

Mediating Banal Populism Through Vlogging in the Philippines

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The belligerent us-versus-them divide typical of populism is central to the expression of contemporary politics. Political leaders and their social media entrepreneurs, however, are increasingly embracing nonantagonistic measures to embolden their appeals to different publics. Using the concept of mediation, banal populism represents a complex bundle of nonconflictual and fun practices that target the personal and political sensibilities of the digital publics. Through an analysis of vlogs of Philippine leaders Ferdinand Marcos Jr. and Sara Duterte, this article presents the narratives of local politics, light moments, sectoral people, and golden years and unity, and traces the implications of these accounts on the affordances and democratic limits of networked platforms. Banal populism seductively captures the shared sentiments of the digital publics much as it portends a spoiling impact on free speech and political participation.

Keywords: mediation, populism, digital politics, free speech, nationalism, democracy

Political leaders and their social media entrepreneurs use the vicious us-versus-them rhetoric to divide and conquer the many publics. The dynamic terms of digital politics in an age of communicative abundance, however, empower such political actors to also embrace nonantagonistic measures to appeal to the personal and political sensibilities of their idealized publics. Departing from the “shoot and kill” vitriol of Rodrigo Duterte, Ferdinand Marcos Jr. and Sara Duterte—elected as president and vice president in 2022—decided to tone down the overt use of hostile sentiment. Marcos and Duterte, scions of former Philippine leaders (Ferdinand Marcos Sr. [1965–1986] and Rodrigo Duterte [2016–2022]) notorious for widespread human rights abuses, took advantage of the platform of video blogging or vlogging to connect with their constituents. Although their animosity against what they perceived as biased media and mythical rights violations was hard to conceal, Marcos and Duterte found the perfect ally in vlogging by showcasing their daily routines and personal encounters with family, fans, and celebrities who share the leaders’ mantras of unity and love of country.

This article explores the mediated appeal of what I call banal populism that represents a complex bundle of nonconflictual and fun narratives deployed to target the personal and political sensibilities of the digital publics. Empowered by the practice of mediation, banal populism underscores the increasingly sophisticated content and style of populism in the digital sphere. Mediation is central to modern political life

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given its ability to circulate the collective expressions of politics as well as in amplifying these messages as part of the new normal.

By engaging with the literature on mediated populism and digital politics, this article builds on the banal ways in which shared political sentiments are organized in a networked environment. The hope is to expand the logics and practices that shape the terms of mediated populism through the platform of vlogging in the Philippines. In addition to inflamed rhetoric and fearmongering that usually target the minority voices, the use of extreme speech or incivility as an expression of hate in many societies today draws strength from social practices that resonate with cultural idioms, humors, and rumors capable of inspiring public participation online and off (Udupa, Gagliardone, & Hervik, 2021). In the United States, for instance, the online culture wars that espoused a new kind of antiestablishment sensibility foster the idea that being on the right where one gets to promote sarcastic and conspiratorial memes is exciting, fun, and courageous (Nagle, 2017).

Using the case of the Philippines, I will discuss the concept of mediation and the vision of populism in defining the notion of the sovereign people. Populism builds on the abstract category of the people by not only resorting to the combative us-versus-them divide but also by spotlighting the mundane expressions of the political subjects the leader aims to mobilize. Empowered by mediation, populism makes a compelling case for interrogating the complicated mix of hostile, banal, and fun sentiments of the digital publics. I will then show how populism thrives in an online climate of disinformation and affective politics where the blending of facts, misleading claims, and visceral emotions clouds the digital sphere. Against this backdrop, the political expressions of Ferdinand Marcos Jr. and Sara Duterte in their vlogs speak of the changing features of mediated politics. These features constitute the accounts of banal populism, namely, local politics, light moments, sectoral people, and golden years and unity used to dominate the battle for political narratives through vlogging. In conclusion, I relate the affordances and democratic limits of vlogging to the way banal populism disfigures the civil consensus on free speech and political participation.

Mediation as Practice

The concept of mediation deals with the factors and processes that arise from the changing media environments and the wider consequences of these factors for societies. Mediation matters to the intricate ties between media and society as the concept brings to the fore the systems and practices attentive to the social, technological, and cultural dynamics of modern polities. In many social spaces afflicted by the whip of us-versus-them rhetoric and disinformation, mediation is key to probing the narratives and practices that inspire not only the amplification of but also the apparent public support for political sentiments that target the mutual views of the publics. With the evolving expression of mediated populism, for example, mediation underlines the social and cultural intricacies of online texts such as memes and blogs that inform the public appeal of certain messages and symbols.

Mediation complements the related processes of such concepts as mediatization and medialization, although, as Couldry (2008) observed, mediation may better capture the complexity of the multiple and dialectical processes through which a range of practices like digital storytelling can

transform society and politics. Mediation describes “the fundamentally, but unevenly, dialectical process in which institutionalized media of communication (the press, broadcast radio and television, and increasingly the World Wide Web) are involved in the general circulation of symbols in social life” (Silverstone, 2002, p. 762). This means, Silverstone (2002) elaborated, that mediation uncovers the dialectical process in which media and other actors like the audiences set the terms of social meanings, and that such process is uneven since the power to work with or against meanings rendered by media are unequally distributed in societies. Mediation has three principal meanings, as Livingstone (2009) recalled the work of Raymond Williams, where the term acts as an intermediary say in reconciling adversaries, an intermediate or indirect agency between otherwise separated parties, and a formal way of directly expressing otherwise unexpressed relations. Put another way, mediation has to do with reconciling two opponents, bridging over distance, and stating the unstated.

The seminal work of Carey (2009) about the transmission and ritual views of communication is central to the workings of mediation as practice. For Carey (2009), the transmission view is concerned with the passage of signals or messages across geography for control and is defined by terms such as imparting and giving information to others. The ritual view, on the other hand, is directed toward the representation of shared beliefs, which draws persons into fellowship and communality and is associated with terms like sharing and participation. Using the case of newspaper for illustration, the transmission view sees the newspaper as an instrument for disseminating news in larger packages over distance, whereas the ritual view examines a more extensive range of issues, including the habitual and dramatic act of news reading and writing. In a comprehensive view of mediation, Martin-Barbero (2003) investigated the transformation of culture and the cultural in media by looking at changes brought about by modernization. Although the wider cultural aspect of mediation is outside the parameters of this article, the work of Martin-Barbero (2003) demonstrated the conceptual and empirical rigor of mediation by thematically organizing the five spheres of life profoundly affected by modern transformations in Colombia: family, consumption, free time, public opinion, and aesthetic tastes. He elucidated, for example, how the print media positively influenced views about the growth of democracy, whereas television accounted for negative views concerning family crisis and declining practice of reading.

Mediation hence provides an analytical lens through which we make sense of the practices that accompany the organization of sentiments under populism. The assumptions and processes of mediation, as the foregoing discussion showed, are essential to understanding the impact of networked platforms on the quality of political and social life. In the next section, I expound on the vision of populism in mobilizing the publics and demonstrate how such vision is predicated on the practice of mediation.

Populism and the Making of “The People”

The concept of populism defines the notion of the sovereign people largely through mediated practices that touch on the personal and political expressions of the publics. Populism generally deals with the way the people are expressed through various channels, including newspapers and social media platforms. In this article, populism is viewed as a political communication style that uses narrative, rhetoric, and media to identify with the people. The concept is reflected in the oral, written, and visual communication of political actors who step into the public sphere, and one whose messages resonate

with the sentiments of media and citizens (Reinemann, Aalberg, Esser, Stromback, & de Vreese, 2017). As present-day politics get stylistic and visual (Moffitt, 2022), seeing populism as a style of politics underlines the performative and mediated acts employed by populists and their publics through networked platforms.

Populism describes the key characteristics of the people and the ties that underpin the relationship of the leader and his followers. Since the core element of populism is to speak and act for the people, the two-dimensionality of appeals to the people as proposed by Brubaker (2017) sheds light on how such appeals are exploited in constructing political identities and political conflict. In the vertical dimension (people versus elite), the people are defined in opposition to elites. Here, Brubaker (2017) clarified that the people (i.e., hardworking and plainspoken) are seen as morally decent although not necessarily pure, whereas the elites (i.e., the rich and institutionally empowered) are playing by different rules and are out of touch from the ordinary people. However, in the horizontal dimension (inside versus outside), the people are a bounded collectivity and threatened by inside or outside forces. Also, populism is fundamentally relational as the term is characterized by a political form of relationship between political leaders and social bases (Ostiguy, 2009). To understand this relationship, Ostiguy (2009) proposed the high and low appeals in politics that explain how the leaders appeal and relate to the people or sectors of society. In terms of manners and observance of institutional procedures, politicians on the high dimension are more restrained and proper, while those on the low are coarser and personalistic.

The high-low dimension of politics is normatively neutral in analytical terms, which means that the low is not necessarily bad as it can be fun and exciting, but the high is not necessarily good as it can be uncaring and boring (Ostiguy, 2009). Populism in this sense is about the flaunting of the low, while antipopulism is represented by the appeal of the high. The term builds on the negotiated relationship between the populist leader and his publics and is capable of providing a voice to collective frustrations while also dividing and excluding the other as the case of Rodrigo Duterte and his publics showed (Curato, 2016). Urbinati (2019), in fact, remarked how populism springs from within representative democracy. Meaning that populism in power, unlike fascism, does not challenge the practice of elections but rather "transforms it into the celebration of the majority and its leader, and into a new form of elitist governing strategy, based on a (supposedly) direct representation between the people and the leader" (Urbinati, 2019, p. 7).

One way to look at how populism uncovers the collective expressions of the publics is through what Keane (2020) called the new despotism, where the political tactics espoused by political leaders are defined not by repression alone but more by forms of power capable of coercing segments of the population to sympathize with rulers who are adversarial to power-sharing democracy. Although monarchs in the eighteenth century used such terms as legal despotism and enlightened despotism (despotic rule that attempted to promote the ideals of the Enlightenment) to delineate their powers, Keane (2020) explained that despotism eventually figured as a term of resistance against the arbitrary power of monarchs and political leaders. In his discussion on varieties of nondemocratic political systems, Linz (2000) in passing recounted that absolutism and despotism were the preferred descriptive terms used at the time to characterize governments free from restraint. By the mid-1770s in the United States, despotism started to be more associated with negative notions of unlimited sovereignty, absolute power, and barbarism (Keane,

2020). Despotic leaders, much like their populist counterparts, are adept at developing techniques to earn the consent of their political subjects through trolls and bots in social media, distortion of election campaigns, mobilization of bigotry, and spread of disinformation.

Networked Disinformation and Affective Politics

In the previous discussion on populism, I presented the centrality of “the people” in understanding the contours of modern political life. I highlighted how populism is replete with tensions in terms of ideologies and practices, and that populism is not necessarily the extreme opposite of democracy. Empowered by mediation, the main interest of populism in rallying the people helps examine the changing expression of political sentiments in networked environment.

The power to construct the putative people can be understood using the burgeoning scholarship on networked disinformation and affective politics. Although disinformation and affect may mean differently across societies, the practices associated with these terms show how political actors like politicians drum up support from the publics. Political actors do so by magnifying their own visions of politics and by pioneering techniques that mirror the sensibilities of their idealized publics. In a study on digital disinformation in 12 countries as diverse as Brazil, India, the Philippines, and the United States, Woolley (2022) described three interrelated trends, namely, the use of real people or semiautomated social media accounts in digital propaganda operations, the hiring of social media influencers that boost the online political offensives of propagandists, and the increasing importance of popular encrypted messaging applications and private chat applications like WhatsApp. In disparate communities of Southeast Asia, Ong (2021) underscored the often-missed narratives of disinformation entrepreneurs who take the lead in producing digital disinformation campaigns in the region. These entrepreneurs, Ong (2021) explained, are mainly financially and not ideologically invested, as seen in Indonesia’s clickfarm industry where lifestyle influencers and companies sell likes and followers in online marketplaces and in the Philippines’ black campaigning where advertising and public relations firms augment election-related sentiments. In India, Udupa (2019) observed how the metapractice of fun through such activities as fact-checking and argumentative confrontations blends with the new media ecology of playfulness and outrage crucial to employing volunteers for the right-wing movements.

Populism has an affinity with disinformation and post-truth because populism concentrates on the supposed infallible power of leaders who build on appeals that validate existing beliefs and identities at the expense of blending facts, lies, and fantasies: “Erasing the distinctions between truth and fabrications and flooding public opinion with disinformation then become essential for political perpetuation” (Tumber & Waisbord, 2021, p. 21). In the United States, the visual images of the people on Instagram through the case of Donald Trump are said to be more homogenous (meaning more white, more masculine, and with fewer young people) than those of Bernie Sanders (Moffitt, 2022). Whereas in Rodrigo Duterte’s Philippines, the dynamic terms of populism on Facebook are characterized by the intensified homogenization of political opposition but also by the symbolic narratives that touch on the shared values on religion, family, and nationhood of the digital publics (Ragragio, 2022).

The phenomenon of affective politics within the setting of contemporary populism shows how political sentiments are amplified through affect and intense emotion. Affect or the sensation one experiences toward a mediated content, be it a social media post or a news report, helps political leaders to connect with their target audiences through the fusion of facts, opinion, and drama into one common message (Papacharissi, 2019). Using the case of Trump, Wahl-Jorgensen (2018) explicated how the media coverage of the leader shifted toward an emotional regime of angry populism that underscored the prominence of anger and emotion in contemporary politics. Wahl-Jorgensen (2018) maintained that anger should not be viewed as a mere destructive emotion but as a viable framework that explains how emotional solidarity and collective action are formed under populism. In the case of the Netherlands, the emotions of anger and fear indicated how citizens attribute blame to the elites or leaders of the national government and the European Union (Hameleers, Bos, & de Vreese, 2017), explaining how emotion and the blame-game approach of populism influence the persuasiveness of populist communication in public.

Vlogging in Marcos and Duterte's Philippines

Political leaders exploit the features of networked disinformation and affective politics to win the electoral support of their constituents. In an era of communicative abundance, however, the leaders and their political entrepreneurs use supplementary practices like media manipulation to harness support from the publics. In the Philippines, the practices associated with populism are empowered by the platform of vlogging used by media-savvy leaders to navigate the networked infrastructures and refigure the terms of democratic consensus in the digital sphere. Although vlogging on YouTube has been around since the late 2010 it was at the height of the 2022 national election and COVID-19 health pandemic that the platform took center stage, arguably on par with Facebook as the political channel of the times.

Ferdinand Marcos Jr. and Sara Duterte were the first Philippine leaders who successfully deployed vlogging in political campaigning. Marcos and Duterte were the leading candidates who evaded public scrutiny by bypassing public fora and debates organized by independent media organizations and universities. Defending his preferred platform of vlogging over attending news media interviews, Marcos, also known as Bongbong or BBM, claimed that social media served as his leveler, which allowed him to interact with the public, decrying in his first vlog that "traditional media" have not been very kind to him and his family (Marcos, 2018a). Duterte, without publicly denouncing the news media, likewise decided to skip public debates and, like Marcos, continued campaigning through vlogging. Marcos and Duterte used banal sentiments to identify with the imaginations of the digital publics and perpetuated the mantra of UniTeam (unity and team) to depict the harmonious coalition of the leaders' presumed political bailiwicks (Marcos's northern Philippines and Duterte's southern Philippines).

The rise of Marcos and Duterte came at a critical juncture when the state of democracy and human rights in the country was in continuous decline in part because of the unabated killings in Rodrigo Duterte's self-proclaimed war on drugs that slaughtered between 5,000 and 30,000 mostly urban poor residents. From an electoral democracy (with free and fair multiparty elections and satisfactory degrees of rights like suffrage and free expression), the Philippines has been classified as an electoral autocracy (with multiparty elections but with insufficient levels of rights) since 2018 up to this writing (V-Dem

Institute, 2023). The country's state of press freedom, once regarded as the freest in Southeast Asia, declined yearly from 2017 to 2022 and placed the Philippines from 127th to 147th spot of 180 territories globally (Reporters Without Borders, 2023). Although the callous records of extrajudicial killings and rights abuses are not unheard of the Philippines, the era of Marcos and Duterte showed how political actors can exploit democratic deficiencies through networked narratives that embody a purported sense of political unity through vlogging.

Reading Vlogs

This article examined 89 vlogs from the YouTube accounts of Marcos (n.d.) and Duterte (n.d.). The 47 Marcos vlogs were published from January 2018 to January 2022, and the 42 Duterte vlogs from December 2021 to February 2022, covering how the leaders mounted their political messages and styles during the run-up to the May 2022 national election. Although Marcos started vlogging as early as November 2009 and has 90 million views compared with Duterte's launch in December 2021 and 1.5 million views, there were striking similarities in how the leaders identified with the digital publics. Suffice to say, the narratives forged through vlogging were meticulously nurtured over time in a country of more than 60 million YouTube users that lead the global race for vlog watching (Statista, 2022).

The vlogs were selected based on the relative diversity of their core political and personal messages—political (e.g., vice presidential electoral protest of Marcos who lost in the 2016 national election and city programs of Duterte as mayor of Davao), personal (e.g., question-and-answer interviews of Marcos with his son and showcasing of makeup kit of Duterte), or a combination of both (e.g., infrastructure projects and the family legacy of the Marcos clan and interviews of Duterte with senatorial candidates about their personal favorites like food). On average, the Marcos vlogs ran 8 minutes and 29 seconds, whereas Duterte's ran 6 minutes and 6 seconds. The vlogs that featured brief (30 seconds and less) and on-the-spot interviews of the leaders, and the abridged teasers of vlogs were excluded during the selection stage to minimize repetitive and overlapping messages.

In the analysis, I documented the title, running time, number of views, date of publication, and story, and used key narratives to label and organize the prominent stories of vlogs (Table 1). Following the methodological lens of narrative analysis and criticism (Gitlin, 2003; Wodak, 2015), I assigned frequency counts to the stories but more importantly organized these stories based on the political salience of the topics addressed. For example, I found that although Marcos and Duterte have vlogs on visiting provincial areas, Marcos (2018d) usually did so to meet with local politicians, whereas for Duterte (2022b), it was more on meeting with typhoon victims. This does not mean that one leader is more pro-people than the other, but it shows how "the people" (e.g., local politicians and typhoon victims) are visually organized through vlogs. Although motivated by the methodological rigor on the visual representations of the people on Instagram (Moffitt, 2022), my approach is more modest in that my interest is in the formation of narratives or metanarrative that chronicle the identity and rhetoric of banal populism.

Table 1. Sample Documentation of Vlogs.

Vlog	Date Published, Length, and Views	Prominent Story
1. BBM VLOG #9: Marcos Back in Malacañan	April 7, 2018 13:47 1,148,918	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Marcos recalled his and his sister (now Senator) Imee's childhood memories at the presidential residence. He explained how his father built a nation with "physical evidence" like buildings (Marcos, 2018b).
2. BBM VLOG #151: Sandro @ 27	March 13, 2021 5:23 1,158,379	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sandro, Marcos's eldest son, was groomed as the next Marcos. Sandro was crowned with a halo of flowers as part of the local Ilocano birthday ritual <i>Padapadakam</i> (Marcos, 2021a).
3. BBM VLOG #174: Ask Me Anything	August 28, 2021 4:56 968,450	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Marcos took up questions about his favorite music, books, and the one thing he can't live without (Marcos answered love; Marcos, 2021c). Marcos reiterated his father's infrastructure legacy, citing the Cultural Center of the Philippines and Folk Arts Theater (Marcos, 2021c).
4. What's Inside the Office Drawer?	January 11, 2022 4:19 50,432	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Duterte showed personal belongings in her drawer like face mirror, hairbrush, eyebrow brushes, and barangay profiles of Davao (Duterte, 2022a).
5. SARA ALL FOR YOU EPISODE #10	January 21, 2022 1:24:20 21,364	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Duterte visited typhoon-hit Dinagat Island, in Central Philippines. She discussed programs for children with disabilities with then candidate (now Senator) Sherwin Gatchalian (Duterte, 2022b).
6. #MahalinNatin AngPilipinasRide "Let's Love the Philippines Ride Day 2	February 3, 2022 4:18 11,177	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Duterte was carrying the Philippine flag. She took selfies with the ordinary and military personnel in the street (Duterte, 2022c).

In three reading phases, I first cataloged the sets of narratives of the leaders and observed in Marcos's vlogs the prominence of light moments like Marcos learning mobile games (13 vlogs), visiting provinces like inducting local politicians into Marcos's political party (11 vlogs), appealing to sectors such as overseas Filipino workers (5 vlogs), and mainstreaming roads and bridges built under Marcos Sr. (5 vlogs). In Duterte's vlogs, the prominent narratives were about the leader's achievements and programs in Davao

(15 vlogs), visits in provincial communities including typhoon-hit areas (7 vlogs), light moments like showing personal stuff in her office drawer (4 vlogs), and rhetoric of national unity and nationalism (4 vlogs). Since the similarities of the narratives were more visible than their overlaps and differences, it made more sense to consolidate these narratives into broad sets of expressions instead of presenting the accounts of the leaders separately. In the second phase, the consolidated narratives exhibited the salience of light moments with family members and social media fans (22 vlogs), visits to provinces (18 vlogs), local programs and achievements (15 vlogs), appeal to sectors and group identities like overseas Filipino workers (11 vlogs), and rhetoric of golden years and unity (9 vlogs). In the third phase, I found how conspicuously notable the stories can be about “the local” that featured provincial places and traditions, local government programs, and national candidates being introduced to the regional constituents of Marcos and Duterte. The final sets of narratives showed the meta-category of local politics (47 vlogs), followed by light moments (22 vlogs), sectoral people (11 vlogs), and golden years and unity (9 vlogs).

The Narratives of Banal Populism

The narratives of local politics, light moments, sectoral people, and golden years and unity represent the accounts of banal populism that target the viewpoints and fascinations of the digital publics. These narratives do not only embolden the rhetoric of political leaders, but they too serve as calibrated sentiments that aim to reconfigure the way the personal and local politics are entwined online.

Local Politics: The Local Identity

The local politics narrative is about the mediated identity of the leader who is identifiable with places, people, and practices in regional communities. This narrative builds on the symbolic ties of the leader with the customs and affairs of community members, including those devastated by environmental calamities in the provinces. As a mediated identity, the local politics narrative matters to populism because this narrative draws the symbolic relationship between the leader and the local constituents in affective ways. The local politics narrative is a calculated performative act that sets the terms of political identification through the local, but one that weaponizes the collective sentiments and frustrations of the publics in exchange for ramping up political support for the leader.

Using various practices, the local politics narrative foregrounds the activities performed by the leader in the provinces, such as visiting typhoon-ravaged communities, distributing food packs to victims of calamities, delivering graduation speeches at state universities and colleges, and leading the regional oath-taking ceremonies of new political party members. Marcos (2018c) and Duterte (2022b) separately visited the typhoon-hit municipalities of Leyte, Samar, and Dinagat Island in the Visayas, Central Philippines. In his engagements with college students, Marcos (2021a) regularly spoke about his eldest, 27-year-old son Sandro, whom the family is grooming to carry on the Marcos legacy.

The narrative of local politics mainstreams the initiatives of Marcos and Duterte in their respective provinces—Ilocos, Northern Philippines, and Davao, Southern Philippines, which the leaders idealized as their regional bailiwicks. But unlike Marcos (2018a) whose vlog script centered around windmill tourism in Ilocos, Duterte (2022b) talked extensively about her city programs in Davao through the vlog series #SAFU

or Sara All For You. The #SAFU vlogs featured interviews with Davao officials who oversaw Duterte's initiatives in such areas as health services; counter-terrorism campaign; micro, small- and medium-sized enterprises; mobile kitchen; one-stop shops for COVID-19 needs; and city programs for the physically abused, persons with disabilities, and LGBTQ+ (Duterte, 2022b).

Light Moments: The Rhetoric of Personal and Fun

If the local politics narrative deals with the local identity of the leader, the light-moments narrative represents the personal side and fun activities of Marcos and Duterte who, notwithstanding the gravity of their political work, share pleasant moments with family, children, friends, and supporters. The light-moments narrative is essential to populism as the narrative shows how compelling the appeal of the leader is in attracting the interest of the digital publics. But what the personal and fun side of the leader provides at best are provisional terms of conviviality and political engagement, one that overshadows the civil consensus on free speech that has the potential to nudge public deliberation on momentous issues, particularly human rights and sustainable employment.

Marcos used his vlog shows to explain why he found comfort in using vlogging and social media to communicate to the public, asserting, for instance, that traditional media have become his "detractors" (Marcos, 2018a). Marcos used a question-and-answer (Q-and-A) type of interviewing with family and relatives, asking them about their personal favorites like food and music. Duterte, meanwhile, was known for taking selfies and groupies with supporters and for riding her own motorcycle as part of the campaign caravan.

In his vlogs, Marcos introduced his three sons (Sandro, Simon, and Vince) as Boys of BBM and showed light activities such as doing Q-and-A interviews with family and social media influencers, learning mobile gaming, and watching mixed martial arts (Marcos, 2021b). Duterte, aside from showing off personal belongings found in her office drawer like a hairbrush and eyebrow brushes and unpacking gifts from admirers, was fond of taking selfies with supporters and the ordinary (Duterte, 2022a). Duterte launched one of her vlog series called *#MahalinNatinAngPilipinasRide* (Let's Love the Philippines Ride), where she was shown riding the motorcycle and touring around major places in the country. Duterte's vlog series, the leader averred in one of her rare national television interviews, was born out of the need to get in touch with the public amid the surge of COVID-19 cases (Duterte, 2022d). In between rides, Duterte would get off the motorcycle to take selfies with supporters like military personnel along the way.

Sectoral People: The One-of-Us Identity

The sectoral people narrative is about the one-of-us persona of the leader who is associated with the identities of social groups, including farmers, Indigenous peoples, overseas Filipino workers, senior citizens, and LGBTQ+. This narrative builds on the mediated image of sectoral-ness and, like the local politics narrative, is necessary in realizing the unifying appeal of banal populism to various categories and identities of the people. The sectoral people narrative symbolically musters the voices of representative sectors, but in a way that misappropriates and hence exploits group identities to dominate the pro-people conversation in political campaigning.

Although the sectoral people narrative draws similarities with how the local politics narrative hinges on the localized ties of the leader with groups like health workers, the sectoral people narrative highlights the images of group identities disempowered in economic and sociocultural fronts. What is novel in this narrative is the way the struggles of the sectors are “celebrated” by the leader through commemorative symbols and activities, like promoting vlogs covering the daily challenges and economic recovery through livelihood programs of persons with disabilities.

In their vlogs, Marcos and Duterte recognized the victories and hardships of vulnerable sectors by taking part in festivities that honored the indigenous way of life, providing medical aid for senior citizens, livelihood opportunities for gays and lesbians, and celebrating the International Seafarers Day. Marcos devoted vlogs about indigenous events and participated in festivities like the *T’nalak Festival* (Weaving Tradition) in South Cotabato, Southern Philippines, and *Dinagyang Festival* (Merry Tradition) in Iloilo, Central Philippines, by delivering welcoming remarks before the participants of festivals (Marcos, 2018a). For her part, Duterte used her vlogs to tell the stories of achievements and struggles of battered women and gays and lesbians in Davao (Duterte, 2022d). Duterte was shown talking with barangay workers and volunteers where the leader stressed how the city and national governments can learn from the experiences of barangay (the smallest political unit in the country). Where Marcos (2018c) dedicated vlogs to celebrate the achievements of sectoral groups, Duterte (2022e) spotlighted the indispensable role of barangay officials in marshaling support and instilling discipline among community residents.

Golden Years and Unity: The Rhetoric of the Past and Future

The narrative of golden years and unity is a rhetorical and historicized expression that allows the leader to invoke the legacy of the past and articulates the political vision of the future. The pronouncements of the leader whose vision is guided by the past and future matter to populism because such a formidable rhetoric marshals the sentiment of the political subjects including those within the generational divide. Under populism, however, the appeal of the past-and-present rhetoric swells within the scourge of disinformation and is attuned to the bending of facts to suit the leader’s agenda of political revisionism.

The rhetoric of Marcos about the golden years is a call to redeem and vindicate the Marcos Sr. rule, while Duterte’s unity embarks on political alliance built around the leader’s mantra of love of country. Marcos relentlessly pushed the rhetoric of golden years of his father’s regime by reiterating the legacy of infrastructures while dismissing voluminous records of human rights violations and ill-gotten wealth. The titles of his vlogs like “Marcos Back in Malacañan (the presidential residence)” and “The Three Ferdinands (Marcos Sr., Marcos Jr., and Marcos Jr.’s son Sandro),” coupled with the constant playing of images of buildings built during his father’s two-decades rule (e.g., Philippine International Convention Center and Cultural Center of the Philippines), aim to normalize the purported Marcos legacy of golden age of infrastructure (Marcos, 2018b, 2021b). On the part of Duterte, the rhetoric of unity was amplified by the leader’s call to unify politicians of different political parties (Duterte, 2022e). The unity playbook of Duterte was tested during the 2019 midterm election when the leader formed the regional party *Hugpong ng Pagbabago* (Alliance for Change) that overwhelmingly seized the senatorial race, leaving the political opposition not a single seat. Duterte used the message of unity as a precondition for the recovery of the

nation from the health pandemic and emblemized her call for patriotism by taking photos with the Philippine flag, members of the military, and government workers (Duterte, 2022d).

Conclusion

The narratives of banal populism that I have examined demonstrate the dynamic vision of populist politics in mobilizing the sovereign people, a vision grounded in the practice of mediation that facilitates the transmission and ritualization of shared political sentiments in the digital sphere. The acts of transmission and ritualization, to paraphrase Carey (2009), dig deep into the ongoing process of circulation and interpretation of texts, symbols, and meanings in multiple facets of social life.

In the Philippines, the practice of vlogging as a prominent platform of banal populism attests to the capability of mediation to circulate and normalize certain narratives that underpin not only the persona of the leader but also the putative ties that bind the leader and the publics. Banal populism affords the exhibition of identities and rhetoric that bridge the political vision of the leader and the aspiration of the digital publics. On the one hand, the transmission perspective underscores how banal populism carries the mediated identity of the leader who identifies with health workers and local barangay officials, as the narratives of local politics and sectoral people showed. Although the leader and its social media entrepreneurs have the upper hand in magnifying the identities of local politics and sectoral people, such identities must be distributed across the digital space to reach a desired effect, that is, to rapidly transmit a persona tied to the moral imaginations of the target publics. The ritual perspective, on the other hand, delves into the complex representation of the shared beliefs of the leader and the publics that foreground symbols and practices that draw participants together. Banal populism is ritualized by the nonconflictual image of fun and nostalgia through Q-and-A interviews featuring personal and fun facts about the leader and constant flashing of photos of infrastructures that evoke the glorious past, as seen in the narratives of light moments and golden years. The manifold participants in this exercise are bolstered by the sectoral people narrative where the sentiments of the leader presumably find resonance with groups such as barangay officials and senior citizens. The ritualized aspect of banal populism reinforces the relational ties between the leader and the people, invoking what Ostiguy (2009) called the flaunting of the low appeal of populism where the leader identifies with the ordinary in fun and exciting way.

Vlogging connects the leader with its envisioned constituents, although the processes underlying the leader-and-people ties thrive against the backdrop of networked disinformation and affective politics where factual, delusive, and outright false stories coalesce into evocative sets of light and fun narratives, thereby blurring the precarious boundaries of free speech and media manipulation. The Janus-faced nature of banal populism, therefore, reflects the affordances and limits of networked platforms at a time when the expression of politics is shaped by a host of sociotechnical, cultural, and transnational forces. Many of the modern politics are no strangers to political sentiments that do not merely espouse the predominant us-versus-them binarism but likewise, the more nuanced narratives that steer, rightly or otherwise, the collective imaginations of the digital publics. The Philippines, in this respect, is part of the global bloc of such diverse societies as India, Indonesia, Brazil, and the United States that experiment on the use of human-

centered sentiments of fun, which resonate with the many publics, much as the practices that accompany such experiment gradually spoil the democratic consensus on free speech and political participation.

I hope to have demonstrated the need to interrogate our common assumptions about the kind of division forged by mediated populism by showing how the novel mix of banal and fun practices animate the communal expression of digital politics. The case of vlogging as a site of banal populism may be fraught with polarized and virulent rhetoric the resembles with how Applebaum (2020) viewed authoritarianism as a frame of mind that speaks of individuals who cannot tolerate complexity, making them antipluralist, suspicious of different ideas, and hostile to fierce debates. But despite—or because of—these consequences, the more pressing it is to explore the mainstreaming of shared political sentiments between the populist and its publics. As Keane (2020) reminded of the new despotism, the appeal of strongman leaders is characterized not by coercion alone but also by deception and seduction that meddle with people's lives, marshal their support, and win their conformity. George (2016), in his work on hate spin and democracy, even cautioned that only when we start treating indignation and incitement as more than hysteria of enraged mobs can we see how strategic, versatile, and networked the methods used by political entrepreneurs. There is thus a need to be more attentive to the way narratives and sentiments are mobilized in an increasingly sophisticated networked environment, so we know what to expose.

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