

Institution: University of Leeds		
Unit of Assessment: 34		
Title of case study: Shaping new government and third-sector media policy in the Philippines through research into digital and networked disinformation		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: September 2013-August 2018		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s): Jason Vincent A Cabañes	Role(s) (e.g. job title): Lecturer	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI: 01/09/2013—01/09/2018
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2018-Present		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? Y/N		
<p>1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)</p> <p>Jason Cabañes' research into digital, 'networked disinformation' (a state-sponsored model of covert political campaigning via fake news and trolling, facilitated by exploiting workers in the creative industries) in the Philippines has led to two sets of public impact:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It has raised the country's awareness of networked disinformation, stimulated debate among lawmakers, policy-makers and publics, and shaped new proposed laws on electoral fairness and political transparency. • It has also benefited a range of organisations concerned with democracy, including third-sector groups, by providing a basis for their research informing the formulation of policies to address the rise of networked disinformation across social media. This collaborative work with third-sector and other organisations has also led to Cabañes' research acting as a model for combating global networked disinformation. 		
<p>2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)</p> <p>Cabañes' research demonstrated how online disinformation has proliferated, in spite of global attempts to counteract it. His research was initially conducted as part of the Digital Labour Research Stream of the NewtonTech4Dev Network, a British Council-funded network aimed at advancing research on digital technologies in low- and middle-income countries. The research published out of this research, which was conducted during Cabañes' time at Leeds, argued that understanding how disinformation is 'networked' is essential to understanding its power. It sought to provide sociological explanations for the phenomenon of online political trolling in the Philippines, and to assess whether and how this trolling plays a role in fostering a democratic media in the country (1, 3). Cabañes' research showed that digital disinformation is more systemic than individual, often led by advertising and public relations executives, who assemble 'click armies' of celebrity influencers, anonymous digital influencers, and community-level fake account operators to fulfil the objectives of their clients – usually politicians. Their 'mastery in corporate marketing extends to an unregulated and highly profitable industry of digital political campaigning', but they additionally 'mobilize populist public sentiment' by 'seeding revisionist history narratives[,] [...] silencing political opponents [and] [...] hijacking news media attention through artificially trending hashtags' (2). Cabañes' research thereby questioned some prevailing understandings of the term 'trolling', which tend to see it as individual rather than systemic activity.</p> <p>Cabañes' research contributed an ethnographically-informed understanding of how, in the Philippines, the personal motivations, social backgrounds and everyday routines of digital workers impact their production of networked disinformation and fake news. The research was</p>		

designed to focus on the systemic causes that lead to networked disinformation rather than on named or individual online ‘trolls’. His research also analysed how these workers use their fluency in vernacular ‘gutter languages’ to activate anger and resentment among sections of the Filipino public. The research exposed the vulnerabilities in Filipino creative industries that enabled politicians to recruit highly-skilled individuals to become architects of ‘networked disinformation’. It also highlighted important gaps in Philippine campaign finance legislation and digital platform regulation, and proposed measures to address these.

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

- (1) Cabanes J.V.A. and Cornelio J.S. (2017) ‘The Rise of Trolls in the Philippines (and What We Can Do About It).’ In Curato N. (ed.), *A Duterte Reader: Critical Essays on the Early Presidency of Rodrigo Duterte*. Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press. Also published by Cornell University Press.
- (2) Ong, J.C. and J.V. Cabañes. (2018) ‘Architects of Networked Disinformation: Behind the Scenes of Troll Accounts and Fake News Production in the Philippines.’ <https://newtontechfordev.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/ARCHITECTS-OF-NETWORKED-DISINFORMATION-FULL-REPORT.pdf>.
- (3) Ong, J., & Cabañes, J. (2019). ‘When Disinformation Studies Meets Production Studies: Social Identities and Moral Justifications in the Political Trolling Industry’. *International Journal Of Communication*, 13: 5771-5790. <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/11417/2879>

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

- 1) Raising awareness of networked disinformation in the Philippines among lawmakers and citizens, stimulating public debate

Explicitly citing Cabañes’ research, in 2018 Philippine Congressman Manuel Zubiri filed three amendments to government bills across the Seventeenth and Eighteenth regular sessions of Congress. House bill 7863 petitioned for amendments to the Omnibus Election Code (1985), noting that such pre-existing codes did not ‘reflect the changes in the electoral landscape’ and needed ‘to recognise the internet as a media platform where electioneering can be conducted’ (A). The Code does not currently account for any online political campaigning, and is not counted in either lawful or prohibited methods of propaganda. However, Zubiri argued that ‘as a form of media, the internet can be utilized – or worse, weaponized – for or against a particular candidate or political party’ (A). Congressman Zubiri argued that ‘[g]iven the recent study by media scholars Jason Cabañes and Jonathan Ong revealing the use of digital media as an elections tool, it may do well to update the provisions of the Fair Elections Act and the Omnibus Election Code to reflect the changes in the electoral landscape and to recognize the internet as a media platform where electioneering can be conducted’ (A). His proposed amendment to the Fair Election Act (B) cited Cabañes’ and Ong’s research, arguing that it ‘confirms the fact paid trolls are being used by political candidates’ and endorsing their proposal in the research that the Filipino government should craft ‘a Political Campaign Transparency Act to require politicians to disclose the political campaign materials for broad public discussion and regulation’ (B).

A version of this bill returned to Congress in the following session, advocating an amendment to the Fair Elections Act in the form of a Political Campaign Transparency Act. Congressman Zubiri proposed amendments to ensure political propaganda materials could be ‘properly identified by voters in order to help them make an informed choice’ and ‘help identify whether the candidate or benefactors of the candidate purchased online material which violated the Fair Election Act’ (C). Although not passed, the bills were debated in the Philippine Congress, and widely discussed in Filipino media and social media, highlighting how Cabañes’ and Ong’s research on networked disinformation stimulated political and policy debate and raised awareness among lawmakers and citizens about networked disinformation.

Media coverage continues to feature Cabañes and Ong's research and recommendations. Cabañes was interviewed by Filipino news network ABS-CBN News Channel, noting that social media disinformation continues to spread globally, and has become both a national and international crisis. *Rappler* (a widely-accessed Philippine online news website) featured an interview with Cabañes' project partner Jonathan Ong, who advocated for their shared idea of a political campaign transparency act (see further 'Rappler Talk: Disinformation in the 2019 Philippine midterm elections', August 9 2019). John Nery, columnist at the national daily newspaper, the *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, put together a pamphlet funded by the Friedrich Nauman Foundation for Freedom, entitled *Democratic Decay and Disinformation in the Digital Age*, citing Cabañes' research in his call for change (D). Ricardo Saludo of *The Manila Times* used Cabañes' research in an article asking Filipino voters not to 'be impressed by masses of likes and positive or negative comments' (Ricardo Saludo (D)). Cabañes and Ong's research has featured in media coverage in the wake of such controversies. Both *Rappler* and ABS-CBN have faced government sanctions for advocating online transparency and criticising the Duterte government: the CEO of *Rappler*, Maria Ressa has been convicted of 'cyberlibel' and ABS-CBN are yet to have their licence renewed following clashes with the Philippine Government. In the wake of this, in December 2019, President Duterte made a public statement following the accusations of online intimidation, and Presidential Spokesperson Salvador Panelo mentioned Cabañes and Ong's research (E) alongside a refutation of claims made by ABS-CBN concerning disinformation campaigns.

2) Benefiting organisations concerned with standards of democracy

Cabañes' research has influenced the policies and practices of Philippine and international agencies working to dispel online disinformation. VeraFiles, a non-profit organisation fact-checking false and misleading claims, has proposed new ways of combatting digital disinformation as a result of Cabañes' research (Merinette Retona (D)). Using his research, Cabañes has collaborated with media professionals to examine the role fact-checking might play in dispelling digital and online misinformation. He consulted with Filipino firm Message, Movements, Media, Inc. (MVMi Philippines) and ABS-CBN to assess the value and possible limitations of focusing solely on fact-checking when combatting online disinformation. The Chief Operating Officer of MVMi testified that in working with Cabañes, MVMi 'were able to advise [their] client about the new realities of public relations operations in the Philippines' and also 'on whether [the clients] are dealing with artificial or truly organic criticisms online'. They were also able to invest 'in training opportunities for [their] community partners belonging to grassroots sectors,' with the aim 'to empower and encourage real people to re-take social media away from proponents of inauthentic social narratives by becoming a counter-force against a disinformation army that constantly seeks to silence citizens from expressing their opinions on social media' (F).

Cabañes and Ong's research continues to contribute to national and global awareness of authenticity online. The World Advertising Research Center (WARC), which provides evidence, expertise and guidance internationally to make marketers more effective and ethical, has reported on the impact of the research on the international standard for marketing (G). The Foundation for Media Alternatives (FMA) claimed Cabañes and Ong's research had become 'a landmark report' on the topic of privacy and disinformation in the Philippines (H), as part of a discussion of how the Cambridge Analytica scandal had also impacted the Philippines more significantly than other populations. In the wake of their research, Ong and Cabañes were also commissioned by NATO to produce models of political trolling in the Philippines in order to counter disinformation (I). The resulting report uncovered new models of profit-driven algorithm-based production and proliferation of disinformation in both local and national political spheres of debate. This report further demonstrates the national and international impacts of Cabañes' exposure of digital disinformation.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

A. Hon. Manuel Antonio F. Zubiri, House Bill/Resolution number 7863, Seventeenth Congress. 'An Act Amending Sections 79,82,84,85, and 86 of Batas Pambansa BLG. 881, Otherwise Known as the Omnibus Election Code.'

Date filed: 2018-06-07

Referral to the Committee on Suffrage and Electoral Reforms on 2018-07-30

http://www.congress.gov.ph/legisdocs/basic_17/HB07863.pdf

B. Hon. Manuel Antonio F. Zubiri, House Bill/Resolution number 7864, Seventeenth Congress. 'An Act Amending Sections 3, 4, 6, and 7 of Republic Act No. 9006, Otherwise Known as the Fair Election Act.'

Date Filed: 2018-06-07

Referral to the Committee on Suffrage and Electoral Reforms on 2018-07-30

http://www.congress.gov.ph/legisdocs/basic_17/HB07864.pdf

C. Hon. Manuel Antonio F. Zubiri, House Bill/Resolution NO. 3457, Eighteenth Congress
Full title: An Act Amending Sections 3, 4, 6, And 7 Of Republic Act No. 9006, Otherwise Known as the Fair Election Act

Date filed: 2019-08-05

Referral to the Committee on Suffrage and Electoral Reforms on 2019-08-07

http://www.congress.gov.ph/legisdocs/basic_18/HB03457.pdf

D. Media coverage featuring Cabañes' research

E. Azer Parrocha, 'Duterte Never Harassed Critics, It's the Other Way Around', *Philippine News Agency*, December 8 2019 <<https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1088214>>

F. Testimonial from Chief Operating Officer, MVM (Message, Movements, Media Inc.), 9 October 2020

G. WARC: 'Study Finds Professional Firms at Heart of PH Disinformation'
<https://www.warc.com/newsandopinion/news/study_finds_professional_firms_at_heart_of_ph_disinformation/40064>

H. Foundation for Media Alternatives: 'Heads and Tails: Untangling the Links Between Privacy and Disinformation in the Philippines' <https://www.fma.ph/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Privacy-and-FOE-revised.pdf>

I. Jonathan Ong and Jason Vincent A. Cabañes, 'Politics and Profit in the Fake News Factory: Four Work Models of Political Trolling in the Philippines', *NATO Strategic Communications Center of Excellence* (2019), <<https://www.stratcomcoe.org/four-work-models-political-trolling-philippines>>