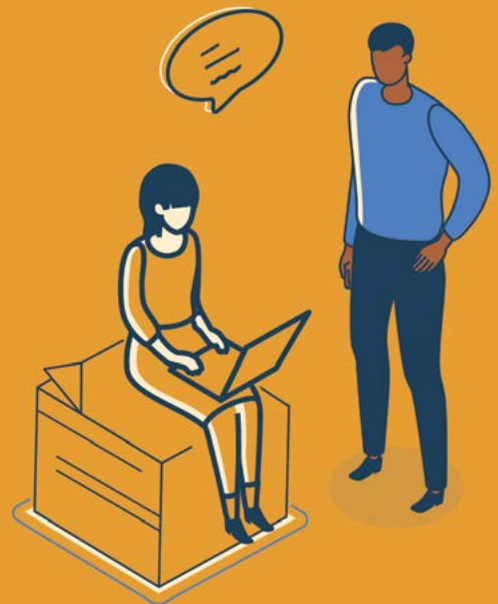# Building Comprehensive Approaches to Combating Disinformation in Illiberal Settings:
Insights from the Philippines

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The entire set of Global Insights essays can be found *here*.

Citizens and civil society organizations in illiberal or, more perilously, authoritarian settings face distinct and particularly serious challenges in addressing disinformation and online harassment. Research on civil society groups in the Philippines under Rodrigo Duterte suggests that assistance in these contexts should address local challenges faced by activists under threat of repression, build resilience, and facilitate cross-sector collaboration in civil society.

In recent years, illiberal and authoritarian leaders across the globe have attacked democratic institutions, intensified censorship laws, and demonized foreign aid and philanthropic activities. The Philippines offers an interesting case study given the Duterte regime's flagrant human rights violations and combative stance toward free press and regional activism.[1] Representatives of local civil society organizations (CSOs) often find themselves personally bearing the brunt of the Duterte regime's repressive tactics. These developments have made the everyday work of Filipino journalists, academics, and human rights advocates progressively more dangerous and challenging. Now, cyberattacks are among the many weapons in authoritarians' trusted arsenal of legal intimidation and forced disappearances against activists.[2]

Though continued efforts to target increased platform accountability are important,[3] local civil society activists and researchers also need to address the historical and structural factors that make disinformation possible and profitable in their own, domestic contexts. To combat disinformation successfully in the Philippines—and around the world—regional and in-country contexts must be better understood; collaboration and local resilience need to be nurtured; and inclusive coalition-building for interdisciplinary exchange should be fostered in favor of siloed interventions and technological determinist advocacies.

Understanding context and local dynamics in illiberal settings.

To cultivate more collaborative and comprehensive approaches to tackling disinformation and hate speech, it is vital to understand the contexts within which CSOs work. Much can be gleaned from the experiences of civil society actors who face challenges in overcoming tensions within their communities while facing a common, authoritarian threat.

My recent collaborative research project with thirty human rights organizations in the Philippines[4] revealed solidarity across CSOs wasn't a given, even when colleagues were under constant threat from the Duterte regime. In this environment, human rights organizations are compelled to weigh the costs of expressing public support for human rights defenders involved in high-publicity legal battles, while managing foreign funder requests carefully to minimize media attention that could lead to direct conflict with Duterte's repressive regime.

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JONATHAN CORPUS ONG

Consequently, Filipino activists and organizations that work to counter disinformation are concerned primarily with survival—as is the case in settings where foreign assistance is equated with foreign interference. Thus, disappointment and frustration are common among frontline organizations that seek to confront the government about its abuses of the information space. Targeted CSOs often report feeling abandoned by their colleagues who choose to avoid publicity and government attention.

Programs that support civil society and pro-democracy initiatives should encourage CSOs to build in-house capacities to withstand both systemic challenges and digital harassment.

In such a fractured landscape, calls for comprehensive efforts to fight the mix of disinformation, harassment, and censorship are difficult to implement. Making matters worse, some major nongovernmental organizations based outside of the Philippines[5] have oversimplified these local challenges, leaning on tried-and-tested—and usually more exportable—fact-checking initiatives to combat disinformation without understanding local dynamics appropriately. International nongovernmental organizations that employ such methods must consider this reality more carefully; otherwise, they risk undermining the work of activists seeking reform on the ground.[6]

Building Sustainable Organizational Infrastructure.

In the Philippines and other illiberal settings, investing resources to build sustainable communication infrastructures and empower communication personnel is foundational to local CSOs' ability to combat disinformation. Notably, almost half (46%) of the human organizations we surveyed in our project have secured funds to invest in their communication infrastructure.[7]

Programs that support civil society and pro-democracy initiatives should encourage CSOs to build in-house capacities to withstand both systemic challenges and digital harassment. Funders should find ways to promote coalition-building as well as support worker justice and wellness in the face of activist burnout.

Fostering such capacities will distribute the risk these organizations face in their operations among a broader swath of civil society actors, thereby reducing vulnerabilities if one organization ceases operations. It may also nurture greater awareness of operations among peer CSOs.

Supporting Comprehensive Approaches to Countering Disinformation.

Comprehensive, cross-sectional approaches that empower local CSOs and foster regional expertise are vital to countering disinformation, although success in this regard has been elusive. Considering the challenging environment in which Filipino CSOs operate and the limited success of purely regulatory fixes, funders can better incentivize interdisciplinary research and interventions to promote learning and expertise across sectors and organizations as part of comprehensive efforts that involve all layers of civil society and international organizations.

Supporting citizen deliberation forums, which gather counter-disinformation organizations and citizens for focused conversations, are an effective tool at encouraging local and cross-sectoral buy-in, as well as gaining a clearer understanding of local information environments. Indeed, it allows us to identify what diverse groups of people think about disinformation when they can become better informed, consider expert evidence, listen to opposing

views, and reflect on their own perspectives. In these fora, we learned that popular perceptions of disinformation in the Philippines extended beyond questions of "fact or fiction," to broader, less clear-cut themes of dishonesty and unfairness within the political system.[8] Such insight is invaluable when establishing strategies and networks to tackle disinformation at its source.

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Building on existing knowledge of the region and acknowledging local CSO experiences are equally important in promoting local interest but doing so has proven difficult in practice. Initiatives to develop regional centers for expertise[9] that allow platforms to better tailor their reform policies are a step in the right direction, but models that resemble the Shorenstein Center's collaboration with journalists and tech policy experts in Silicon Valley to solve urgent social problems have been harder to find and sustain in the Philippines.

Code for Africa is one successful example. Funded by NED and other international donors, this organization convenes and empowers local networks of journalists to promote independent media and protect digital information spaces.[10]

The absence of comprehensive approaches undermines CSO efforts to combat disinformation, both in the Philippines and elsewhere. Yet with local buy-in, a clear understanding of the local information environment, and a recognition of the threats to their safety that many activists face, comprehensive approaches can lay a foundation to support CSO efforts to combat disinformation, even in illiberal and authoritarian settings.

KEY POINTS:

- Comprehensive and collaborative approaches are vital to combatting disinformation networks in local and regional contexts. Encouraging diverse groups and cross-sectional cooperation among civil society activists, international organizations, and other grassroots initiatives is crucial to the success of these efforts.

- Counter-disinformation initiatives must take local contexts into account, be they political, social, or economic—particularly so in repressive societies. Paying greater attention to regional dynamics is equally vital.

- Organizations and citizens simultaneously seized with safety and information integrity concerns encounter different challenges than those in stable, democratically advanced societies. Thus, building sustainable organizational structures and resilience to sociopolitical pressures is also critical.

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Endnotes

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