

Social Division, Discontinuity, and Disconnection during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

In this essay, I talk about the division, discontinuity, and disconnection brought by the pandemic in the context of the Philippines. I highlight the division between poor and privileged Filipinos through a critique of the Philippine government's Social Amelioration Program, look at discontinuity in education as I reflect on what it means and implies, and pursue an argument concerning disconnection as I comment on infringements on social and mainstream media by the Philippine government. This range of issues has been brought into sharper focus by the pandemic and I will ground my arguments on personal narrative, experience, and observations.

Keywords: COVID-19, disconnection, discontinuity, Rodrigo Duterte, Social Amelioration Program

INTRODUCTION

Some say that the pandemic is an equalizer for the way it is experienced by everyone, regardless of race, gender, and class. That the pandemic has a death toll both locally and globally is taken to mean that nobody is really safe from the threat of disease. However, not everyone experiences the pandemic in the same ways (Matthewman and Huppert 2020, 1). As professor of communication Robin Boylorn aptly noted, “marginalized communities are grossly impacted by COVID and racism, because they are doubly vulnerable” (2020, 527). In the Philippines, issues of class and government accountability remain salient in the management and handling of the COVID-19 pandemic. I focus on issues of class and government accountability because they interact, if not compound, the challenges brought about by the pandemic.

In this essay, I will talk about the division, discontinuity, and disconnection brought by the pandemic. First, I look at the division between the poor and privileged Filipinos as I critique the Philippine government’s Social Amelioration Program. Second, I zoom in on the discontinuity in education as I reflect on what discontinuity means and implies. Finally, I provide a discussion of disconnection in the media as I comment on infringements on social and mainstream media by the government. As I describe below, these are the issues most apparent based on my news consumption and observations in my social media network when I was writing this essay. My arguments in this essay – as well as my definitions of the word division, discontinuity, and disconnection – are thus based on my personal experience, narrative, and observations.

As a Filipino residing in the United States and currently pursuing doctorate studies, my connection to my home country is sustained by social media platforms such as YouTube. During the first months of the lockdown, I spent a lot of time at home. I watched the primetime news *24 Oras* that airs in the Philippines and is later uploaded to YouTube. The same news frames appeared throughout the coverage of COVID-19 in the Philippines from April to June – Filipinos defying stay-at-home orders, health workers and medical front liners who are both dying and celebrated for their service, government health officials addressing the public, and celebrities finding worthwhile activities at home.

On Facebook where I also get updates and breaking news, I am amused to see the complaints of some of my friends about President Rodrigo Duterte’s rambling addresses to the nation and the “call-out culture” that emerged from social media. People name and shame erring officials (such as police officer Debold Sinas and those involved in corruption in Philhealth) and those whose statements reek of privilege (celebrities who say, “just Netflix and chill, that’s not so hard!”). While I am glad to note – based on the content of my social media platforms – that I have a generally self-aware and politically conscious social network, there are still netizens who uncritically praise the government’s management efforts and believe that the poor, at least during the lockdown, are disobedient, defiant,

and therefore responsible for their condition. The media and the government have roles in this representation, and I venture to provide a commentary.

DIVISION: THE SOCIAL AMELIORATION PROGRAM (SAP)

As a disbursement program meant to temporarily assist poor families with their material and financial needs, the Social Amelioration Program (SAP) has made apparent a sense of division. The division here is a class division that, on its most basic level, affects the haves and have nots but can also target more specific members of the populations or communities. Division becomes clearer when one sees that there are those who can stay comfortably at home and those who defy stay-at-home orders because of hunger; between those who need not worry about employment because of the guarantee of regularised compensation and those who live paycheck to paycheck and must work to sustain their hand to mouth existence; between those who will have easy access to healthcare and medical assistance and those who cannot afford hospitalisation; and finally, between those for whom technology has become a basic need and for those who consider gadgets and internet connectivity a luxury.

While there is an outpouring of support for the poor who lost their livelihood, there remains an element of victim-blaming whenever the poor is overrepresented on TV as violators of the guidelines of the “community quarantine.” Division is furthered by a level of misunderstanding between those who only need to stay comfortably at home as they watch the news and those who are featured in the news scrambling for whatever resources the government may provide. Some who are unaware of their privilege label the poor as “pasaway” (stubborn) for defying stay-at-home orders while the poor articulate an altogether different priority: survival. The reasoning of those interviewed for the evening news goes, “we might not die of COVID but we will die of hunger.” This of course leads me to examine my own privileged position from where I view and judge the situation.

Logistically, SAP should have been implemented to minimise the risks to beneficiaries. As a temporary solution, SAP also heightened risks of transmission in long queues, prolonged interaction with other beneficiaries or SAP workers, and long hours of waiting. Like government response to disasters and calamities, the SAP is short-sighted and reactive. What is needed is a strategic, contingent, and institutionalized government response codified in law to allow the government to properly respond during exceptional crises, such as a global pandemic. While government officials claim that the lockdown worked, the fact remains that the solution to COVID-19 is an appropriate public health intervention and not militarization. To be specific, what the country needs aside from vaccines are mass testing and of course, a sustained social servicing program that alleviates rather than exacerbates community transmission.

The media also play a crucial role in disseminating information that will not only be useful to the public but also to policymakers. For instance, instead of endlessly featuring the poor and the frustration of SAP beneficiaries and those who failed to receive any help from the government, the media can instead feature the best practices of contact tracing, testing, and treatment in different local government units (LGUs). Baguio City Mayor Benjamin Magalong is called the “contact tracing czar,” yet insights about best practices are not given depth of attention. There is also a tendency to focus on the National Capital Region or Metro Manila while other LGUs are only occasionally featured. As this is a global pandemic, the media can also integrate into their reports the ways in which other countries are dealing with the outbreak. Well-researched, data-driven news items based on scientific evidence and expertise need to be prioritised. These will provide important information to citizens to hold their leaders accountable.

DISCONTINUITY: EDUCATION

In the education sector, the pandemic has emphasised the digital divide between countries such as the US and the Philippines. While I was able to pursue the academic requirements in my classes and saw the semester proceed to its conclusion as classes in the US seamlessly moved online with minimal disruption, the same cannot be said about classes in the Philippines where access to the internet and technological equipment is not available to everyone. Most universities and colleges in the US can exclusively host classes online as there are a lot of online degrees offered at the undergraduate and graduate levels. However, the same infrastructure for online learning is largely unavailable in the Philippines. Therefore, a sense of discontinuity always pervades the prospects for education and learning in the Philippines because while schools and universities can adapt to virtual or online environments, the circumstances under which students learn and educators teach is far from “normal.” COVID-19 is an interruption between a seamless past and a distant future.

Like the SAP, indeed the problem with government response in a developing country such as the Philippines is the country’s reliance on short-term solutions and lack of contingency plans to proceed with business as usual. Of course, the division is not only evident between developed and developing nations. Even within the Philippines, divisions already exist in the social and class hierarchies of the poor and the wealthy. Discontinuity is more a concern for the poor than the rich. The issue of access is also compounded by the question of quality. As (virtual) classes opened in the Philippines’ basic education system, images of erroneous information in modules and textbooks circulated online. Meanwhile, in higher education, teachers were asked to complete course packs and account for students without gadgets and internet connection. It is hard to ensure the quality of education with asynchronous learning, especially if learning materials and resources have been completed at a shorter time compared to what would otherwise be afforded if classes did not migrate online.

Therefore, the discontinuity implies something bigger than not having access. It also signifies a break and departure from routine. The affordances of face-to-face learning for both students and teachers are no longer available in the “new normal.” Whereas teachers in primary and secondary school are usually always by the student’s side to correct any misinformation or clarify instruction in face-to-face learning, virtual classes shift and share that responsibility to parents as the closest authority figures to students at home. Whereas university faculty may be on top of their game when teaching face-to-face, online learning takes away some affordances, such as the ability to interact with students more personally and give feedback promptly. The home has suddenly been transformed as a learning and working space. Technical proficiency is now expected. On a positive light, discontinuity may compel adaptability and flexibility for both students and teachers, but consequences are yet to be fully understood in the education sector.

DISCONNECTION: ABS-CBN AND ANTI-TERROR LAW

On a literal level, disconnection is felt among those who do not have access to technology. However, disconnection can also mean punishment in social media such as temporary blocking of personalities. For instance, blogger Mocha Uson has been “mass reported” on Facebook for sharing “fake news” and propaganda. With proper investigation and due process, disconnection through censorship in social media may be justified if speech violates community standards and the content blatantly deceives and manipulates by ignoring facts, reason, and evidence. However, mass reporting and blocking should also be used judiciously to avoid infringements on free speech.

In the case of the Philippines, I will focus on a more insidious kind of disconnection: the government’s inaction on the renewal of television giant ABS-CBN’s franchise and the expedited passage of the Anti-Terror Law. Free speech and media advocates, activists, and the academe have lamented both the developments in ABS-CBN’s struggle to have its franchise renewed and the way that the Anti-Terror Law skirted the needed legislative debate in both the lower house and the senate. Putting ABS-CBN off-air disconnected viewers from a source of news and information which becomes more crucial in the context of the pandemic. At the same time, the passage of the Anti-Terror Law concentrates power on the police instead of the judiciary. The Anti-Terror Law’s vague definition of terrorism can have the consequence of disconnecting citizens from a crucial practice in healthy democracies: expressing dissent. The disconnection resulting from these issues also becomes more probable with the Duterte administration’s sensitivity to criticism.

Protests in the Philippines during the lockdown focused on the rights to free speech, peaceful assembly, and to express dissent without prior restraint and subsequent punishment – rights that are threatened by the Anti-Terror Law and to some extent by ABS-CBN’s closure. The protests show that

we should safeguard the right of citizens against warrantless arrests, against a law that can be weaponized to crush dissent, and against all attempts to silence citizens into conformity and blind loyalty.

If anything, COVID-19 did not stop protesters in the Philippines to express discontent and disagreement with the issues of the day. However, disconnection remains a real threat in the Philippines, especially when democratic institutions cannot safeguard constitutionally guaranteed freedoms. Duterte seems to have been able to constitute a supermajority in congress and has a “favourable” judiciary behind him. Supreme Court Chief Justice Sereno was ousted via the unprecedented quo warranto petition; the Supreme Court affirmed Duterte’s order to have Marcos buried at the heroes’ cemetery. These suggest that he has potentially reduced the obstacles that can check and balance his executive power, namely the legislative and judiciary. The challenge is for citizens to continue interrogating government (in)action through various means of political participation today – writing commentaries, posting on social media, protesting, and consciousness-raising as the country prepares for the 2022 national elections.

CONCLUSION

This essay is a reflection on various issues I deem important in light of the Philippines’ experience with COVID-19. I have focused on media coverage and the government’s Social Amelioration Program through the lens of division, looked at discontinuity in education, and commented on issues of disconnection in relation to Duterte’s precarious relationship with the media and activists. In sum, the news frames that seem to suggest that the poor are “pasaway” (stubborn) sow division in their capacity to incite perceptions that the poor are law breakers. Discontinuity in education is characterized not only by an interruption in learning and teaching because of the need to adapt to technology or virtual environments. Discontinuity is just as much about a break and departure from routine for students, teachers, and parents. Finally, disconnection is a product of government action such as when it chose not to renew the franchise of a TV network and decided to legislate an Anti-Terror Law that can amount to silencing dissent. These issues were brought into sharper focus by the pandemic and they remind us that COVID-19 as a health issue interacts with economic and political challenges of the present.

Given the foregoing, this essay recommends taking seriously Lokot and Avakyan’s insight: COVID-19 can also be understood using “intersectional analysis [that] places power at the centre... taking a broader approach to conceptualising how power hierarchies and systemic inequalities shape their life experiences” (2020, 3). This means that at the heart of COVID-19 are issues of power, whether such power is exercised by the government, media, or citizens themselves. Experiences of division, discontinuity, and disconnection will make some people more vulnerable than others as it affects

different groups variably; thus, it is always important to examine the ways in which a pandemic relates to and affects the political and economic realities of individuals and communities. What can we do then as scholars and teachers of communication? I propose that a critical practice in interrogating power includes reflecting on and writing commentaries that make visible social, economic, political, and cultural issues to make the government accountable to the consequences of their decisions.

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