

Learning to fight fake news

Inherited thoughts

My father is a curious man. A Bangladeshi who was no stranger to corrupt regimes, he would often poke my Filipino mother's support of the Marcoses. To my dad, he saw a family of despots who plunged the country into a dictatorship, murdered thousands, and looted billions¹. To my mother, she saw the golden years of the Philippines in the dictatorship, and voraciously defended them. None the wiser, I inherited my mother's thoughts.

But things changed when I went to a liberal arts college. In was the rebel energy of youth, out were my mother's unverifiable claims. I made friends with Joshua, a Filipino from the South, who supplied me books and articles to read on Marcos Senior, the dictator. In history classes I took, I interviewed ordinary Filipinos who lived through the martial law era (MLE). I read papers from Economics to History to Sociology. My mother was wrong.

A silly hope

I was on summer break in the Philippines during our 2022 election. We were driving through the lush hills of Batangas, my Singaporean roommate staring out into the bay. The radio was dictating the election results. My hopes were on Leni Robredo, the then Vice President (VP), a reformist firebrand whom I knew could change the country for the better². She was running against Bong Bong Marcos (BBM), the son of the dictator.

Yet, despite the People's Revolution that threw out the Marcoses after 10 years of dictatorship³ or BBM's loss to Leni in the last VP elections⁴ or his history of lying⁵, I wasn't surprised when he won by a landslide victory. In what many called a referendum on the MLE, Marcos clinched 58.74% of the vote⁶, surpassing Duterte's 38% in 2016⁷. But I knew the War on Truth he led, and the Druckerian businesses that got him there.

A silent drowning

As I sat by the campfire that evening, I thought about how troll farms - or rather, what I call fake news generators (FNGs) - came to be in the Philippines. Duterte was the first mover, hiring his private army in 2016 to spread lies on social media⁸. Then the 2016 US elections happened, following which Eastern Europe developed a local industry

¹ (Francisco, *Martial law, The dark chapter in Philippine history*, 2022)

² (Antonio, *Robredo's Angat Buhay has benefited over 600K families*, 2022)

³ (Francisco, *Timeline: How the Marcoses made their political comeback*, 2017)

⁴ (Cerdeña, *Duterte, Robredo win in final, official tally*, 2016)

⁵ (Cos, *Marcos Sr. knew and 'lied' about Bongbong's academic woes at Oxford: Vera files research*, 2023)

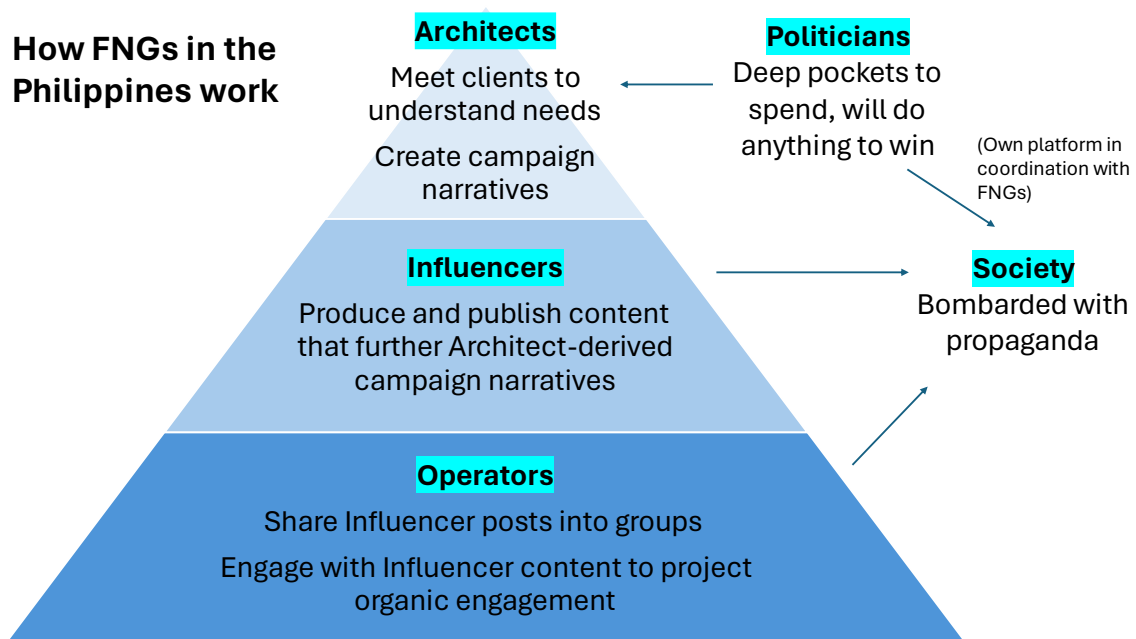
⁶ (Rappler, *Official results: 2022 presidential, vice presidential election: Philippines*, 2022)

⁷ (Cerdeña, *Duterte, Robredo win in final, official tally*, 2016)

⁸ (Matsuzawa, *Duterte camp spent \$200,000 for Troll Army, Oxford Study finds*, 2020)

disseminating misinformation globally⁹. For the 2022 Philippine elections, gone were the private or overseas armies, an onshore ecosystem had sprung up.

From the outset, you might think that such FNGs were scattered, poorly managed shops, but upon closer inspection, we observe just how Druckerian and professional they are in management. As Drucker wrote, the primary purpose of any business is to “create a customer”¹⁰ and this is evident in their basic structure of architects, the people who meet with the politicians, set campaign objectives, and create campaign narratives, followed by the influencers who create content for and publish on social media, followed by the operators who engage with such content¹¹.



But these businesses rely on even more timeless Druckerian concepts. FNGs rely entirely upon Drucker’s concept of the Knowledge Worker¹², as the work of the organization is an intellectual task: the creation and dissemination of narratives to influence public perception. FNGs also employ Management by Objectives (MBO)¹³ through the setting of campaign milestones and target number of shares for operators in a day¹⁴.

Finally, management also understood Drucker’s notion of decentralization¹⁵ as workers were given considerable autonomy in their tasks: influencers are free to adapt campaign narratives into their production styles and operators are given leeway in how

⁹ (Paulo & Heng, *Meet the fake news trolls who influenced US and Indonesian polls for money*, 2019)

¹⁰ (Drucker & Wilson, *The Essential Drucker*, 2001)

¹¹ (Ong & Cabañes, *Architects of networked disinformation: Behind the scenes of troll accounts and fake news production in the Philippines*, 2018)

¹² (Drucker, *The Landmarks of Tomorrow*, 1959)

¹³ (Drucker, *The Practice of Management*, 2007)

¹⁴ (Paulo, *Trolls for hire in Philippines: The concealed political weapon used in a social media war*, 2022)

¹⁵ (Drucker, *The Concept of the Corporation*, 1964)

they engage with the post and other users. As we'll see later, Drucker would be disappointed in this application of his ideas.

As my family talked about the election, I noticed they weren't celebrating Marcos's victory, instead they were celebrating Leni's defeat. I knew why. Tsek.ph, a local fact checker, analysed 326 false narratives pushed by FNGs in the 2022 elections. 47% of all narratives targeted Leni, of which 94% were negative, ranging from theories on how she would steal the election to fabricated sex videos of her daughters¹⁶. That night, I grieved because 31 million Filipinos¹⁷ had just elected a sea of lies and hate to power.

A post-truth world

With the sun disappearing behind the mountains, long shadows encroached on the valley, engulfing its inhabitants in darkness. Within, a dystopian future stared back.

In 2016, the Oxford Dictionary named *post-truth* the international word of the year¹⁸, acknowledging societies shifting away from facts. Maria Ressa, the Filipino journalist and Nobel Laureate known for her work on Filipino press freedom¹⁹, noted in her 2024 Harvard commencement address that the Philippines had become a petri-dish for misinformation as FNG successes here would be then replicated globally²⁰. As Druckerian FNGs begin to spread around the world, 2024 would be the coming-of-age party for our post-truth world.

Part of that maturing will be the FNGs' embrace of two cutting edge technologies to increase their productivity, true to the Druckerian spirit of innovation. ChatGPT or rather Generative AI has enabled the industrial manufacturing of high-quality disinformation, while TikTok or rather short-form content platforms enable the swift dissemination of such content.

The Philippines has already seen Marcos Sr. deepfakes distributed on TikTok, garnering hundreds of thousands of views with users believing the dictator had been revived²¹. The same innovations will be seen in the US polls later this year and will be a staple for years to come, soon we will be Winston in George Orwell's *1984*, not knowing whether two plus two equals four or five or three. But hope is not lost.

People over profits

We were up at 5:00 AM the next morning to hike the mountain range nearby. After a short drive to the park entrance, dawn began to break, sunlight streaking across Mount Batulao. A new day had begun.

¹⁶ (Tsek.ph, *Disinformation attempts to rehabilitate the Marcoses, disparage EDSA*, 2022)

¹⁷ (Rappler, *Official results: 2022 presidential, vice presidential election: Philippines*, 2022)

¹⁸ (Oxford, *Word of the year 2016 - Oxford University Press*, 2016)

¹⁹ (Nobel Prize, *The Nobel Peace Prize 2021*, 2021)

²⁰ (Harvard & Ressa, *Maria A. Ressa, LL.D. '24, Harvard Commencement Address 2024*, 2024)

²¹ (VERA Files, *Vera files fact check: Video of Marcos Sr. taking a jab at voters supporting a tax evader fake*, 2022)

In beginning to understand the way forward, Drucker's wisdom offers a path out. In his book, aptly titled *Managing in a Time of Great Change*, Drucker wrote on the social responsibility of any organization, corporates included: "Every organization must assume responsibility for its impact on employees, the environment, customers, and whoever whatsoever it touches"²². Effectively, businesses assume total liability for their societal impacts, good and bad.

We must take great care in differentiating Drucker's definition with competing ones. First, there is the contemporary zeitgeist of what business can do *for* society exemplified by companies publicizing community outreach programs. The second, more harmful definition is the profit maximizing one as described by Milton Friedman where "The social responsibility of business is to increase its profits"²³.

Let's walk through each one's implications through the audit industry. An example of the current application of CSR would be the Big 4 accounting firms giving their employees time off to volunteer. Milton Friedman would advocate that auditors hide financial irregularities and make clients look good on paper in the hopes of continued employment. And Drucker would advocate audit firms on training their auditors to always uphold integrity and to never give into the pressure of possibly losing clients. What are the potential outcomes of each?

One just needs to glance into history to know why Milton Friedman's profit-maximizing auditors would doom us all. The implications of teaching auditors to uphold integrity and say the truth is not just good for the sake of integrity and truth itself, it is critical to the very workings of the global financial system, on which millions of livelihoods depend on.

Consider EY's purposeful hiding of Lehman's financial irregularities in 2008 that kickstarted the Great Financial Crisis²⁴, leading to 25 bank failures²⁵, and resulting in the Great Recession that led to 8.7 million Americans losing their jobs²⁶ and countless more worldwide. As Drucker once put it, "Business enterprises – and public-service institutions as well – are organs of society"²⁷, and if I may add, "if they fail, so too does society."

So, if I were to ask Drucker today his thoughts on BBM coming back into power, he would criticize not just BBM's platform for telling lies, but more so the profit-maximizing FNGs that borrowed his management principles for manufacturing lies.

Drucker believed that when a business's harmful social impacts were no longer manageable, governments must step in to regulate. He would thus advocate for the

²² (Drucker, *Managing in a Time of Great Change*, 2016)

²³ (Friedman, *A Friedman doctrine – the social responsibility of business is to increase its profits*, 1970)

²⁴ (Brown, *Ernst & Young to pay \$99 million to end Lehman Investor lawsuit* | Reuters, 2013)

²⁵ (FDIC, *Bank failures in brief – 2008*, 2008)

²⁶ (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Consumer spending and U.S. Employment from the 2007–2009 recession through 2022 : Monthly Labor Review*, 2014)

²⁷ (Drucker, *Management: Tasks, Responsibilities, Practices*, 1974)

Philippines Government to shut down the FNGs on the basis that their primary objective is to deceive society, revise history, and smear political opponents. Their very work has damaged and continues to damage the very social fabric of society.

Therefore, in our quest to find a solution that can remedy the War on Truth, it must reflect a paradigm shift on business ethics education. As the leaders of tomorrow, students must be exposed to Friedman and Drucker's notions of CSR and the society-destroying/building preserving implications of each as illustrated by the auditors. I am reminded of Drucker's words in *Management*: "Free enterprise cannot be justified as being good for business. It can be justified only as being good for society"²⁸. In essence, people over profits.

Failures

On that day as we hiked, the air felt much cleaner. It reminded me of the day that I presented on the MLE in a class I took called the *Culture and History of Southeast Asia*. Oh, how much lighter I felt after inching closer to truth, how clear-headed my mind was for representing victims of the MLE, including the people I had interviewed for the presentation. After 19-years of inherited misinformation, as I presented, it felt exactly as we reached the top – we could finally see what was going on.

The re-election of Marcos in 2022 was not just a failure of Druckerian CSR and government regulation, it was the exploitation of vulnerabilities within the Philippine population. Historians have long pointed out the weak historical public education regarding the martial law era as a significant factor. Some of our textbooks not only whitewashed Marcos Senior's crimes by debating the pros and cons but even portrayed the dictatorship as a solution to the Philippines' then problems²⁹.

Consider that upon return to the Philippines, Imelda Marcos, Marcos Senior's wife and BBM's mother, ran and failed for President twice in 1992 and 1998³⁰. Clear repudiation of the family name then. But between 1998 and 2022, the Marcoses not only had 24 years to spread propaganda through their various campaign runs and successes, FNGs, and poor public historical education, they also had an entire generation of voters that didn't experience the MLE to influence. As Imelda remarked in her documentary *Kingmaker*: "Perception is real, truth is not"³¹.

Such a knowledge gap is only emblematic of a deeper issue amongst the populace: media, or rather digital, illiteracy. In 2021, 51% of Filipinos found it difficult to spot fake news on TV, radio, or social media³². But consider this number underestimated, just examine the common Pinoy's perceptions towards social media: Crisdel Almarez, interviewed by the LA Times in 2022, thought of the martial law era as a time of

²⁸ (Drucker, *Management: Tasks, Responsibilities, Practices*, 1974)

²⁹ (Santos, *How Philippine education contributed to the return of the Marcoses*, 2022)

³⁰ (Francisco, *Timeline: How the Marcoses made their political comeback*, 2017)

³¹ (Greenfield, *Kingmaker*, 2019)

³² (Tuquero, *51% of Filipinos find it difficult to spot fake news on Media – SWS*, 2022)

“national bliss”. The then 25-year-old saleswoman working in a Manila mall said she knew this through TikTok. Why TikTok over experts? Because “We don’t believe the history books anymore. We have social media now”³³.

And yet, what truly facilitated the brainwashing of the public weren’t just digital illiteracy and poor historical awareness. Though important, these issues are just manifestations of the root problem: a lack of critical thinking. Consider that a 2017 survey found the Philippines ranked the third most ignorant amongst 38 other countries in subjects such as crime, health, and religion. Further exemplifying this, we also rated third most confident³⁴, a nod to the Dunning-Kruger effect³⁵.

That ignorance starts with Philippine’s education system (PES). In 2018, when the Philippines first participated in the OECD’s PISA³⁶, our students came in last out of 78 peer countries, despite our ASEAN neighbour Singapore, almost topping the charts. Not only were 78% of Filipino students unable to process scientific phenomena, 81% couldn’t perform basic math or read moderately long texts³⁷. In 2022, we came 78th out of 81³⁸. The consistently dismal results only illustrate the urgent change needed in PES.

I won’t pretend that there aren’t existential issues with PES. Consider that in a government report last year, more than 2/3 of 327,851 schools needed to be repaired or replaced³⁹. And private education is being hit as well with more than 400 elementary and high schools having closed since 2020, affecting at least 20,000 students⁴⁰. But the question I am concerned with is the curriculum and pedagogy of the PES, as traditional education distribution is a matter of efficient government administration.

At the most fundamental level, PES needs to transition away from the ‘what to think’, traditional educational model. Think teacher-led classes with mono-directional lectures that only lead to passive learning. One might say students can ask questions at any time, but I’ve found that teachers are often poorly equipped to answer questions, either not being able to answer why and just telling us to memorize or just confusing us further. This reliance on teachers for our learning only ingrains the mindset from young that we need to rely on central authorities to progress in life.

The cognitive damage doesn’t end there. Life-or-death exams with long syllabi and questions that only have one answer, even if students don’t understand them, only

³³ (Pierson, *Dictator's son uses TikTok to lead in Philippine election and rewrite his family's past*, 2022)

³⁴ (Ipsos, *The Perils of Perception 2017*, 2017)

³⁵ Defined in Britannica as a "cognitive bias whereby people with limited knowledge or competence in a given intellectual or social domain greatly overestimate their own knowledge or competence in that domain relative to objective criteria or to the performance of their peers or of people in general, (Duignan, *Dunning-Kruger effect*, 2024)

³⁶ The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) is an assessment and comparison of 15-year-olds skills in maths, English, and science.

³⁷ (Chi, *Teachers' group scores lack of 'tangible' goals in DepEd Basic Education Report*, 2023)

³⁸ (Chi, *Teachers' group scores lack of 'tangible' goals in DepEd Basic Education Report*, 2023)

³⁹ (Chi, *State of Education: Two out of three school buildings need repairs*, 2023)

⁴⁰ (Chanco, *We're losing private schools*, 2023)

pressurizes us into rote memorization. This act of memorizing without understanding the underlying only serves to further degrade cognition as we become habituated to memorizing the right answer from teachers. But what if our teachers or textbooks are wrong, as exemplified in the textbooks with MLE misinformation? Reliance on others to dictate right and wrong only enables societal brainwashing.

The Path Forward

As we began our descent, I started to miss my younger cousin Karlos who often kept me company. A curious boy, he often asked questions about MLE history and politics. Never one to impose my views, I gave him sources to read. The joy on my face when he began to ask the same questions I did when I started my liberal arts education (LAE).

As an educator, I believe that failed students aren't failures, rather they were failed by the system. And if 4/5 students are failing, as seen from PISA, then a new educational paradigm shift is required. The current PES gives students the fish, teaching them what to think. But in a post-truth world fuelled by FNGs, social media, and AI, especially as chatbots disrupts Philippines's BPO⁴¹ industry⁴², today's fish will be tomorrow's chum. Students need to be taught how to fish instead, meaning a 'how to think', skills-based education. Essentially, a LAE.

I know this system firsthand as a liberal arts graduate. A LAE means nothing more than the study of the human condition from a barrage of vantage points, from the humanities to the sciences to the social sciences. As a student is exposed to different knowledge systems and ways of thinking, from the Druckers to the Friedmans of the world, they begin to formulate their stances based on collected evidence, their morals, and their circumstances. Students take centre stage in their learning.

Such self-driven learning is crucial to the skills-based aspect. Through activities such as presentations, debate, and essay-writing, students are given the space to develop skills such as argumentation, research, public speaking, conflict resolution. As students develop their critical thinking skills, so too will they make an active and informed citizenry that will take on the issues of digital illiteracy, and poor historical reasoning one by one. It is this very ability of a LAE to nurture critical thinking that Drucker advocated it even for managers⁴³.

However, it is valid to critique the proposition as out of reach. A LAE requires low faculty to student ratios as more instructors are needed to moderate discussions, grade assignments, and guide students. The average US liberal arts college has an average ratio of 1:11⁴⁴, whereas the national average across school systems is at least 1:31⁴⁵. But one can tap surprising Filipino strengths. To address the ongoing teacher shortage,

⁴¹ Business Process Outsourcing

⁴² (Suroy, *AI threatens Philippine BPO industry's dominance*, 2024)

⁴³ (George & Johnson, *Peter Drucker's vision of management as a liberal arts education*, 2024)

⁴⁴ (BestValueSchools, *What is a good student-to-faculty ratio for U.S. colleges?* 2022)

⁴⁵ (Philstar, *'Glaring' teacher shortage on school opening day needs 'strategic' solutions - lawmaker*, 2023)

schools can hire fresh graduates⁴⁶, currently experiencing the highest unemployment rates, to work as teaching assistants.

To facilitate affordable, scalable, active learning, Philippines can innovate 'national' flipped classroom approaches through 'national' MOOCs⁴⁷. The government can take advantage of having the highest internet penetration rates⁴⁸ to publish lectures for students to watch prior to school. Class time is then used for students to clarify misconceptions, first talking in breakout groups to teach and learn from one another, before sharing with the classroom, and then engaging in structured activities such as debates.

And MOOCs for students can then easily be transformed into MOOCs for the public, its intended purpose. Local governments can work with academics and non-profits to create accurate content on digital literacy or critical thinking to fight misinformation, which the general public can watch, then possibly go to a community centre for a discussion or even engage with other netizens through discussion posts, chats, and comments. As critical thinking slowly spreads through the population with students pulling families to do the MOOCs, possibly together, the notion of public 'cognitive' health is born. And it will only get better with time.

End

It often strikes me how brilliance can be found anywhere, even on the roadside. A week after our hike, my roommate and I travelled to Palawan, an island known for its pristine beaches. As I was getting off a tricycle, the *manong*⁴⁹ struck up a conversation. After mentioning that I was studying in Singapore, he replied "Good, forget the country, we've just re-elected the *magnanakaw*⁵⁰".

But dear *manong*, I can't. Every Pinoy deserves better. And for us to get the leaders, businesses, non-profits, and prosperous country we deserve, our leaders of tomorrow will need societal paradigm shifts in management ethics, education, and public health: A movement away from Friedman's profit-maximizing to Drucker's harm-minimizing; A transition from a 'what to think' education to a 'how to think' liberal arts education; Finally, as FNGs induce a post-truth world, the recognition of a public 'cognitive' health.

Word count, excluding footnotes and figures: 2,994 words.

⁴⁶ (Cervantes, *Jobless Filipinos down to 7.9m in September: SWS | Philippine News Agency, 2023*)

⁴⁷ Massive Open Online Course, whereby anyone on the internet can access the content.

⁴⁸ (Duarte, *Countries with the highest number of internet users (2024), 2024*)

⁴⁹ Mister, in this case used to refer to the tricycle driver.

⁵⁰ Thief in Tagalog.

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