

The Emergence of the Philippine “Anti-Media”: The Duterte Factor

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Abstract: *The Philippine news media is perceived to be the freest in Asia. However, it also has its faults which its audiences have noticed. This study was aimed at exploring the factors which have lead to the audience’s dissent and subsequent emergence of an online anti-media movement. A qualitative research method was utilized where in social media posts and websites were analyzed with the Agenda Setting Theory to explain the frames being made by the mainstream and anti-media. The results showed factors such as the internet and its tools in creating a new virtual community.*

Keywords: *agenda setting, anti-media, audience bias, political bias, social media*

Abstrak: *Media Filipina dipandang sebagai media yang paling bebas di Asia, walaupun tidak terlepas dari kekurangan. Penelitian ini bertujuan menggali faktor yang mendorong audiens untuk mengemukakan perbedaan pendapat dan memunculkan pergerakan anti media online. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode penelitian kualitatif untuk mengamati posting di media sosial dan website dengan menggunakan Teori Agenda Setting, terutama untuk memetakan keterkaitan antara media mainstream dan anti media. Hasilnya menunjukkan bahwa faktor-faktor seperti internet dan aplikasi di dalamnya mampu membentuk komunitas virtual yang baru.*

Kata Kunci: *agenda setting, anti media, bias audiens, bias politik, media sosial*

The Philippine news media has been dubbed by several media watchdogs as one of the freest media community in Asia. In fact, it has full protection from the The Constitution of the Republic of the Phillipines 1987 (2013). The Bill of Rights mentions that “no law shall be passed abridging the freedom of speech, of expression, or of the press...” (The Constitution of the Republic of the Phillipines 1987, 2013). This statement stemmed from the oppressive policies of the late President Ferdinand Marcos when he declared Martial Law in 1972, where only

outfits owned by his cronies were allowed to “practice” journalism. Those which were against the President were closed down. However, some remained open, albeit doing underground reportage, the so-called “mosquito press”, despite the threats of persecution from the government.

After the EDSA People Power Revolution in 1986, the history tell that freedom from almost 2 decades of Marcos-led dictatorship, the media presented itself as the vanguard of the Filipino people’s basic freedoms, especially the freedom of

speech and expression. However, as with any responsibility that pertain that freedom, the news media had its flaws. Years of relatively free-for-all coverage and unabated freedom have exposed abuse by the mainstream media on its perceived and constitutionally-protected power as an overseer of not only the government, but also of society in general.

The most prevalent problem beset against the news media is the issue of conflict of interest especially with political bias. Some members of the audience have seen trends in the news media on the manner they reported on various issues of the society. A few of these observations are unbalanced space or time for particular candidates or parties, stories being angled to present a rosier or equally messy picture of political rivals, and so on. The perceived trend of favored coverage and reportage emanated a sense of the media setting the stage or “agenda” for the people to believe on and possibly sway their minds. No other event in the country with full of agenda from all sectors, and even the media, than local and national elections.

Though Jim Morrison, an American singer, may not be the best person to talk about the media, he has been quoted numerous times in media studies lectures with this statement, “whoever controls the media, controls the mind”. It seemed communication scholars agree on the power of the propaganda made by media organizations. In Teun van Dijk’s “Power and the News Media”, the media has the power to “control to some extent the minds of readers or viewers, but not only directly their actions...”. However, despite

that persuasive power of the media, he also surmised that “whatever the symbolic power of the news media, at least some media users will generally be able to resist such persuasion” (van Dijk, 1995, p. 10-11).

Maxwell McCombs (McCombs & Reynolds, 2002) reiterates this perceived power of the media to control the mindset of its readers and audiences. In his Agenda Setting Theory, the news media has the ability to influence the salience of topics on the public agenda. McCombs’ theory highlights the power of the news media to select certain parts of the news coverage and leave out segments which are necessarily not of the “public’s interest” to know. Meaning, some aspects of the daily news agenda is deliberately left out, not published nor aired at all for some reason:

Newspapers provide a host of cues about the salience of the topics in the daily news – lead story on page one, other front page display, large headlines, etc. Television news also offers numerous cues about salience – the opening story on the newscast, length of time devoted to the story, etc. These cues repeated day after day effectively communicate the importance of each topic. In other words, the news media can set the agenda for the public’s attention to that small group of issues around which public opinion forms (McCombs & Reynolds, 2002, p. 1).

The theory further suggests this type of trending leads to “agenda setting”, where a pattern or repeated relay of information has been developed through the days of reportage. Over a period of time, issues are emphasized, some get treated light coverage while others do not even get the attention. He also assumes that the press and the media filter and shape the agenda and subsequently, certain stories are pushed into the public agenda.

With the agenda always comes the issue of political bias. In “Media and Politics in Pacific Asia”, Duncan McCargo (2003, p. 2-4) assumes that the media act as actors in shaping the political scene of a certain country. He argues that the media community has differing roles in politics and in just one news outfit. There are various characters that mold the political agenda. McCargo cites an example:

Different sections of the media may be cheering, reproving and denouncing power-holders on the same day. Indeed, a single publication may itself play diverse roles. Different columnists and editors may adopt different forms of political agency within the same issue of the same publication: a critical front page story indicates that the publication is seeking to restrain certain power-holders, while a bland editorial appears to offer them tacit support, and an aggressive columnist calls for their resignations (McCargo, 2003, p. 2-4).

It would seem that the media can get away with bias through the years especially in the Philippines. As mentioned earlier, during the dictatorship of former President Marcos, the media have become the anchor for basic human rights and freedom of speech albeit restricted to pro-government propaganda. Some tried their best but people have relied on them for perceived fairness and balanced news, which the pro-Marcos media did not practice. It is this heavy reliance in the “mosquito” media gave the sense they are the vanguards of freedom and policing society’s corruption. This persuasive power that gives the media its perceived “holiness” in politics has been largely undoubted until the internet came. The one-way relationship in the past, the thought that the media will not go against its principles of fairness and being the “fourth

estate”, has made the ordinary citizen also question the agenda of the mainstream media, on whether they really cater for the public’s interest or not.

While traditional mainstream media in the country are still preferred platforms to sway people’s minds, the internet’s tools are much more democratic or relatively free platforms for whatever one may want to write. This also includes even distaste of people against the ill practices of the mainstream media. It is evident in social media with status posts and comments being publicly shown for everyone in virtual space to see. The freedom to disseminate information, through technology, has given another sense of democracy. This reigns true with the term “semiotic democracy” coined by John Fiske. He assumes that:

...audience, to a varying degree, to “resist”, “subvert”, and “recode” certain cultural symbols to express meanings that are different from the ones intended by their creators, thereby empowering consumers, rather than producers... it promised a complete reversal of the monopolistic hierarchy of the author and the presumed passivity of the audience in receiving meaning. The term “semiotic democracy” offered an interesting juxtaposition of ideals -political liberty, freedom of expression and creation- alongside a basic disruption of the common assumptions that inhere in authorial control (Katyal, 2012, p. 1).

William Fisher III (2004b) in Berkman Center for Internet and Society shares this assumption that the traditional content creators, such as established movie houses and television stations, no longer have the monopoly to create meanings, concepts, and creative works. Furthermore, Fisher emphasized on the role of technology in helping the ordinary person to create works

of art, be it film, news, and other media products. It is the continuing proliferation of cheaper or free but quality software and hardware that has become available for the ordinary consumer. He also opines “the new technology opportunities for a different style of creativity- more collaborative and playful, less individualist or hierarchical” (Fisher III, 2004a, p. 31).

These factors of setting the agenda also coincide with the concept of “agenda cutting”. In a monograph by Rita Colistra (2012, p. 100-102), agenda cutting is a “process whereby problems or issues have attention directed away from them by receiving little or no media coverage”. She cites Wober and Gunter on how agenda cutting came about. One factor is through the media’s logistical constraints, whereby news outlets could only gather information and present a certain amount of stories or reports depending on their resources such as manpower. Prejudices also “cut-off” certain issues of the society. This is where journalists, intentionally or not, use subjective judgment in deciding on what stories to omit. As with any organization, news outfits are not immune from internal and external influences. Internal influence comes from owners/executives or managers who have editorial powers and external sources are indirect relationships to these organizations such as governments, private institutions, or even their competitors in their businesses. Though Colistra’s study focuses on the view of writers and reporters of content, the end-users of the news are particularly affected because the aforementioned factors influence the way “gatekeepers” of information set the agenda.

In the case of the Philippines, the media community has long had the keys to the gates of information where they had monopoly of doing the news with various influencers who set or cut the news agenda. However, through the years, the audiences have taken into their hands the dissemination of information since traditional media have not catered to the particular mindset of the anti-media that their agenda is not being presented by the mainstream, often perceived, biased media entities. The mindset that their views and opinions are limited by editorial judgments, corporate, and political interests of established news organizations. Technology, such as smartphones and Facebook has given the ordinary person the tools to freely contribute to the realm of the information age. Thus, eliminating the monopoly of the media in information dissemination.

To illustrate further, political analysts have dubbed the past 3 polls as the “social media elections” wherein the discourse was no longer limited to grandstands and the streets but also in internet platforms such as Facebook. According to data gathered by the International Telecommunication Union (2016), there are almost 55 million people who already have access to the internet, which is more than half the population of the country which stands at 102 million.

Though internet penetration in the country is lower than its neighbors, political campaigners cannot eliminate the fact that it can give them easier platforms for propaganda. Thus, politics transcend from the stages and grandstand to the virtual space. Sta

Maria-Abalos (2016, p. 1-6) of the University of the Philippines Baguio, observed political opinion is already happening online. She said that supporters of candidates are much more engaged in social media, specifically Facebook, with the use of click buttons 'like' and 'share' while 'comments' provide a space for posting opinions or starting a time delayed discussion. Sta Maria-Abalos explained that online media is actually a space where people are bounded by information and extensive use by individuals and groups become a public space to relay information and may "influence political opinion". However, the problem of Facebook posts rarely present complete information and lead to uninformed and usually brash opinions. Sta Maria-Abalos reiterated:

What is evident in these kinds of Facebook pages is presentation of limited information but with conversations and replies of Facebook users with extreme and nonsensical comments. Because this is primarily used as a source of information for most voters, posts such as these elicits more questions and confusion about information contained in the post and in the thread of comments (Sta Maria-Abalos, 2016, p. 1-6).

These certain interactions also change the way social media sites behave. In the concept of "Social Media Logic" (van Dijck & Poell, 2013, p. 5-6), Facebook demonstrates "programmability" wherein interaction of users with relational activities such as liking, favoriting, or sharing may in turn influence the flow of communication and information. Algorithms within the social media site are affected by the number of likes, shares, or comments of a certain post. More of these interactions in a post, the higher that post in people's news feeds. This

is against mass media's "programming" where content is scheduled in a one-way fashion which is often dictated by editorial judgments of those who run the newsroom or the company as a whole. Though users can "resist" these algorithms in some sites such as Reddit, the attempt is futile in Facebook or even Twitter since "code" is hidden from view and un-editable. As posts appear higher in a news feed, coincides with another element of social media logic. "Popularity" is affected by way of "distinct mechanisms for boosting popularity of people, things, or ideas, which is measured mostly in quantified terms" (van Dijck & Poell, 2013, p. 7). For example, Facebook's EdgeRank which is an algorithm, relying on quantified data, push some topics higher the feed and devalues others subsequently suggesting popularity or "trending". Twitter also has its own algorithm but similar to Facebook's. However, these algorithms can be manipulated by "trending" techniques whereby "groups of users who decide something needs to become trending can orchestrate a publicity wave to promote a particular item". This feature, which public relations managers and even people who want to make their ideas or themselves, take advantage of in order to reach more people in a virtual environment. A stark contrast from mass media's logic of controlled environments.

No other election has made social media abuzz than this year's national polls, much more pronounced in Facebook where much of the online campaigns have focused their effort. Just this year, Facebook

said it has more or less 49 million active monthly members from the Philippines alone (Statista, 2016). With that number, campaign managers have seen a way to easily reach millions of people not only to make people aware of their candidates but to engage them as well and further their candidate's popularity.

Using social media has many perks but it also has its fair share of problems particularly among the supporters of any candidate. Information of any kind in social media is rarely fully presented. If a person needs to read a full story, such as news, in social media, one will have to get out of the site itself to be in a certain website. This is problematic especially in the Philippines where internet connectivity and speed is an issue. Telecommunication companies may have promos for free access to social media sites but the subscriber needs to have enough internet load credits to surf outside of Facebook or Twitter. At times, even if a person has access outside of social media networks, very slow connection certainly discourages that subscriber to even click on web links to supposedly read complete information. Sta Maria-Abalos (2016, p. 8) explains that the incomplete portrayal of ideas, opinions, and information in general, "elicits more questions and confusion about information contained in the post and in the thread of comments". She added users of the social media site gets temporarily satisfied eventually lead the formation of shallow political opinion. Sta Maria-Abalos' argument explains further how shallow discourse amongst

political players, particularly supporters of candidates in an election, emanate in the online space.

These mix problems and new found freedoms with the internet has become the root of the emergence of the anti-media movement in the online space. In this paper, the term "anti-media" is defined as a virtual community composed of individuals disapproving of the practices of the news media. The study of this phenomenon is important in order to understand the growth of online virtual communities that are influenced by agenda, personality, or events. In this case, the national elections and the indirect influence of then candidate Rodrigo Duterte has instigated the formation of an anti-media movement in social media.

As a result, whoever has the power to control the agenda is whoever controls information and opinions. It has been established that the mainstream media has its agenda. The same is true with the anti-media which aims to sway people away from the agenda of the mainstream media. The anti-media community enforces its own agenda through posting and sharing of alternative information in the internet. The determination of the factors behind the anti-media behavior is worthy to understand and explore upon.

Thus, the researcher aims to answer the following questions:

1. What are the factors in the formation of the "anti-media" community in the Philippines society?

2. How did the “anti-media” emerge in the country’s context?

Based on these questions, the study’s objectives are:

1. To identify the factors leading to the formation of the anti-media community in the Philippines.
2. To analyze the factors on how these lead to the formation of the anti-media community

METHODS

The researcher used a qualitative research method. Various social media posts were gathered and observed from April to August 2016, which contained information or messages against the mainstream media’s coverage of the elections. These posts were subjected to textual analysis where the researcher determined the agenda of various political sectors including individuals and organizations. Historical and present factors leading to

the emergence were also determined. The Agenda Setting Theory used to analyze and explain the phenomena of the emergence of the anti-media movement.

FINDING

Various factors contributed to the emergence of the anti-media in the Philippines. First, is the prolific use of the internet and its tools. Numerous “news” websites sprouted even before the 2016 national elections have started. One of which is kami.com.ph. This website collates news and features from other news outlets. Some stories were even paraphrased from the original source. However, it is observable that the site bannered any and all news about Duterte, his campaign, and events. Most of it being posted in the front or home page. Even after the elections, the site dedicated a “Rodrigo Duterte” section which is a compilation of all the content about Duterte (see Figure 1).

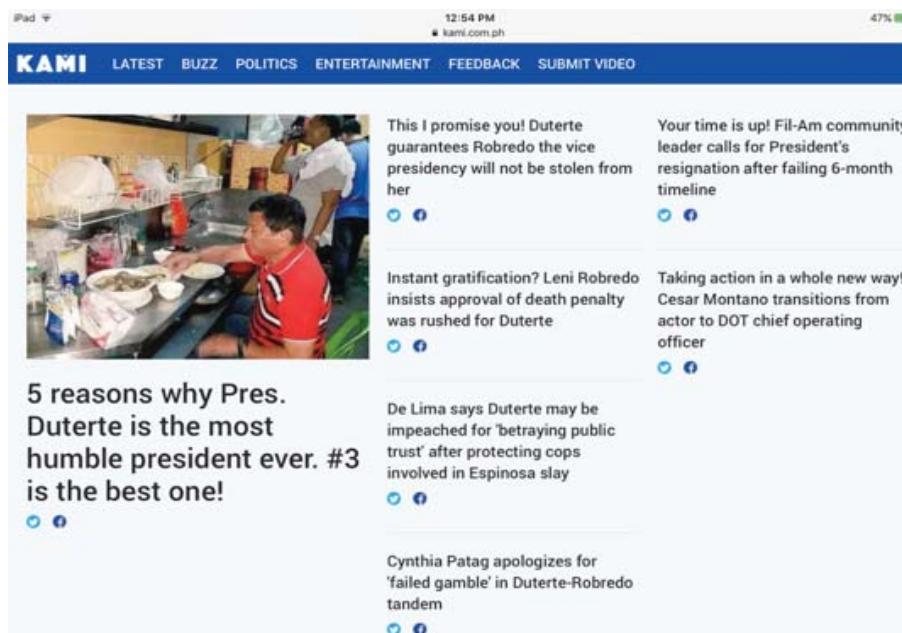


Figure 1 Kami.com.ph’s Duterte Subsite

Another site is newsportal-ph.blogspot.com. It has the same layout and presentation of content as kami.com.ph. It has a banner headline and picture for each story such as seen in Figure 2. The site is dominated by articles all about Duterte. After the elections, it renamed itself into du30newsinfo.com.



Newsportal: Trillanes Offers Himself as Defense Adviser to Duterte?

Figure 2 Newsportal-ph's Article about Senator Antonio Trillanes' Offer to Duterte

Both sites employed professional designs akin to news websites such as CNN, local ABS-CBN network or Inquirer.net. Other websites followed suit such as aspinoytrnding.altervista.org, pinoytrendingnews.net, and trendingphnewz.blogpost.com among others. All these websites also utilized social media to their advantage especially Facebook to spread its content by way of linking their stories or their whole website (see Figure 3). It can be shared and saved. Subsequently, liked and commented then it appears on the top of news feeds.



Figure 3 Kami.com.ph being Shared and Reachable via Facebook

With the help of Facebook, these websites and its contents are being spread like wildfire. Facebook has an algorithm which places highly interacted posts and sites appear on top or recurrent in news feeds. It is in this way that an agenda is established and enhanced through repetitive visits helped out by social media. The agenda of the anti-media movement is to make Duterte known to many people through the free help of interactions in Facebook. With the use of “news website” styles of presentation, borrowing information or whole articles from other news sites present a sense of credibility. It also creates an agenda wherein the objective information have been selected with a Duterte topic from other sites are being collated or at times, rewritten to suit the writer’s agenda and placed in their website. This is in accordance to the thought of agenda setting that the writer leaves out information and presents other information that appropriate for their interests. The other candidates only relegated their online strategy with status updates, photo albums with captions, and videos that are mostly personal in nature and gets lost in the newsfeed without interactions.



Figure 4 Supporters Engagement in Mudslinging

The advantage of social media is it is relatively free to comment. This leads to the second factor for the rise of the anti-media, which is the freedom to speak one's mind. Based on the observations, supporters have engaged in online mudslinging. Supporters have called each other names such as "Dutertards" for Duterte's supporters while "Yellowtards" are thrown against the Liberal Party's supporters.

The online debates became very heated to the point that the media has been dragged into the debacle. Facebook groups have sprouted to specifically move against the media. ABS-CBN Broadcasting Corporation, the company that started the widespread citizen journalism movement, has been the most criticized in the 2016 polls.

Various FB pages, mostly groups, which are connected or support to then candidate Duterte, called for the boycott of the largest broadcaster in the country for allegedly having bias for the administration's ticket. One such group is "Boycott Abs-Cbn Station". On its page introduction, the group aims to encourage supporters to stop watching the programs of the said station because of its alleged bias in reporting facts. The page is full of posts with pictures of people showing placards to "boycott" and the logo of the company. They also use the tags such as "#ABSCBNBoycott" in order for the posts to be easily found on Facebook. They are taking advantage of the tools and features of Facebook to further their agenda to do damage in a way that the station is perceived with bias.



Figure 5 A Collaged Picture from "Boycott Abs-Cbn Station"

When the polls were finished and Duterte coming out as the victor, the attacks did not end. Figure 6 presents just one of the many groups which have shown dissent of the network, also calling for the boycott of ABS-CBN. This was also during the time when the President boycotted the media because he said they were biased and presented him often in a bad light.

Rival network, GMA News, was not spared (see Figure 7). Unlike ABS-CBN, GMA's detractors are much more brazen by calling to "gather in the station's headquarters and kill all of employees..." (see Figure 7). This came about by just an article revealing Duterte's overall fitness which are seen as bias against the President. The comment may just be in jest but there were 14 people who "liked" it which is a sign of agreement to what the commenter was aiming to happen. The administrator of GMA News then replied by

tagging the Philippine National Police's page. This effort of the administrator was trying to divert the attention of those who were liking the post. With the continued interaction by people through liking the comment, it went up on top of the news feeds. However, with 20 more likes than the original commenter, the GMA News page was much more successful in gaining more interactions from either their supporters or those who really do not agree of the comment.

Other that established news networks, online social news network Rappler has also been under fire especially with Duterte's supporters. Rappler was seen as "anti-Duterte" since many of their articles pertain to the President's rather "unconventional" demeanor and rhetoric. Upon close observation, the reactions of these individuals and groups are short bursts of political "brashness" against the media.



Figure 6 Facebook Group which Called for a Boycott of ABS-CBN for Alleged Bias

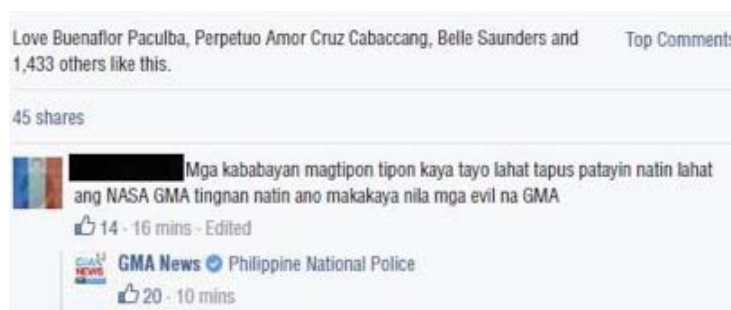


Figure 7 A Supporter of the President Called People to Attack GMA Employees



Figure 8 A Supporter Saying the Bias of Rappler.com on their Various Coverages of Duterte



Figure 9 Mocha Uson in Blog

While most individuals focused on posting status updates, speaking their minds through the comments box or reacted by liking or sharing, one particular person has taken the rhetoric to a whole new level. She is Margaux Uson or popularly known for her stage name as “Mocha Uson”. She is a former member of a sexy dance group and now a confessed supporter of the President. Her blog “Mocha Uson Blog” gained ground in the late 2010s because of the sexual topics she discusses. However, in media interviews, she is

now a self-confessed volunteer for the present administration. Just recently, Uson talks about Duterte and anything under sun. Moreover, she gets more attention in Facebook where she shares her blog posts. She is very vocal about her dismay with the mainstream media. Such as seen in Figure 9 wherein she described established news organizations as “presstitutes” which, according to her, are journalists or news outfits which profess fairness and balance in reporting but have personal, political, or corporate goals in mind.

Another scathing tirade from Uson was a tweet she posted last July 3 where she said (see Figure 10) authentic journalism is not learnt in school. This post earned a mixed bag of reactions from journalists and netizens but mostly against her argument.



Figure 10 Mocha Uson in Twitter

Her posts were in response to the political bias that the mainstream media have been presenting in their news programs. According to her, the media have been unfair to Duterte in various social and political issues. Mainstream news writers are deliberately diverting people's attention from Duterte's platforms by highlighting perceived bad news, which she explicitly writes in her numerous posts. Other than expressions of support and selecting certain news which she perceives as helpful to Duterte's image, her posts were more of attacks on the credibility of the mainstream media to be balanced, fair, and ethical in presenting the news.

Uson's repeated and often escalating "attacks" against the news media, in general, sets the agenda against the perceived political propaganda and bias of the mainstream media. Despite these, the apparent silence of the news media against the online bombardments against them further enhanced or reinforced the resolve of the anti-media. This is where

the tables are turned whereby the agenda setting of the news media pushes stories out of the public's interests, the anti-media pushes their own interest for the public to understand and believe in the long run.

DISCUSSION

The Philippine news media is definitely on the ropes with the emergence of the anti-media movement in the country. The researcher has found 3 main factors to the emergence of the anti-media movement in the Philippines. One is the proliferation and increased usage of the internet. The penetration of the internet in the country and the easy access that cheap smart gadgets offer to everyone has given the freedom to ordinary people to voice out their problems against the mainstream media's abuse of their vested power. The internet is a way for "netizens" to prevent both setting and cutting done by news organizations which have pre-set prejudices, both internal and external influencers, and biases which prevent the whole picture from being presented to the general public.

The second factor is the use of the tools from the internet specifically websites and social media. The features of these tools enabled supporters of then candidate Duterte to further their candidate's popularity especially in the online space. The tools such social media and easy website creation lead the way for people to either congregate to support a cause or to spread propaganda. Social media's popularity is a come on for interest groups to engage with almost everyone and including the mainstream

media. With algorithms which alter the agenda for who interacts most to a thumbs up icon which presents opportunities for popularity for good or for the worst. It is also a way of hyping the anti-media sentiment through constant bombardment of posts, comments or general interactions such as likes or shares. With this “trending” technique, there is also a trend which developed where like minded individuals continue to interact, converse or argue in much the same way. In this case, Duterte’s supporters have tried to convey an “anti-media” message in a lot of engagements in Facebook. One salient example is the rise of Mocha Uson as the most vocal critic of the news media from posting her opinions in her own webpage even going further by suggesting new words to describe the mainstream news organizations.

The third is the relatively free access that the tools have given to the people. With the deep penetration of social media in the Filipino society, the power to express thoughts, opinion or even news events have been ever so free nowadays. It is free to register for an online account and use it as platform to say whatever a user wants. A website is free in most cases. Through the democratization of message platforms, the assumption that the media had a monopoly on information is now a thing of the past. It is also free for almost anyone to set, cut, and frame the agenda. Thus, setting and framing of the news media for decades have been challenged by the audience doing its best to “re-frame” the agenda through their interactions in social media or putting up

numerous sites to counter all, if not most, of the mainstream media offers on their newspapers, broadcast networks, or online. The researcher also surmises that the disappointment in the mainstream media, brought about years of agenda setting, instigated a form of social mobilization.

CONCLUSION

The concept of the “anti-media” in the Philippines may not be a well established community, organization, or even recognized as a sector of the society. It may seem like a form of rebellion or a collection of bullies against the mainstream media but it shows how the country enjoys the concept of democracy and freedoms that come with it. Added to the mix is the role of technology that has eventually freed the common person from just receiving information to being a contributor and active agenda setter. Basically, they are part of a grass roots movement composed of ordinary, interconnected people, acting to set the agenda powerful, traditional, mainstream media would otherwise not present.

However, the emergence of the anti-media then brought into the fore some repercussions which has been further reinforced by President Duterte’s rhetoric and attitude on the media. One effect is on the formation of political opinions by the virtue of repeated bombardment of polarized and uninformed views of certain issues of the society. Another is the abuse of freedoms afforded by the internet’s tools such as social media to promote one’s

agenda in the expense of other people's opinions. Lastly, the apparent "challenging" or questioning of the established norms in journalism, ethics, and even civility.

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