2019b, p 3). Platforms engage in governance (i.e., governance by platforms) as they create parameters for the production, distribution, and consumption of content that mediate sociality (Gillespie, 2010; Bucher, 2018) through its governance architecture, algorithmic management, and content moderation policies. Yet they can also be governed by external actors (i.e., governance of platforms) such as the state, supranational entities, and civil society (Gorwa, 2019b, 2019a). Platforms can self-regulate inasmuch as they can also be regulated by external bodies through the use of specific laws and policies that involve sanctions attached to the breaking of those policies (Flew, 2021).

The platform governance triangle framework (Gorwa, 2019a, p.1) highlights the “inter-actor relationships of power and coercion” that are needed to push for platform accountability amid the complex assemblage of human and non-human actors and digital objects involved in platform operations. These involve a mixture of approaches that include possibilities for self-reflection and self-regulation by platforms, formal state or supranational regulation, informal governance mechanisms by civil society actors (Flew, 2021; Gorwa, 2019a, 2019b) to exert pressure upon platforms and influencers to act on the democratic consequences of unchecked political influence. Co-governance mechanisms involving the cooperation and bargaining, as well as modes of contestation, between or across stakeholders in this triangle have also been identified to address the limits of single actor regulation (Gorwa, 2019, Flew, 2021).

In the Philippines, a Broadcast Code of Ethics has been instituted as a form of self-governance by the association of broadcasters to promote professional and ethical standards in the industry. It recognizes broadcasting’s immediate and lasting impact on the public and public opinion, nudging broadcast networks and broadcasters to uphold “respect for the rights and sensitivities of all people,” “promote national unity,” and preserve the honor and the sanctity of institutions (KBP, 2011). Developed prior to the rise of social media and influencers that attained the capacity to “broadcast” to wide audiences, there is a quandary on the applicability of such broadcasting code of ethics to social media influencers and how the code takes into account the impact of unethical coordinated and networked action of multiple actors within platforms. We respond to the ambiguity of the governance implications of influencers engaging in malicious interlocation and of platforms facilitating the consequent anti-media discourse through our empirical study.

Methodology

Influencers are entangled in networks in many ways: through their content collaborations with other influencers (Lewis, 2018), through their algorithmic linkages formed by their shared political agenda (Laaksonen et al., 2020), or through algorithmic recommendations based on topics they cover (Soriano & Gaw, 2022). Our empirical investigation in this paper locates influencers as actors in algorithmically-sanctioned *issue networks*, where we analyze their points of contestation, engagement with other actors, and the bases of the controversy (Marres, 2015). Unlike topic networks where influencers' goal is to dominate the subject field, issue networks focus on how they embed themselves into the network of political interlocutors and how they assert their arguments to position them as formidable sources of political opinion, notwithstanding their stature as outsiders to elite political and media establishments.

We chose the ABS-CBN network franchise denial in the Philippines as our empirical case as it coincides with the tensions between anti-media populism and influencer culture. Although we focus on ABS-CBN, this issue is situated within the fraught relationship between the populist President Rodrigo Duterte and the media. His administration regularly assaults the press by “filing of spurious lawsuits”, unjustly penalizing them with regulatory violations, and Duterte himself regularly using abusive language to “de-legitimize” and “ridicule their claims to a moral high ground” (Coronel, 2018). ABS-CBN is owned by the Lopezes, an elite family who have been the proprietor of the network since 1956 and maintained its dominance through its duopoly with GMA Network. Through the years, ABS-CBN has been mired within controversies of anti-competitive business strategies and precarious labor practices (Media Ownership Monitoring, 2018), but it was also critical to the resistance against dictator Ferdinand Marcos Sr. and to investigations of unlawful and corrupt government practices, including Duterte's violent ‘war on drugs’ campaign. As its 25-year franchise approached expiration, ABS-CBN was

threatened by Duterte that “(he) will see to it that (they)’re out” for its alleged refusal to air his political ads and for biased reporting against his administration (Ranada, 2019) . With Duterte’s allies having a supermajority in Congress, legislators were able to block the franchise renewal in July 2020. During the Congressional hearings, several YouTube content creators were avid commentators of the issue, mobilizing their audiences against ABS-CBN.

To assemble the issue network, we first identify the keywords from Google Trends relevant to ABS-CBN during the period of the Congressional investigation up to October 2021. The top breakout queries “abs-cbn franchise” and “abs-cbn shutdown” (Figure 1) were then used to collect the relevant videos on YouTube using the YouTube Data Tools directly linked to YouTube’s API. We first collected the set of videos that contained the keywords and generated 100 unique videos (video set 1), then, we generated two more sets of recommended videos to derive the first-degree and second-degree (video set 2-3) recommendation video and channel networks. In total, we collected 1809 videos from 342 channels. We employed network analysis using the software Gephi to map the algorithmic connections among the channels and selected influencers who are identified by the YouTube algorithm as related to the keywords and videos about the ABS-CBN shutdown from video sets 1 to 3. First, we determined each channels’ relative importance using the degree centrality measure and grouped them into clusters by generating the network’s modularity class. Then, we analyzed the channels based on their media genre, institutional/political affiliation (or lack thereof), and other salient characteristics to make inferences about their algorithmically-constructed relationships.

Related queries ?		Rising ▼ ↓ <> ↔
1	abs-cbn franchise	Breakout
2	abs-cbn shutdown	Breakout
3	abs-cbn franchise renewal	Breakout
4	youtube abs-cbn news tv patrol live today	Breakout
5	abs-cbn ball 2019	Breakout

< Showing 1-5 of 25 queries >

Figure 1: Rising ‘queries’ related to ABS-CBN from October 2019 to July 2021

While influencers might be dispersed in the network, one community was identified to host the most influential ones who are algorithmically identified to be relevant to the search keywords. We determined the top five influencers in the cluster, distinguished by the production of their own content, and analyzed ten of their most viewed videos in the network through discourse analysis. Attention was given to their network strategies that strengthened their attachment to the issue network, such as the use of relevant keywords and tags, the timing and format of the video, and the engagement tactics to appeal to audiences. We also examined the discursive strategies that advance anti-media and/or populist discourses, particularly the video's narrative elements, audio-visual cues, evidence presented, credibility/reliability signals and manipulative claims. Together, we examined how the influencers were able to position themselves in the issue and relate to each other's political interlocation to create “socio-epistemological formations” visible and recognizable to their audiences (Marres, 2015, p. 663).

Mapping the ABS-CBN shutdown issue network

The issue network of the ABS-CBN shutdown is moderately dispersed with an evident concentration of influential channels towards the center (Figure 2). Influencers are nested within this network, some more prominent than others and more intertwined with particular actors. We situate the algorithmic entanglement of influencers through the four major communities that constitute the network.

The first and most influential community represents mainstream news channels doing critical reportage, comprising 39% of the network (C1). ABS-CBN's own news channels, ABS-CBN News and ANC 24/7 are most salient in this cluster, as well as reputable national and international news media outlets such as Rappler, CNN Philippines, and Al Jazeera. The second community is a confluence of 'alternative' news channels and influencers that are known to be politically-allied with Duterte, making up 30% of the network (C2). We will delve more into C2 later to characterize the relationship between the influencers and other channels in this cluster. The third and fourth communities involve both mainstream media channels reporting the issue as hard news and infotainment (C3) and gossip and viral stories channels (C4), comprising 14% and 8% of the network, respectively. While the influencer channels are primarily in C2, we also identified channels like *JUST in Balita* and *PH Latest*, which are 'news-annotation' channels that repurposes and repackages news and online content, in both C3 and C4 that amplify influencer content in C2.

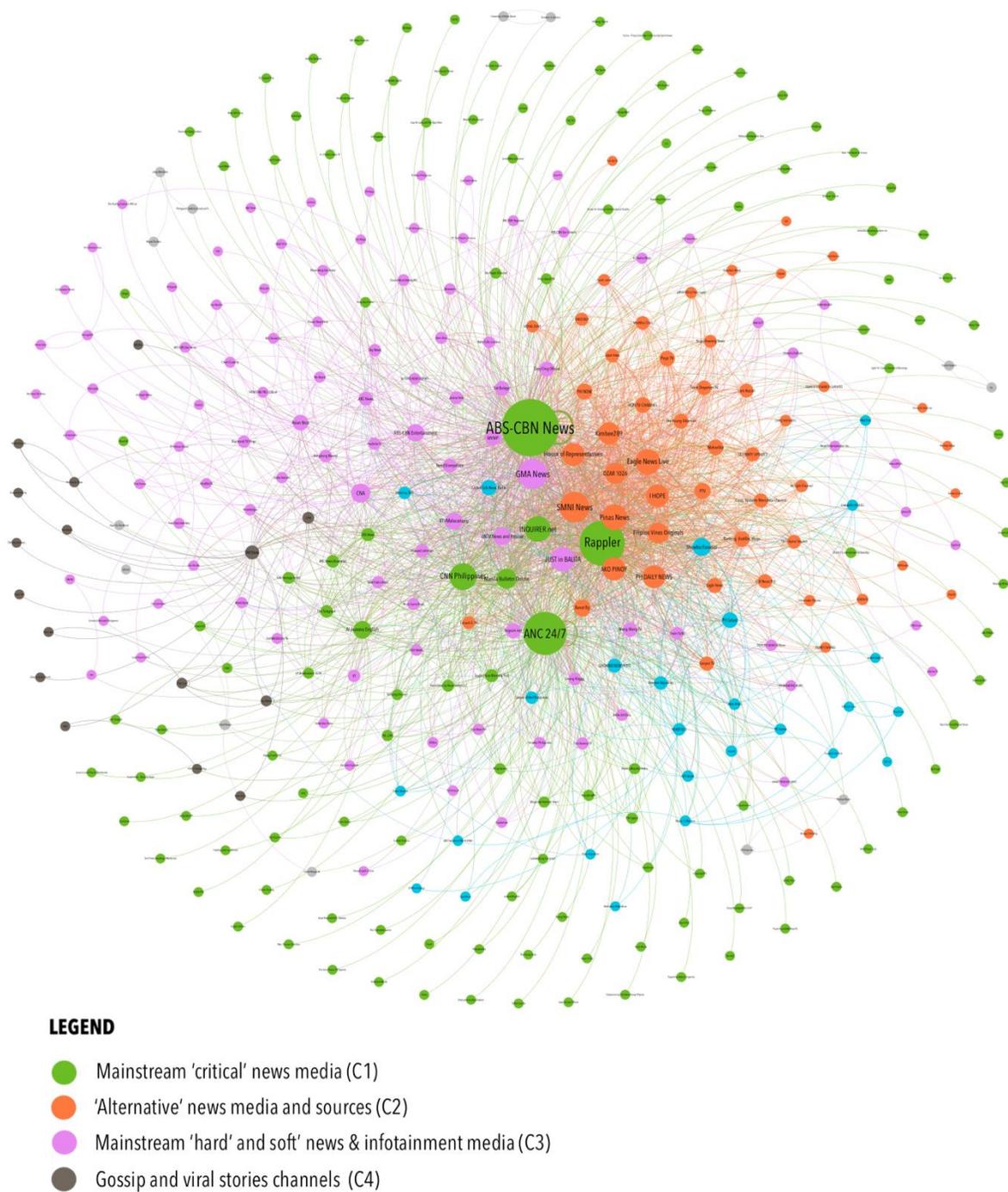


Figure 2: Issue network of ABS-CBN generated through Gephi

We focus our investigation on C2 as the community where 26 out of 51 channels are categorized as influencers. Channels in this community are overtly and historically partisan to Duterte and his allies (CMFR, 2022; Divinagracia, 2020), including broadcast media companies owned by major religious organizations (SMNI News, Eagle News Live), other ‘news annotation’ channels (Pinas News, PH Daily News), government-owned media channels (House of Representatives, Philippine Television Network) and the popular influencers (*Banat By* and *Maharlika*) who are analyzed more closely in the next section. This collection of relatively influential channels shares a highly dense relationship, exemplified by their intricate annexing connections compared to the other clusters. While this community is distinct from the cluster of mainstream critical news media (C1), we can see how closely the YouTube algorithms associated them with each other. Rappler, a staunch media critic of Duterte that has also been legally persecuted by his administration, is surrounded by these hyper-partisan news channels, news annotators and influencers.

The network analysis illustrates that the influencers, while not the dominant actors in the issue, have successfully embedded themselves in a high-stakes, legally technical, and contentious issue network. Unlike polarized issue networks where oppositional discourse is situated separately from the dominant discourse, influencers engage with mainstream actors and their content that directs the YouTube recommendation system to recommend them next to each other. They are also in close proximity to other discursively aligned channels that serve as bridges to the center of the network, with hyper-partisan news channels priming the audience to oppositional views, news annotators making salient the preferred media angles, and other YouTube channels amplifying their content in more distant areas in the network.

Influencers and political interlocution

We identify five influencers in C2 that have the highest degree centrality indicative of their connectedness to the network (Table 1). Our review of their channels indicate their antagonistic position towards ABS-CBN and their unwavering support of Duterte and his allies. The most popular of them is *Banat By* who has built his career on pro-Duterte political commentary on YouTube and later transitioned to becoming a broadcaster. *Maharlika* is an overseas Filipino vlogger known for mobilizing Filipinos abroad to support Duterte’s ally, now President Ferdinand Marcos Jr., and publicly antagonizing opposition personalities. The other influencers *AKO PINOY*, *Pepz TV* and *Badong Aratiles Vlogs* deliver ‘news’ and commentary with an overt partisan slant and curates content from Duterte-allied influencers from other platforms. Below, we discuss their strategies that build their credibility, relatability, and proximity to the other actors in the network and the key contentions they advance about the issue.

Influencer channels	Subscribers	Video views of top related video
<i>Banat By</i>	574K	219K
<i>Maharlika</i>	469K	133K
<i>AKO PINOY</i>	224K	363K
<i>Pepz TV</i>	180K	70K
<i>Badong Aratiles Vlogs</i>	169K	59K

Table 1. Most prominent influencers in the issue network as of 21 July 2022

Network strategies

The influencers' entrenched position in the network is not by chance, but a byproduct of overt network techniques. While these strategies do not guarantee their place in the network, these tactics signal the YouTube recommendation system of their 'relevance' to the issue at hand (Rieder et al., 2018; Laaksonen, et al, 2018).

Key to building their algorithmic linkages is their video format. All videos are 'reaction' videos to latch onto relevant ongoing or recently concluded events. Through this format, influencers are able to affix themselves to the existing discourse around the issue through the use of related keywords and their interjection during the issues' 'trending' moments. For instance, the influencers often do a blow-by-blow review of and response to the Congressional hearings, which are already partisan, and translate them into accessible but even more sensationalized forms. Outside of the 'technical' aspect of the issue, the influencers also use the format to respond to the statements by other public personalities. *AKO PINOY*'s (2020) most watched video is a reaction video to an A-lister celebrity's Instagram video expressing outrage over the predicament of ABS-CBN. For over 50 minutes, he dismissed the celebrity' arguments, threw insults, and questioned the celebrity's genuine intent and credibility. Reaction videos interposed during the significant moments of the issue bolster the presence and salience of the influencers in the network.

The live format of their YouTube videos is also a potent tactic, leveraging not only the number of people viewing the video but the quality of engagement they solicit from the real-time commentary. Throughout the live broadcast, the influencers were reading live audience

comments and integrating them into their political talk, especially if it served to affirm their views. For example, during a live broadcast, *Banat By* (2020) would recognize viewers' comments like "May you continue to catch the bad guys" and others that reinforced their adversarial position against the media network. 'Shoutouts' were also given to Filipino viewers from abroad to donate money to their channels. The YouTube algorithms incentivize these influencers for their high-value interactions with viewers with visibility, which fortified their influential position in the network despite being unaffiliated with media or political organizations.

Apart from attaching themselves to prominent YouTube channels, they also position themselves as proxy sources of news and information. The influencers regularly post live footage or recorded sessions of the Congressional hearings and press conferences, often emulating the stylistic conventions of broadcast media with talking heads, banner headlines, and studio set-up. Some influencers also have access to prominent personalities for exclusive interviews, such as *Banat By* (2020) hosting an exclusive interview with the main legislator of the investigation, as well as political supporters-turned-detractors of ABS-CBN. Where the news delivers the 'facts' of the issue, the influencers distinguish their role as critics and commentators who are detached and independent from the media establishment.

Discursive strategies

The influencers use an array of discursive strategies to render their anti-media populist discourse the legitimacy, sensibility, and relatability necessary to permeate the issue network. These tactics are akin to the practices and performances of authenticity and intimacy documented by research on influencers, but they present nuances that reappropriate mainstream, alternative, and hyper-partisan political interlocution.

Against the dominant reportage on the issue as an attack on press freedom, influencers used manipulative tactics to assert that the denial of the ABS-CBN franchise is based on the rule of law. *AKO PINOY* (2020) emphasized that the issue is not targeted against the media industry and has singled out ABS-CBN as “the only one who did not follow the law”. Addressing claims of the Congressional decision as instigating a chilling effect on the media, *Maharlika* (2020) similarly maintained that ABS-CBN was not subjected to ‘harassment’ and is only under scrutiny because it violated the law. This concerted attempt to frame the issue as legal rather than political is also to downplay claims of Duterte’s purported personal vendetta against the network and hostility towards the broader Philippine press. *Badong Aratiles Vlogs* (2020) asserted that the decision to close the network was based solely on the congressional investigation and not due to pressure from the President.

In addition to this are claims that misconstrue the adverse consequences of the closure of ABS-CBN. They would suggest that democracy is advanced with ‘social media’ displacing traditional media. The influencers proclaimed that the media industry is unaffected by the shutdown, and that people continue to have access to information through the internet and social media. *Maharlika* (2020) dismissed the value of ABS-CBN as a lifeline to critical information, especially in rural communities, asserting that “all information reaches us, even up to the mountains”. Convinced that ABS-CBN is ‘biased’ and has been a peddler of propaganda for the opposition, the influencers considered the defeat of ABS-CBN to be a palpable victory for Philippine democracy. *Pepz TV* (2020) even contended that “if we do not have anti-administration media, life would be better for the Filipinos.”

The influencers framed the closure of ABS-CBN as ‘part of the crusade’ against the elites and what the ‘majority’ of the Filipinos want, drawing the boundary between the elite (‘them’)

versus the people ('us'). For example, *Maharlika* (2020) underlined how the rejection of the ABS-CBN franchise represented how 'justice' is served against the greed and excesses of the oligarchy. *AKO PINOY* (2020) argued that ABS-CBN's closure should be "celebrated" as "we are able to overthrow a giant," with the influencer holding drinks and playing party music. The influencers leaned heavily on their vulgar but authentic performances of the self to signal their relatability to the masses, such as cursing and body shaming. At times, they also engaged in self-deprecating humor, belittling their own influence as a 'nobody' with 'no power' and making fun of their own ignorance on some issues.

Influencers within networked political brokerage:

Framework for governance and analysis

This article has examined the role of influencers on YouTube—as constitutive of the process of 'networked political brokerage' and constructing anti-media discourses that subvert democratic values and institutions. In this section, we outline their implications for governance. YouTube has advanced a position that is facilitative of openness and freedom of expression. Its policies attract users to generate and circulate content but with "minimal liability for what those users say or do" (Lewis, 2018, p. 44). These content creators are also outside the purview of traditional regulatory bodies and are not subjected to the ethical conventions of media practitioners, despite their assumption of the role of 'media' in the context of this research. As influencers engage as brokers of political opinion and YouTube becomes a dominant space for shaping political opinion, we highlight the governance and regulatory implications to platforms, and the political imperative of states and civil society to compel platforms to act on them.

We present a framework below which provides a paradigm shift in understanding influencers' embeddedness in networked political brokerage on YouTube. We draw from

existing governance approaches towards influencers and content creators on YouTube and identify their limitations in recognizing systematic political manipulation, such as the case of the ABS-CBN issue network. Then, we discuss the functions of influencers as networked political brokers and define the governance implications of this analytical perspective. We emphasize three aspects of governance in this framework: the structure of political brokerage on YouTube, the strategies of influencers as political brokers, and the consequences of influencer-led anti-media populism.

Structure

Like most social media platforms, YouTube's content moderation policy operates on a case-by-case basis, limited to its narrow definitions of objectionable content in the platform. Because of this, YouTube regulates mainly at the content-level. In its recent transparency report, YouTube documents the removal of 3.8M videos from the platform from January to March 2022, as well as the termination of 4.4M channels considered as repeat offenders of its community guidelines or those who have engaged in 'severe abuse' (YouTube, 2022). This is but a sliver of the billions of videos in the platform. The exceptions to this insulated moderation policy include global crises, such as COVID-19 and vaccine misinformation, and large democratic events, such as elections but mostly in the Western context. Categorical policy response is also borne out of public pressure, such as the case of the call to ban all content denying climate change, and the crackdown on "coordinated influence operations" based in Russia and China (Neuman, 2019). Every other issue is in the grey area and is reviewed based on the flagged individual content and its host channel.

This platform governance framework is myopic and acutely inadequate to respond to networked political brokerage on YouTube. As illustrated by the ABS-CBN issue network,

networked brokerage is situated in and part of larger political machineries, digital economies, and online media cultures. In the Philippines, influencers on YouTube operate in the context of high tensions between a populist government and legacy media networks, with the freedom of the press to be critical to upholding democracy amidst authoritarian governance. Influencers have been seeding anti-media sentiment since Duterte's campaign in 2016 (Elemia & Gonzales, 2021). Despite becoming more mainstream, they manage to stay "below the radar" (Abidin, 2021) and their real and symbolic entanglement with political assemblages (politicians, publics, platforms) are obscured. Our findings epitomize the role of seemingly minor actors in legitimizing major social upheavals such as the closure of a large media network through networked political brokerage. Because platforms regard and regulate influencers as individual actors, the extent to which the latter shape political discourses, either through cooperative relationships with other propaganda actors or through antagonistic relationships with media, are unrecognized, underestimated or outright dismissed. Platforms need to evolve their governance mechanisms from responding to individual violations by influencers to monitoring networked relationships among influencers that collectively enforce anti-democratic influence in the digital public sphere. By locating influencers as part of networked brokerage, platforms bring to the fore the dynamics, linkages, and social capital that influencers mobilize to make their political interlocation more potent.

Strategies

With the rise of influencers engaged in propaganda and disinformation, the strategies of branding, authenticity and relationship-building salient in influencer-focus research (Abidin, 2015) are mobilized to make false or manipulative content relatable and resonant to various publics. From the lens of networked political brokerage, we interpret these strategies not only as

means for influencers to persuasively convey their political message but also to collectively position themselves as legitimate and invaluable voices in political discourse. Anti-media populism aligns well with this objective, disparaging the old media gatekeepers to be displaced by ‘new’ intermediaries who disavow the values, formalities, and professional conduct characteristic of mainstream media. In the issue network, this alternative and transgressive ‘branding’ was imprinted in the network and discursive strategies of the influencers. First, they were simultaneously performing as ‘anti-media’ and ‘media’ through their hostile barrage of commentary against ABS-CBN and mainstream media, more broadly, and their fulfilment of media functions such as delivering the “news”, interviewing key political actors, and engaging with publics. The ‘react’ video formats are central to this strategy by trespassing the close network of news media actors and thus, accessing their audiences through algorithmic recommendations. Second, these influencers weaponize democratic values by framing mainstream media as an impediment to democracy and rationalizing actions by the administration to overthrow the elites. They even provoke the public imagination by asserting that closure of large media networks such ABS-CBN is a step forward for democracy, with ‘ordinary’ people like them and the internet as people’s source of information. Third, influencers represent the authenticity, relatability, and transparency absent in media that respond to the sensibilities of mass publics. Abstract, political, and technical discourses are levelled off into accessible, visceral, and personalized content while resembling media genre conventions not only of news but of entertainment programming. This amalgamation of performative, affective, and stylistic characteristics create ample ambiguity in their political interlocation that circumvents the regulatory rules of the platforms, as well as evade scrutiny and detection by news fact-checkers and watchdog groups.

All these strategies designate influencers as ‘alternative’ media actors by subverting traditional media practices while purportedly representing the people’s agenda and co-opting the discursive power of democracy. By working as a network, these strategies expand their capacity to shape discourse beyond their personal capital to a *cooperative structure* that can amass exponential media power, without the social responsibility and accountability expected of media institutions. Currently, platforms primarily rely on influencers’ self-reported category (i.e., ‘news’ or ‘educational’) as signals to algorithms on where their content should be recommended. Despite the influencers evidently perverting these generic conventions, they still appear as ‘news’ and recommended with other ‘news’ content (Soriano & Gaw, 2022). Because platforms are concerned with the ‘message’ of the content instead of its ‘form’, the emerging formats that fuses news genre manipulation, influencer strategies, and platform vernaculars are overlooked, if not neglected. Platforms need to expand their policies from detecting individual objectionable practices of influencers to a ‘genre’ of strategies that characterize the forms, schemes, and techniques of contemporary political interlocation.

Consequences

The consequences of influencers as emerging political actors in social networks are often generalized with other disinformation or propaganda actors. On the one hand, this helps locate influencers as components of contemporary political campaigns online by acting in tandem with other digital propaganda apparatuses. On the other hand, the ways we respond to influencers are enveloped in normative solutions to “coordinated influence operations” such as fact-checking, content takedowns, and demonetization. These regulatory interventions by platforms are emblematic of the same problems discussed above and reduce both the complexity and magnitude of their social harms. From our empirical investigation, we problematize the cultural

consequences of networked political brokerage that reconfigure our epistemological frames of understanding politics and require states and civil society to intervene in platform governance.

Influencers can cultivate new political values and standards that in democratic contexts are considered dangerous and detrimental to an open political discourse. Pronounced in the issue network is the overemphasis on the democratizing power of social media that relegate traditional media as elitist, exclusionary, and expendable. Media trust is on a decline and influencers are exacerbating this condition by proclaiming the media's insignificance in the age of unrestricted access to information through the internet. The decline of the cultural influence of traditional media paves the way for alternative influence networks (Lewis, 2018) and their hyper-partisan politics to gain mainstream prominence. The influencers also shift the cultural norms around political discourse to make incivility, intolerance, and harassment permissible and even necessary as part of membership in particular political communities. Although influencers appear to advance the broadening of democratic space, their promotion of anti-media rhetoric reinforces the broader assumption of maliciousness on the part of actors critical of the government, warranting hostility from influencers and viewers. In all these, the underlying cultural idea espoused by the influencers is the palatability of authoritarianism. By depicting mainstream media as part of an elite conspiracy, normalizing attacks towards them, stifling dissent and debates, and rationalizing state actions for the sake of 'democracy,' influencers are building the groundwork for the acceptability of authoritarianism as a sensible governance framework.

Importantly, we argue that networked brokerage reframes these consequences not as one-off efforts to manipulate public agenda or to launch counter-attacks against opposition actors but as enduring and irreversible shifts in norms around politics and democracy. Existing platform governance mechanisms overlook these impacts because they are complex, intangible, and

difficult to articulate in clear-cut terms, allowing influencers to evade scrutiny and accountability altogether. These consequences are also neither within purview nor the interest of platforms given their historical ambivalence to intervene and arbitrate acceptable and objectionable content and behavior. The gravity and longevity of influencers' normalizing anti-democratic discourse calls for the involvement of the states and civil society to co-govern with platforms, as Gorwa (2019a) suggested, to revamp regulatory frameworks in response to this political crisis. In particular, civil society is in the best position to espouse sets of principles that should be observed in governing influencers as political actors, as it has performed historically before states institutionalized regulation (Gorwa, 2019a). It is only by involving these stakeholders in platform governance that puts pressure on the platforms to oversee influencers beyond the transactional aspect of their propaganda work and focus on their discursive impact on the democratic processes and political participation.

Conclusion

This article interrogates platform governance mechanisms underlying the networked political brokerage that facilitates anti-media populism. While we focused on YouTube, what we presented here may be interrogated in the context of other platforms. It reveals how influencers strategically interact with platform affordances to enact political discourses delegitimizing and supporting the takedown of democratic institutions such as the media and in turn, how this networked environment facilitated a space for influencers to gain visibility, connect with key issue networks, and promote anti-media populist discourses relatable and emotionally charged. Network political brokerage is an analytical intervention to influencer, disinformation, and platform governance research by problematizing influencers both as distinct actors enacting their

political agency and as interdependent entities contingent on their social relations with political agents, platforms, and publics to advance a political agenda.

This double articulation of influencers reframes the questions of influencer regulation from creating a set of standards by which they must abide by to defining their role in the networked construction of political agenda. Apart from moderating their content, platforms must interrogate the political, social and cultural conditions engendered by their governance mechanisms. Platforms tend to ‘discursively position themselves’ (Gillespie, 2010) as mere technological hosts, as ‘facilitators of expression,’ or as channels for distribution of user-generated content. This discursive focus on user-generated content directs responsibility on users but allows platforms to relinquish accountability. A networked political brokerage perspective trains our attention to the complicity of platforms in enabling influencers and facilitating political influence networks along with unfettered circulation of networked content that promote divisive and hostile political cultures.

We highlighted the ways platforms can self-regulate by examining how their governance mechanisms contribute to such emerging political dynamics. Under conditions of declining media trust and the press under political persecution, however, we also highlight the important social consequences of this networked dynamics that reconfigure the way politics and democratic institutions are engaged with and contested, implying the imperative of co-governance by platforms, states, and civil society in ways sensitive of networked political brokerage processes. Civil society organizations need to revisit broadcast ethics in ways that pay attention to ‘new broadcasters’ – influencers whose hyper-partisan contents that influence epistemological frames for engaging with politics — are made visible, corroborated, and cemented through networked processes. It may be difficult to assume that states directly benefiting from such anti-media

populist discourses would act in earnest. However, the consequences of networked political brokerage extends beyond a single political regime or the subject of media takedowns. For example, what we have seen here aligns with what other scholars found as anti-immigration practices in Finnish politics advanced by the same networked dynamics on YouTube (Laaksonen, et. al., 2020).

The construction of media hostile rhetoric, and the emplacement of influencers in networked assemblages advancing such discourses, is important because it can be used as a vantage point for legitimizing their political role as ‘alternative media’ in ways that can extend to other issues, societies, and in other platforms. Although the study focused on the Philippines as an empirical anchor, anti-media populism is a growing trend globally, and the role of social media influencers in advancing and amplifying such and related discourses within the Asia-Pacific region and beyond implies the need for more extensive research. Populist media criticism “points to some blind spots of unreflected practice” (Kramer, 2018, p.17)—for example, elite media ownership, or opaque journalistic decisions about the inclusion and exclusion of particular issues from public discourse. Although anti-media populism may appear to embrace a direction of dislocating media power from the stronghold of elites, we need to interrogate if such opening of spaces for democratic conquest truly makes way for the marginalized, or if it is used merely as a pulpit for appropriating greater power for populist leaders or for bolstering nationalist bulwarks. As our case study has shown, influencers within a networked assemblage end up functioning as political brokers for populist leaders—allowing the population to be addressed via influencers and in turn express their allegiance to the populist leader by means of likes, comments, or channel subscription. In the quest to promote virtues of democratic voice,

influencer politics and their excesses need to be scrutinized by unmasking their embeddedness in techno-social infrastructures of anti-media populist networks.

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