International Journal of Communication 19(2025), 2407–2423 1932–8036/20250005

How Conspiracy Theories Harm Deliberative Democracy

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This article examines the harms of conspiracy theories to deliberative democracy. We begin by mapping the debate on the harms and potential contributions of conspiracy theories in the public sphere. We then extend this debate by grounding our argument in empirical research on the production and reception of conspiracy theories in the Philippines—the so-called "patient zero" in the global disinformation epidemic. We argue that conspiracy theories harm deliberative democracy in two ways. First, they corrupt deliberative norms by instrumentalizing their performance to secure commercial gains. More than simply mobilizing emotions, we find conspiracy theories to simulate deliberative norms of appealing to evidence and encouraging viewers to practice informed judgment. Second, we argue that conspiracy theories serve particular functions in the public sphere, including as placeholder explanations for issues people do not wish to discuss. We argue that besides worrying about the poor epistemic quality of conspiracy theories, of greater concern is their discursive power to evade difficult conversations and pursue plausible political projects on which people can pin their hopes.

Keywords: conspiracy theory, deliberative democracy, disinformation, public sphere; the Philippines

There are many reasons why conspiracy theories are harmful to deliberative democracy. Deliberative democracy envisions a polity where collective decisions are made based on an inclusive exchange of reasons. It is a normative ideal that places talking rather than voting at the heart of democratic life, for it is through inclusive, informed, and reflective communication that societies can collectively arrive at epistemically robust decisions. Institutions of knowledge, such as scientific and expert bodies and the media, play a critical role in realizing this aspiration. At the most basic level, these institutions establish

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Date submitted: 02-08-2024

[1] This article is based on a collaborative research project funded by Internews under the Six-Track Engagement Against Disinformation Initiative (STEAD-i). Field research and data analysis was supported by the Norwegian Research Council (Project No. 314849).

factual premises on which public deliberations are based. Their reports and findings inform public opinion and decision making and have the power to set the agenda on topics worthy of public deliberation. Conspiracy theories challenge the legitimacy of these institutions. They cast doubt on their integrity by accusing them of cover-up, biased reporting, or colluding with powerful actors. They sow confusion in the public sphere by putting forward emotionally manipulative claims that do not withstand epistemic scrutiny. They corrupt agenda-setting in public deliberation by diverting people's attention from important matters to captivating hyperpartisan narratives based on assertions with no epistemic justification. Conspiracy theories harm deliberative democracy by compromising processes and institutions that build a polity's capacity to make intelligent decisions.

This, however, is not the whole story. For various scholars, the general dismissal of conspiracy theories as epistemic failures is unwarranted. People investigating conspiracy theories may have productive contributions to deliberative democracy, for they "undertake a morally and epistemically dangerous task that most of us don't have the stomach for" (Coady, 2007, p. 203). Indeed, some conspiracy theories have been proven to be true, as in the case of tobacco companies' manipulation of scientific evidence and the Watergate scandal that led to the resignation of U.S. President Richard Nixon. Dismissing conspiracy theorists as irrational poses the danger of stifling public deliberation and increases the likelihood of other conspiracies being exposed. Far from being irrational, studies have demonstrated that conspiracy theorists see themselves as people who value skepticism and epistemic diversity ("daring to think differently") (Harambam & Aupers, 2015, p. 471). They are not antidemocratic as some portray them to be but are strong supporters of direct democracy, for processes like referendums give people a direct say on matters at a time when they do not feel well-represented by their elected representatives (Pantazi, Papaioannou, & van Prooijen, 2022). Conspiracy theories, one can argue, have an ambivalent role in deliberative democracy. They may compromise the epistemic quality of public deliberation, but they also promote norms of free and open inquiry consistent with deliberative norms.

This article aims to add further nuance to this debate by offering an account of the extent to which conspiracy theories harm deliberative democracy. Our argument is based on the empirical case of the Philippines—a country that a Facebook executive described as the "patient zero" of the global disinformation epidemic (see *Rappler*, 2018). In 2022, the son and namesake of the late dictator Ferdinand Marcos won the presidency by a landslide. Historians, academics, and journalists have pointed to the spectacular ways in which the Marcos campaign "weaponized" social media platforms, particularly YouTube and TikTok, to downplay the brutal legacy of the Marcos dictatorship in the 1970s–1980s. Conspiracy theories figured prominently in the campaign. One of these conspiracy theories—the subject of our empirical investigation in this article—is about the Marcos gold bars. It tells a simple yet powerful story that the Marcos family has been holding tons of gold bars in trust for the Filipino people for decades, and it is only when Marcos Jr. wins the presidency that the wealth will be redistributed to the nation. The regime that replaced the Marcos dictatorship colluded with liberal media to cover-up this information for decades, but the time has come for it to be told.

Our analysis of 230 videos on the Marcos gold bars and our decade-long fieldwork among communities that described themselves as "supporters" of the Marcos family led us to two arguments about the extent to which conspiracy theories harm deliberative democracy. *First, we argue that the production*

of conspiracy theory harms deliberative democracy by instrumentalizing the performance of deliberative norms to attract more subscribers and sustain viewer engagement to monetize content. We affirm the argument that part of conspiracy theories' appeal is their reference to deliberative norms of open-mindedness and scrutiny of power, but we are careful not to romanticize conspiracy theories just because they appeal to deliberative norms. We situate the production of conspiracy theories within networks of disinformation (Ong & Cabañes, 2018) where content creators have monetary incentives to produce niche content, such as inviting audiences to participate in a conversation or join in a conspiracy investigation by appealing to their civic norms of inquisitiveness, critical thinking, and skepticism toward authority. *Second, we find that everyday people value conspiracy theory less for their epistemic credentials, and more for their ability to contribute to the flow of discourses in the public sphere.* While scholarly attention has mostly focused on the harmful impacts of conspiracy theories on matters like public health (as in the case of antivax conspiracy theories) and national security (as in the case of the U.S. Capitol insurrection), our fieldwork documented how conspiracy theories served as placeholder explanations for difficult issues people were not yet ready to discuss and created opportunities for communities about alternative futures—topics that seemed off-limits when public discussions were shaped by disheartening news reports from mainstream media. Taken together, we argue that the production and reception of conspiracy theories posit a more complex picture of the harms of conspiracy theories to deliberative democracy.

We develop this argument in three sections. First, we present our definition of conspiracy theory and map the debates on its harms to deliberative democracy. The second section discusses our empirical case, the approach we used to study the production of conspiracy theories and our approach to field research to study the reception of conspiracy theories at the community or micropolitical level. The final section presents the findings of our data analysis on the production and reception of conspiracy theories.

The Ambivalent Role of Conspiracy Theories in Deliberative Democracy

There are various definitions of conspiracy theories in the scholarly literature (for review articles, see Douglas & Sutton, 2023; Huneman & Vorms, 2018; Nera & Schöpfer, 2023). For this article, we use Karen M. Douglas and Robbie M. Sutton's (2023) definition of conspiracy theories as a "belief that two or more actors have coordinated in secret to achieve an outcome and that their conspiracy is of public interest but not public knowledge" (p. 282). There are five parts to this definition.

First, conspiracy theories are *oppositional* in that they go against official narratives or dominant interpretations of events. Included in this definition are conspiracy theories that elected officials promote but go against institutional knowledge. Examples include U.S. President Donald Trump's claim that the 2022 election was "stolen" or Brazilian President Jair Bolsanaro promoting the "lab leak theory" behind COVID-19. While Trump and Bolsanaro wield power in shaping public discourse, their conspiracy claims are in opposition to official narratives established by institutions such as the courts, as in the case of the "stop the steal" conspiracy claim, and the World Health Organization, as in the case of the lab leak theory. Second, conspiracy theories claim to *uncover malevolent plots against the public interest.* This provides an emotional and moral narrative arc to conspiracy theories by identifying villains (conspirators) who need to be held accountable and victims (the public) who need to know the truth. Third, conspiracy theories *blame conspirators with the agency to achieve self-serving outcomes.* This explains why malevolence is an essential

characteristic of conspiracy theories, as it establishes the intention of some actors to harm the public interest for personal gain. Conspiracies entail planning among intentional actors that have a shared goal. For conspiracy theorists, nothing happens by accident. Some argue that teleological thinking underpins conspiracy theories in that they "entail the distant and hidden involvement of a purposeful and final cause to explain complex worldly events" (Wagner-Egger, Delouvée, Gauvrit, & Dieguez, 2018, p. R867). Fourth, conspiracy theories are *epistemologically risky.* While they may seem credible, they are highly prone to errors. There are various reasons for this. The covert nature of conspiracies leaves few traces of evidence, making it impossible to be exposed to public scrutiny, which is necessary to establish truth claims in a democracy. Finally, conspiracy theories are *social constructs.* As Douglas and Sutton (2023) put it, at the heart of every conspiracy theory is a "moral, even political claim, about what the public should believe as opposed to the falsity that they have been hoodwinked into accepting" (p. 284).

Our approach to studying conspiracy theories begins with a normatively ambivalent position. In mainstream media, conspiracy theories are often portrayed in pejorative terms. A *Financial Times* op-ed warns that conspiracy theories "destroy a rational society" (Thornhill, 2021, para. 1), while philosopher Simon Blackburn dismisses conspiracy theories as claims that "make stupid people feel intelligent" (Blackburn, 2021, p. 136). By starting our approach with a normatively ambivalent position, we withhold our judgment on whether conspiracy theories are "good" or "bad" for deliberative democracy. We argue that outrightly dismissing conspiracy theories and people who believe them as irrational hinders a precise understanding of what specifically harms deliberative democracy and which aspects or consequences of these theories might be harnessed to promote deliberative norms.

Reading the scholarly literature on conspiracy theories using a deliberative lens supports our normatively ambivalent position. Conspiracy theories, we argue, have the potential to both promote and corrode core deliberative norms of *inclusiveness* and *reason-giving* and generate positive or negative *consequences* for the public sphere.

Take the case of inclusiveness—one of the core virtues of deliberative democracy. We use the term *inclusiveness* to refer to the consideration of diverse viewpoints in the public sphere. For some scholars, conspiracy theorists are exemplars of "oppositional readers," or people who critically unpack dominant narratives to expose wrongdoing (Grusauskaite, Harambam, & Aupers, 2022, p. 2). A qualitative study from the Netherlands, for example, found that believers of conspiracy theories describe themselves as "skeptic by nature" or someone who "dare[s] to think differently," "think out of the box," and "put[s] question marks over nearly everything" (Harambam & Aupers, 2015, p. 471). Actors willing to critique established knowledge may advance inclusiveness by infusing alternative interpretations of dominant narratives into public deliberation. Contrary to the impression that conspiracy theorists hold antidemocratic views, which deter them from engaging in public deliberation, some studies have found a correlation between belief in conspiracy theories and support for democratic principles (Swami, Chamorro-Premuzic, & Furnham, 2010). One interpretation of this finding is that conspiracy theorists are not necessarily against democratic values but against a political system that is not sufficiently democratic or that does not give sufficient voice to its citizens (Pantazi et al., 2022).

A less sympathetic interpretation of conspiracy theories' potential for inclusiveness, however, comes from the perspective of political economy. Cass Sunstein and Adrian Vermuele used the term "conspiracy entrepreneurs" to refer to people who "profit directly or indirectly from propagating their theories" (Sunstein & Vermuele, 2009, p. 212). Far from making public deliberation more receptive to plural and alternative interpretations of events, conspiracy theories further consolidate power to a few people to advance a political agenda or secure economic gains. Various studies have demonstrated how conspiracy theorists on YouTube have access to a "robust network of monetization" (Ballard et al., 2022, p. 2714). Even though YouTube may have taken action to demonetize or exclude advertising in conspiracy theory videos, content creators still have access to third-party channels as alternative revenue streams. Viewed this way, conspiracy theories do not create more space for alternative views but exploit people vulnerable to believing such content for economic gain. Typically, researchers find that these are people from disadvantaged backgrounds, such as those with lower educational backgrounds and cognitive abilities (see Furnham & Grover, 2022).

The literature also conveys mixed views on conspiracy theories' potential to promote norms of *reason-giving* that are critical in public deliberation. The oppositional character of conspiracy theories can prompt reflection in the public sphere by asking people to scrutinize evidence and cultivate skepticism toward authority figures in late modern societies (Grusauskaite et al., 2022). As David Coady (2007) puts it, conspiracy theorists may be "valued members of the community who undertake a morally and epistemologically dangerous task that most of us don't have the stomach for" (p. 203). Conspiracy theorists follow the norms of reason-giving by inviting audiences to join them in co-discovery. Just like lawyers in a jury trial, they exhibit evidence using official documents, screenshots of statements of public authorities, and video excerpts from legacy media. In a methodical fashion, they compare the evidence they present and the actions of alleged conspirators to highlight their complicity in the malevolent plot (Grusauskaite et al., 2022). They trust their audiences to decode the evidence and, in so doing, bestow esteem toward their viewers as rational actors who can peruse evidence and practice independent thinking. A study (Grant et al., 2015) from the Netherlands, for example, found that vaccine-skeptical websites' communication models better deliberative behavior than provaccination websites. While the provaccination website provided credible and official information, vaccine-skeptical websites presented links to both pro- and antivaccination information, encouraging their users to consider all arguments. Vaccine-skeptical websites were also interactive. They provided space for online discussion, therefore building communities of people who, together, co-constructed knowledge about vaccination based on what they read and based on their lived experiences. Meanwhile, provaccination websites appeared hierarchical and dogmatic in their presentation of knowledge.

For Russel Muirhead and Nancy Rosenblum (2020), however, conspiracy theories represent the opposite of reason-giving. New conspiracism, they argue, "is monologic, not dialogic" (p. 123). While they give the impression of being deliberative, their presentation strategically omits counterevidence and the context in which the supporting materials they present are produced. Thus, when they engage with counterevidence, they dismiss it as another form of machination from unscrupulous individuals to discredit their claims. They operate through bare assertion and repetition, using social media as a stage for performing "what a lot of people are saying" (Muirhead & Rosenblum, 2020, p. 32). Conspiracy theories have a "self-sealing quality" in that they resist any evidence that challenges their claims (Harris, 2018;

Sunstein & Vermuele, 2009, p. 223). The argumentative logic behind conspiracy theories provides an illusion of balanced inquiry while deliberately failing to engage meaningfully with opposing views.

Apart from understanding how conspiracy theories promote or corrode norms of inclusiveness and reason-giving, scholars of deliberative democracy are also interested in their effects on the political system. Discourses or claims are *consequential*. Typically, conspiracy theories are portrayed as dangers to liberal democracy because they sow distrust in institutions and tarnish public deliberations' epistemic quality, leading to poor collective decisions (Sunstein, 2018). For others, however, conspiracy theories have connective power. They give meaning to the distrust and suspicion of corruption that many people feel, which may encourage institutions to be more humble and more accountable in their claims. As the example of provaccine and vaccine-skeptical websites mentioned earlier demonstrates, conspiracy theories have connective power to build communities of inquiry that technocratic forms of communication do not typically foster.

Case Study: The Marcos Gold Bars

We contribute to the debate about the harms of conspiracy theories to deliberative democracy by grounding our argument on the production and reception of conspiracy theories in the Philippines. In 2022, the son and namesake of the late dictator Ferdinand Marcos won the presidential election by a landslide. Academics, journalists, and pundits equated Marcos Jr.'s electoral victory to the triumph of disinformation (see Mendoza, 2022). "Disinformation reigns in the Philippines as Marcos Jr. takes top job" (Beltran, 2022), "How YouTube can Rewrite the Past and Shape an Election" (Elliot, 2022), and "Dictator's son uses TikTok to lead in Philippine election and rewrite his family's past" (Pierson, 2022) were some of the headlines in international media. In these accounts, Marcos Jr.'s electoral success was attributed to online content that glorified his father's legacy. The Marcos regime was depicted as the golden age of the Philippines through video montages of bridges, hospitals, and cultural institutions built during the dictatorship, alongside photos of the late strongman with world leaders. Buried and belied in these visually striking images are historical records of human rights violations during the dictatorship and court cases that convicted members of the Marcos family and their associates of plunder. As Sheila Coronel (2022) puts it:

> The toxic information space, particularly social media, has put the wringer on accountability crusades and those who take part in them. Investigative reports about corruption and abuse are drowned out; falsehoods and fake news proliferate; and crusaders are falsely tagged as criminals or communists. Citizens drowning in the disinformation deluge and unable to distinguish between fact and fiction are not likely to take action. (p. 369)

Sanitized narratives of the dictatorship mobilized sentiments of nostalgia for the Marcos regime and served as "melodramatic enactments" of the injustices the Marcos family faced after a popular uprising in 1986 ousted them from power (Espiritu & Cristobal, 2022, p. 415). Pro-Marcos content used an "artful victimhood narrative" (Ong, Fallorina, Lanuza, Sanchez, & Curato, 2022, p. 12), where prodemocracy politicians were accused of colluding with liberal media to take power away from the Marcoses and manipulate Filipinos into believing that the Marcos family had plundered the nation. Having established a

narrative of victimhood, pro-Marcos performed an "ameliorative function" (Espiritu & Cristobal, 2022, p. 415): to correct the injustice, the nation must restore the Marcoses to power by electing the late dictator's only son to the presidency.

One of the most prevalent online contents that advanced this storyline is the conspiracy theory about the Marcos gold bars. Academics and investigative journalists find that this conspiracy theory appeared in the digital public sphere at least a decade before the 2022 presidential race, suggesting that mythmaking and rebranding the Marcos family's image have been a long-term project (see Macaraeg, 2022; Mendoza, Elemia, Recto, & de Castro, 2023). In its basic formulation, the conspiracy theory tells this story: Ferdinand Marcos Sr. is a wealthy man. He made his fortune by rendering legal services to the Tallano family—a precolonial royalty that owned vast amounts of gold. Marcos Sr. received hundreds of thousands of metric tons of gold, which is currently kept in the Central Bank of the Philippines and other banks around the world. This wealth, the story goes, is destined to be distributed to all Filipinos. However, the nation must be vigilant. The Marcoses' political rivals, the international banking cartel, the Catholic Church, and the communists, among others, are colluding to keep the fortune away from Filipinos. It is Marcos Sr.'s son who will realize the Philippines' destiny to become a prosperous nation once he becomes the president of the Philippines.

Table 1 provides a breakdown of this story's characteristics that correspond to the qualities of a conspiracy theory. The narrative has an *oppositional* character, such that President Marcos Jr. himself denied the existence of the gold bars (see Gonzales, 2022). It *uncovers malevolent plots against public interest* in the form of a systematic cover-up by people who benefit from keeping the Marcoses of power (Mendoza et al., 2023). These narratives *blame conspirators who have the agency to achieve self-serving outcomes,* which include a whole range of personalities placed together under the label of "the liberal elite." However, unlike popular conspiracy theories, such as "pizzagate" or the "great replacement theory" which provokes people's "paranoid disposition" (Cosentino, 2020, p. 59), the story of Marcos gold bars evokes the mentality of abundance, akin to the prosperity gospel (see Cornelio & Medina, 2020). There is much wealth to be shared if conspirators do not get in the way of the Marcoses. These stories are *epistemologically risky.* Fact-checking initiatives have provided evidence of institutions such as the Central Bank of the Philippines denying the existence of such gold bars (see Cruz, 2023), but conspiracy theorists have challenged these fact-checks as part of the conspiracy. Finally, gold bar stories are *social constructs.* As Jonathan Corpus Ong and colleagues observed, social media served as a "living archive for participatory Marcos mythmaking, where supporters riffed each other's theories, shared and amplified each other's content, and attacked those who attempted to correct and fact-check them" (Ong et al., 2022, p. 34).

The Marcos gold bar narrative performed various political functions in the public sphere. Academic studies (see Mendoza et al., 2023) have demonstrated how the conspiracy theory normalized the view that the Marcos family did not steal from the nation and put forward an alternative narrative about the legitimate source of their wealth. The conspiracy theory also positions the Marcoses as critical to the nation's economic prosperity. It connects the gold myth to nostalgic content about the Martial Law regime being the "golden age" of the Philippines. It invites audiences to be invested in the success of Marcos Jr.'s regime, as reclaiming the gold bars will have direct material benefits. During the presidential campaign, some versions of the conspiracy theory claimed that a Marcos victory would result in the redistribution of gold bars to all Filipinos,

with each citizen receiving a million pesos, while versions of the conspiracy theory after the election suggested that wealth from the gold bars would be invested in education, hospitals, and roads.

Table 1. Marcos Gold Bars as Conspiracy Theory.

Quality	Manifestation
Oppositional	Debunked by institutions, including the president himself
Uncovers malevolent plots against public interest	Cover-up by people keeping Marcoses of power
Blame conspirators with the agency to achieve self-serving outcomes	Marcoses' political rivals including politicians, liberal media, the Catholic Church, the communists, international banking cartel
Epistemologically risky	Fact-checking dismissed as part of the conspiracy
Social constructs	Participatory mythmaking online

Research Methods

Our research builds on existing empirical work on the Marcos gold bars by investigating their production and reception in the public sphere. While academic studies have focused on the content or key messages of the conspiracy theory (Mendoza et al., 2023), our research focused on their "discursive style" to examine the extent to which they harm deliberative norms. We conducted our research in the following manner.

To study the *production* of conspiracy theories, we analyzed 230 videos on the Marcos gold. We examined videos posted on YouTube, TikTok, Twitter, and Facebook from October 2021 to October 2022. This period spans the election season in the Philippines, from the filing of certificates of candidacy in October 2021 to election day in May 2022 and through the first four months of the Marcos presidency. The source of our data is a crowdsourced and validated disinformation database hosted by the Institute for Media Freedom in the Philippines (see: https://totooba.info/about.html).[2] We watched all the videos and coded them on two levels. First, we coded the basic characteristics, including the length, content creator, images and sounds used, format (e.g., explainer, reaction videos), and the narrative arc. Second, we coded the videos' discursive styles and how they sought to persuade viewers. Deliberative democracy considers inclusive reason-giving as normatively desirable communication practices in the public sphere, so we coded the videos based on the extent to which they appealed to inclusiveness and reason-giving. We kept these categories broad to spot general patterns, rather than diving into the variations in videos that generate more nuanced codes. We coded the videos separately and discussed those we coded differently. In the end,

[2] Internews' team of social media researchers and select media partners are monitoring online disinformation and suspected influence operations in the Philippines. Through Digital Insights and Literacy (DIAL)—Formerly TotooBa.info, Internews has developed a monitoring database and reporting mechanism on disinformation and influence operations. DIAL follows this process: a) collecting data from a variety of sources; b) analyzing the actors, behaviors, narratives, and networks; c) evaluating potential harms or the adverse effects of patterns and trends; d) sharing the key findings and their impact on the information environment.

there was no discrepancy in how we coded the videos, as the videos we analyzed largely followed similar formats, speech styles, and tonality.

One of us (Curato) studied the *reception* of conspiracy theories by conducting a weeklong fieldwork in Tacloban City—one of the electoral heartlands of the Marcoses—a week before the election. Since 2014, we[3] have been conducting fieldwork in this city, first to track the implications of postdisaster rehabilitation in political participation and then to track the rise of the populist strongman Rodrigo Duterte in 2016. We returned to the field site at least once a year (except in 2020 and 2021 during the COVID-19 pandemic) to document how Duterte sustained or negotiated his popularity with disaster-affected communities (see Curato, 2019). We returned to the same field site in 2022. We conducted fieldwork in communities we have been visiting since 2014 to stay in touch with our research participants and to document the resonant narratives and justifications for their preferred political candidates. We spent afternoons in the home of one of our key informants to experience the rhythms of everyday life during the campaign season. We joined our research participants in waiting for envelopes that contained cash gifts to encourage residents to vote for a candidate, engaging in banter with neighbors campaigning for the Marcoses' political opponents, comparing notes as to which party's political rallies were more entertaining and had better catering, and exchanging views about the Marcos gold. Although the findings of this fieldwork cannot be generalized to the wider population that viewed the videos of the Marcos gold, we argue that our findings provide insight into the impact of conspiracy theories in everyday conversations in the public sphere.

Production of the Conspiracy Theory Videos

Conspiracy theory videos of the Marcos gold bars took different forms. Content spanned from 15 to 20 minutes on average, with a few running for 30 minutes to one hour and shorter one- to two-minute videos on TikTok. YouTube had the most audience engagement, followed by Facebook and TikTok. These videos take various formats. An explainer is the most common, where a voice-over establishes a sequence of events that make sense of the Marcoses' wealth, how this wealth has been kept away by liberal elites from the nation, and the stakes for the return, and, in videos produced after the elections, the preservation of the Marcoses in power. Others take the form of reaction videos, where the screen is split between a conspiracy theory video and a content creator playing the role of an "ordinary person," reacting and commenting on the gold bar videos as they watch them in real-time.

Our analysis of these videos is consistent with the empirical studies discussed in the first part of this article, where conspiracy theories are found to *simulate* norms of deliberation. We emphasize the term "simulate" because we recognize that a networked industry of disinformation produced these videos to monetize views, rather than purposeful deliberative actors aiming to create a more inclusive and reasonable public sphere (see Ong & Cabanes, 2018; Ong et al., 2022). We find that videos on the Marcos gold bars follow disciplined messaging in raising specific themes that legitimize the view that the Marcoses have always been wealthy and did not steal from the nation. In a few instances, we spotted videos using the same script but different voiceovers and stock images to make such videos appear unique. We argue, therefore, that

[3] We use the pronoun "we" for consistency, although only Curato conducted the fieldwork.

the harm caused by the Marcos gold bar videos is instrumentalizing deliberative norms for the sake of commercial gains. Two findings are worth highlighting.

First, we find that the Marcos gold bar videos seek to *establish an epistemic appeal by selectively presenting evidence to support their claims.* All videos we reviewed used evidence to establish their claims, whether in the form of images of bank certificates, testimonies of whistleblowers, or video footage of the late dictator's wife, First Lady Imelda Marcos, explaining the source of their wealth. Often, the evidence presented relies on the legitimacy of institutions such as legacy media and international organizations. For example, a content creator named Siobal D uploaded a reaction video to a post on a YouTube channel called Sa Iyong Araw (Your Day). The post presented a clip of a 2009 BBC travel documentary, where British journalist Simon Reeve (2009) was reading out a document stating that there were "deposits in the name of Ferdinand Marcos in a bank in Brussels and it's for $987 billion" (Sa Iyong Araw, 2022, 1:19). The video was clipped at 20 seconds, which excluded the journalist's reflections on his encounter with Imelda Marcos. "Such a huge sum surely can't be genuine," Reeve said in his voice-over in the documentary. "Like armies of lawyers, I fail to unravel the mystery of Imelda's billions," he added (Reeve, 2009, 8:48). Reeve's skepticism about the First Lady's claims was excluded from the reaction video. The decontextualized clip of the BBC documentary served as a springboard for content creator Siobal D to reinforce the conspiracy theory. He amplified the claim that international media confirm strong evidence that Marcos's wealth is authentic. Other conspiracy theory videos used similar tactics of selectively presenting clips of Imelda Marcos's interviews with prizewinning Filipino journalists and well-respected television personalities, where Mrs. Marcos is seen holding documents to support her statements about their wealth.

While many videos were posted online in the lead up to the 2022 Philippine elections, video content likewise evolved to thread the narrative of abundance associated with the Marcos family into the first few months of Ferdinand Marcos Jr.'s presidency. For example, a video Pinas News Insider (2022) framed Marcos' trip to New York in September 2022 as a sign that Marcos was finally withdrawing the interest earned from his father's gold deposits in the World Bank to benefit the public. Marcos' ringing of the New York Stock Exchange bell was offered as "proof" that Filipinos would soon share in the Marcos family's wealth. Another common tactic used to establish epistemic credibility involved statements from Karen Hudes, who was portrayed as a "whistleblower" and former World Bank employee. In various iterations, Hudes claimed that Marcos had placed gold reserves and other wealth in a special trust account for the benefit of humanity. Many videos featured interviews with Hudes, in which she asserted personal knowledge of Marcos' wealth because of her experience at the World Bank. Voiceovers often emphasized the difficulty of discrediting Hudes' claims, as the World Bank itself acknowledged her former employment. However, in 2014, the World Bank issued a statement clarifying that Hudes had not been employed there since 2007. Far from simply appealing to viewers' emotions, the Marcos gold bar conspiracy theory treated its viewers as people who deserved to be shown evidence based on reliable sources.

Second, we observed that Marcos gold bar videos *invite viewers to be critical thinkers and practice healthy skepticism*. It is common for content creators, especially those using the format of reaction videos, to remind viewers to "do their own research." Often, content creators take a humble tone, stating that their channel is their simple contribution to discovering the truth about the gold bars and that viewers should do their share, too. For example, a content creator on the channel Real South Pride Production calls his audience

"utol," a Filipino slang for brother or sister. This establishes an equal and familiar relationship between the content creator and his audience. In his commentary, the content creator reminded his viewers—his brothers and sisters—that what he says in his vlog is only his personal musings. He used qualifiers such as "theory," as in "these are just some theories" about the Marcos wealth to keep the conversation open-ended (Real South Pride Production, 2022a, 2:28). In some instances, the content creator can be seen modelling the deliberative behavior of weighing and reflecting on different views. In another reaction video, for example, the same content creator paused the conspiracy theory video he was watching and said he was neither confirming nor denying the veracity of the information he had just watched. "Think of it as a two-sided coin," he said. "Look at both sides and remember that at the end of the day, it is up to you to form your own views on the matter" (Real South Pride Production, 2022b, 5:41). The content creator went on to say that all information exhibited in the videos is part of a "conspiracy theory unless proven otherwise" (Real South Pride Production, 2022b, 5:54). The discursive style of inviting viewers to think for themselves and interrogate the content of the videos they consume is a powerful feature. Instead of calling *out* viewers for believing in mainstream media, they are calling them *in* to consider a range of perspectives and use their judgment.

These practices of using reaction videos and inviting viewers to use their own judgment are not unique to the Philippines but are consistent with Starbird, DiResta, and DeButts' (2023) concept of "participatory disinformation," wherein users actively participate in creating, disseminating, and amplifying misleading content. This participatory process not only boosts the reach of conspiracy theories but also reinforces their resonance among audiences, as the collective engagement creates an illusion of collective truth-seeking. This time, however, the agents of truth-seeking do not belong to the "elite institutions" of liberal democracy such as courts, oversight bodies, and legacy media but to everyday people. Like QAnon influencers, content creators of Marcos gold bars portray themselves as truth-seekers—the "populist expertise," as Marwick and Partin (2024) put it—who sift through evidence that institutional elites purportedly conceal. For example, videos selectively presenting clips of Imelda Marcos holding documents or whistleblowers discussing the gold bars rely on the rhetorical strategy of empowering the viewer to verify and interpret the evidence.

On the surface, practices of participatory disinformation may provide an impression of a democratic project of epistemic co-discovery. This impression, we argue, is precisely the harm caused by conspiracy theories to deliberative democracy. Videos simulating deliberative norms such as inclusiveness and reason-giving distort democratic deliberation for commercial and political gains. However, as widely documented in various studies, there are monetization networks behind such content, disproving the impression that such content is organic and representative of "authentic" voices from "the grassroots." In the Philippines, studies have documented how political operatives employ "architects of networked disinformation" whose role is to recruit influencers and micro-celebrities to disseminate narratives favorable to their clients. Ong and Cabañes (2018) reveal how paid Marcos influencers craft compelling content while blurring the lines between authentic grassroots support and coordinated propaganda. Paid influencers amplify the Marcos gold bar conspiracy theory and further embed them into public discourse. This exemplifies how participatory disinformation transforms audiences into unwitting collaborators in producing conspiracy theories, ultimately corrupting the authenticity of the public sphere. Put another way, participatory disinformation is a coercive practice of communication, which is the opposite of deliberation.

Reception of the Conspiracy Theory

When limiting our analysis to the reception of Marcos gold bar videos online, it is evident that a niche community of viewers affirmed the content they consumed. Viewers posted comments that thanked content creators for spreading the truth. Others complimented them for explaining "historical facts" in a clear and simple manner. Instead of provoking inclusive and reflective public deliberation, conspiracy theories fortify discursive enclaves that further polarize the nation.

Offline, however, the reception of conspiracy theories takes on a different character. In our fieldwork, we met only one person who took the gold bar conspiracy theory seriously, while the rest of the community laughed it off. This, however, is not to say that the conspiracy theory served no function in the public sphere. We found that the gold bar narratives performed two functions.

First, the conspiracy theory served as a *placeholder explanation to diffuse confrontation*. It provides the vocabulary to smoothen interpersonal relations rather than demanding accountability from people in power. In the community we observed, we noticed parallelisms between the way the conspiracy theory normalized an alternative explanation for the Marcoses' wealth and the way people made sense of the unexplained wealth they saw in their everyday lives. For example, one of our research participants in her forties told us that she grew up hearing stories of treasure hunters looking for gold left by the Japanese occupiers during the Second World War. We asked her if she knew anyone who had lucked out in finding gold. She said no, but she remembered her neighbor who, one afternoon, brought home a motorcycle and, months later, opened a hair salon downtown. She said no one dared to "make trouble" or ask this neighbor how they could afford their new lifestyle. However, she heard a rumor that their neighbor's distant relative had found the gold bars. The motorcycle and the hair salon were the cuts they got from the successful expedition. In this example, the "hitting a goldmine" narrative did not hold epistemic weight. Our research participant classified it as a "rumor." Throughout our conversation, the participant phrased her stories with caveats like "this is just what I heard," or "we can't tell for sure." It served the function of a placeholder for explaining what was inexplicable when her neighbors were neither interested nor ready to "make trouble." During our fieldwork, the mood in the neighborhood was already tense at times. Aid distribution by the government and philanthropic foundations in the aftermath of disasters has often caused friction in communities, with some residents wondering why some households received more gift packs or cash than others. Speculations arise about patronage and favoritism, but these speculations rarely evolve into confrontations or calls for accountability. Instead, the norm was to speak in hushed tones to avoid offending the neighbors they also rely on in difficult times, or to listen to stories that help them make sense of everyday realities.

We found a similar function for the Marcos gold bar stories. Many of our research participants found the story frivolous, but they found it useful when softening potentially confronting conversations about the Marcoses' ill-gotten wealth. "But isn't Marcos a thief?" I asked one of our research participants—a self-described Marcos "super fan"—in one of our chats. "There's gold, remember?" he said, laughing. "Tons and tons," added his wife, joining the banter. This encounter may seem mundane, but it demonstrates how the "super fan" diffused a potentially heated conversation about corruption through a joke referencing the conspiracy theory. The conspiracy theory was useful, not because of its epistemic quality but because of its

discursive power to evade conversations people do not want to have. Viewed this way, one can argue that conspiracy theories play a double-edged function in the public sphere. On the one hand, it harms the public sphere by protecting powerful people from confrontational yet necessary questions to hold them accountable. On the other hand, it serves as a cushion for everyday conversations to remain congenial and not deteriorate into antagonistic encounters that corrode the social fabric in hyperpolarized societies (see Talisse, 2019).

Second, we observed that conspiracy theories *prompt conversations for communities to envisage alternative realities*. The Marcos gold bars open a hopeful conversation about what one would do if one got a share of the gold bars or a million pesos, as one version of the conspiracy theory claims. At our field site, we heard stories of a mother who said she would prioritize paying her debt from the electricity company as she just received a final notice of disconnection. Another woman said she would spend the million pesos on her mother's mounting hospital bills and medication. One of our research participants asked what exactly one million could afford. Is it enough to pay for the tuition fees of her four children until high school? We met a man planning to migrate to Saudi Arabia to become a construction worker and estimated that a million pesos might just be enough to cover his and his brother's relocation expenses and predatory fees from job placement agencies. In our conversations, none of our research participants naively pinned their hopes on the gold bars. As mentioned, the conspiracy theory held no epistemic weight. Instead, it had discursive power to forge conversations about realistic aspirations—topics that seem to be off-limits when the basis of public discussions is disheartening news reports from mainstream media. We also observed that the hope evoked by conspiracy theories is situated in deeper, intergenerational narratives about the Marcos family. We documented the stories of our research participants, remembering the benevolence of the Marcos family to their communities during the dictatorship. "His papa was generous, helpful," said a 63-year-old woman when I asked her why she felt deep affection for Marcos Jr. In her story, the Marcos family has always been kind to them, and they were sorely missed when they fled to the United States after the mass uprising. This narrative is widely shared among our research participants in the Marcos heartland, which makes *part* of the conspiracy theory about the gold bars resonant. From their perspective, the message of the gold bar stories is that the Marcoses share whatever they have. Viewed this way, we argue that the precise harm of the conspiracy theory rests not on its poor epistemic character—Filipinos do recognize the frivolity of this story. Instead, the precise harm rests in limiting people's imaginations to pursue plausible political projects on which they can pin their hopes.

Conclusion

This article examined the harms of conspiracy theories to deliberative democracy. We aimed to provide a nuanced account of how conspiracy theories jeopardized the public sphere through communicative distortions. We grounded our argument on the production and reception of conspiracy theories in the Philippines and put forward two arguments. First, we argued that conspiracy theories harm deliberative democracy by simulating deliberative norms for commercial gains. We affirmed the findings of the empirical literature that find conspiracy theories persuasive because of their appeal to evidence and viewers' critical thinking. The harm, we argue, lies in the corruption of deliberative norms to advance personal gain.

Second, we studied the reception of conspiracy theories by situating our observations on the rhythms of everyday life in the Marcos heartland. We find that the power of conspiracy theories rests not

on the epistemic weight or its believability but on its power to shape conversations. At our field site, we found that conspiracy theories served as tools to avoid difficult conversations and were used to imagine alternative futures without corresponding, plausible political projects. Throughout this article, we were careful not to romanticize conspiracy theories or overstate their democratic potential, but we recognize that champions of deliberative democracy can learn from the conspiracy theorists' playbooks.

Finally, we acknowledge that the empirical insights from this case study have limited generalizability. The case of the Marcos gold bars is unique in that its power lies not in its epistemic weight or oppositional character but in its aspirational narrative entwined with the political and cultural imaginaries in the Philippines. Conspiracy theories that challenge institutional authority or are grounded in historical grievances function differently in the public sphere and pose distinctive challenges and opportunities for deliberative democracy to flourish. For example, antivaccine conspiracy theories that challenge scientific authorities may disrupt public health initiatives, while conspiracy theories that have epistemic weight and are eventually proven to be true can catalyze calls for accountability and transparency. By presenting the unique case of the Marcos gold bars, we aim to advance a contextualized understanding of the functions and dysfunctions of conspiracy theories while provoking a conversation about the precise harms they cause to today's hypernetworked yet increasingly fragmented public sphere.

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