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Chasing the Wind?

Influence Operations Methodologies During the 2025 Midterm Elections

Jose Mari Hall Lanuza, Ferdinand L. Sanchez II, and Rowella Marri G. Berizo

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"A classroom of the Gasan Central School in Gasan, Marinduque converted into a polling station for the 2025 Philippine general election"

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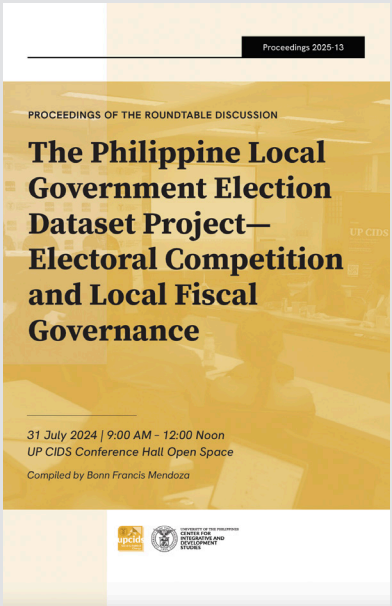

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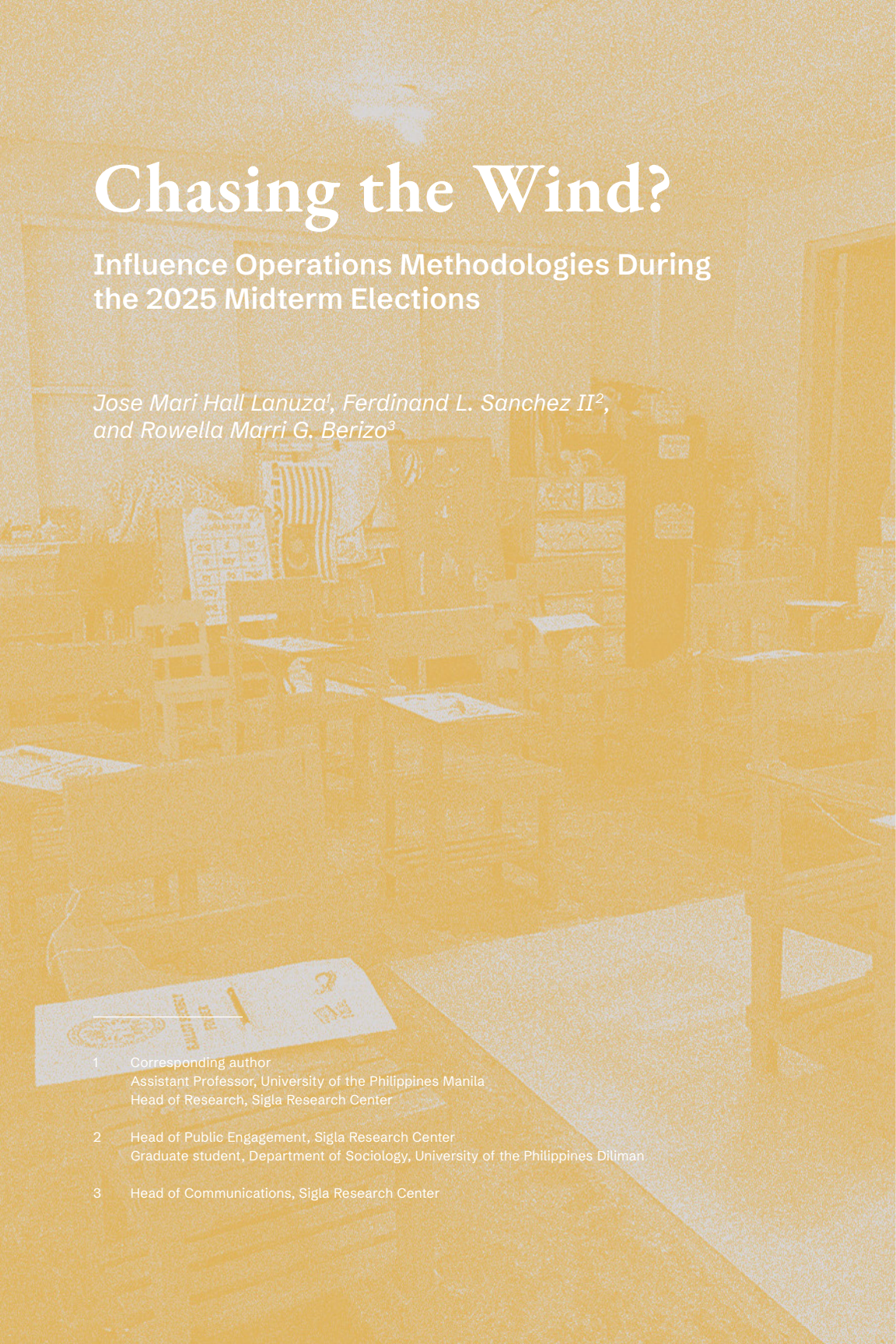
The Philippine Local Government Election Dataset Project—Electoral Competition and Local Fiscal Governance

Chasing the Wind?

Influence Operations Methodologies During the 2025 Midterm Elections

Jose Mari Hall Lanuza[1], Ferdinand L. Sanchez II[2], and Rowella Marri G. Berizo[3]



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Key Highlights

- The expansion of the campaign toolkit from mega-influencers in 2016 to micro- and nano-influencers in 2019, to knowledge influencers and influence operations blurring true-false dichotomies in 2022, has created sustained challenges to both regulating and studying electoral disinformation.

- The shutdown of national news channels has exacerbated information shortages in rural regions. Global political shifts towards social media platforms and disinformation research funding have only complicated these endeavors.

- The 2025 Philippine midterm elections saw not only the use of disinformation for campaigning amidst these challenges, but also the nascent use of generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) in online propaganda.

- We propose connective ethnography as a flexible methodological approach looking to capture the messiness of disinformation operations, simultaneously comparing vertical (national to sub-national) and horizontal (across sub-national) influence operations and centering long histories and sociopolitical realities on the ground.

- We draw from six months of online and offline fieldwork focused on local cases of emergent influence operations in select provincial elections in Luzon and Visayas to see how connective ethnography can capture the nuances of both electoral disinformation unique to localities and electoral disinformation transportable to both national and local scales.

- We reflect on both methodological and practical challenges hindering disinformation research, and provide recommendations for future research.

Introduction

How might we study electoral disinformation when its production is usually hidden, elusive, and simultaneously deployed across varying ethnoregional contexts? This paper examines the methodological challenges of researching electoral disinformation and influence operations (IOs) in the Philippines and proposes an alternative methodology. More specifically, and drawing from Sigla Research Center's multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork for the 2025 Philippine midterm elections, we position connective ethnography as both an advantageous methodological choice and an ethical imperative for critical, applied IOs research. Rather than centering questions of disinformation reach and post metrics, we highlight what crucial insights are surfaced when we examine how subnational media configurations enable the mapping of truthy (Colbert 2005; Zimmer 2010) master narratives (Levinger 2018) onto regional deep stories (Hochschild 2016) and ideological dialects (Tripodi 2022).

Current disinformation methodologies have been more quantitatively oriented (Marino and Iannelli 2023; Kapantai et al. 2021; Yu et al. 2023), producing valuable insights into the conditions that make interventions such as fact-checking and prebunking (preemptive debunking) successful (Barman and Conlan 2024). However, this unevenness in methodological orientation creates two weaknesses for the field of disinformation studies. First, it necessitates treating contemporary forms of manipulated information as discrete objects, false claims, or images with a digital trace. This has, in turn, led to a more technological and platform-determinist position (Caplan, Clark, and Partin 2020), overinflating the influence of platforms and reducing our understanding of electoral disinformation and IOs as simply a problem of problematic information supply. Second, it creates artificial study settings that only partially explain how audiences may react to encountering disinformation and IOs, but not how disinformation is produced to effectively deceive while skirting regulations. While studies on fact-checking efficacy employ experiments (see, for example, Liu et al., 2025; Walter et al., 2020) to rightfully see whether interventions work, they cannot spotlight the hidden processes of disinformation production (Ong and Cabañes 2018) or why certain populations become more exposed in banal ways (see Tripodi 2022). Simply put, while quantitative approaches provide us crucial insights into operation scales and intervention efficacies, qualitative orientations are better equipped to show why some disinformation narratives employed in IOs work, and how various actors in the media campaign loop react to these disinformation narratives. Meaningful long-term solutions need to wrestle with these questions.

This discussion paper proceeds as follows. First, we provide a short discussion of IOs as a more appropriate analytic concept, followed by a brief history of IOs in Philippine elections and the structural conditions that enable what we call the opacity double bind in conducting IOs research. We then discuss mainstream methods in IOs research, highlighting two strands of criticism: its proclivity towards a limited and isolated understanding of IOs, and its preference for platform-determined research data and directions. From here, we propose connective ethnography as a necessary shift in studying IOs. We expound on what this shift entails, what added value it contributes to mainstream methodologies, and why it is not only empirically necessary but also morally imperative to consider when designing Philippine IOs research. Next, we argue for connective ethnography's utility as a workaround to opacity double bind, through case studies from Cebu City, Cebu and Laoag City, Ilocos Norte. We conclude by showing why mainstream approaches fall short in Global Majority contexts and suggest ways to incorporate connective ethnography into current counter-IO initiatives.

Influence Operations and the Philippine Elections

Defining Influence Operations

While existing attempts to inclusively define disinformation[1] encompass broad operations and account for the three crucial elements of disinformation (harm, falsity, intention; Tucker et al. 2018), it is less explicit about the industrialized nature of disinformation production in countries like the Philippines. Broad definitions emphasizing decontextualization and fabrication as polar ends in a range of disinformation practices may also inaccurately forward the idea that sufficient interventions will range from fuller contextualization to debunking and information correction. We instead adopt IOs to more accurately account for disinformation-for-hire (Grohmann and Ong 2024) as a lucrative business.

IOs have traditionally been studied within propaganda and military information warfare. Contemporary scholarship links IOs to disinformation

1 Michael Hameleers (2022, 2) develops an inclusive definition of disinformation as "all practices of intentionally creating or disseminating deceptive content to cause harm, sow discord, or create financial and/or political gain . . . [it] may range from the decontextualization of known facts to the fabrication of alternative narratives."

in increasingly securitized ways, largely due to shifts in information and communication technology. Innovations in the information and media landscape have transformed both modern conflict and the conduct of foreign IOs (Bradshaw 2020). This definition accounts for new, social media-driven methods, albeit still conflict-centered. Many scholars similarly foreground states and terrorist organizations, reinforcing a securitized frame. Yet this narrow focus excludes nonmilitary contexts where IOs already thrive. Intentionally misleading content now circulates at scale within subnational settings, produced by nonstate, nonmilitary actors, and outside armed conflict. Contemporary IOs are better characterized by politicized deception conducted through mixed, networked production schemes—where disinformation and IOs converge.

We define IOs as "strategic communications that aim to hack attention, mobilize audiences, and influence electoral outcomes" (Ong et al. 2022). This definition still encompasses conflict-centered or foreign interference cases—such as the Pentagon exposé (Bing and Schectman 2024) or Chinese content creators spreading misleading videos on the West Philippine Sea (Chi 2024; McPherson and Lema 2025; Vitug 2025)—but also supports analysis of local media manipulation tactics produced through participatory or professional networks and shaped by illicit economies and flawed political processes. Such tactics are central to understanding contemporary Philippine campaign practices. Moreover, the "operations" aspect underscores intentionality: these efforts deliberately obscure, deceive, or confuse at scale. This enables a richer middle-outward analysis that complements top-down and bottom-up approaches, directing attention not only to disinformation content but also to structures of complicity and perpetration.

Influencing in Philippine Elections

From 2016 to 2022, the deployment of disinformation and IOs have evolved in response to regulations, public pressure, and more sophisticated media affordances. The report *Architects of Networked Disinformation* (Ong and Cabañes 2018) was the first study to highlight the role of advertising and public relations firms and mega-influencers in using networked disinformation for electoral campaigns during the 2016 presidential elections. In 2019, operations shifted from mega-influencers to micro- and nano-influencers to become more hidden and difficult to trace, in response to conscious response to civil society pressure towards social media platforms and government officials to sanction hyper-partisan mega-influencer accounts (Ong, Tapsell, and Curato 2019).

Within these two election cycles, disinformation largely involved presenting false content as true through decontextualization or fabricated texts and images.

During the 2022 national elections, there was a slight shift in electoral campaigns relying on media manipulation. Campaign operators relied on content which were not explicitly false but alluded to sensibilities tapped by persistent disinformation narratives. These operators expertly blended these with truthful claims. IOs allude to the professional nature of networked media manipulation campaigns and shift the conversation away from facticity and towards the salience of influential narratives. For example, in 2022, Imee Marcos published a series of "satirical" online skits where she and her influencer friends attacked a character named Len-Len, referring to then-presidential candidate Leni Robredo, the challenger to eventual presidential winner and Imee Marcos' brother, President Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos Jr. These skits involved spoofs reliant on gay humor, spliced videos, and disinformation narratives that have been seeded since 2016 (Ong et al. 2022). However, these skits by themselves did not necessarily lie, but only alluded to ideas related to disinformation against Robredo, skirting around disinformation regulations.

IOs also exploit similar individual and collective vulnerabilities and experiences—what Arlie Hochschild (2016) refers to as "deep stories." However, they professionalize this exploitation as a lucrative deception industry. For example, the false victimhood narrative of the Marcoses during the 2022 elections resonated with Filipinos supportive of Ferdinand Marcos Sr. and the Martial Law era (Dulay et al. 2023), in the same way pro-Duterte IOs in 2016 appealed to democratic anxieties (Thompson 2022; Curato 2016). Both the Marcos Jr. (Retona 2021) and the Duterte (Williams 2017) camps have been tied to networked IOs banking on these deep stories.

IOs encompass more traditional disinformation expressions (i.e., manipulated texts and images) along with newer forms of subtle attention hijacking, which, while not explicitly disinformation in form, nevertheless contributed to a broader information disorder. Along with the satirical skits discussed above, this includes influencer videos questioning the references of disinformation research papers and foreign social media reactors riding the news algorithms and creating misleading or incautious political commentary. Whereas previous electoral disinformation forms went against platform community standards, these exercises of IOs did not.

These previous investigations at the national level highlighted broad trends, but only hinted at what democratic anxieties were salient enough to drive support

for illiberal politics. For the 2025 elections, we looked at subnational contexts to see how national IOs mapped onto local election campaigns. Specifically, we looked at whether there were distinct local influencer actors and tactics yet to be mapped, and how local IOs localized national IOs narratives if they did. We found emergent methods of electoral media bypass—defined as strategic publication of campaign messaging across multiple social media platforms while also actively excluding traditional media platforms (Lanuza and Ong 2024, 189)—performed by both old and new influencer personalities and actors relying on social media platforms and hyperlocal media. We further found AI use in targeted political campaigns as election campaign regulations tried but ultimately struggled to catch up (Lanuza et al. 2025).

Structural Drivers of Political Influence Operations

We identify three major factors that shape regulatory environments, financial incentive structures, and service demand upkeep for IOs: one, media ownership orientations at a national and regional level (Lanuza & Arguelles, 2021); two, the presence of legislative opportunism as a barrier to effective and critical regulatory frameworks (Ong et al., 2022); and three, the open orientation of the Philippine advertising and public relations industry (Lanuza & Arguelles, 2021; Ong & Cabañes, 2018). A separate fourth factor external to the Philippines is social media platform orientations (Diaz Ruiz, 2023). These factors all find footing in enduring undemocratic institutions and free market practices in Philippine media and government. Together, they enable the disinformation-for-hire industry (Grohmann & Ong, 2024) to thrive and remain profitable, while also reinforcing the challenges to disinformation research.

Ownership is one of the measures of political parallelism, especially if owned by the state or a political party (Seymour-Ure 1974). Parallelism indicates how close media organizations are with what Seymour-Ure calls "general political tendencies," or more basically expressed as media content, defined as "the extent to which the different media reflect distinct political orientations in their news and current affairs reporting, and sometimes also their entertainment content" (Hallin and Mancini 2004). Media ownership thus matters since it signals (un)democratic distributions of communicative power, the presence and reliability of democratic safeguards, and the health of media markets (Baker 2006).

In 2001, Sheila Coronel wrote about how Philippine media have almost always been privately owned, a stark difference from traditions of state- and party-owned media in other regions. This claim remains true more than two decades later, as shown in the most recent media ownership monitor report in 2023 (Nuval 2024). More specifically, Philippine media is owned mostly by oligarchic families. Of the 24 owners listed by Media Ownership Monitor, 13 are political and economic elite families (2023). In the Philippines, political and economic circles greatly overlap and are mutually reinforced through informal relations, much like the rest of Southeast Asia (Slater 2010). In such instances, privately owned media can exercise a kind of power Rodney Benson (2016) calls "business instrumentalism," pertaining to how media owners can influence news and media content slant to benefit their business interests by selective promotion and omission. To illustrate this, Filipino journalists and fact-checkers have expressed how newsrooms have been more hesitant and anxious to publish critical news after the ABS-CBN shutdown under the Duterte administration (Lanuza and Fallorina 2025). This can lead to media coalescence towards authoritarian politicians to avoid loss of profit and audience support in the long run (Lanuza and Fallorina 2025), or to ensure self-preservation (Tapsell 2022) or certain levels of censorship in favor of political allies (McCoy 2009) in the short run. For example, Ross Tapsell's (2022) research on Philippine media elites showed how some media outlets did not overtly contest Duterte's attacks against certain media personalities or organizations, and instead maintained that "being friendly to power in order to achieve good business deals and maintain political connections is part-and-parcel of the business."

Legislative opportunism is defined as the hijacking of regulations by state leaders through moral panics to gain control over the digital environment (Ong 2021). In Southeast Asian countries, fake news laws have been weaponized to punish and deter government critics (Sombatpoonsiri and Luong 2022). The same can be said for the Philippines, where legislative efforts and hearings have benefited legislators more than civil society (Ong 2021). We see this legislative opportunism as a way for politicians to both perform involvement and attention to what is perceived as a major political problem, while also paving regulatory pathways that can shift the blame towards other actors—shielding their complicity from scrutiny in the process. In this case, there is no genuinely effective regulatory pathway paved.

On the other hand, we also see this legislative opportunism as a way to silence critics by enabling politicians to define who and what can be held accountable.

For example, during the Duterte administration, the government was found to have even engaged in amplifying "favorable misinformation" (Cho 2025) while also portraying critics as peddlers of disinformation, such as when journalists and civil society actors called out the government's COVID-19 response plan (Conde 2020). More recently, we saw how congressional allies of current President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. used legislative hearings as a witch hunt against pro-Duterte influencers (Lanuza et al. 2025). In the Philippine context, these so-called accountability approaches (Fallorina et al.,2023) pose risks to civil rights and liberties and obscure top-down involvement in IOs.

Thus, legislative opportunism not only hinders the process of enacting genuine, critical, and sociologically-informed regulation but also encourages selective IOs beneficial for select political interests. At its worst, legislative opportunism can harm civil rights and liberties when politicians malign critics as peddlers of disinformation and impose punitive responses like red-tagging or imprisonment. Crucially, legislative opportunism shields the most fundamental complicit actors: politicians and the advertising and public relations industry.

The advertising and public relations (ads and PR) industry plays a central role in Philippine IOs. In their report *Architects of Networked Disinformation*, Jonathan Ong and Jason Cabañes (2018, 2) described these architects as a "professionalized and hierarchized group of political operators who design disinformation campaigns, mobilize click armies, and execute innovative 'digital black ops' and 'signal scrambling' techniques for any interested political client." Other observed models of Philippine disinformation and IOs center on the state, politicians, and gig workers amplifying campaigns (Ong and Cabañes 2019), but over time, these models have also folded in ads and PR professionals at different levels of engagement and commitment. For instance, while some marketing professionals admit to having politicians as clients for their firms during the 2016 elections (Ong and Ventura 2022; Ong and Cabañes 2018), in subsequent election cycles, ads and PR experts—along with influencers—have consulted for state-sponsored disinformation (Tapsell, 2020) and politicians at the national and local level (Lanuza et al. 2025; Gaw et al. 2023; Ong et al. 2022). In some regions, emergent influencer economies operating without ads and PR firms converge around local influencer groups operating as firms in how they distribute gigs and opportunities or help set market prices (Lanuza et al. 2025). Since the main clientele for ads and PR firms engaging in disinformation-for-hire are politicians themselves, the ads and PR industry's shadowy campaign machinery activities are left relatively unchecked and out of reach for research transparency initiatives.

Finally, platform orientations also matter. IOs are partly driven by the business models of social media platforms. All social media platforms moderate content (Gillespie 2018) while also targeting users for advertising (Dawson 2021). The processes and motivations that shape these choices are mostly kept secret and broadly oriented towards profits. These conditions worsen the disinformation problem because, as argued by Carlos Diaz Ruiz (2023), media business models oriented towards the attention economy and sale of user data can nudge audiences towards content that eventually serves as gateways to misinformation. Journalist exposés of troll operations saw how electoral fake news production can be driven by click farm profits (see Silverman 2017) or microtargeted advertising, such as in the Cambridge Analytica scandal (Hern and Pegg 2018). How much platforms disclose about their algorithm and content moderation is determined by how powerful regulations are in their areas of operation. This uneven landscape of platform regulation means platform orientations can be especially challenging for researchers in areas with less coercive power over platforms, like the Global South.

Opacity Double Bind in Influence Operations Research

A persistent methodological challenge we have encountered in electoral disinformation research is the opacity double bind: the compounding effects of campaign finance opacity and platform opacity to the democratic exercises of elections and academic investigations into IOs. Much of what animates IOs is hidden behind regulatory weaknesses in campaign finance and platform discretion. Campaign finance opacity is secured by various intertwining actors: media outlets securing their survival through informal relations, politicians exercising legislative opportunism, and the ads and PR industry providing media and communications expertise for profiting on broad and targeted propaganda work. For example, in the 2022 Philippine general elections, cost estimations of influencer employment in political campaigns relied on secretive reporting by influencers and incomplete data from official sources like the Commission on Elections (Gaw et al. 2023).

Platform opacity is buoyed by social media platforms' status as multinational corporations operating outside of state power while inside state territories. Though we have seen states impose varying levels of control on these platforms, their ubiquity makes it difficult to completely remove platforms' influence on various information ecosystems globally. Moreover, (in)accessibility to

data is shaped by platform interests. Exclusion and constraints are not bugs in the code; they are features of the platform business model. For instance, Meta's removal of CrowdTangle has negatively impacted what researchers and journalists can do to hold Facebook more accountable (Pehlivan et al. 2025).

As academics, journalists, and counter-disinformation activists struggle with this opacity double bind, shadow politics, or "the dual structure of 'official' and 'unofficial' streams of campaign organization that can integrate diverse influence actors with the party campaign system" (Udupa 2024), is further entrenched. Multiple data constraints make comprehensive investigations nearly impossible. Investigative tenacity is rewarded with threats to job and personal security (Lanuza and Fallorina 2025). Given these constraints, how have IOs been studied in the Philippines?

Mainstream Methodologies

Mainstream disinformation research has favored quantitative approaches (Ha et al. 2021; Kapantai et al. 2021; Marino and Iannelli 2023; Yu et al. 2023), content analysis and detection (Mahl, Schafer, and Zeng 2023), or big data and experimental studies (Altay et al. 2023). In the largest recent systematic review of 1041 journal articles on disinformation, Broda and Stromback (2024) illustrated this comprehensive preference for Global North studies and quantitative approaches. According to their data, out of the 10 most coded countries, seven belong to either the United States or the European Continent (including the United Kingdom). China (3rd; 81 articles), India (4th; 68 articles), and Brazil (9th, 33 countries) represent the other three; noticeably missing are other Global South non-BRICS[2] areas, such as Sub-Saharan Africa or Southeast Asia. As for methods, 293 (28.2 percent) used computational methods, 211 (20.3 percent) used experiments, 203 (19.5 percent) used surveys, and 168 (16.1 percent) used quantitative content analysis, accounting for 84.1 percent of all articles surveyed. The rest used interviews or focus groups (6.5 percent) and qualitative content analysis (9.4 percent). In turn, these lead to two mutually-reinforcing criticisms: the tendency to have a limited and isolated understanding of IOs and their preference for platform-determined research data and directions.

2 Brazil, Russia, China, India, South Africa

Opacity double bind also shapes how mainstream disinformation has been researched, through constrained data access. Unlike government data or private firms' data, online activity data are accessible and convenient, though limited and platform-determined. This naturally attunes researchers to seek what can be mined, traced, and readily counted or identified. For example, in Southeast Asia and the Philippines, some social media like X (formerly Twitter) are more studied due to their accessibility (Tapsell 2020). This methodological narrowness imposed by data constraints problematically produces a race to isolate and catch what we call the disinformative moment, separate from broader social contexts. When scholars, journalists, and activists are forced to focus on just these data with limited methodological orientations, the fuller context of the IOs problem is missed. For instance, Broda and Stromback (2024) argue that while experiments are one of the more dominant approaches to studying disinformation, there is a shortage in using this method under realistic circumstances. For Maria Kyriakidou and colleagues, experimental approaches in the field of disinformation studies find their weakness in how they imagine disinformation audiences: as mere disinformation consumers, and not agentic engagers of flawed information as it relates to their daily experiences (2023). This separation of disinformation understanding from social contexts individualizes our view of disinformation vulnerability and limits our ability to understand disinformation audiences beyond the cultural dupe thesis.

In the Philippines, journalists and fact-checkers have done the hard work of manually tracing networked IOs. For example, Cristina Chi of the Philippine Star has written on both pro-Duterte networked operations (Chi 2025a) and pro-China networked operations in the country (Chi 2024) after manually gathering online data (Kumar 2025). Independent news and information website PressOne.PH, a signatory of the International Fact-Checking Network Code of Principles, selects and fact checks false claims by manually seeking out the origins of the false claims and looking for primary sources that contextualize and debunk the claims made. These experiences are common to most counter-disinformation researchers as well. Investigating the costs of hiring influencers for the 2022 Philippine general elections, Fatima Gaw and colleagues manually mapped out influencer networks across social media platforms and supplemented their findings by interviewing influencers and campaign managers to ascertain costs and compensation models (2023, 2025).

More grounded studies have also been conducted, though fewer in number than those reliant on platform-determined available data. Jonathan Ong and

Jason Cabañes' landmark work on networked disinformation architectures (2018) relied on key informant interviews with diverse actors across the disinformation hierarchy to spotlight how classed moralities produced varying justifications for engaging with disinformation work. Documentaries on influence work elevate how precarity motivates informal influence work (see *Undercover Asia* 2022, S9E9, "The Troll Army"). These studies align with Cabañes's (2022, 430) push to center what he calls the imaginative dimension of disinformation, or "the cultural, emotional, and narratival roots of fake news and political trolling online," though limited to disinformation actor motivations.

Though critical studies on Philippine IOs attempt more comprehensive, sociological, and just investigations which avoid persistent "dumb voter" tropes, we find that the everyday experience with IOs across different scales remains elusive to current methods. This limit in what has been studied (or more accurately, what we have been allowed to study) constrains our understanding of the political realities and aspirations of IOs audiences, as well as our imagination of what solutions we can deem realistic.

Connective Ethnography as a Comprehensive and Ethical Alternative

In response to these limits imposed by opacity double bind, we forward connective ethnography as an alternative methodology and orientation focusing on the everyday of IOs. IOs occur along what Jenna Burrell (2009, 189) refers to as "spatial complexities." Similar to how memes and viral content online "constitute weak vehicles for citational practices" (Kido Lopez 2017), IOs can get continuously shared, screenshotted, cross-posted, or anonymously disseminated across various accounts, groups, or networks within a platform, and across various platforms. Furthermore, these contents are also carried over in offline conversations across different settings and contexts within a city, within a village, or even within a street.

A focus on the everyday crucially explains the salience and efficacy of IOs in three ways: by surfacing bottom-up dynamics of disinformation spread, by highlighting how engagement with IO content may ignore true-false binaries, and by highlighting the social contexts that afford disinformation legitimacy within communities. These hybrid online-offline movements of IOs require what scholars call connective ethnography (Hine 2000, 2007; Leander and

McKim 2003). We adapt George Marcus' prescription of following in a multi-sited ethnography (1995), employing following to online and offline expressions of IOs—as practice, content, or narrative. This distinct following—not only multi-sited across geographic field sites but also across physical and virtual field sites—enabled us to challenge the view that IOs are purely social media platforms' fault. Instead, we find justifications for what Kate Starbird calls "participatory disinformation" (2019). Rather than contributing to scholarship which overestimates social media power (Jungherr and Raufleisch 2024), we forward grounded scholarship which acknowledges necessary nuance and agency in negotiating how communities relate to IOs.

Recognizing how perceptions and receptions of IOs can also be understood as "online practices . . . increasingly embedded in offline practices and vice versa" (Dirksen, Huizing, and Smit 2010, 1046), we conducted connective ethnography looking to add layers of understanding (Strathern 2002, 303) into how and why particular IOs are used or not used in local electoral campaigns. We take together the insights of media workers, influencers, influence operators, and audiences to see how ethnoregional identities, local media and information ecosystems, and local information-seeking practices shape what IOs work best in subnational contexts. We also get to see the evolution of networked and distributed multiplatform AI use across scales: from individualized, cartoon-like applications for politicians' online greetings prior to the campaign period, to more coordinated and sophisticated attacks against specific political camps during the campaign period, to scaled-up operations between major political factions at the national level.

Connective ethnography finds its value most in studies that look at fluid and dynamic objects of analysis simultaneously unfolding across different sites in different manners. It also finds power in not only validating online–offline influence flows, but also in narrowing down the most salient actors and narratives engaging with influence translation work of national narratives for local resonance. Practically, connective ethnography means multi-sited ethnography online and offline, conducted in collaboration with other researchers working together as a team during a prescribed period of time. In each site, the objects of analysis remain the same, but there is a degree of leeway in how conversations are approached depending on cultural contexts. This process of collaborative data-gathering is supported by regular team conferences, sharing findings and working together to address dilemmas or debug problems encountered in the field.

Extending this collaboration further, beyond simply looking at the same phenomenon from different social settings and adding in these separate perspectives, we approached connective ethnography as a response to some scholars' call for ethnographic data-sharing as community building (Piller et al. 2024). The ethnographic collaboration is done not just as a response to a practical need to cover distant sites and voluminous data, but as a deliberate practice to create a "research community of practice" (Piller et al. 2024). This community functions as a space for data-sharing and knowledge co-production among researchers within our group and even with partner practitioners and fellow activists.

Methodologically, most elements of the research design were collaboratively designed. Prompts for interviews and focus group discussions were jointly developed. We employed collaborative fieldnote-taking with the research team, writing together about our activities and interviews per day, and discussing them together daily to compare our interpretations and address variations in understanding events we jointly experienced or observed on the ground. We jointly recognized nuanced understandings of particular experiences or utterances provided by our local research assistants. Conversely, we were able to make the familiar strange by comparing experiences and events already familiar to our local research assistants with observations and experiences from other sites. We also shared our findings with various allies and partners in the anti-IOs space. After conducting fieldwork from October 2024 to March 2025, we jointly participated in various events such as a closed-door consultative meeting between a major social media platform and Philippine civil society organizations, private comparative sessions with journalists and election monitors, and media appearances in several radio, television, and social media talk shows. These activities further refined our understanding of our own data as well as the data of similar concurrent research initiatives.

By opening the ethnographic research process to peers from different organizations, we are able to understand more the complex and dynamic nature of IOs as they traverse online–offline boundaries and local–national contexts in the Philippines. Election monitors provided insights into how IOs are perceived in different locales. Election integrity advocates informed us how regulations affect IOs. Survey firms provided us insights into what campaign styles and narratives are more pertinent for this election cycle. Media workers pointed us to niche IOs that do not directly talk about the elections but nonetheless inform electoral decision-making. Individually, members of the team are also made more accountable for our observations

by already subjecting individual interpretations to various viewpoints at the data-gathering and analysis stage. Through multiple-round interviews with some interlocutors, conversations with the members of the research team, closed-door consultations between platform executives, journalists, and IOs researchers, and continuous engagements with a national election monitor, we were able to validate particular empirical observations while also refining prior theoretical assumptions.

In the succeeding sections, we illustrate how our practice of connective ethnography in two of our sites allowed us to address both site-specific and IOs-facing methodological challenges.

Case 1: Laoag City

Laoag City offers a revealing case of how political alliances fracture and reconstitute over time and how political dynasties not only survive, but also become "obese" where multiple members of the same political clan occupy different electoral positions (see Mendoza et al. 2019; Fonbuena 2024). Laoag City, home to more than 110,000 residents, has long been under the influence of the Marcos family since Bongbong Marcos's first congressional win after exile in the early 1990s (Agence France-Presse 2016). Loyalty to the Marcoses is a form of cultural capital, and political narratives are built around kinship, nostalgia, and moral obligation. These affective ties create a self-reinforcing information environment where political actors, influencers, and media professionals sustain IOs not only for profit but also for belonging. In this context, the information ecosystem is deeply intertwined with the Marcoses, exhibiting media capture through ethnoregional identity, particularly the establishment of the "Solid North" frame, which the Marcoses capitalize on to reinforce narratives of loyalty and legitimacy.

Here, IOs do not simply replicate popular national narratives, such as the Marcos–Duterte political feud, allegations of drug use against Marcos, and portrayals of the Duterte camp as aligned with China. These narratives are not automatically reproduced at the local level. Instead, it operates through a dense ecosystem of influencers, partisan media, and government-linked pages bound by patron-client ties. While national discourse often focuses on troll farms or centralized networks, field observations in Laoag show a more decentralized but culturally organized system of IOs. Various local actors and influencers mobilize narratives and conduct activities that resonate with broad audiences based on shared identities, histories, and social cues. Shared regional identity

enables coordination without formal contracts. Thus, IOs impact could not be captured through digital metrics alone. Influence work simultaneously occurs through offline interactions, interpersonal endorsement, and repeated exposure within trusted social networks, which social media platforms cannot make visible, such as likes, shares, or even the comment section. The moral and social infrastructures sustaining political support or resistance required online fluency and offline immersion. However, this presented three challenges.

First, access to influencers wary of casting attention on their promotional labor was necessary. In Laoag City, nascent and emergent influencer organizations took the place of ads and PR firms acting as political brokers (Gaw and Soriano 2024) between politicians and influencers or audiences. As documented in the 2025 elections, Ilocos-based vloggers formed collectives that manage sponsorships, campaign partnerships, and branded collaborations (Lanuza et al. 2025). Many publicly align with politicians, while others maintain an image of neutrality. The same individual may act as a civic volunteer, lifestyle vlogger, and campaign endorser, illustrating how politicians bypass media and innovate campaign tactics even down to the local races (Ong and Lanuza 2024).

These blurred boundaries required a methodological approach that not only focuses on official campaign pages but also on other sources of informal and affective influence, such as community-based vloggers, media pages, and community groups. To gain deeper insights, it was necessary to secure access to these influencer networks, including local campaigners, vlogger organizations, and media workers, through rapport-building and participation in local events, tracing who occupied different positions within this communicative sphere. Establishing trust was a critical but delicate process. Because content creation is a source of livelihood for many of these influencers, researchers had to be careful and reflexive interlocutors, respecting their labor while still interrogating its political implications. This balancing act exemplifies the fine line between ethnographic empathy and analytical distance when studying digital precarity and political visibility at the local level.

A second methodological challenge lies in Facebook advertising and hidden campaign spending. In our effort to understand how much money is actually being spent on digital visibility, we examined Facebook's Ad Library but found that it offered little usable information. This limitation underscores how disinformation and IOs often circulate through auxiliary pages that boost posts on behalf of candidates. Meta's Ad Library provides minimal transparency, as most sponsored content is routed through personal or entertainment

accounts that are not registered as political. Financial transactions are typically informal, whether exchanged in cash for favors or given as digital gifts such as Facebook Stars. This makes tracing the flow of campaign funds difficult. Because of this opacity, researchers had to triangulate data through interviews, local testimonies, and the insights of media workers familiar with market rates for online promotion. This field-based approach revealed the structural weakness of transparency mechanisms for local and national-level campaigns, as it remains inadequate in capturing the informal economies of political advertising.

The third challenge is in the tight intertwining of local media outlets and information sources with ethnoregional affinities to the Marcos family. In a region historically loyal to the Marcoses, broadcasters and Facebook pages often downplay tensions within the ruling family during the Marcos–Duterte fallout.[3] For example, interviews revealed that residents commonly described tensions within the Marcos family as "*away pamilya* (lit. family feud)," a framing that downplayed political rifts as ordinary family disagreements rather than as developments warranting political concern or disapproval. Interpreted through this lens, Imee Marcos's public criticisms of President Bongbong Marcos and her tactical alignment with Duterte-backed candidates were not seen as politically problematic but as internal family matters. These conflicts were not perceived negatively and did not translate into an electoral penalty at the local level as Imee Marcos remained the top-voted senator in Laoag while Duterte allies underperformed. This illustrates how national-level infighting and polarization are locally refracted through cultural frames, which in this case privileged regional unity and familial loyalty over the political consequences such conflicts might carry elsewhere.

The ethnographic aspect of connective ethnography provided levels of immersion that could get over issues of access. Genuine connections with influencers and candid conversations with media and information workers were fostered by transparent and accountable ethical research, presence and immersion, and personal ties. The connective aspect of connective ethnography enabled us to be more pointed in where we should look for IOs online and offline. Longitudinal observations of online campaigns, conducted

3 After forming an alliance in the 2022 national elections, the relationship between Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos Jr. and Sara Duterte fractured following disputes over cabinet appointments, allegations of corruption, and renewed investigations into former president Rodrigo Duterte's drug war.

in the months preceding and during the campaign period, allowed us track shifts in narratives, actors, and patterns of engagement over time. Online monitoring was iteratively cross-checked through offline fieldwork, allowing digital signals to inform ethnographic direction amid the vast amount of data online. These observations enabled us to be more intentional but accurate about which people we should talk to, which accounts we should monitor, or which narratives we should ask about in interviews. It also showed us how the entanglement of Marcos's identity with regional identity was either sustained or challenged at the fringes. Finally, the collaborative aspect afforded us a more grounded understanding of how ethnoregional identity equating Ilocano citizenship with Marcos allyship acted as both a lens for viewing national political narratives and a compass for navigating local political choices.

Case 2: Cebu City

Cebu City's information landscape boasts an enduring local radio and print media industry with three dailies and more than 20 radio stations with consistent listenership. However, beneath this facade of a rich and diverse media ecosystem lies a complex information landscape where emerging information sources such as state-funded information apparatuses and legislative maneuvering become critical mechanisms for IOs to take ground.

Similar to Laoag City, politicians in power use publicly-funded online information pages not only as a public service for information provision, but as an avenue for information control and soft media capture. However, unlike in Laoag City, the orchestrators of Cebuano PIOs can churn out news stories faster than local media outlets with the deliberate intention of becoming a primary information source of Cebuanos and rivaling news outlets in the city. While the weaponization of pseudo-news channels to amplify specific narratives is not new (Wallis et al. 2021), the rise of these social media profiles in Cebu City is an indication of more professionalized IOs at the local level (Salvador et al. 2017). Adopting the practices and logic of news outlets, these Public Information Office (PIO) pages enable officials to ensure political incumbency through permanent campaigning along either veiled attacks against political opponents or welfare-centric content.

Adopting the practices and logic of news outlets, these PIO pages enable officials to ensure political incumbency by engaging in perpetual image-making strategies. To demonstrate how valuable these PIO pages are, former and current leaders of the city fought over ownership of a PIO page that

has amassed more than 300,000 followers since its inception in 2012 (Seares 2024). Due to the shortage of specialized beat journalists in the tri-city area of Cebu, Mandaue, and Lapu-Lapu, newsrooms are forced to rely on either press releases or official news content by information pages, which slyly seed narratives serving the interests of specific actors. While press releases are considered standard information sources for journalists, the overdependence on these communication channels without undergoing proper verification can result in news reports that follow the political framing advantageous to the elected government official. The potential omission of vital mechanisms of vetting and fact-checking not only dilutes journalistic integrity but can also lead to the unconscious complicity of local media workers with IOs at the local level.

We also learned how elected leaders put in place censorship mechanisms that block their department heads from disclosing relevant information to media organizations. Stories of censorship complicate the picture of Cebu's vibrant media diversity. Former Cebu City mayor Mike Rama has been previously criticized for establishing de facto "gag orders" that prevent city officials from providing statements regarding matters concerning the current administration (Seares 2023). Local branches of public national news outlets also followed informal state directives of non-reportage of certain figures as a way of controlling information flow.

The challenge of locating where IOs occur in a locale with many media outlets for scrutinizing public information required connective ethnography. The ethnographic aspects of local immersion provided us access to the hidden worlds of campaign orchestration and public information curation, while the connective aspect of connective ethnography let us triangulate which actors amplified what messages online in this context of discreet partisanship and soft media capture, and how this soft capture translated to information production processes offline. Furthermore, the collaboration among the team of researchers enabled layered understandings of how ethnoregional culture, clan-tied political history, and ethnoregional affinities to national politicians shaped what IOs worked and what did not, and why. Specifically for our Cebu case study, our online immersion into obscure Facebook comment threads on local political actors, paired with our offline immersion into how the same local political actors manipulate smear campaigns and political news supply, provided partial explanations for why incumbency advantages did not translate to electoral victories in 2025.

Another challenge was in how traditional forms of patronage served as conduits for offline IOs. Our interviews with the head of a local public utility motorcycle group and a former media worker who is now a local town chief informed us of how IOs run on networks of personal whispers and trust. For example, while Cebu City is primarily urban, it has geographically isolated areas in the mountains where community members who vote in elections are more reliant on local leaders' suggestions and endorsements than campaigns. In these cases, the local leaders—whether town chiefs or organization heads—are also key opinion leaders who shape which IOs narratives are muted or erased, and which are transmitted to far-flung areas. Verifying these also required monitoring online media content and cross-referencing media listenerships with locations.

Finally, the biggest challenge we observed in Cebu City was the disjunct between salient IOs narratives online and salient election issue concerns offline. This disconnect between what was loudly talked about in online local community groups on the one hand and traditional media and offline community conversations on the other meant that non-connective methodologies will fail to capture what drives local political communication: material and immediate city concerns such as flooding, traffic, and food prices. Furthermore, though these two distinct faces of issue salience can be uncovered with mainstream methods, how they relate to each other and to the bigger political contests at the national level can only be gleaned through a connective ethnographic approach. Through connective ethnography, we have unearthed otherwise obscure processes and systems that configure information flow both online and offline in hyperlocal settings.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Connective Ethnography in the Post-disinformation Moment

The arrival of Trump 2.0 has resulted in a global decline in democratic rights and services. Politically, Trump has emboldened Big Tech to have more control over our public sphere, to the benefit of Trump's giant IOs machine (Pruszynski 2025). Economically, Trump-initiated tariff wars have resulted in American inflation (McKibbin, Nolan, and Schuetrim 2025) while trade partners suffer losses (Flach and Baur 2025). Experts have claimed that Trump 2.0 will also be disruptive for global health (Buse and McKee 2025; Howard

2025). The field of disinformation studies has also suffered, with a decline in global aid on counter-disinformation movements in both the United States and the rest of the world. This has doubly impacted the Global South.

In the Philippines, more than programs for humanitarian work, health, and environment (Chi 2025b), this has translated into big tech pulling back its funding for fact-checking organizations. These challenges further strain local academics, journalists, and activists already reeling from opacity double bind. While experts exploring transnational collaborations have already highlighted the value of intra- and inter-country, South-to-South learning and fighting against IOs (Ong et al. 2024), the actual best practices to carry this out are still works in progress.

Using the cases of Laoag and Cebu in the Philippines, we highlight the potential of connective ethnography as a method in studying IOs especially during this post-disinformation moment. Connective ethnography requires the collaboration of various stakeholders with distinct and complementary skillsets, dispersed across sites, offering intimate ways of knowing how IOs are produced, received, or even resisted. Mainstream methodologies oriented towards indexing the disinformation moment can only present approximations of operational scale. However, as lamented by Irene Pasquetto (2020), when journalists and funders alike ask about IOs, it's always about "the actual impact of online disinformation" as a way to ascertain quantifiable degrees of harm, and consequently concrete cases for regulations. While mainstream methodologies can offer the closest quantitative answers to this, ethnographies of IOs can expose the actual impact of IOs not through quantification, but through illuminating bottom-up processes of support formation for illiberal politics benefiting from IOs. We argue that this is a more ethical process of knowledge production towards depolarization and understanding, resisting the urge of fast science in favor of critical and just representations. We thus give applicable shape to existing calls for more sociological approaches to studying IOs (Ong et al. 2022).

If mainstream methods provide answers of quantifiable approximations of reach, or correlations of behavioral change, what question are we asking of them? Are we just seeking measurable impacts? For whose benefit? And is it sufficient to just ask this question if our shared goal is to build inclusive democratic futures? Beyond this, we argue that we should expand our inquiries into the everyday negotiation of community relations to IOs. We raise these questions as provocations for the counter-disinformation space

in the Philippines. By pushing to the center messy questions of how people encounter political information in compromised environments, we do not get constrained by discussing how many votes a certain operation converted, or discussing how much regulation should be imposed on our public spheres, digital or real. Instead, we get to focus on how much worse things can get when the starting point for IOs is a weak democracy.

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