Social Media and Election Campaigning: How social media won the Philippine Presidency in 2016?

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Abstract:

The study aims to make sense of the relationship between social media usage and election campaigning by looking at the successful campaign of the Philippine president, Rodrigo Roa Duterte last May 2016. While most studies to date are claiming the return to the 'equalization' thesis (a view that claims the social media allows minority parties to compete with majority parties in an electoral cycle) in the understanding of online campaigning among democratized polities, recent elections among democratizing societies may reveal an interesting case on the use of social media in election campaigning. With weak party system, emerging media institutions, powerful business actors, prevalence of dynastic rule, widespread use of violence, fragmented population, among others, democratizing societies exhibit a different pattern of social media use in electoral campaigning. Using the Philippine case, it examines how social media platforms, such as web blogs, facebook, youtube, among others, were used by the campaign team (composed of lose networks of small and weak parties and volunteer groups) of Duterte during the campaign period of the Philippine presidential elections of 2016. Using key informant interviews, archival research, and Philippine election survey data, it argues that, in addition to conventional offline campaign methods (using either 'command votes' and 'market votes'), the Duterte campaign team heavily used the social media to mobilize supporters, to convert other supporters, and to engage rival supporters and their candidates. It further claims that the Duterte campaign makes use of social media for organizing efforts, fake news, and online trolling. It confirms the extant scholarly literature that minority parties or candidates tend to use social media more in election campaign than major parties.

Introduction:

Last 2016, the Philippines caught global attention with the election of Rodrigo Roa Duterte, Mayor of Davao City, Philippines, as the 16th president of the first republic in Asia. Having no prior experience at the national level, Duterte rose to power as a controversial, eccentric and unconventional political figure who captured the political imagination of Filipinos by promising to put an end to pervasive criminality and the worsening drug problem in the country. Despite his scandalous statements, rampant expletives, and unremitting improprieties during the campaign period, he slowly rose in the surveys months leading to elections by sticking to his message of 'change' and strategically targeting various types of disgruntled populace across the country and even abroad. He decisively won the presidential elections with a convincing 39% share of the total votes as against the 23% of the administration candidate, Manuel Roxas II and 21% of independent candidate, Grace Poe (see Figure 1).

Name	Popular Votes	Percentage
Rodrigo Duterte (PDP-Laban)	16,601,997	39.01%
Manuel Roxas (Liberal Party)	9,978,175	23.45%
Grace Poe (Independent)	9,100,991	21.39%
Jejomar Binay (UNA)	5,416,140	12.73%
Miriam Defensor Santiago (PRP)	1,455,532	3.42%

Figure 1: Philippine Presidential Election 2016 Result (Data taken from the Commission on Elections of the Republic of the Philippines.)

Scholars and academics have tried to make sense of this surprising electoral feat by highlighting the following features of Duterte's electoral campaign. First, Duterte's political narrative represents the inadequacy of post-Marcos reformist ethos (Teehankee 2017). According to this view, Duterte's popularity and appeal are product of the growing disillusionment of the middle class toward the 'reformist' agenda of the post-EDSA politics. His slogan of 'change' basically speaking is a clear repudiation of his predecessor's framework of rule (that is focused on principles of good governance, transparency and accountability in the government). This change resonated well with the general public, especially with the middle class, due to the poor services and governance shortcomings of the Aquino administration (2010-2016) (Arguelles 2017; Teehankee 2017). Duterte used his image of being an effective mayor in a progressive city in Mindanao, Davao City, to present himself as the complete opposite of the Aquino presidency.

Second, Duterte's massive support can be explained by the command votes that come from his deep ties with the Mindanao region. His electoral success has been claimed to be an offshoot of age-old neglect of the region and deep misunderstanding between Manila and non-Manila narratives (Altez & Caday 2017). Duterte managed to unite the diverse population of Mindanao (composed of Visayan speaking Christian settlers, Sunni Muslim settlers, native indigenous peoples, among others) by articulating issues such as the armed conflict in Mindanao, prevalence of poverty, marginalization of various ethnic communities, that are close to each and every group/community in Mindanao (Altez & Caday 2017).

Third, Duterte's mode of campaigning was generally oriented toward his popularity as framed by his image as a person of political will, focused on issue of ending criminality and drug menace, and proclaiming a message of 'change' against the status quo of Philippine politics (Curato 2016). This focus on popularity was then integrated or perhaps transformed into a populist political ethos that became the very character of his campaign (Abao 2017). The 'us-versus-them' was effectively deployed during the campaign period through his slogan of 'change is coming' which assumes the negation and rejection of the traditional ways of doing politics in the Philippines such as transactional politics between oligarchic political groups, patronage networking, among others.

Lastly, Duterte's campaign team is said to have heavily used the social media for its propaganda work during the campaign period. Using Facebook, Twitter, weblogs (e.g., Mocha Uson Blog), and self-made news websites (e.g., Trend News Philippines), Duterte's social media

team focused on using social media to influence communication flow by spreading propaganda materials in the form of information brief, Facebook posts, and news articles that tackle issues or controversies related to Duterte and his rivals (Ressa 2016a, 2016b). Through these means, the social media team was also able to mobilize supporters both here and abroad with the help of social media volunteers who campaigned for Durterte within their social media network (Guerrero 2016). This effort to mobilize volunteers was reinforced with efforts to influence voters' perception through fake FB accounts, online trolling and fake news (Williams 2017; Hofileña 2016; Ressa 2016a, 2016b).

Upon closer look, Duterte's successful campaign reveal some of the important changes in contemporary electoral campaigning. The use of social media in electoral campaigning in the Philippines provides an interesting case of the strategic use of social media in electoral campaigning among contemporary societies. In particular, it is interesting to know how the use of social media altered the kind of electoral campaigning where political parties play a minor role in organizing, mobilizing and converting supporters and where campaign actors innovate just to make up for their shortcomings and weaknesses in a given electoral cycle.

My inquiry will focus on how social media was used to help a national candidate consolidate political support in a short time. In particular, I am interested to know how did Duterte campaign team use social media during the campaign period (February to May 2016) of the Philippine presidential election of 2016. What forms of social media platforms did they use throughout the campaign period? How did they use these platforms throughout that period?

In this study, I argue that, in addition to conventional offline campaign methods (using either 'command votes' and 'market votes'), the Duterte campaign team heavily used the social media to mobilize supporters, to convert other supporters, and to engage rival supporters and their candidates. I particularly claim that the Duterte campaign makes use of social media, such as Social Networking Sites, Web-blogs, and Youtube for informing supporters, producing and diffusing fake news to convert people, and online trolling to harass rival supporters.

My study aims to further confirm the extant scholarly literature on the 'equalization' thesis which claims that minority parties tend to use social media more in an election campaign than major parties. Also, it contributes to this thesis by offering the tripartite role of social media in electoral campaigns: *mobilizing*, *converting* and *antagonizing*. This role of social media allows minority parties or even campaign actors themselves (not belonging to a party) to compete with more organized parties or campaign actors who have more resources in an electoral campaigning.

Theorizing Social Media Usage in Electoral Campaigning

The current understanding about the role of social media is informed and framed by these two perspectives or schools of thought: normalization perspective vs. equalization perspective (Anstead & Chadwick 2009; Gibson & McAllister 2015). The normalization perspective, basically, assumes that the current conditions, set-ups, structural order, among others will later on be replicated online (Anstead & Chadwick 2009). This school of thought claims that the digital democratic space will remain to be dominated by political elites (Small 2008; Gibson &

McAllister 2015). The equalization perspective, on the other hand, argues that the ongoing changes in the use of internet or social media will eventually lead to widespread democratization of social and political tendencies among contemporary societies (Rheingold 1993; Gibson & Ward 1998; Anstead & Chadwick 2009).

At present, recent works on the topic have become focused on exploring various ways by which parties or other electoral actors make use of contemporary social media platforms for their electoral campaigning. Recent scholars have noticed the growing reliance of electoral actors such as candidates, parties and even voters themselves, on the new technological innovations brought by this digital age (Howard 2005). This can be seen in the growing number of candidates who make use of emails, personal websites, political blogging, and other social networking sites (SNS) (Howard 2005). The 2008 US presidential election, for instance, is arguably claimed as the first election where SNS and other forms of social media became both the medium and message to allow a candidate (Barack Obama) to dominate in the primaries and during election day itself (Sanson 2008).

Also, recent studies have become focused on the particular usage of the internet or social media in electoral campaigning. Due to the innovative nature of social media, the use of social media in campaigns has become undeniably the cheaper way to reach millions of people at a lower cost (Shea and Burton 2006; Miller 2013). Citizen-initiated campaigning or the use of grassroots-based method of organizing supporters became more intense since the advent of the internet age and the development of social media (Gibson 2015). Also, scholars have began noticing the disruptive form of political action brought by online trolling. Trolling creates this effect negatively subverting and challenging existing practices and narratives that have kept social media relations in order (Highfield 2016).

In summary, the use of social media in electoral campaigning is understood in the extant literature can be categorized into the following areas: introduction, communication and organization. For the first one, social media is used by parties and candidates to introduce themselves by providing basic and important information about their platforms, background and stands on issues. For communication purpose, social media is said to provide a less costly but more interactive and engaging communicative means in engaging supporters as well as potential supporters. Lastly, as for the organizational purpose, social media is assumed to give a more effective and instantaneous means of organizing the resources of an electoral campaigning.

This research proposes three more functions that further the potential of social media usage in electoral campaigning: *mobilization*, *conversion*, and *antagonization*. These three functions were seen in the Philippine 2016 presidential election, in particular, in the campaign of the Rodrigo Roa Duterte. This research aims to further the understanding on social media use in electoral campaigns by providing anecdotes and descriptions about the how a minority candidate used social media to mobilize his supporters, convert other people to support him and later on, antagonize other people. The research question that this research aim to answer are: How did the Duterte campaign team use their social media to mobilize, convert and antagonize voters during the 2016 presidential election?

Social Media Usage in Electoral Campaigning in the Philippines:

Scholars in electoral politics in the Philippines have long pointed out that Philippine elections are often dominated by weak parties and candidates with clientelistic networks that mobilize voters from patronage and dynastic relations (Lande 1965, 1996; Machado 1974; Kierkvliet 1995; Hutchcroft & Rocamora, 2003, 2013; Teehankee 2010). Since the 2001 midterm elections, parties and candidates in the Philippines were seen to have utilized new technological tools, such as the internet and mobile telephony, for introducing national candidates and mobilizing supporters vis-à-vis the usage of traditional means of campaigning (Gloria, Tabunda, & Fonbuena 2004; Tabunda, Rufo & Fonbuena 2008; Teehankee 2012).

This digitalization of electoral campaign intensified with the use of presidential candidates websites in the 2004 elections with the following means: information provision, candidate/party promotion, voter participation, political education and political discussion (Cuevas 2004; Mirandilla 2007). According to this framework, internet usage in electoral campaigning can be categorized by the following functions:

a.) Information provision – this involves the availability and access to basic information about who are the candidates, their political positions, and other election-related information. More information than what the traditional media is supposed to give. (Biography, History, About Us, Speeches, Endorsements, and Issue Positions)
b.) Candidate/party promotion – encourage offline actions (paraphernalia, public statements of support, send-a-link, etc.)
c.) Voter participation – this involves online efforts to encourage supporters to volunteer for campaign activities; become a member of the organization; sign-up to receive e-mails; read updates; donate monetary support
d.) Political education – this talks about how the internet is used to give information on election laws/procedures / comparative analysis of other candidates
e.) Political talk – this speaks of how the internet is used as a means where voters can engage themselves through online forums and discussions

In the coming years, studies have claimed that cybercampaigning (as the new term used to pertain to the use of social media in electoral campaigning) has been limited to its informative function with minimal or underutilized networking/mobilizational capabilities (Karan, Gimeno, & Tandoc 2008; Mirandilla 2009).

Scholars have also noticed the deliberate use of "public opinion" among candidates and parties as a strategizing tool in influencing voters' perception for the 2010 presidential elections (Hedman 2010). These changes, as we have seen in May 2016 election in the Philippines, also confirm the ongoing marketization of Philippine national electoral politics (Teehankee 2010). As will be shown later in the case of Duterte's use of social media, candidates harness their popularity through heavy media (old and new) presence and voters strategic targeting. This new approach in winning national elections is seen as a viable complementary means to the traditional and conventional 'command-vote' driven approach which is done either through the mobilization of network of patronage or through party-coalitions (Teehankee 2010).

In addressing the research question raised in this research, I have revisited the frameworks of Cuevas (2004) and Mirandilla (2007) in understanding social media usage in electoral campaigning in the Philippines and came up with a new typology of social media usage in the electoral campaigning in the Philippines: *mobilization*, *conversion*, and *antagonization*:

a.) Mobilization function – this basically involves the usage of social media to organize efforts of supporters regarding the campaign;
b.) Conversion function – this talks about the social usage in converting supporters of rival candidates to vote for the other candidate.
c.) Antagonization function - this speaks of the social usage in harassing or intimidating supporters of rival candidates.

Duterte's Social Media Presidential Campaign

Duterte's campaign team heavily used the social media for its organizational tasks, propaganda work and offensive operation.Using Facebook, Twitter, weblogs and self-made news websites, Duterte's social media team focused on using the social media platform to influence communication flow by spreading propaganda materials in the form of information brief, Facebook posts, and news articles that tackle issues or controversies related to Duterte and his rivals (Ressa 2016a, 2016b). Through these means, the social media team was also able to mobilize supporters both here and abroad with the help of social media volunteers who campaigned for Durterte within their social media network (Guerrero 2016). This effort to mobilize volunteers was reinforced with efforts to influence voters' perception through fake FB accounts, online trolling and fake news (Williams 2017; Hofileña 2016; Ressa 2016a, 2016b).

From January to May 2016, Duterte's numbers in the surveys rose from 20% to 34%.[1] Duterte's rise in the polls began in December 2015 following his announcement of his candidacy. This was systematically supported by the social media campaign during the crucial moments of the campaign period—February to May 2016. Duterte started to lead the surveys by April 2016. In three instances, Duterte's social media team was able to support the offline campaign of Duterte by amplifying the following messaging:

a.) 'Atin ito pre' – which means 'he is ours'. A messaging that was directly oriented toward then leading candidate Grace Poe to condition the minds of the people regarding the citizenship case against her. This was heavily used in November 2015-January 2016 or following the favorable Supreme Court decision allowing Grace Poe to run as president. In fact, he used this as his reason why he ran as president.
b.) 'Tapang at Malasakit' – which means 'Bravery and Compassion'. This was heavily used when Duterte was already catching up in February-March 2016.
c.) 'Change is Coming' – this is the consistent messaging used all throughout the campaign to imply that Duterte is an extraordinary candidate.

In the discussions below, I will examine the three important areas by which the Duterte campaign team used social media during the 2016 presidential elections.

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[1] Survey results from *Social Weather Stations*, *Pulse Asia* and *The Standard*.

A. Mobilization

The mobilization function of social media usage in electoral campaigning in the Philippines during the 2016 presidential election was seen in the following SNS: Facebook group, youtube, and personal accounts, blogs, and News Websites. For the first FB group and personal accounts, the campaign team of Duterte created hundreds of FB accounts with similar personalities and orientation in terms of their content. What made them problematic is that most of the posts made by these accounts are noticeably the same with other Duterte-themed accounts. During the campaign period for instance, information about Duterte's indecisiveness to run was constantly publicized by hundreds of FB accounts. This information was syndicated using the facebook algorithm by constantly feeding people who are interested with Duterte (Ressa 2016b).

For blogs, popular figures such 'Mocha Uson'[2], 'Thinking Pinoy'[3], used political blogging (either through facebook or a website) during the campaign period to mobilize Duterte supporters by providing information regarding political issues surrounding Duterte's candidacy. The blogs were used to frame issues and controversies by giving explanations and descriptions about a contentious issue that involves Duterte. Mocha, for instance, during the campaign period constantly filled her FB account (as her platform to blog) with posts that discuss why Duterte should run as president. She framed the candidacy of Duterte as a framework of 'peace and order' (Go 2016).

This perfectly corresponds to the kind of image that Duterte embodies during the campaign period. The strategy of Duterte was based creating a solid branding—branding of firmness in leadership and peace and order (Cantera 2016). The decisions took scientifically followed what survey data, such as Pulse Asia's February 19, 2016, are saying about what people want for a president (Cantera 2016).

The use of social media also worked well for the social media team. The team was able to use social media to systematically divide the supporters into four major groups: overseas Filipino workers (OFWs), Luzon, Visayas and Mindanao (Gavilan 2016). This allows the social media team to systematically and meticulously undertake a coordinated effort to mobilize supporters in the Philippines, as well as, abroad.

B. Conversion

Recently, information found in the online news is perceived to be more favourable than information found in the social media (Faraon, Stenberg & Kaipanen 2014). In the Philippines, the use of social media as a source of information has been effective in converting people especially during elections. This is what the Duterte campaign team did in 2015-2016 by constantly bombarding the unsuspecting social media users with fake information, especially

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[2] See https://www.facebook.com/Mochablogger/?ref=br_rs.
[3] See http://www.thinkingpinoy.net/ and
https://www.facebook.com/TheThinkingPinoy/?ref=br_rs.

through youtube videos and fake articles, that tend to soften their support to their initial candidate and contaminate them with the biases for Duterte.

Just like in the mobilization function of social media usage in electoral campaigning, FB group and personal accounts were also instrumental in spreading fake news during the campaign period (Ressa 2016a). Using hundreds of Duterte-themed FB accounts, these accounts shared fake news articles that usually come from existing websites which has the resemblance of a real news outlet. During the campaign period, the 'Mindanation'[4], 'Dutertenews'[5], 'Duterte Altervista'[6], among others, provided useful information for the Duterte campaign by bombarding social media users with fake news articles that exaggerate or magnify Duterte's deeds or words. For instance,

What made them problematic is that most of the posts made by these accounts are noticeably the same with other Duterte-themed accounts. During the campaign period for instance, information about Duterte's indecisiveness to run was constantly publicized by hundreds of FB accounts. This information was syndicated using the facebook algorithm by constantly feeding people who are interested with Duterte (Ressa 2016).

For bloggers who support Duterte, popular figures such as Uson and 'Thinking Pinoy', were also used during the campaign period to convert supporters by sharing fake news to highlight Duterte's candidacy. The blogs were used this time to fuel the support and to convince soft voters about Duterte's political and even governance skills. Uson, for instance, during the campaign period constantly filled her blog with articles from Duterte-themed websites that depict the exaggerated capabilities and characteristics or perhaps unreal actions and words done by Duterte. What is troubling about these bloggers is that they justify the usage of these websites by saying the the mainstream media is being paid by the opposing candidates/parties. These influencers, basically provided the needed support to legitimize the fake news websites.

C. Antagonization

While negative campaigning has become a serious trend in electoral campaign in the last forty years, (Kavanagh 1996) social media usage in negative campaigning has proven to be an effective means to weaken the grip of rival candidates during an election. Harassment and intimidation were used to further the candidacy of Duterte by sowing fear among the rival supporters. During the 2016 elections, FB accounts were heavily used by the Duterte team to 'troll' the rival supporters on issues that affect Duterte.

The use of fake accounts during that time became rampant, as thousands of FB accounts were made to create a perception of widespread support for Duterte and to harass supporters of other candidates (Hofileña 2016; Williams 2017). These fake accounts basically provided the needed support of the mobilization and conversion by constantly liking and sharing the information from Duterte-themed websites, FB accounts or bloggers.

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[4] See http://mindanation.com/troops-cops-earn-higher-pay/.
[5] See http://dutertenews.com/.
[6] See http://pilipinews.altervista.org/.

For political blogging during that period, the antagonization function was very much strong among the bloggers. Particularly, Uson that time became more popular (apart from being the leading dancer in the 'Mocha Girls') by being instantaneous and constant in defending Duterte and attacking his rival candidates.

During that time, it is surprising that Duterte team openly denied this systematic effort by saying that it also happens to other campaign teams and that "you cannot expect to control all people in the social media sphere, people have been given a weapon and a medium where they can express themselves, so you should understand this is a whole volunteer movement, you cannot control everybody", said Nic Gabunada, Duterte's social media tactician and strategist (quotations taken from Lamble & Mohan 2016).

Conclusion:

To conclude, the Duterte campaign is basically composed of two modes: offline and online. While the former provided the needed machinery to counter the strength of the administration candidate (Mar Roxas) and popularity of Grace Poe, the latter created a new resource that eventually became his main political base in the months prior to May 2016 elections. As mentioned in this study, Duterte's social media campaign is organized into three areas: to mobilize, to convert and to antagonize. Using popular SNS these days, such as FB, youtube (though minimal), weblog, among others, supporters as well as campaigners were able to propel Duterte's numbers during the crucial days of the presidential campaign (February to May 2016).

Despite having a weak traditional or conventional party electoral campaigning, Duterte's campaign team was able to use social media to make up for his weakness. The use of social media allowed him to mobilize his supporters, to convert other voters and to antagonize the supporters of his rival candidates. This goes to show that, in the Philippines, where there is high social media penetration, social media usage can really be used by campaign teams 'to equalize' campaigning.

However, there are a number of caveats that I have identified that may be useful of future researchers. One, given the situation that elections are really hotly contested and that operators are not really inclined to divulge details of their craft, researchers should expect constant denials and silence from them. In fact, this is what happened to me during the time when I was already validating the initial findings from archival research and initial survey analyses. Two, given this shortcoming, I guess, what other researchers can do is to look for patterns and lead from other sources like election administration bodies, media, among others.

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