

EDITORIAL

Named by the World Health Organization as COVID-19, this virus was “assessed and characterized as a pandemic on March 11, 2020” (World Health Organization). Different from the other viruses that have mutated in the past years, COVID-19 is highly contagious. Compounded by the unavailability of a vaccine, this virus has caused a world-wide panic. As a consequence, countries across the world have imposed strict health protocols and border closures to prevent people from travelling from one point to another to combat the spread of the virus. Similarly, we in Southeast Asia experience imperious rules on staying at home. Confined to our homes with limited face-to-face interactions and waiting for news and information on COVID-19, many of us feel isolated, compounded by fear and uncertainty.

As the pandemic continues to shape new social realities for Southeast Asians, we also witness the reliance on online media platforms. Choudry (2020) reports that in “Southeast Asian countries: Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, Vietnam and Thailand, a total of 40 million people came online in 2020, pushing the total number of online users to 400 million, or nearly 70% of the population.” As Southeast Asian countries are experiencing the outbreak of COVID-19, we also witness the outbreak of the use of online media platforms to conduct economic transactions, access news and information and cope with social isolation to establish notions of connectedness.

As a response to this scenario, this current issue is titled “Communication Outbreaks,” in an attempt to highlight the significance of media and communication, as well as their participation during this global pandemic. Rooted in the social contexts of Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines and Vietnam, this issue presents research articles that center on relevant discourses on the key elements of online communication: 1) source and/or receiver, 2) message and/or information content, and 3) effect and consequences. Alongside the examination of these key elements are pertinent inquiries on online media use, information reliance, control and non-control of information spread, meaning-making, and notions of memorializing.

This issue comprises six research papers and two academic essays that take a more introspective view of the communication experience during the peak of the global pandemic. This issue illuminates the metaphorical idea of an epidemic as a “rapid or violent rise in activity” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2021). Looking at communication outbreaks akin to the dramatic rise in the use of online media platforms in Southeast Asia during the pandemic is preemptive of the need to examine the proliferation of fake news and information online. As fast as the spread of COVID-19 in Southeast Asian countries has been happening, we witness the outbreak and virality of fake news and information.

Lim Shiang and Edmund Ngo Chun Hou's article titled "A Study of the COVID-19 Infodemic in Malaysia" examines the varied types of fake news posted and shared in Malaysia from January 2020 to March 2021. Examining the collected false news and information during the first, second and third waves, or surge of COVID-19 in Malaysia, findings show two intrinsically linked themes: the instilment of fear and the spread of rumors on how authorities mitigate the spread of COVID-19. Magnified by this article is the fact that false information can only lead to a lack of knowledge consequential to erroneous actions and behaviors. Emphasizing the need for digital literacy, Shiang and Hou conclude that fake news can only be "combatted" if the audience is knowledgeable enough to distinguish what are real and true news and information.

The term "outbreak" also means "insurrection ... or revolting against civil authority" (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2021). This journal issue features two kinds of insurrection: 1) the insurgence of digital witnessing on Twitter, and, 2) the rise of social resistance utilizing online platforms. Jon Benedik Bunquin and Fatima Gaw's article titled "Digital Witnessing in a Pandemic: An Assemblage Analysis of the Twitter Hashtag Network #MassTestingPh" is about the interchangeable roles of the source and audience in social media. In this article, we see how the roles of the source and audience can shift and merge in constructing meanings in posted hashtags. Such phenomena in a social networking site, like that of Twitter, proves that it can extend its function as a platform and medium for constructing and re-constructing meanings of social events and phenomena. Bunquin and Gaw's article shows how the "flattening of hierarchies in digital witnessing" can occur to broaden the use of social networking sites.

Raymond Grenfell and Agung Wardana's article titled "Impacts of Platform Capitalism on Community Activism in Indonesia" describes issues and concerns about the use of platform capitalism for social organizing against the Omnibus Law in Indonesia. Focusing on the experience of community-based collective houses and how they demonstrate resistance, Grenfell and Wardana elaborate on how social mobilization has transferred online. Emphasizing face-to-face organizing and the need for a physical space to assert one's rights, Grenfell and Wardana note that the online "platforms cannot yet be considered as a viable substitute for physical organizing."

From the social mobilizing to renewing discourses on notions of nationhood, Vu Hoang Long and Dang Hoang Hai in their article titled "Digital Nationalism During the COVID-19 Outbreak in Vietnam: Collective Forgetting and Domestic Xenophobia" takes a different turn on the use of online media. Centering on the reading of news and information on the pandemic, Long and Hai write that in Vietnam the online media have established COVID-19 as the enemy and that "war rhetoric" as the main tenor of news and information on the pandemic has worked effectively in establishing a sole enemy – which in turn has brought about collectiveness among the citizens. This in turn, diverted pertinent discussions on nationalism and bridged the social divide. The duration of the pandemic, which forced many citizens to stay at home, became a leeway for many to pick-up pending discussions on their notions of

nationhood. In this article, the online platform, in a way, proves that it can be an alternative space for political discussions and assertions. Elaborating on how digital technology can be used in shifting discourses, the authors note that the spaces in which the digital platform was utilized for the rhetoric of war for the pandemic have evolved into “spaces for liberation and self-fulfillment.”

The term “outbreak” can also be perceived as a precursor for establishing order. Two articles center on the online space that can be used as a site for communication to achieve work tasks and as a site for collective memory-making. Doris B. Wilson’s article titled “Establishing Indicators for an Effective Communication among Task Groups: The Case of the ‘Task Force Out of Baguio’ (TFOOB)” describes the experience of communicating online among task force members to achieve their work goals. As an alternative way of communication, this article shows us how online communication can be used to facilitate work deliverables. Wilson also recommends indicators for measuring and evaluating effective communication networks for online groups.

Samuel Cabbuag’s article titled “Nostalgia for Normalcy: Online Producers in a Filipino Food-Related Facebook Group Amidst a Pandemic” curates a series of posted photographs on food. Reading the comments and infographics of such posts, Cabbuag explains how they elicited memory-making and nostalgia and a desire for normalcy among Facebook group members. Presenting a series of posted photographs on Facebook, Cabbuag deepens the discussion on collective hope for normalcy and notions of connectedness.

Two academic essays conclude this journal issue. In the essay “Social Division, Discontinuity and Disconnection during the COVID-19 Pandemic,” Orville B. Tatcho reflects on the state of the Philippines. Discussing how inequality is magnified through the varied relief programs and strategies of the Philippine government, Tatcho explains that quarantine policies implemented in the Philippines divide citizens into those “who can stay comfortably at home and those who defy stay-at-home orders because of hunger.” Effaced with a virus that chooses no one, the political strategies in the Philippines appear to be socially selective.

On a more hopeful note, Jose Carlo Garcia De Pano, in his essay titled “Finding Comfort in Uncertainty: Dealing with Anxiety,” writes about his experience coping with his fears about the COVID-19 pandemic. The author narrates how his anxiety has prompted him to communicate online with his friends and family and to seek out more information about the pandemic. Connection becomes an operative concept in this essay, where connectedness to family, and connectedness to thoughts and knowledge about the pandemic become vital coping mechanisms.

The contributions in this issue open a plethora of inquiries on the phenomena of communication outbreaks in Southeast Asia: With the rapid increase in the use of online communication platforms, are

we looking forward to more digitally literate people? In the shifting roles of the source and audience who can seemingly control the online rhetoric and discourse, are we witnessing the political growth and maturity of the online audience? Are we foreseeing social renewal in the way we utilize communication now? The readers are encouraged to ponder these questions as they immerse themselves in the articles and essays presented here.

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