

The imaginative dimension of digital disinformation: Fake news, political trolling, and the entwined crises of Covid-19 and inter-Asian racism in a postcolonial city

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Abstract

This article uses the concept of the 'imaginative dimension of digital disinformation' to explore how inter-Asian racism in a postcolonial city matters to the way people engage with racially tinged Covid-19 digital disinformation. It pays attention to two key socialities that fake news and political trolling online seek to weaponise people's existing social narratives as well as their relationally embedded practices of media consumption. Drawing on 15 life story interviews with locals from the Philippines capital of Manila, this article characterises their interpretations of online dis-information campaigns that aim to amplify their shared social narrative of resentment towards China and bank on their communicative practices surrounding this. It also aims to show the value of empirical research that possesses a transnational sensibility in assessing the interpretive and social dynamics surrounding such racist Covid-19 digital disinformation.

Keywords

Covid-19 pandemic, fake news, inter-Asian racism, political trolling, social media, social narratives

In line with the special issue theme of 'Covid-19: The cultural constructions of a global crisis', this article underscores the value of a transnational sensibility in addressing how digital disinformation has mediated the entwined crises of the Covid-19 pandemic and heightened racism of this contemporary moment. This kind of sensibility entails attending to the links between the racial dynamics at play in our increasingly toxic information ecosystem and the entanglements of cross-cultural racial hierarchies across the world. Concretely, it necessitates expanding the discussion on racially tinged fake news and political trolling online beyond global North countries like the USA and the UK (for example, Gao and Liu, 2020; Yen et al., 2021). It means also being attuned to the diverse, long-

standing, and complicated multicultural tensions in global South contexts (for example, Ong and Lin, 2017; Yen et al., 2021).

To contribute to developing such a transnational sensibility, this article looks at the case of the Philippines. Emphasising the ‘imaginative dimension of digital disinformation’ (Cabañes, 2020) – that is, the cultural, emotional, and narrational roots of this pernicious communicative phenomenon – it examines why inter-Asian racism in this postcolonial country matters when people encounter racially tinged Covid-19 digital disinformation. It focuses on the way that locals in Philippines’ capital of Manila consume fake news and political trolling that link the recent influx of Chinese nationals migrating to the city to the ongoing pandemic. For several reasons, this case is a meaningful empirical context for thinking through the role that digital disinformation plays in the twin crisis of the pandemic and of racism.

First, the Philippines continues to be a global innovator of digital disinformation strategies. A big tech leader once described it as the ‘patient zero in the global disinformation epidemic’ (Harbath, 2018). Currently, its disinformation industry has become even more entrenched under the populist regime of President Rodrigo Duterte, wherein digitally amplifying the vitriolic and toxic elements of divisive political rhetoric has become normalised (see Jereza and Perrino, 2020). Second, the country has been also been a global hotspot of Covid-19. It has unfortunately been one of the top countries as regards the number of active cases and deaths in what the World Health Organization labels as the Western Pacific region (WHO, 2021). Finally, and crucial to the discussion here, it is a postcolony with a long history of complicated inter-Asian racism, with Filipinos having their own postcolonial brand of skin-tone based racial hierarchies of themselves and their cultural others (Laforteza, 2015). Included in this is the storied relationship between Filipinos and Chinese, which predates the formation of the Philippines as a country during the Spanish colonial period (Wickberg, 2002).

In this article, I build on two sets of writing. For one, I connect with the set of recent popular pieces that have done the important work of attending to how digital disinformation content links together people’s Covid-19 fears and anti-Chinese sentiments (for example, Cook, 2020; Ruiz, 2021). They provide crucial insights into the ‘production side’ of digital disinformation, which is about the ways that creators of fake news and political trolling campaigns online weaponise people’s predominant social narratives related to the pandemic and to racism. I complement these pieces by providing an empirically grounded account of how Filipino social media users construe Covid-19 related anti-Chinese digital disinformation. I generate insights as regards the ‘consumption’ of digital disinformation in two ways: first, by identifying the actual social narratives they draw on in interpreting such politicised content; and second, by establishing the broader social context within which these interpretation practices are embedded.

The other set of writing I connect with is the journalism studies literature that argues for the importance of attending to the social dynamics that are central to people's responses to digital disinformation (for example, Duffy et al., 2019; Wagner and Boczkowski, 2019). These studies reveal that when people encounter digital disinformation online, their social relations matter not only in how their interpretations are formed. They also matter in whether and how they eventually express and/or act on these interpretations. I push this discussion further with my work that is situated in the multicultural realities of a postcolonial capital city such as Manila. I generate insights on the ways that racially tinged pandemic digital disinformation might shape and be shaped by a societal context wherein race is a 'vexed but ambiguous thing, omnipresent yet hard to pin down' (Rafael, 2015). Indeed, many Filipinos tend to implicitly subscribe to well-entrenched racial hierarchies of themselves and their cultural others, while being loath to talk about it openly in public.

To summarise, this article helps to further a transnational sensibility in studying racist digital disinformation across the world. As an empirical case, it spotlights the sociality of how local residents in the Philippines capital of Manila engage with Covid-19 related fake news and political trolling about the recent influx of Chinese migrants in the city. Using the concept of the imaginative dimension of digital disinformation, it identifies the social narratives that the city's local residents draw from in interpreting online content that maliciously entwines Covid-19 and anti-Chinese racism. It also characterises socially embedded media consumption practices that contextualise their interpretation of such disinformation.

The imaginative dimension of digital disinformation and the sociality of media consumption

Taking seriously the imaginative dimension of digital disinformation means going beyond defining this communication phenomenon as a distortion of information. As mentioned earlier, the notion of the imaginative here harkens to the cultural, emotional, and narrational roots of fake news and political trolling online. To look into it, one has to consider how digital disinformation is enmeshed in human sociality, defined here as the way that persons constitute their lives within a dynamic matrix of relations (Long and Moore, 2012). In line with this, I want to develop two key analytical points when it comes to assessing the socialities specifically involved in the imaginative dimension of how audiences engage with fake news and political trolling online. This should allow us to better understand how the locals of Manila engage with content that blames the recent influx of Chinese migrants for the spread of Covid-19 in the city.

The first point has to do with how digital disinformation seeks to connect with people's existing shared social narratives. This is because the vulnerability of people to certain kinds of fake news and political trolling content has less to do with them being 'dumb audiences', and more to do with how these

communicative techniques are resonant with, dissonant from, or contrapuntal to certain shared social narratives to which they subscribe (see Livingstone, 2018). The second point has to do with how fake news and political trolling content seek to connect with people's relational socialities in consuming media. This is because, even in our time when people are increasingly moving toward 'personal' media technologies like mobile phones and social media apps, the interpretations that they bring to bear on such content are embedded in the broader social context of media consumption practices (see Miller et al., 2016). I develop each of these points below.

On shared social narratives and media interpretations

Central to understanding how audiences consume digital disinformation are the powerful shared social narratives that people draw on for imagining the world they live in and, crucially, what they are able to do in such a world (Jameson, 1981). For the discussion at hand, the most relevant of these shared social narratives are 'deep stories' (Hochschild, 2016). This concept refers to how individuals portray the socio-political world to themselves and to others, including who they are, what values they hold and, ultimately, what their place in such a society is (for parallel discussions, see Norris and Inglehart, 2019; Pilkington, 2016).

What makes deep stories important in audiences' consumption of digital disinformation is that they underpin people's interpretation of political – and politicised – media content. As Kreiss et al., argue, we have to ask: 'where do [people's] identities, feelings, and passion stem from, how are they created and sustained, and why do they take the expressive forms that they do?' (Kreiss et al., 2017: 476). In the case of the local residents of Manila and their encounters with anti-Chinese Covid-19 digital disinformation, the interview data – which I will discuss in detail later on in this article – reveal that the primary deep story involved is a narrative of resentment towards the Chinese government that, unfortunately, sometimes extends to a resentment towards Chinese nationals and even to Filipinos with Chinese heritage or descent (henceforth, Chinese-Filipinos).

This narrative of resentment is borne out of the distinct postcolonial condition of the Philippines in general, and of Manila as a capital city in particular. For one, despite the country's formal independence, it continues to be asymmetrically entangled in the geopolitical competition of China as its neighbour and emerging global power and of the United States of America (USA) as its former coloniser and long-standing global power (Tolentino and Ham, 2015). The Philippines government under President Rodrigo Duterte has attempted to navigate this entanglement by signalling its desire for closer relations with China, ostensibly because of how the country has been exploited by the USA (Tan, 2021). Many Filipinos, however, are much more resentful of China because, amongst many things, it has ignored the 2016 decision of the United Nations Permanent Court of

Arbitration on the territorial disputes about the West Philippine Sea, which ruled in favour of the Philippines and which the USA has claimed to support (Dreisbach, 2019). There is also the multicultural dynamics of Manila that is distinct from its global North counterparts, where many foreigners and migrants are marginalised both economically and symbolically (for example, see Georgiou, 2020; Lentin and Titley, 2011). In this postcolonial capital, there has been a long history of foreigners and migrants being economically superior to the locals (Connaughton et al., 1995; Irving, 2010; Wilson, 2004). This has bred resentment among the locals, who now tend to symbolically marginalise those whom they consider as their cultural others or as cultural minorities (for example, see Kim, 2016; Thapan, 2002).

Entwined with the above, the narrative of resentment that Filipinos draw on is also premised on a pernicious amalgam of imaginaries about China as a state and of diverse Chinese people (for comprehensive accounts of the historical development of these imaginaries, see Ang See and Ang See, 2019; Chu, 2021; Hau, 2017). One is, as mentioned earlier, about the rise of communist China as an emerging global superpower and its increasingly assertive claims about the West Philippine Sea and other territories in Asia. Second is the long-standing trope of the 'untrustworthy Chinaman' borne out of the physical and social exclusion of the Chinese in Manila during the almost 400-year Spanish colonial regime from the 1500s to the 1800s. Third is the trope of the 'disloyal' Chinese that is enmeshed with the complicated feelings that non-Chinese Filipinos have with the rapid socio-economic ascent of many in the Chinese-Filipino community, which gained momentum during the almost 50-year American colonial period in the early to mid-1900s and continues today.

The strategies of the earlier anti-China digital disinformation campaigns from the 2019 Philippines midterm elections, thought to be propagated by anti-government camps, are also indicative of the presence of the above-mentioned narrative (Ong et al., 2019; see also Dang, 2021). Surmising that President Duterte's close relationship with the Chinese government is one of the very few weak points in his broad populist appeal, the people behind these campaigns have produced content that sought to marshal the nationalist fervour of Filipinos. These connected with the public's worries about the incursions of the Chinese military into the West Philippine Sea and the Chinese nationals migrating to Manila and taking away jobs from working-class Filipinos. Importantly, these also drew on the long-standing Sinophobia of Filipinos, which has conflated the Chinese government, Chinese nationals, and Chinese-Filipinos.

In the second half of this article, I flesh out the complicated ways in which local Filipinos in Manila articulated and drew on this narrative of resentment towards China, particularly as they interpreted digital disinformation that linked the Covid-19 pandemic to the recent increase in the migration of Chinese nationals to the city. I also show that whether the locals leaned towards supporting or opposing the Duterte administration, the disinformation that connected with the said

narrative harmfully eroded the positive value that should be associated with the notion of being 'anti-racist'.

On social contexts and media consumption practices

Alongside identifying the social narratives that audiences draw on in interpreting digital disinformation, it is also important to characterise the socialities within which their media consumption practices are embedded. A good starting point for this is to contextualise their access to fake news and political trolling content.

In the case of digital media access in the Philippines, the relatively poor telecommunications infrastructure in the country means that, despite its growing internet penetration rate – 67% in 2021, up by 6.1% from 2020 (Kemp, 2021) – most of its 111 million people only have what can be called a 'good enough access' (Uy-Tioco, 2019). To be sure, those in the middle and upper classes have relatively stable internet connection. However, an intermittent and limited internet connection – often prepaid, and with credits bought and budgeted in daily increments – tends to be the norm for users belonging to the lower class, who comprise 58% of the population (see Albert et al., 2018). This is also true, although to a lesser degree, of those users belonging to the so-called 'precarious middle class', who comprise 37% percent of the population (Albert et al., 2018).

Despite these challenging digital conditions, 99.8% of Filipinos who are online are very engaged with social media. Almost all of them have accounts on YouTube (97.2%), Facebook (96.8%), and Facebook Messenger (92.1%) (Kemp, 2021). These platforms are, of course, often characterised as hotbeds of digital disinformation. Equally material, Filipinos spend the most time on social media, at an average of 4 hours and 15 minutes per day (Kemp, 2021). Because of this, the Philippines has been called the world's 'most social country'.

The key implication of the kind of access described above is that Filipinos who have some kind of privilege of being online seek to maximise it. One can argue that this exposes them to much digital disinformation. But it can also be said that it exposes them to much information (see Chua, 2021). As the data that I will discuss later on indicate, what makes individuals vulnerable to fake news and political trolling content is how they do what they construe as 'fact-checking', labelling particular facts as 'truths' and others as 'lies'. This partly depends on the shared social narratives they draw on. But at the same time, this also depends on the people in their social media network and how many of them amplify, challenge, or negotiate these narratives (see David et al., 2019). Indeed, the socialities within platforms like Facebook tend to have an outsize influence on what Filipinos count as news or not because many of them do 'not have a strong history of journalism and news use' (David et al., 2019: 12).

The other key thing to note about how people consume digital disinformation is that it is not constituted of one single determinate moment where they think about

what the content means. Instead, their thoughts about fake news and political trolling develop over time and within reach of the influence of other people around them, beyond those in their social media networks. There has not been much scholarly work about such kinds of socialities of digital disinformation consumption, including on the Philippines. Extant scholarship has taken a primarily informational approach to disinformation (for example, see Ireton and Posetti, 2018). This is of course important, but so is an imaginative approach.

In the data and analysis sections then, I attend to two entwined socialities central to how the locals of Manila engaged with anti-Chinese Covid-19 related digital disinformation. I show that, unfortunately, these tended to entrench the narrative of resentment towards China, which I established in the preceding discussion. One of these socialities has to do with a predominant dynamic in Filipino society that prioritises the maintenance of smooth interpersonal relationships (Mulder, 2011). This dynamic – shared in varying degrees with other Southeast Asian cultures, such as the Thais and Javanese – is often characterised by conflict avoidance. This is meant to help people maintain their inner personal cores in a social milieu where strong communally oriented personhoods are prioritised. As the data revealed, one unfortunate consequence of this is that Filipinos found it difficult to confront what have become normalised and casual racist articulations – such as labelling Chinese nationals as smelly and unhygienic or Chinese-Filipinos as greedy and disloyal (see Chu, 2010) – because this might create social tension. This had key implications for how Manila's locals consumed toxic disinformation online, as it created a disconnect between their views and practices about such content and their everyday conversations with others about these.

The other important sociality has to do with how public discourse in Manila – and the Philippines more broadly – does not seriously attend to the issues that emerge from the cultural diversity in the country. In comparison to its neighbouring multicultural cities in Southeast Asia for instance, the Philippines' capital does not have a well-developed public discourse about race and ethnicity (see Walton et al., 2020). This is because the predominant preoccupation in most of the country is driven by a postcolonial nationalism, seeking to establish a singular and unifying cultural identity that all Filipinos can share. This elides discussions about both the internal cultural diversity of local Filipinos and that of their growing migrant population (see Teodoro in PNS, 2010). Consequently, the data showed that the kind of 'resources for judgement' that the media – that is, both mainstream media and social media – provided for Manila's locals tended to be those that featured flashpoint issues, such as the West Philippine Sea and the Covid-19 pandemic (see Silverstone, 2013). They did not provide enough sensemaking content for the locals to have a nuanced understanding of the long and storied relationship between Filipinos and Chinese that could blunt the impact of problematic digital disinformation.

Methodology

The article is part of a broader project that I conducted with two other researchers about the weaponisation of deep stories in the Philippines. Driven by an ‘ethnographic spirit’, our research team explored, from the bottom up, the ways in which the engagement of Manila’s locals with fake news and political trolling content were embedded in their personal lives and, crucially, how they saw their lives entwined with wider social, cultural, and historical formations (see Gillespie, 2005). For the current discussion, I draw on the data from 15 online life story interviews of local Filipinos residing in the Philippines capital of Manila. I particularly focus on those concerning the imaginative dimension of the participants’ engagement with digital disinformation linking the recent influx of Chinese migrants to Manila to the challenging Covid-19 situation the city has experienced. These data include the backstory of the participants, the shared social narratives they brought to bear in interpreting news and political trolling content, and the context of their social media consumption practices.

In selecting the participants, our research team used purposive sampling in looking for individuals who could best address our research questions (Oliver, 2006). Through the help of several key informants, we were able to reach participants who: (1) were Filipino citizens of voting age, since much of the digital disinformation in the Philippines is geared towards producing electoral outcomes; (2) had either mobile or desktop access to at least one social media account for at least one year prior to the research project, so that they had experiences to draw from as regards encountering disinformation online; and (3) were from the so-called ‘precarious middle class’ – those with monthly household incomes ranging from PHP 15,780.00 (approx. USD 310.00) to PHP 78,900.00 (approx. USD 1560.00) (Albert et al., 2018) – as the kind of ‘good enough’ access they had afforded them relatively greater capacity to engage in socio-political relations in social media.

Second, and within our purposive sample, our research team aimed for maximum variation in terms of the participants’ age, sexual orientation, level of education, occupation, political orientation, and religious beliefs. In doing this, we hoped to highlight the unique experiences of each participant, while also seeing significant shared patterns that cut across their individual cases (Patton, 2015). We did manage to reach a diverse set of participants, but were unable to involve individuals over 45 years old. We surmise that this was because of hesitancy among this age group about having to participate in an online interview via Zoom.

Articulating the narrative of resentment

This section begins to flesh out the imaginative dimension of how Manila’s locals engaged with anti-Chinese Covid-19 digital disinformation. In the ensuing discussion, I elaborate on the ways that the interview participants drew on and articulated what I established earlier as a shared social narrative of resentment,

which problematically amalgamates the Chinese government, Chinese nationals who have migrated to Manila, and Chinese-Filipinos. I show how this perniciously racist narrative worked differently for the participants depending on their political stance, that is, whether they leaned towards supporting or opposing the Duterte government. I also underscore, however, that political stances notwithstanding, this narrative's interaction with the kinds of fake news and political trolling that the participants saw eroded for all of them the positive value that should be unequivocally associated with being anti-racist.

It is important to note that the political stances of most of the interview participants were unlike the impression that one might get on social media, where Filipinos seem to be heavily polarised by the country's personality-oriented politics. Online, many commenters are either pro-Duterte (derisively called 'Dutertards' for being supposedly blind followers of Duterte) or anti-Duterte (derisively called 'yellowtards' for being supposedly blind followers of the yellow-themed opposition Liberal Party). The participants' views better aligned with extant works that characterise Filipinos as having low political polarisation (see Arugay and Slater, 2018; Curato, 2018). They did have leanings towards being supportive or not of the Duterte government. These leanings were too nuanced, however, to be categorically labelled as strictly pro- or anti-Duterte. The participants were also often informed by thinking that the divisions in the Philippines were not necessarily about the polarisation of ordinary citizens, but about the personality-driven politics of the country's oligarchs.

Take for example Amielhyn (female, 24, administrative assistant), who said that she was not really a supporter of the Duterte government. But even so, she was cognisant of the faults of previous administrations. As a concrete example, Amielhyn talked about the Philippines' public debt. She said that while it was true that the country's debt was currently huge, 'this was also not addressed during the previous administrations', including the most recent one led by the Liberal Party, which is now emblematic of the opposition. This paralleled the opinion of Janzen (male, 36, office staff), even if he expressed greater support for the Duterte government. He said that one should not blame one's personal fortunes on whichever 'Pontius Pilate' was in power. Annoyed by those who keep on complaining about the government, Janzen said that he would never ask of any politician, 'Hey, you need to make me rich right now' or that 'Hey, you need to make all Filipinos rich and give them a million pesos [or approximately USD 50,000.00] each.'

That said, leaning towards being supportive or not of the Duterte government did play a role in how the participants articulated and drew on the narrative of resentment when they engaged with the anti-Chinese Covid-19 digital disinformation. This was because of how the Philippines' political camps were positioned vis-à-vis the Chinese government. As discussed earlier, the Duterte government – at least on the surface – had tried to take a friendly stance towards China, while those opposed to the government had taken an anti-China stance.

A peculiar implication of this was that with regard to the issue of anti-Chinese racism, the supporters of the often-demonised, authoritarian-leaning, and populist Duterte government seemed to have taken the position of the anti-racist. This was because of its protective stance towards China and, by extension, the Chinese migrants in Manila. An exemplar of digital disinformation that campaigned for this stance was this Facebook post – and its several variations – showing sympathy for the plight of Chinese nationals (see Figure 1). While most of the post was in English, the first paragraph was written in Taglish (that is, a mix of Tagalog and English), which read:

I'm sad. We have Chinese neighbours in our condominium, and just now we came across a male (Chinese) with 2 kids. They should've been first to use the elevator, having gotten there first But when he saw us (Filipinos) behind him, he and his kids stepped back and stayed behind. They didn't go together with us. I heard the kids asked their dad why, but he just shushed them. So painful for the heart. (sic)

This 'copy-paste' fake news material began to spread all over the social media platform when the Covid-19 pandemic began taking hold in the Philippines around March 2020.

Meanwhile, the supporters of the anti-government camp, associated primarily with the opposition Liberal Party, sometimes crossed the line and extended their anti-China government stance to an anti-Chinese people stance. This can be seen in a Facebook comment on a photo featuring facemasks that Chinese businesspeople were giving away for free to residents of Manila (see Figure 2(a)). Echoing anti-Chinese trolls, one user's comment in Tagalog read: 'You can have your facemasks just leave the Philippines' (sic) (see Figure 2(b)). This was a characteristic expression of frustration from those who did not support Duterte, stemming from the perception that his stance towards China might be his only weakness, given that no other critique seems to stick to his 'Teflon' populist political image and performance.

In light of the above, the participants who leaned towards being pro-Duterte had a tendency to make a quick – and tenuous – equivalence between being supportive of the current regime and being better than the 'racist opposition'. They tried to establish this primarily by contrasting themselves to those whom they labelled as 'anti-government trolls'. For these participants, the bigotry of the said trolls was made obvious by their endless nitpicking over Duterte's cosy ties with China and his welcoming stance towards the Chinese migrants. The participants reasoned that the president's China-friendly stance was such a small thing compared to the how well the government was being run. Andrew (male, 27, sales executive), said that 'the relationship between the Philippines and China is not the biggest problem of our country anyway'. Maikah (female, 22, housewife) also echoed this sentiment, saying, 'President Duterte's close

relationship with China is the only real issue I have with him. But otherwise, I agree with everything else he has done.'

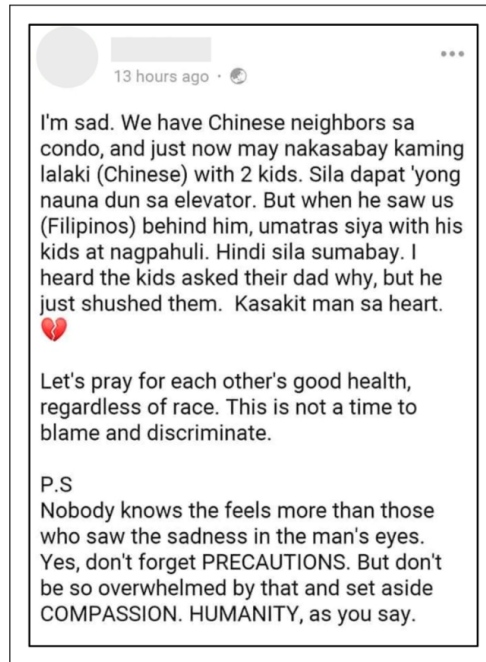


Figure 1. A copy-paste Facebook post in support of the Chinese nationals who have migrated in Manila

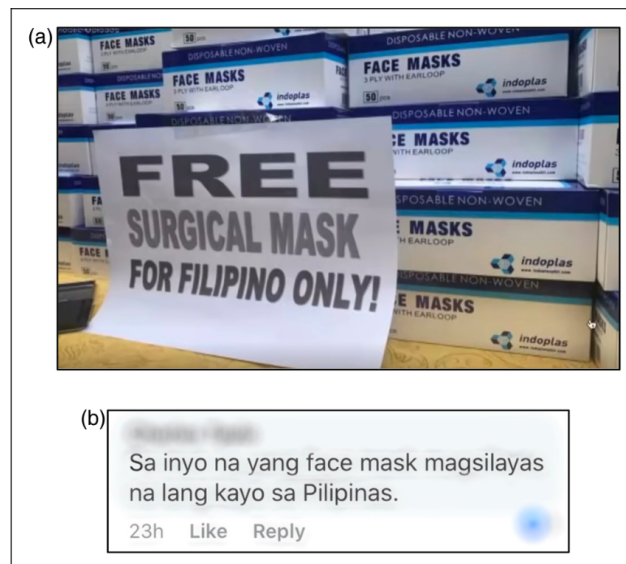


Figure 2(a) and (b). (a) A Facebook photo featuring facemasks that Chinese businesspeople were giving away for free to residents of Manila; (b) A Facebook comment on the photo in Figure 2(a)

At the same time, however, these participants' minimising of China as an issue seemed primarily geared towards defending their supportive stance towards Duterte. They would still actually articulate the narrative of resentment, affirming some of the digital disinformation content connecting the spread of Covid-19 in Manila with the influx of Chinese migrants into the city. For example, Agatha (female, 40 insurance advisor) complained that 'the problem is that our government sometimes gives more priority to foreigners like the Chinese than to us. It's not fair.' She then went on to say: 'It's really the Chinese who brought in the virus [into the country], so we shouldn't trust them as much as possible.' Marisol (female, 29, administrative assistant) discussed a parallel issue, expressing her concern that although it was not necessarily wrong for the government to seek close ties with another government, she felt that the Philippines was being made into 'a Province of China'. She also expressed dismay the country's openness to Chinese migrants made going to Manila's popular class Divisoria shopping area feel 'like being in China ... because there's so many Chinese stall owners there', without acknowledging that some of them were actually Chinese-Filipinos. She also said that this overwhelming presence of the Chinese forced her to be constantly careful and to 'always wear my face mask and face shield ... [as] I wouldn't know what do anymore if those things didn't work.'

As for the participants who leaned towards being anti-Duterte, they tended to discount the so-called anti-racism of pro-government supporters as nothing more than a product of being blind followers of the current regime. Meanwhile, they characterised themselves as anti-racist as well, distancing themselves from anti-government disinformation that blamed Covid-19 on the Chinese. These participants were circumspect, nuancing their stand on the situation. An exemplar of this would be Jackie (24, male, project officer) and his reflection on the role of China in the spread of Covid-19 in the Philippines and the rest of the world. He said, 'It's hard to say anything [about the Chinese government's direct involvement in the spread of Covid-19], since many of their own have died. But if it's about whether they made the situation worse, yes definitely. They could've addressed it better.' There is also Edna (33, female, housekeeper), who said, 'Most probably it was just an accident that this one sick individual from China came over here [to Manila]. Most probably there wasn't a direct hand [of the Chinese government].'

However, there were times when the exasperation of these participants about the Covid-19 situation in Manila led them to cross the line and make remarks that validated, even if only subtly, the narrative of resentment. Armand (45, male, store supervisor), for one, said that there was nothing necessarily wrong with the Philippines and Chinese government having close ties. But he was frustrated with what he claimed was 90% of Chinese migrants 'being illegal, having no papers'. He would then link this with how Covid-19 spread in the country, saying that, 'It came from them and it has spread. They want to contain it, but unfortunately, it has just spread more and more.' This kind of assumption also led

Jackie (24, male, project officer) to explain that, although he did not condone the anti-Chinese sentiments on social media, he felt that ‘there are valid reasons why people say that.’ In the same vein, Edna (33, female, housekeeper) said that she ‘understand[s] why some would express opinions like that’ and that ‘since they’re the ones affected [by Covid-19] after all, it’s okay for them to express their feelings’.

Entrenching the narrative of resentment

In this section, I turn to the socialities that contextualised how locals in Manila interpreted anti-Chinese Covid-19 related digital disinformation. I flesh out what I introduced in the first half of this article as the two intertwined dynamics central to how the interview participants’ consumption of digital disinformation tended to further entrench the narrative of resentment about China.

As indicated earlier, the first of the two socialities relates to how many in Filipino society prioritise the maintenance of smooth interpersonal relationships and, consequently, the avoidance of overt confrontation (Mulder, 2011). In the case of the interview participants, this manifested in their disconnected views and practices about the racially tinged pandemic disinformation they saw online and the kinds of everyday conversations they had with the people around them.

On the one hand, the participants were unanimous in complaining about how toxic social media had become. They found the very politicised and very vitriolic content online off-putting. Some of them would ignore such content, skipping rather than clicking on these posts. Others moved to what they perceived as less toxic platforms, which was Facebook for those who leaned towards supporting Duterte and Twitter for those who leaned towards opposing Duterte. Among the toxic strands that the participants distanced themselves from was what they labelled as anti-Chinese fake news and political trolling. They said that they and those in their networks would never post nor engage with such content.

Andrew (male, 27, sales executive), for instance, talked about a meme he saw posted on Facebook trying to incite anger against the Chinese by featuring a supposed pool party in Wuhan, where the Covid-19 virus is said to have originated. He said, ‘there were many people who commented things like, “You’re the ones who spread [the virus] but now, you’re having a grand time!”’ When followed up about who these commenters were, Andrew was adamant that they were ‘strangers, not particularly related with me ... not even one of my friendlies, not even one of my friends, none, none, none, they weren’t the ones who posted those reactions.’ Edna (33, female, housekeeper), who also saw similar kinds of anti-Chinese content online, said that her family never talked about those kinds of things. She said that even her siblings who worked in Hong Kong did not engage with such stuff, as ‘they’re not really fond of posting those kinds of things on social media.’

On the other hand, one can glean from the participants' narratives how normalised it was for them to have conversations with those close to them – such as their family, friends, and co-workers – that involved the narrative of resentment. It seemed then that while they disapproved of publicly engaging in something confrontational like talking about race-related issues on social media, smooth interpersonal relationships meant that they did not stop their familiars from talking about it. And at times they participated in these conversations, with different levels of (dis)comfort. So even if the often-discussed affordances of social media did not necessarily lead the participants to boldly express their race-related sentiments online, the disconnect between their online and their everyday lives left unchecked the reinforcing dynamic between what they saw on the internet and the shared social narratives to which they subscribed.

Like some participants, Marisol (female, 29, administrative assistant) shared how she and her relatives would make what she described as harmless jokes about the Chinese. She recounted that because she got the Astra Zeneca jab and some of her cousins got the Sinovac jab, she teased them, 'Oh no, China will claim you! You'll just suddenly realise that you're in China already! You won't be Filipino anymore!' Marisol also told of a conversation she had with her husband when they observed Filipinos avoiding this condominium block that was said to house many Chinese migrants. They agreed that, 'Well, you can't blame [the locals], since the virus did really come from [the migrants] (laughs)'. Amielhyn (female, 24, administrative assistant) also recalled how this kind of talk was nothing new to her co-workers. Out of earshot of their Chinese-Filipino boss, she would cringe when some of her colleagues would speak about the 'chingchong' in reference to the Chinese. She also said that it was inevitable that their conversations would include discussions of the continuing unfair advantages the Chinese in the Philippines have, especially vis-à-vis the West Philippine Sea issue and the pandemic issue.

The second related sociality I previously introduced is how public discourse in the Manila – and the Philippines more broadly – does not seriously attend to the issues that emerge from the cultural diversity in the country (see Teodoro in PNS, 2010). Consequently, Manila's locals relied primarily on the 'resources for judgement' offered by both mainstream media and social media, which tended to focus on flashpoint issues and did not necessarily provide sensemaking content for a nuanced discussion of cross-cultural dynamics (see Silverstone, 2013). This was evident in the accounts of the interview participants.

To better contextualise the participants' recounting of where they drew their opinions from about anti-Chinese Covid-19 related digital disinformation, it is important for me to note that my research team's broader project also looked at the issue of historical distortion in digital disinformation, and particularly regarding the Martial Law period of the Philippines, from 1972 to 1981. For this other issue, the same set of participants would talk about a broad range of resources that underpinned their opinions. Despite being a contentious issue as well, it was

evident that public discourse deemed it necessary to be talked about. Indeed, the participants were familiar with many discussions that directly addressed the Martial Law era, even if in contesting and contradictory ways. These included, among many other things, school textbooks and the lessons that their teachers would build on these, local films that had cinema runs, and museum exhibitions in different parts of the country. The participants also mentioned having engaged conversations about this with their relatives, neighbours, and other close relations.

In contrast, none of the participants recalled a similar range of resources for understanding cross-cultural relations, including those between Filipinos and Chinese. Instead, their primary – and sometimes only – resource for this issue was the media, coupled with their often unreflective and often jokey conversations with people familiar to them. For example, Yellowbelle (female, 21, teacher), despite working in basic education, said that she derived her understanding of the issues between Filipinos and Chinese mostly from social media. She said, ‘I’ve heard so many issues on Philippine-China relations on social, like how the Philippines has now been loaned out to China, that China is subjugating us, that Covid[-19] is just a creation of China for them to make money.’ When asked if she thought these were disinformation, she replied, ‘I think they’re closer to the truth.’ As with other participants, Jackie (24, male, project officer) would also implicate the mainstream media in entrenching all the negativity. He said that he often found anti-Chinese adversarial framing ‘even in our news outlets’, especially as regards the issue of the West Philippine Sea. Jackie opined that, for him, this resonated with the kind of negativity that he saw from Twitter posters who spread toxic disinformation linking Chinese migrants to Covid-19. He said that this conflict-directed content got people confused and arguing against each other, ‘with some people saying that [this kind of coverage] is racist and unfair ... and some people say that it’s true [that China directly caused Covid-19]’.

Conclusion

This article aimed to contribute to establishing a transnational sensibility that would allow us to sketch out the role that digital disinformation plays in exacerbating the entwined crises of the Covid-19 pandemic and entangled racisms in different parts of the world, especially beyond the global North. It paid particular attention to the case of the Philippines capital of Manila, exploring how inter-Asian racism in a postcolonial context matters when people encounter racially tinged Covid-19 fake news and political trolling online.

Drawing on online life story interviews with 15 of Manila’s locals, this article spotlighted the complex operations of the shared social narrative of resentment towards China that underpinned their interpretation of online disinformation that entwined Covid-19 and anti-Chinese racism. I also shed light on the socialities that contextualised the digital disinformation consumption of Manila’s locals and

that, unfortunately, entrenched the pernicious racial tensions from the said narrative of resentment.

Through the empirical case that I have fleshed out in this piece, I hope to have demonstrated the value of taking seriously the imaginative dimension of digital disinformation. Research on this communicative phenomenon should really not just be about how fake news and political trolling content distort and pollute our contemporary information ecosystem. Those who particularly aim to look at audiences across the world – but especially in global South contexts – would do well to take a deep dive into the link between digital disinformation and two things. One is people’s shared social narratives, which should reveal the ways in which they might draw on different complicated entanglements of cross-cultural hierarchies. The other is the relational socialities within which people’s media consumption is embedded, which should reveal the distinct socio-cultural dynamics that might be at play in the ways in which the mediation of cultural diversity is increasingly being weaponised.

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