

The Internet as a Democratizer: Exploring “Political Voice” in a Philippine Website Blog¹⁾

Yellowbelle Del Mundo DUAQUI²⁾

Abstract

This paper examines <http://kuro-kuro.org>, which is at least one of the many active sites in Philippine blogosphere, in the context of Philippine democracy. This Internet address hosts a website blog that publishes essays submitted online by Filipino citizens all over the world. It was launched by Filipino expatriate supporters during the presidential campaign of Philippine President Benigno Simeon “Noynoy” Aquino III.

It is fundamentally conjectured in this paper that political blogging has become a democratizing tool in the Philippines, which deepens democracy by foregrounding the “political voice” of ordinary citizens. This paper seeks to answer the following questions: does political blogging promote freedom of expression? Does it serve as a democratizing tool? How does blogging impact mass politics and democracy in general?

Keywords : political blogging, Philippine democracy, mass politics, political voice, Internet

I. Introduction

As of June 2010, Internet penetration rate in the Philippines was pegged at 29.7%, which translates to 29, 700,000 users out of the total population of about 99 million Filipinos, according to the research company AC Nielsen.³⁾ The Yahoo-Nielsen Net Index 2008 found out that 28 percent of Filipinos in the 22 major Philippine cities (including Metro Manila) have Internet access. Internet connectivity, however, is not only an urban privilege; it extends to far-reaching geographic locations, age groups and income brackets in the Philippines. The study also discovered that approximately 5 percent of its respondents use the Internet daily. The Internet is most appealing to young Filipinos, with 50% of the respondents in the 10 to 19 year-old age group having gone online the month before they participated in the study.⁴⁾

Table 1 shows the increasing trend of Internet use in the Philippines within the span of a decade, between the years 2000 to 2010.

Table 1. Growth of Internet Use in the Philippines, 2000-2010

Year	Internet Users	Population	% of the Population	Source
2000	2,000,000	78,181,900	2.6 %	ITU
2005	7,820,000	84,174,092	9.3 %	C.I. Almanac
2008	14,000,000	96,061,683	14.6 %	Yahoo!
2009	24,000,000	97,976,603	24.5 %	Nielsen
2010	29,700,000	99,900,177	29.7 %	ITU

Source: <http://www.internetworldstats.com/asia/ph.htm>

Despite Internet penetration not being able to cover even at least half of the Philippine population, it is worth noting that the Philippine blogosphere acts as a vibrant public space and an important opinion maker. Based on a study of global Internet use conducted by the Universal McCann, approximately 90% of Internet users in the Philippines read blogs on a regular basis, trailing behind South Korea at 92%.⁵⁾ Meanwhile, the Yahoo-Nielsen Net Index 2008 study found out that Filipino Internet users are “more likely to be opinion leaders.”⁶⁾ It could be claimed, on the basis of these two studies, that there is a sustained effort in blog writing and a solid blog readership base in the Philippines.

II. Literature Review

Earlier analyses of the linkage between democracy and the Internet showed a positive correlation, citing the spread of democratic values and the empowerment of ordinary citizens to bypass state censorship as its clear outcomes.

A. Western Literature on the Democracy-Internet Connection

Simon (2002) noted that the developers themselves of the Internet intended the technology to “reinvigorate democracy and spread democratic values around the globe.” (Simon, Corrales and Wolfensberger, 2002: vii) These “idealistic technologists”, according to Simon (2002), point to the various unprecedented capabilities of the Internet in order to prove the link between democracy and the Internet: it made possible for anyone to become a publisher and gain access to a wide readership base, it allowed “new modes of free expression”, it built civil society by making freedom of association and advocacy support digitally possible, it empowered ordinary citizens by providing the tools for e-participation, and it promoted government transparency and accountability. (Simon, Corrales and Wolfensberger, 2002: vii)

Simon (2002) also pointed out that the connection between democracy and the Internet can be historically validated. The development of the Internet, according to the author, coincided with the fall of the Soviet Union and Communism. The rapid expansion of the Internet also occurred contemporaneously with the transition to democracy of formerly Communist states in Eastern

Europe, Russia, and certain Asian countries. (Simon, Corrales and Wolfensberger, 2002: viii)

Citing Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye, Simon (2002) underscored that the information age is empowering not only the big industrial nations, but the small developing ones as well. The Internet has become a tool for soft power, changing the nature of power in international relations. (Simon, Corrales and Wolfensberger, 2002: 13)

For industrial nations like the United States, the Internet was appropriated as a tool for governance. Aikat (2000)⁷⁾ discussed how the United States government is making use of the Internet on how to promote access to government information it is willing to share. The author cited a landmark legislation passed by the United States Congress in 1993, known as the Government Printing Office Electronic Information Access Enhancement Act, directing the U.S. Government Printing Office and the Office of Superintendent of Documents to improve access to federal electronic information by maintaining an electronic directory, providing a system of online access to government publications and operating an electronic storage facility. (Albarran and Goff, 2000: 34)

B. Asian Politics and the Internet

The 2011 Singapore elections demonstrated the power of social media to transform existing power dynamics. The People's Action Party, which has been ruling Singapore for 52 years, had experienced an unprecedented decrease in its share of votes by 60%. The dramatic shift in the Singaporean political terrain is attributed by many politicians and scholars in Singapore to the increasing importance of online media to reach out to voters. The People's Action Party had been observed to cling to traditional media such as the newspaper and television during the electoral campaign while neophytes had gained popularity (but not necessarily clinching political victory) as they resorted to the latest social networking tools in the Internet.⁸⁾

In national contexts where there are high levels of political censorship and repression, political blogging has been found to proliferate. China, the country that registered the highest number of political bloggers in the world, offers an interesting case.⁹⁾ Esarey and Qiang (2008) analyzed popular Chinese political blogs that mostly involved satire directed to the Chinese State and its policies. The authors cite blogging as a medium of political expression in China that is relatively impervious to state repression.¹⁰⁾

Meanwhile, in Iran, Khiabany and Sreberny (2007) cited the writings of Iranian youth bloggers on national and international issues at the backdrop of a repressive Islamic state. Similar to the Chinese case, Persian bloggers are numerous, making the Persian language one of the top five most popular languages in the global blogosphere.¹¹⁾ In the Chinese and Iranian case, scholars

regard Internet use very positively in terms of advancing democratization in these countries.

Meanwhile, political developments in Tunisia and Egypt in 2011 had led observers to refer to these events as the “Facebook Revolution.” But while analysts in popular media have disagreed to the proposition that social media had caused the widespread support to the protests, they claim that it did hasten the process. In Egypt, for example, organizing of the January 25, 2011 protest had already been done even before the Egyptian government was able to block Twitter and Facebook. According to popular media analysts, social media also largely shaped the narrative. While the Egyptian government had been trying to make the situation look anarchic, a New York-based Egyptian blogger had been able to persuade global media networks like CNN that the event constituted a legitimate uprising. Most importantly, popular media analysts underscored the role of social media in attracting international support for the Egyptian cause.¹²⁾

Like the Egyptian case, Tunisian protesters also turned to Facebook and Twitter for organizing and public support. Highly educated and prolific Tunisian bloggers, who were perceived to be critics of the government, also figured prominently as the Tunisian government actively sought to block blog sites.¹³⁾

C. The Use of Information and Communications Technology in Philippine Democracy

Hutchcroft and Rocamora (2003) speak of a “democratic deficit” in Philippine democracy involving a mismatch between strong demands and weak institutions. They point out that it is manifested in the “deepening frustration over the inability of democratic institutions to deliver the goods, specifically goods of a *public* character.” Hence, crisis in Philippine democracy springs not from the lack of appeal of democratic values to Filipino citizens, but from the incapacity of democratic institutions to deliver public services in a reliable and efficient way. (Hutchcroft and Rocamora, 2003: 259-260)

A United Nations (UN) compendium (2009), meanwhile, seems to suggest that this weakness in Philippine democratic institutions is getting remedied through the use of technologies for political governance. The compendium had identified, for instance, the use of cellular phones in doing political governance in the Philippines. The cellular phone is the “preferred device for eParticipation in the Philippines.” According to the same study, approximately 28 million out of more or less 80 million Filipinos in 2001 own a cellular phone unit, with each user sending an average of one to seven text messages per day. The use of cellular phones by far exceeds the use of the Internet in politics in the Philippines.¹⁴⁾

The Philippine government in 2001, under former President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, initiated a TXTGMA campaign that launched the SND A TXT MSG 2 GMA service that made use of

the short-messaging system to enable ordinary Filipino citizens to directly communicate their concerns to the Philippine government. Its goal was “to bring the Presidency closer to the people” by enhancing the poor’s access to basic social services. Hence, the content of the text messages from ordinary Filipino citizens who made use of this e-tool mostly involved “complaints about government services, projects and officials”. This campaign was made possible by the creation of a Presidential Action Center (PACE) ran by six persons who received the text messages, then forwarded it to the appropriate government agency for corresponding action. In its maiden year, the TXTGMA campaign registered a monthly record of 18,000 messages per month. According to the UN compendium (2009), this program was a “pioneer in the use of SMS in government.”¹⁵⁾

But the use of technology in Philippine politics is not only government-driven. In *Txting Selves, Cellphones and Philippine Modernity*, Filipino sociologist Raul Pertierra (2002) wrote about the “coup d’text”, an instantaneous mass mobilization in Edsa largely organized with the use of mobile phones (particularly its SMS feature) that ousted former Philippine President Joseph Estrada in January 2001 due to alleged plunder and betrayal of public trust.

D. Political Blogging in the Philippines

The rise of democracy as an important feature of modernity is marked by the emergence of mass politics. Political blogging is an important hallmark of mass politics in the Philippines, penetrating a wide social base and transcending classes or even traditional nation-state boundaries. The average Filipino blogger is an educated middle-class person.¹⁶⁾

Before the rise of the Philippine blogosphere, Velasco pointed out that social commentary was largely monopolized by the Philippine mainstream media: two broadcasting networks with both TV and radio infrastructures and two daily broadsheets. He claimed that political blogs now became part of the marketplace of ideas traditionally monopolized by the church and the academe, leading to the formation of a new space for public opinion.¹⁷⁾

III. Conceptual Framework

Democracy, as a concept, is operationalized in this paper in terms of the exercise of civil rights, particularly the right to free expression.

There are at least three schools of thought arising from the literature dealing with the democracy-Internet connection, to which I refer in this paper respectively as: the Internet as a democratizer school, the “myth of digital democracy” school, and the Realist school. The first and second schools of thought espouse extreme positions in their assessment of the role of the Internet vis-à-vis democracy (the first proposing a positive connection while the second one suggesting a

negative connection). Meanwhile, the third school lacks the idealistic triumphalist tone of the first school at the same time lacking the critical pessimism of the second one. The third school offers a “sober” assessment of actual studies done on Internet use and how it impacts political behavior, especially in the United States.

A. The Internet as a democratizer school

This school subsumes both views discussed by Shirky (2011) in *The Political Power of Social Media: Technology, the Public Sphere and Social Media*: the “instrumental” view and the “environmental view” of Internet statecraft. Both views fundamentally assume a positive relationship between Internet and democracy, but differ on their projections when democratization will take place and on their analytical sequence between the development of a public sphere and democratization.

According to Shirky (2011), the “instrumental” view basically assumes that “communicative freedom is good for political freedom.” The “environmental” view, meanwhile, looks at social media as “long-term tools that can strengthen civil society and the public sphere.” According to the second perspective, democratization or any improvements in the political life of a society follows the emergence of a vibrant public sphere.¹⁸⁾

The Internet inspired visions of prosperity and democracy, and generated hype that it was a tool to achieve both. According to Margolis and Riaño (2009), many expected the Internet to revitalize democratic politics in two ways: (1) “Public officials will use the Internet’s information and communication technologies (ICTs) to elicit citizen input about public policy decisions and to deliver public services with greater equity and efficiency”; and (2) “Citizens will use ICTs to acquire knowledge about civic affairs and public policies and to organize themselves to communicate effectively to policy makers their informed opinions and desires.” (Margolis and Riaño, 2009: 5)

Claiming that they believe in a “less exalted notion of democracy,” Margolis and Riaño (2009) defined “democracy” as a “method of governing an association, a form of governance through which the people rule by means of political procedures upon which they commonly agree.” (Margolis and Riaño, 2009: 5) Citing the notion of political theorists on how political participation should be done, the authors emphasized that “democratic procedures for decision-making” entail that citizens be provided with “substantial equal opportunity for effective participation in politics.” (Margolis and Riaño, 2009: 6) Not only does it presume “modern governmental institutions”, but a political environment that permits the flourishing of cherished liberal values such as individual freedom and liberty for all achieved through the cultivation of “diverse lifestyles and individual self-development.” (Margolis and Riaño, 2009: 6-7)

However, Margolis and Riaño (2009) noted that even a self-proclaimed democracy like the United States that presents itself to the world as an “exemplar of democracy” can fall short in the tall order of democratic governance. First, with the way by which popular rule is facilitated by the American political system, elite control of democratic institutions and practices that precludes popular rule is among the major glitches cited in the workings of American democracy. The authors cited that scholars who point out the procedural and institutional limitations of American democracy and other democracies in other parts of the world have eyed the Internet as a potential solution to this shortfall, particularly in improving the political participation of ordinary citizens. (Margolis and Riaño, 2009: 7) According to the authors, the ideas on what the Internet can do to improve democratic governance include serving as a vehicle to educate the citizenry in making informed choices during voting period and as a vehicle to provide the citizenry significant information in making informed policy choices. (Margolis and Riaño, 2009: 7) The second feature of American democracy examined by the authors concerns the “scope of democracy itself.” Since the Internet is capable of “extending and deepening citizens’ involvement in public affairs,” the authors point to the possibility of using virtual communities to serve as “online extensions of real world organizations to creating new interest groups online.” (Margolis and Riaño, 2009: 8)

Moreover, Margolis and Riaño (2009) clarified the concept of “effective participation” as “more than simply the right to make one’s views known” but it “requires not merely a chance, but rather an equal chance to voice those views.” It is in this context that the Internet is tasked to create a space “in which all voices get an equal chance to be heard, and all views can be expressed effectively” and where technically speaking, “every citizen can become his or her own publisher.” (Margolis and Riaño, 2009: 9) According to the authors, political reformers have looked on the Internet as a way of progressing towards the “ideal of responsive democratic governance in the area of public administration.” (Margolis and Riaño, 2009: 12) This ideal is based on classical democratic theory’s vision of democracy as a “form of self-government that entails the public’s direct participation in political life on an ongoing basis.” (Margolis and Riaño, 2009: 10) Adherents of this theory argue that citizens can now use the Internet to rule more directly, although only a few of them believed that collective deliberation and sustained action from collective decision-making is possible through it. (Margolis and Riaño, 2009: 12)

B. The “myth of digital democracy” school

In his discussion of what democracy and democratization meant in his famous book *The Myth of Digital Democracy*, Hindman (2008) defined “democratization” along the lines of “political voice” as defined in *Voice and Equality* stating that, “meaningful democratic participation requires that the voices of citizens in politics be clear, loud, and equal.” (Verba, Schlozman and Brady, 1995: 509, as cited in Hindman, 2008: 6)

Hindman (2008) noted that the study of “political voice” expanded to the study of “deliberative democracy” trailblazed by Jurgen Habermas. Proponents of deliberative democracy agree that “democracy should be more than just a process for bargaining and the aggregation of preferences”. They claim that “true participation” can only stem from citizens directly engaging in discussions with one another. It is in this context that the Internet is purveyed as a tool that would expand the public sphere, widening the range of political ideas brought into the discussion and broadening the number of citizens as well who can take part in it. (Hindman, 2008: 7)

In a chapter titled “Blogs: the New Elite Media,” Hindman (2008) debunked the popular notion that the rise of political blogging in the United States had democratized politics, particularly by giving voice to those who were formerly left out by mainstream media. According to the author, a closer analysis of the political bloggers themselves, especially the most successful blogs in the United States, reveals that most of it are maintained by educated middle-class white American men who do not represent the typical American or a significant part of the American electorate even as they claim to represent them. This led the scholar to claim that a new elite had arisen in the person of these professional bloggers, who are mostly university-educated, technically-equipped, and have business and journalism backgrounds. (Hindman, 2009: 102-128)

Meanwhile, in another popular book titled *Republic.com* that similarly bore the spirit of critical pessimism expressed by Hindman, American legal scholar Cass Sunstein (2001) wrote about the occurrence of “cyber cascade” or “incestuous amplification” in the “echo chambers” found within political blogs in the Internet, as in the case of the United States. “Cyber cascade” refers to a phenomenon wherein false information spreads due to fractured communication in a digital environment, leading to group polarization and extremism. (Sunstein, 2001) The author explained “group polarization” as “after deliberation, people are likely to move toward a more extreme point in the direction to which the group’s members were originally inclined.” Hence, from the point of view of “political voice,” Sunstein seems to ask how far and how exactly voices are heard. With the balkanization of opinion in the American blogosphere, the author seems to suggest that online politics is no different from real-world politics. (Sunstein, 2001: 51-88)

C. The Realist School

For this school of thought, this paper shall refer to empirical studies done on the effect of Internet use to political activity. One of the various empirical studies done on this is by Rice and Katz on the American political system which found out that “the internet had a mild positive impact on political activity” where the American presidential elections of 1996 and 2000 are concerned.¹⁹⁾ Using data from the Syntopia 1996 survey and the Pew 1996 and 2000 presidential election surveys, the study found out that a huge percentage of Internet users participated in “some kind of online

political activity.” Some Internet users also responded that the Internet had exercised an influence on their voting decision during the American presidential elections in 2000.

However, the study also discovered that “neither internet use/nonuse nor frequency of internet use” positively correlated with both online and offline political activities. It also showed that the use or nonuse of the Internet and the frequency of its use was associated with “perceptions of the importance of print media or television for political issues.”

The study then concludes that the Internet has become “a way in which to expand political involvement without sacrificing current modes of political activity.” Despite data showing that some Internet users changed their opinions due to online exposure, Rice and Katz clarified that it does not suggest that the Internet is radically changing the political behavior of American citizens and the access to political information compared to age, education and income which remain the significant predictors of political behavior in the United States. (Howard and Jones, 2004: 118)

IV. Methodology

Content analysis was done on 100 out of the total of 479 blogs published in <http://www.kuro-kuro.org> as of December 19, 2010. These blogs had been submitted in the website between August to December 2010. The application of content analysis in this paper endeavors to look at the frequencies that issue areas are tackled in blogs. Frequencies will be measured in two ways: (1) the number of blogs written on a particular topic, and (2) the number of comments that a particular blog generates. Table 2 summarizes the number of blogs sampled for this study.

Table 2. Study Sample

Period	Total Number of Blogs	Sample
December 2010	10	10
November 2010	21	16
October 2010	119	30
September 2010	87	34
August 2010	10	10
Total	479	100

Source: Archives (<http://kuro-kuro.org/>, as of December 19, 2010)

V. Results and Discussion

The Internet address <http://www.kuro-kuro.org> houses a website blog started by Ben Totanes and Betty Abrantes, two Filipinos who are based in the United States. Abrantes is a graphic designer while Totanes is a technical writer based in San Jose, California. (<http://www.kuro-kuro.org>) The self-description of this website blog in the Facebook page dedicated to it states that:

“Kuro Kuro’, (“Opinions” in English) is an opinion blog about the current political, social and economic conditions in the Republic of the Philippines. Its self-avowed mission is “to promote healthy discussion amongst its members towards the overall good of the country and its people.”

A. Themes Arising from the Political Blogs

These are the categories employed by the website blog to sort blog contributions: commentaries, culture, education, feature articles, for a better Philippines, government, history, humor, infrastructure, miscellaneous, news, politics, polls, religion, and economy.

After coding and tabulating the data, an analysis of the coding table revealed that there are certain themes and patterns emerging from the political blogs. Table 3 aims to present these themes in an organized manner.

Table 3. Themes and Patterns from the Blogs

Themes and Patterns	Number of Blogs	% (N=100)
Welfare services	3	3%
Internet politics	6	6%
Manila hostage crisis	4	4%
Filipino labor migration	2	2%
Personal change	7	7%
Education reform	1	1%
Health reform	1	1%
Traffic management scheme	1	1%
Parenting	1	1%
Post-bar exam bombing	1	1%
Population management	3	3%
Foreigners in the Philippines	1	1%
Foreign diplomacy	2	2%
Technological development	2	2%
Role of the Philippine Executive	13	13%
Entrepreneurship	4	4%
Civil service	1	1%
Nationalism	3	3%
Graft and corruption	7	7%
9/11	1	1%
Prostitution	1	1%
Rice technology	1	1%
Railroad system	1	1%
Conditional cash program	5	5%
Supreme Court plagiarism	1	1%
Build-operate-transfer program	1	1%
Spirituality	2	2%
Separation of church and state	1	1%
Philippine industrialization	1	1%
Participatory community design	1	1%
Organic farming	1	1%

Tourism	1	1%
Philippine history	3	3%
Disaster management	1	1%
Price control	1	1%
Land ownership	1	1%
Labor rights	1	1%
Bus transport system	1	1%
Nuclear power	1	1%
Politicization of the military	1	1%
Food security	1	1%
Political change	3	3%
Women's suffrage	1	1%
Gun licensing/carrying	1	1%
Oil spill	1	1%
Sports	1	1%

* **Source:** Archives (<http://kuro-kuro.org/>, as of December 19, 2010)

Table 4 shows the top five most discussed issues. It was measured in terms of the number of blogs submitted on a particular topic.

Table 4. Top Five Themes Frequently Discussed in Blogs

#	Frequency	Theme (s)
1	13%	Role of the Philippine executive
2	7%	Graft and corruption, personal change
3	6%	Internet politics
4	5%	Conditional cash program
5	4%	Entrepreneurship, Manila hostage crisis

The theme “role of the Philippine executive” refers to blogs tackling the key accomplishments of Philippine presidents, the problems and challenges faced by the incumbent Benigno Simeon “Noyonoy” Aquino III (PNoy) administration, the key projects and programs of the PNoy administration, policy suggestions to the government specifically addressed to the Office of the President of the Republic of the Philippines, poems dedicated to the president, criticism against the presidential staff, and a review of the President’s first 100 days in office.

Under “graft and corruption,” the political blogs raised issues about the Truth Commission, the prosecution of former President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo for graft and corruption, huge salaries in the government-operated and controlled corporations and the political socialization of the *Sangguniang Kabataan* into corruption, among other issues.

“Personal change” ranges from tips on personal success and professional growth to realizations about how an ordinary Filipino citizen can contribute to national development.

Meanwhile, “Internet politics” pertains to blogs tackling the use of Internet features such as blogs and Facebook for politics. Most of the blogs under this theme tackled issues surrounding the

controversial Facebook page established and maintained by PNoy supporters during the electoral campaign period, which was later taken down by Facebook following the alleged request of the Presidential Communications Secretary of the Philippines.²⁰⁾

The “conditional cash program” is a recent Philippine government dole-out amounting to approximately 29 billion pesos to be distributed to 2.6 million poorest Filipino households made in exchange for making sure that parents put their children to school and attend to their children’s medical needs. The Philippine government hopes to generate immediate economic gain out of the program through a multiplier effect.²¹⁾

“Entrepreneurship” involves blogs discussing the need for home-grown small-scale business, the need for Filipino migrants to save and invest in the Philippines, and the need to incubate unique products.

Finally, the “Manila hostage crisis” relates to the August 23, 2010 hostage-taking incident in the Philippines that killed 9 Hong Kong tourists.²²⁾ This incident arose barely two months after the ascent of President Aquino to the presidency.

Furthermore, the website blog has a feature that allows comments to be posted on a blog, as well as replies to these comments. Although blog readers are entitled to as many comments they want and thus implies that the number of comments do not necessarily equate to the number of authors of these comments, the sheer volume of comments received from the blog reading public can also indicate the political import assigned to selected issues and must be thus tackled as a separate measure. Table 5 shows the top five themes that drew the most number of comments.

Table 5. Top Five Heavily Commented Themes

#	Theme	Number of Comments
1	Personal change	221
2	Population management	177
3	Education reform	164
4	Manila hostage crisis	149
5	Internet politics	84

B. Issues Relating to Democracy Discussed in the Blogs

The issues directly related to democracy that were tackled in the blogs are the following: the role of the Philippine executive, politicization of the military, civil service, political change, graft and corruption, separation of church and state, and women’s suffrage. Figure 1 shows the volume of discussion that each particular topic received in the blog sample.

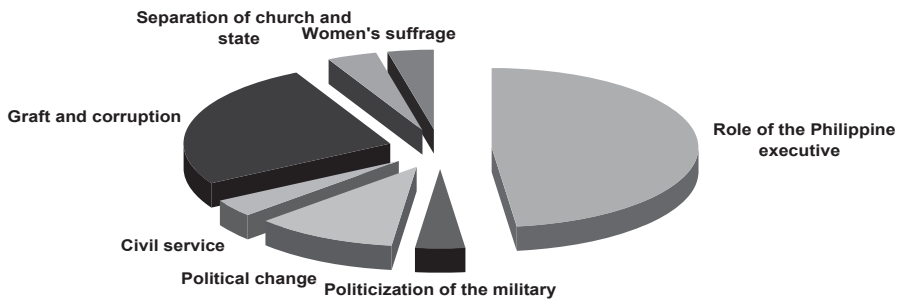


Figure 1. Issues on Democracy Raised in the Blog Sample

In the sample of blogs limited to those only discussing issues directly involving democracy, the biggest chunk discussed the role of the Philippine executive – a result coinciding with an earlier finding concerning the general blog sample. It was followed by blogs tackling graft and corruption and then political change.

D. Areas of Public Policy Raised in the Blogs

Furthermore, the topics that emerged from the blogs are observed to be important areas of public policy that any nation would consider as critical to their national development planning. These issue areas are the following: Filipino labor migration, foreign diplomacy, nuclear power, food security, disaster management, tourism, entrepreneurship, technological development, health reform, and education reform. Figure 2 shows the volume of discussion that each particular area of public policy received from the sample of blogs that discussed public policy issues.

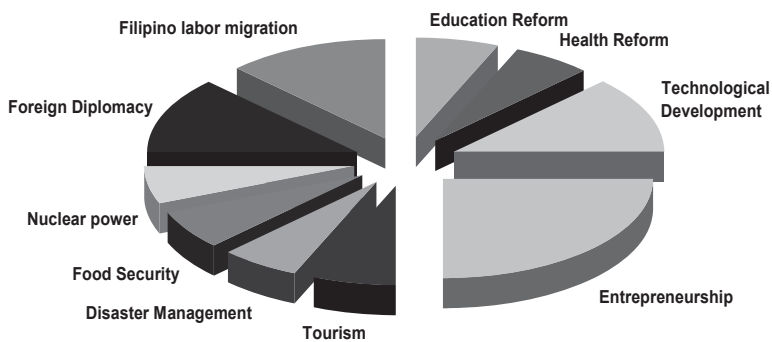


Figure 2. Areas of Public Policy Raised in the Blog Sample

Of this sample of blogs that particularly dealt with areas of public policy, majority of them discussed entrepreneurship followed by Filipino labor migration and technological development. It is then followed by education reform and health reform issues. Tourism, disaster management, food security and nuclear power are also issue areas tackled in the sample.

E. Engaging the Public

Bloggers in <http://kuro-kuro.org> themselves affirm the political importance of this website blog. In “Something Good Called Technology” posted in September 25, 2010, a blogger named Cynthia wrote:

“That is why whoever thought of Kuro-Kuro dot org (last I checked, it had more than two million hits by the way and it’s relatively new) is doing the President and the people a vastly GOOD service. Instead of hiring a whole “monitoring” team to listen to all the commentaries, there’s the internet. It also is a constructive idea NOT to stop “negative” comments (no matter how illogical some may admittedly be) because that matters. As Sun Tzu advises, “know thy enemy” — or know the lies that can be “used” against the leader. Okay, that sounds mercenary, but politics is mercenary and there are people who would do ANYTHING to bring down even a good man.”

Another blogger, Joe Josen, posted a blog titled “Turning Adversities into Opportunities” in December 10, 2010 expressing a similar sentiment with regards to public criticism in the Internet:

“Another positive aspect of the Kuro-Kuro blog was its policy to allow constructive criticism which made the platform balanced. If you hear nothing but praises and great things happening in an organization, especially that of a government that has perennially been suspected of corruption for years, people get suspicious. No matter how hard the President and his team tries to do everything right, they will make mistakes and people will want to hear that. The President I am sure wants to see where he and his team can improve. It has been said that when a leader starts to think that he does not make mistakes, he stops being a leader. So, ownership to one’s mistakes is indeed a great quality of a leader.”

The blogger Cynthia, highly conscious of the implications of the use of the Internet in politics, also noted how politics is becoming online:

“Naturally, e-politics also means that people do not believe the most ridiculous things they hear without “checking” their facts and these days, it also is easy to check ones facts when one is “wired”. Google it, use brains.. see what seems logical.. after all Filipinos are NOT a stupid people. Most people (ourselves included) even feel that soon traditional media will change. How many of us REALLY read the news from newspapers these days or do we go ONLINE and read it there?”

Comments from these bloggers that center on the advantages of blogging for political life affirm the hopes and goals of the “Internet as a democratizer” school. Among the blogs that discussed Internet politics, not even a single one tackled issues that the “myth of digital democracy” school represented. The nature of the data and method used in this paper, however, is

not adequate to determine the impact of blogging to Filipino political behavior, as investigated in the American blogosphere.

VI. Summary and Insights

Given the data presented in this paper, it could be claimed that the “Internet as a democratizer” school is valid on the particular point that any Filipino citizen, both residing within the Philippines and abroad, can have the same equal access and equal chance of getting published, anytime and anywhere they may be, in this website blog. The thoughts and opinions expressed by contributors are not editorialized, thus preserving public opinion in its purest form. This is conducive to the cultivation of “political voice” and enriches the public sphere. In Kuro-kuro.org, the voices of contributors are all heard “clear, loud and equal,” which are hallmarks of direct participation that any nation calling itself a democracy would envision.

As the website blog collapses time and space between and among Filipinos all over the world who use the website blog, the readership base is widened globally and the lively exchange of comments is done in real-time. However, even if just about anyone is welcome to submit a contribution, this access is curtailed to a certain extent by the fact that the administrators of the website blog still screen submissions before publishing it. While submission is universally possible, gatekeeping occurs before contributions are published online. There is no data available that would establish the parameters used in publishing. This, in effect, undermines communicative freedom; hence, political freedom. It is in this context that the Realist school becomes more plausible rather than the “internet as a democratizer” school that rests on an idealistic conception of political voice, political participation and democracy in general. The free-for-all posting in the comments section allows greater communicative freedom than the procedure used for blog publication. On the whole, it could not be claimed that this website blog absolutely permits “self-publication”.

However, as previous studies on the Philippine blogosphere had pointed out, most bloggers hail from the educated middle-class. This resonates with the United States experience where blog use and consumption is limited to young, highly-educated professionals, which undermines the “instrumentalist” view of Internet statecraft to produce greater democratization. Without greater education, democratization will hardly take place even if Internet technologies are in place to provide a venue for political communication. This dimension affirms the critical pessimism expressed by the “myth of digital democracy” school.

Furthermore, despite the diversity of themes and issues that had been presented, these are all interconnected and centrally points to a national development agenda arising from the grassroots.

There are no signs at the moment that these policy suggestions from the bottom had been noted by the Philippine government, which operates based on the traditional method of relying on technocratic expertise. The findings of the content analysis validate Rocamora and Hutchcroft's concept of "democratic deficit" in the sense that the myriad issues presented in Table 3 mostly involve "strong public demands" for "public goods" that Philippine democratic institutions fail to deliver to the citizenry.

Meanwhile, the central focus on the "role of the Philippine executive" bolsters what Juan Linz (1990) in "The Perils of Presidentialism" describes as the tendency for presidential systems to bestow a certain image or aura on presidents that raises too much public expectation.

Since there are no efforts from the Philippine government to distill information from citizen-driven political blog sites such as the case cited in this paper, it could not be fully claimed that political blogging is a democratizing mechanism in the Philippines although it did provide the material conditions that could railroad the way to deliberative e-participation.

VII. Issues and Recommendations

Due to lack of an advanced technical skill in tracking the countries of the blog contributors, this researcher could not extract the data required to assess the scope of participation in the website blog. The country of residence of the blog contributor is not indicated nor required in submitting an essay in this website. Hence, even while this website blog is configured for globality, sophisticated techniques in doing Internet research are required to ascertain if it is consumed globally. Moreover, there is a need to uncover differentials in participation between blog contributors based in the Philippines and those abroad. It is worth noting, for the meantime, that this website blog is an initiative from two Filipino citizens abroad.

Furthermore, the content analysis method used in this paper will not be able to determine whether cyber cascades, fragmentation and group polarization as pointed out by the American legal scholar Cass Sunstein in his analysis of the American blogosphere occurs in the Philippine blog world. Hence, this paper will not be able to validate or invalidate the "myth of digital democracy" thesis if it is applicable to the Philippine case. The survey method is highly recommended in order to investigate the phenomenon described by Sunstein.

Endnotes

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- 2) Graduate Student, MA Global Studies Program, Graduate School of Global Studies, Sophia University, 7-1 Kioi-cho Chiyoda-ku Tokyo, Japan 102-8554
 - 3) (<http://www.internetworldstats.com/asia.htm>)
 - 4) Conducted between October to November 2008, the study sample consisted of 1,200 respondents aged 10 to more than 50 years old. For highlights of the study, see Abigail Ho, “Filipinos get sucked into worldwide web,” *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, in <http://technology.inquirer.net/infotech/infotech/view/20090412-198910/Filipinos-get-sucked-into-worldwide-web>, posted online on 20:02:00 04/12/2009.
 - 5) (<http://www.umww.com>)
 - 6) (<http://www.slideshare.net/yuga/yahoonielsen-net-index-2010>)
 - 7) From Chapter 2 titled “Cyberspace of the People, by the People, for the People: Predominant Use of the Web in the Public Sector” by Debashis Aikat in Alan B. Albarran and David H. Goff, eds. *Understanding the Web: Social, Political, and Economic Dimensions of the Internet*. Ames, Iowa: Iowa State University Press, 2000.
 - 8) <http://newsinfo.inquirer.net/breakingnews/infotech/view/20110511-335892/Social-media-shake-up-Singapore-political-terrain>
 - 9) According to the Universal McCann global comparative study of 2008, known as “Power to the People,” China has 42 million bloggers, making it the largest blogging community in the world.
 - 10) Ashley Esarey and Xiao Qiang. “Political Expression in the Chinese Blogosphere: Below the Radar.” *Asian Survey*. September/October 2008, vol. 48, no.5, pages 752-772.
 - 11) Gholam Khiabany and Annabelle Sreberny. “The Politics of/in Blogging in Iran.” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 27.3 (2007): 563-579.
 - 12) <http://www.fastcompany.com/1722492/how-social-media-accelerated-the-uprising-in-egypt>
 - 13) http://articles.cnn.com/2011-01-12/world/tunisia_1_protests-twitter-and-facebook-tunisian-government?_s=PM:WORLD
 - 14) Department of Economic and Social Affairs, the United Nations. *Compendium of Innovative e-Government Practices*. Volume III. New York: The United Nations, 2009. To read the whole document, please check out this link: <http://unpan1.un.org/intradoc/groups/public/documents/UN/unpan037362.pdf>
 - 15) <http://unpan1.un.org/intradoc/groups/public/documents/UN/unpan037362.pdf>
 - 16) <http://www.slideshare.net/ianhoyboy/philippine-implications-of-cocreation-1321045#text-version>
 - 17) Ibid.
 - 18) Clay Shirky, “The Political Power of Social Media,” *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2011, vol.90, no.1, p.32.
 - 19) From Chapter 7 titled “The Internet and Political Involvement in 1996 and 2000” by Ronald E. Rice and James E. Katz, in Philip N. Howard and Steve Jones, eds. *Society Online: The Internet in Context*. Thousand Oaks, London and New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2004.

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