

The Rhetoric of Anti-Intellectualism: Facebook Pages in Duterte's Propaganda

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ABSTRACT

This study considers how anti-intellectualism is weaponized by the bloggers and pundits in former Philippine president Rodrigo Duterte's propaganda machine while attempting to nuance our understanding of anti-intellectualism, which is commonly defined as an attack on the intellect. In the Facebook pages or blogs of Mocha Uson, RJ Nieto, and Sass Sasot, anti-intellectualism serves a two-fold function: (1) to attack perceived opponents of the Duterte administration labeled as "elitists" to muzzle criticism and (2) to promote an alternative epistemic regime that endorses knowledge that is arguably practical, commonsensical, and politically expedient. The rhetorical cues of anti-intellectualism in the Facebook pages thus include populist anti-elitism, opinion leadership through punditry, and spreading falsehoods. I advance the arguments of this paper through James Martin's rhetorical political analysis (RPA) as a method and Christian Kock and Lisa Villadsen's conceptual frame of rhetorical citizenship. This paper concludes with suggestions to improve the rhetorical practices of citizens who engage with and encounter Duterte's propaganda machine.

Keywords: anti-intellectualism, anti-elitism, DDS, Facebook pages, rhetorical political analysis

In a televised interview in January 2019, then House Majority Leader Fredenil Castro said: "We're always talking of science. We are relying so much on science instead of relying on what we see, the real experience that we encounter in our daily lives" ("Ignoring Science"). Castro was in favor of the proposed amendment to the Juvenile Justice and Welfare Act of 2006 that would lower the criminal age of responsibility from 15 to nine years old in the Philippines (Nolasco), a bill that then President Rodrigo Duterte urged as he claimed that "children are now the ones maintaining shabu [slang for crystal methamphetamine], trade they will bring it to the customer and take the money, even the children take drugs as young as 6, 8, 9, 14" ("Duterte"). Castro's statement is a response to research, statements, and studies by the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) and other child rights organizations concluding that "discernment on decisions and actions' does not develop until adolescence" ("Ignoring Science").

Meanwhile, in a budget hearing for the Department of Agriculture in October 2019, Senator Cynthia Villar questioned why a significant part of the proposed budget was allocated for research, saying “*Parang lahat ng inyong budget puro research? Baliw na baliw kayo sa research. Aanhin niyo ba yung research?* (It seems like all of your budget goes to research. You are so crazy about research. What will you do with research?)” (Aguilar). In another budget hearing for the Presidential Communications Office (PCOO) in October 2020, Senator Imee Marcos commented on PCOO’s DevCom (Development Communication) program: “DevCom, even as a subject taught in universities, has been largely debunked. . . . It is so old-fashioned. It is sort of cute and archaic” (Magsambol).

Marcos’s statement prompted the University of the Philippines Los Baños College of Development Communication (UPLB-CDC) to release a statement saying:

First, DevCom has a long and established history, which is recognized by leaders around the world. Second, Devcom is a vibrant academic program being offered by numerous local and international academic institutions. And third, driving positive social change through communication has always been at the heart of Devcom (Magsambol). Development communication is also a thrust of the Philippine Information Agency, which focuses on grassroots communication and media production for social change (“About Us”). Aside from educators, netizens took to social media to “school” Marcos about her statement, prompting discussions on Marcos’s claims regarding her academic degrees which have never actually been proven to exist (Magsambol).

The preceding examples illustrate a heightened sense of anti-intellectualism pervading Philippine political talk, whether it takes the form of denying scientific facts, lack of appreciation for research, or statements about the supposed uselessness of an academic degree. It is especially alarming that the statements quoted above come from elected officials themselves, with some even declaring false statements to boost their credentials. Marcos claimed that she graduated from Princeton University and the University of the Philippines College of Law, but both universities denied that she is an alumna of their respective institutions (Cepeda; “Imee Marcos”). It is not just politicians, however, who stirred controversy for their anti-intellectualism. In this study, I look into the rhetoric of bloggers and pundits in Duterte’s propaganda machine for the way they instantiate anti-intellectualism.

Defining Anti-intellectualism and its Typologies

American historian Richard Hofstadter defined anti-intellectualism as “a resentment and suspicion of the life of the mind and of those who are considered to represent it; and a disposition constantly to minimize the value of that life” (7). Merkle and Loewen identify those who represent the “life of the mind” in their definition of anti-intellectualism as “the generalized distrust of experts and intellectuals” (706). In the United States, those who may be regarded as anti-intellectuals are “mid-twentieth century politicians like Wisconsin Senator Joseph McCarthy who called for investigations into academics’ supposed-ties to Communism and Alabama Governor George Wallace who derided college professors and judges as “pointy-headed intellectuals” (Motta, “Had Enough”).

As someone who minimizes the value of the life of the mind, an anti-intellectual “disdain[s] individuals who speak universal values and engage in the pursuit of knowledge from reason” (Siniver 630). Contemporary examples include political figures such as Duterte and former United States president Donald Trump who deemphasize science, facts, and evidence to stoke fear and fan the flames of discontent among the public. Trump insisted that he won the 2020 election, “uttering baseless allegations of election fraud that have been amplified by allies and conservative media outlets” (Gerhart). Meanwhile, Duterte exaggerated the drug problem despite reports from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) that the prevalence of drug use rate in the country is only 1.69% against the global rate of 5.2% (Diola).

As for the consequences of anti-intellectualism, Michael Peters posits that anti-intellectualism is a “virus [that] can damage and eventually kill the life of debate or public discourse in a democracy” (362). Anti-intellectualism can constitute epistemological rupture by denying science, undermining research, and discrediting experts. Anti-intellectualism also takes the form of beliefs that emotions are good and reason is bad, and that knowledge is useless unless it is practical (Claussen; Peters; Rigney). The examples mentioned in this essay’s introduction and the statements from Filipino politicians devaluing science, development communication, and research are indications of anti-intellectualism in Philippine political talk. However, anti-intellectualism that attacks the intellect per se is only half the story. In this study’s analysis, it will be shown that anti-intellectualism is also a rhetorical strategy used to promote an alternative epistemic regime (i.e., knowledge that is supposedly practical, commonsensical, and even politically expedient).

The book *Anti-intellectualism in American Life* (1966) by Richard Hofstadter outlined three forms of anti-intellectualism, out of which Daniel Rigney created his typology

in 1991. Professor of political science Matthew Motta then relates succinct definitions of the types of anti-intellectualism that Rigney conceptualized:

The first, anti-rationalism, is the rejection of critical thought as a desirable quality for individuals to hold. The second, unreflective instrumentalism, describes the preference for short-term payoffs irrespective of carefully reasoned long-term consequences. While these types of anti-intellectual thought may plausibly be related to support uncritical political rhetoric and for policies with immediate payoffs, the link to electoral politics and public opinion is somewhat unclear.

However, a third type of anti-intellectualism he identified has a more obvious connection to politics and public opinion—what Rigney terms the *anti-elitist* form of anti-intellectualism. Broadly, this can be thought about in affective terms. This form of anti-intellectualism refers to the distrust, and perhaps even dislike, for individuals who claim to have superior knowledge or wisdom about a subject matter. (467-68)

The third type of anti-intellectualism, its anti-elitist conception, is the definition used in this paper as it relates to politics and has an affective dimension, a rhetorical strategy that is weaponized against perceived opponents of the Duterte administration.

Aside from the view that anti-intellectualism devalues knowledge and its sources, “anti-intellectualism is associated with not only the rejection of policy-relevant matters of scientific consensus but support for political movements (e.g., “Brexit”) and politicians (e.g., George Wallace, Donald Trump) who are skeptical of experts” (Motta, “The Dynamics” 465). Anti-intellectualism is then not only an epistemological issue but is also a matter of partisanship, affirmed by this study’s finding that populist anti-elitism invokes binaries and sows division between “us” (e.g., the DDS or Duterte Diehard Supporters) and “them” (e.g., perceived critics of the Duterte government labeled as “elitists”).

Finally, it must be noted that anti-intellectualism is not a unique feature in the rhetoric of contemporary populists such as Duterte or Trump or their propagandists (see Motta, “The Dynamics”). Anti-intellectualism has been embedded in political talk for decades, more so in scientific discussions. According to Gordon Gauchat, “public trust in science has not declined since the 1970s except among conservatives” and that “political discontent that has manifested in the right-wing in the United States has likely already affected the relationship between organized science, private economic interests, and government” (182). While no longer within the scope of this paper, further studies should be conducted to ascertain the reasons for the rise of

anti-intellectualism such as the role of political discontent with current epistemic regimes to explain the prevalence of anti-intellectualism in political talk.

Text, Method, and Conceptual Frame

This study investigates the rhetoric of bloggers and pundits in Duterte's propaganda machine with a sizable following on Facebook, namely: (1) the Mocha Uson Blog, (2) Thinking Pinoy, and (3) For the Motherland—Sass Rogando Sasot. As the most widely used social media platform in the Philippines, Facebook provides a steady stream of news, information, and entertainment content to Filipinos. This study selected posts from the Mocha Uson Blog, Thinking Pinoy, and For the Motherland—Sass Rogando Sasot Facebook pages that deal with the terms “anti-intellectualism,” “intellectualism,” “anti-elitism,” and “elitism.”

The Facebook pages and posts of the mentioned bloggers or pundits were chosen because of their complicated relationship with the Duterte government. While these bloggers maintain that what they say and post on Facebook are their personal opinions, they have ties to the government owing to their previous government appointments. In 2017, RJ Nieto of Thinking Pinoy was hired by the Department of Foreign Affairs as its social media consultant (Syjuco). In 2019, Duterte appointed Mocha Uson as a “deputy executive director at the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration” (Ranada, “Duterte Gives”). The ties of these bloggers to the government, as well as their active roles in pro-Duterte campaigns in the 2016 presidential election, made it improbable for them to be objective and critical of Duterte and his administration.

This study analyzes a total of nine posts—three posts from each Facebook page that directly and indirectly relate to the issue of anti-intellectualism. These posts which were drawn from the period of 2016 to 2020 include audio-visual and textual elements. The audio-visual elements include videos, memes, and images while the textual elements are the written messages or posts that accompany the image, video, or meme. While the content of the video, image, or meme will be described, what is quoted verbatim in the analysis are the textual elements. Finally, excluded from the analysis are the comments of the followers of the Facebook pages because of their sheer volume, length (most are short comments that do not offer explanation), and the inability of this study to verify the identities of the users behind the comments.

Finally, the conceptual frame used in this study is rhetorical citizenship. Robert Asen advanced a discourse theory of citizenship that is “fluid, multimodal, and quotidian,” a kind of citizenship that is enacted “in a multiple public sphere” (191). Based on this definition, citizenship is not simply a matter of engaging in ritualized

practices of voting, petitioning the government, and participating in protests within the traditional venues of civic affairs such as town halls, debates, and plebiscites. As the discourse theory of citizenship emphasizes a mode, manner, or method of public engagement (Asen 643), it highlights the role of rhetoric and non-traditional spaces of civic participation. These spaces include online, social, or digital media and how they constitute or even fail to constitute a public sphere (Espiritu "The Public"; Eveland and Dylko; Pfister; Papacharissi).

Asen's discourse theory of citizenship is considered the bedrock of what would later be referred to as rhetorical citizenship, a conceptual frame and practice emphasizing agency and deliberation (Kock and Villadsen, "Rhetorical Citizenship" 5-7). According to the proponents of rhetorical citizenship, citizenship is not limited to rights, legal status, and privileges bequeathed to the citizen. Rhetorical citizenship is also a "way of conceptualizing the discursive, processual, and participatory aspects of civic life" (Kock and Villadsen, "Rhetorical Citizenship" 5).

Rhetorical citizenship is enacted on a spectrum, from participation as active deliberators in debate to the criticism of rhetoric by receivers (Kock and Villadsen, "Contemporary Rhetorical" 14). Examples of rhetorical citizenship include traditional activities such as voting, lobbying, and protesting, as well as contemporary forms of public participation such as blogging; creating content online such as memes, parodies, satire; and using Facebook and Twitter to express and justify opinions during elections, among others. However, I must clarify that not all practices that use rhetoric must be considered a form of rhetorical citizenship.

When using the term "rhetorical citizenship," this paper refers to the ways in which actors enact agency rhetorically as they contribute to, instead of detract from, the goals of deliberative democracy. This study thus advances the perspective that the Facebook pages in Duterte's propaganda advance a bastardized form of rhetorical citizenship when they spread falsehoods and encourage punditry, anti-elitism, and anti-intellectualism that disregard "constructive civic interaction" (Kock and Villadsen, "Contemporary Rhetorical" 11). When the Facebook pages instigate polarization and muzzle criticism over productive debate, then their use of rhetoric detracts from the goals and ideals of rhetorical citizenship.

The sections that follow are structured according to the sections of James Martin's method of rhetorical political analysis (RPA). RPA is a three-part method of rhetorical criticism that includes the section of (1) rhetorical context where a brief background of each Facebook page is provided, (2) rhetorical argument where the rhetorical cues of anti-intellectualism are discussed, and (3) rhetorical effect where suggestions to enhance rhetorical citizenship are presented.

Rhetorical Context: Duterte's Propaganda Machine

At the beginning of his term in 2016, Duterte promised to appoint only the “best and the brightest” to his cabinet (“Best and Brightest”). Appointments to the cabinet are a largely unencumbered presidential prerogative in the Philippines. Duterte consequently drew flak for appointing former-sexy-star-turned-propagandist Uson to the Presidential Communications Operations Office (PCOO) because of “utang na loob” or debt of gratitude (“Best and Brightest”). Uson was an ardent supporter of Duterte during the campaign, addressing her over 5.8 million followers on Facebook (as of 2020) as Duterte Diehard Supporters or DDS. The acronym DDS is also a pun on Duterte’s rumored links to the Davao Death Squad known for executing extrajudicial killings in the Philippine south.

Along with the Mocha Uson Blog are two other Facebook pages which comprise Duterte’s networked propaganda machine: Thinking Pinoy and For the Motherland – Sass Rogando Sasot (Alba, “How Duterte”; Hofileña; Ressa). Nieto or the “Thinking Pinoy” also held a position as a government employee and maintains a following of 2 million while Sasot’s Facebook page has over 800,000 likes as of March 2024. I zoom in on each of the three Facebook pages or blogs for context.

Mocha Uson Blog

Prior to supporting Duterte’s candidacy in 2016, Uson was a member of an all-female dance group, the Mocha Girls, known for their sultry and titillating performances. Uson also gained notoriety for giving sex advice and tips in her online videos (“Fast Facts”). With a degree in medical technology, Uson has supported causes such as breast cancer awareness and the controversial reproductive health or RH law that guarantees contraceptive options for Filipino citizens (Carpio). Uson stirred controversy in the past for the way she expressed support for the RH law. She distributed free condoms and trinkets saying “I love sex education” (Carpio), a move frowned upon by the Catholic church which has strongly adhered to its dogma and advocated natural family planning methods.

Uson’s foray into political campaigns is also unsurprising given what Uson claims as the politically motivated assassination of her father who was then a regional trial court judge (“Fast Facts”). While Uson has long been slut-shamed because of her provocative acts, she became even more controversial for her role in Duterte’s propaganda machine. In an article in *The Manila Times* dated October 27, 2016, professor of political science Antonio Contreras stated:

Mocha Uson is powerful not because of her intelligence. She is powerful because she renders intelligence useless. She is powerful not because she produces facts. She is powerful because she renders facts irrelevant.

She has become powerful by reinventing her sexuality. . . . Mocha Uson destabilized, challenged, unmasked. She forced the contradictions of the conflicted, hypocritical social elites to unravel.

Contreras's statement is based on the various instances in which Uson was involved in spreading falsehood and misleading information, earning her the moniker "Queen of Fake News" (J. Tan). However, Contreras also notes that Uson's anti-intellectualism brought to the fore the hypocrisy of "social elites"—a point we return to in the section on rhetorical argument as Uson arguably uses anti-elitism to rally support for Duterte.

In her government appointment, Uson also faced criminal charges and an administrative complaint for alleging that Duterte critic and then Senator Antonio Trillanes IV had offshore bank accounts ("Fast Facts"). Uson also drew flak for performing with the Mocha Girls at the Resorts World Manila's Casino despite a ban on government employees from entering gambling casinos ("Fast Facts"). Finally, she drew the ire of the public for her "Pepepdederalismo" (a lewd wordplay on "federalism") jingle video which she made with another pro-Duterte blogger. During the campaign, Duterte promised that he would push for federalism as a form of government in the Philippines. The words "pepe" and "dede" in Uson's "Pepederalismo" jingle video, however, are colloquial terms for vagina and breasts (Leonen).

Thinking Pinoy

Thinking Pinoy is both the name of the blog and a reference to the person maintaining it—RJ Nieto. He stated that the blog was created to help Filipinos make "better choices in the 2016 elections" (Nieto). On his Facebook page, however, Nieto introduced Thinking Pinoy with the following statement: "A Thinking Pinoy's common sense take on Philippine Politics." Nieto's "common sense" take on Philippine politics is also part of his attempt to distinguish himself from "intellectual elitists" and their "narcissism" (Thinking Pinoy, "Intellectual Elitism"). In his page, Nieto provides explainers, interpretations, infographics, and videos that supposedly attempt to break down the complex issues of the day for the common viewer. Nieto further claims that:

TP is not officially affiliated with any political party. Unless otherwise specified, the opinions expressed in this ThinkingPinoy.com and its associated social media accounts are TP's own and do not necessarily reflect the view of any particular political party. (Nieto)

Despite Nieto's claims of objectivity, Thinking Pinoy himself is an "unabashedly partisan blogger... hired by the Department of Foreign Affairs as a social media

consultant” (Syjuco). In 2018, Nieto was charged with cyber-libel for alleging that Trump called a known Duterte critic, then Senator Antonio Trillanes IV, a drug lord (“Thinking Pinoy Blogger”). In his complaint, Trillanes mentioned that Nieto’s post “constituted ‘fake news’ as the blogger did not cite the source or the news outfit that supposedly conducted the interview with Trump” (Uy).

In the 2004 US presidential election, D. Travers Scott raised the important reminder that blogs may be engaged in “partisan hackery in the guise of watchdog journalism” (53). The possibility that blogs may “assimilate into the existing political communication machine” (D. T. Scott 53) is already a reality and should raise questions about claims to political impartiality. The use of propaganda casts doubt on the accuracy of information shared or the truthfulness of a bloggers’ analysis or perspectives on issues. Hence, rhetorical citizenship requires both senders and receivers to be critical of claims and discourses masquerading as rational or logical but are nonetheless partial or partisan.

For the Motherland—Sass Rogando Sasot

To provide a background on Sasot and her blog, it is best to quote her directly. In her column for *The Manila Times* dated April 2, 2019, Sasot called out *Rappler* CEO and journalist Maria Ressa for saying that the former is a “pseudo-intellectual.” Ressa wrote about Duterte’s networked propaganda and was the subject of attacks from Duterte and his supporters. In response to Ressa, Sasot said:

I never claimed that everything I write in my blog is for “intellectual” purposes. A lot of them are tongue-in-cheek posts, written in street-style language. But perhaps Ressa was referring to my international relations-related posts, where I do indeed take a more academic tone?

Why does she find it so hard to acknowledge my background? I have a master’s degree in international relations from Leiden University; finished, magna cum laude, my combined major in world politics and global justice at the international honors college of Leiden University, with courses taken at University of California, Los Angeles. My bachelor’s degree was an interdisciplinary program in international relations, law and development. And I’m currently teaching international relations-related courses in a university in the Netherlands. Perhaps she needs to mute these facts in order for her slant to stand.

A pseudo-intellectual is “a person exhibiting intellectual pretensions that have no basis in sound scholarship.”

Whenever I use more learned language, I publish the output as a column here in the Manila Times. Does Ressa read them? My political position is well-grounded on realist and social constructivist thinking traditions in international relations. But how can Ressa judge whether what I have written are pseudo-intellectual when she has no academic training in international relations (IR) at all? Isn't she the real pseudo-intellectual here?

Whereas Uson would cater to the Filipino masses and overseas Filipino workers with active presence on Facebook (Ranada, "Grace Poe"), Sasot targets the educated class as she foregrounds her degrees and knowledge of international relations. Sasot's qualifiers above like her academic degree, what influences her thinking, and positions on issues may also sound like posturing or credentialism as she paints herself as the "intellectual" while Ressa, the first Filipino named a Nobel laureate in 2021, is the "pseudo-intellectual." Sasot and Nieto take jabs at intellectuals through terms such as "narcissists" and "elitists." The contradiction here is that while Sasot and Nieto criticize intellectuals, Sasot's spotlighting of her credentials can also be seen as an attempt to prove that she is an intellectual.

Sasot also uses English as the dominant medium in her blog. Like Nieto, Sasot may switch codes from English to Filipino, yet for her lengthier posts, English is the medium. This suggests that her role in Duterte's propaganda machine is to appeal to and converse with the thinking or educated class fluent in English. In a sense, Nieto and Sasot have more in common as they provide commentaries, sometimes through lengthy posts, on various issues and controversies hounding the Duterte administration. In contrast, Uson speaks to the masses as her blog or Facebook page shows more shares of posts and content from the Duterte echo chamber. Nonetheless, the three pundits share each other's posts or praise each other on Facebook, a rhetorical move to show a unified front among influencers in Duterte's propaganda machine.

Rhetorical Argument: Anti-elitism, Punditry, and Falsehoods

This section does not configure the bloggers as anti-intellectuals per se but rather as influencers, or as intellectuals of a "different mold"—as Nieto and Sasot posture—who use the anti-elitism rhetoric, punditry, and even falsehood.

Anti-elitist Rhetoric

Duterte's propaganda machine attacks mainstream media and labels Duterte critics as "intellectual elitists," a term used by Nieto in his Thinking Pinoy Facebook page (Thinking Pinoy, "Intellectual Elitism"). Uson makes a distinction between herself

as a blogger versus a journalist whom she attacks as “presstitutes,” a portmanteau of the words “press” and “prostitute” to suggest that journalists are paid hacks. A cursory look at the Facebook pages also reveals how they purport to be the voices of the masses through their attacks on elites. The campaign to name and shame opponents who criticize Duterte leads to the delegitimization of traditional sources of knowledge such as journalists, media, experts, and intellectuals.

As the bloggers proclaim to be the “voices of ordinary Filipinos,” they articulate a unified identity against the enemy. They claim to be attuned to the pulse of the public, especially the DDS, while they refer to the opposition or those critical of Duterte in general as out of touch “elitists.” In a post on her Facebook page dated November 14, 2016, Uson shared what appeared in her column in the broadsheet *Philippine Star* the next day:

Elite is a term used to identify people who are successful in a certain field, people with money and/or power, and people with high status in a society (Merriam-Webster.) [An] Elitist, on the other hand, believes in the superiority of the elite class and tends to look down on people they deem inferior (Oxforddictionaries.com and Merriam-Webster.) It is also worth noting that not all elitists are elites, there are people who just happened to have the attitude of an elitist.

Let me just clarify that there’s no problem with being an elite, the problem arises when you use it to just show your superiority and to put people down instead of helping them be where you are. Just like when I got this opportunity to be a columnist here, I got a lot of negative comments from elitists ranging from “She must know her place” to “She’s garbage.” Some of these elitists even made derogative comments toward my supporters saying that they just use free data and won’t have enough to buy a P20 newspaper...they [elitists] might be better than the average people but it doesn’t give them the right to belittle them [my supporters]. You must learn to help them improve and reach their maximum potential instead of just rubbing in your superiority... .

There is an ongoing battle between the elitists and the common people – the elitists and the dutertards. These elitists are always trying to put down the common people by questioning their intellectual capacity and using the term “Dutertards,” a word play of “Duterte” and “retard,” to identify the Duterte supporters that they believe to be thickheaded.

You must understand that your opinions and your lives are not the only things that matter. Time and again, it has been shown that the collective

voice of the common people is powerful, whether it is to elect or oust a President....

So, I ask you, instead of using your strength and intelligence to belittle us and criticize the President's every move – why don't you use it to help our country improve? Because after all, we are all Filipinos. The success of this administration is a victory for us all. Like outgoing US President Obama said, "Ultimately, we're all on the same team." (Mocha Uson Blog, "Elitists vs. Duterteards")

In one of her rather more sober posts, Uson equates elitism with the arrogance of her "elitist" critics who call her "garbage" or look down on her supporters. Uson also speaks in terms of victimage to claim moral high ground ("these elitists are always trying to put down the common people"; "instead of using your strength and intelligence to belittle us...."). However, Uson's call for unity (quoting Obama's "we're all on the same team") is betrayed by the fact that she is also guilty of inciting division in her posts, invoking binaries between the DDS and those she calls "dilawans" or "yellowtards" (yellow is the party color of the opposition Liberal Party).

In relation to critics who label Duterte's supporters as "Dutertards" or "bobotantes" (idiot voters), criticizing Duterte supporters should happen sans the *ad hominem* because these labels are polarizing and may even prove the bloggers' claim that the opposition is "elitist." The label "Dutertards" also becomes a rallying cry for Uson or the DDS to unite the "common people." Duterte supporters who are insulted with the label might double down on their support for Duterte and pundits like Uson who "forced the contradictions of the conflicted, hypocritical social elites to unravel" (Contreras). Unpacking Contreras's insight, Uson supposedly exposes the hypocrisy of social elites who, on one hand, call out Duterte's acerbic remarks, and on the other hand, engage in *ad hominem* themselves through labels such as "Dutertards" and "idiot voters."

Uson's rhetoric, however, remains problematic. In a Facebook post dated November 5, 2019, Uson shared a video of her informal interview with Atty. Larry Gadon where Gadon attacked then Vice President Leni Robredo, members of the politically prominent Aquino family, priests, and communists whom he hurled invectives at like "bobo" (idiot), "hindot" (sex-crazed), and "putang ina niyo" (you're a son of a bitch). While Uson deflects by saying that these statements are not from her, she is nonetheless responsible for amplifying derogatory content. The said video has been viewed 2.5 million times and garnered 67,000 reactions and 13,000 comments. It may also be recalled that in 2017, Uson called Robredo "bobo" (stupid) in her radio program and the former was later sacked for the incident (Concepcion).

Uson's video with Gadon shows that when it comes to incendiary comments and remarks, Duterte's supporters are as guilty as their "elitist" critics. But what encourages coarse language among the DDS? The obscenities and invectives by the DDS are a response to the perceived "elitism" of Duterte's critics or opponents. For one, Duterte is popular for his gangsterism and use of colorful language. He speaks the language of the streets. Whether the rest of the Filipino masses speak this way is another story, but Duterte is popular because he arguably represents and embodies most Filipinos who do not speak using high-minded language (Tatcho, "Beyond"; Tatcho, "Duterte's"). Duterte rationalizes his profanities by saying that it is a way in which he captures media attention. In his propaganda machine, the same profanities can be used against the supposed arrogance and condescension of "elitists." Hence, the kind of language that might seem crass and politically incorrect to the elites is potentially the rhetorical strategy of the pro-Duterte bloggers as they claim to represent the "common people" or "ordinary Filipinos."

Acting as Opinion Leaders through Punditry

Uson, Nieto, and Sasot act as opinion leaders in the sense that they supply content to be shared by their followers in their echo chambers. In social media parlance, they are influencers that stoke public feelings and sentiment with polarizing content. Like Duterte, Uson's rhetorical performance is characterized by a populist style, one that promises to be the voice of the people. Hence, Uson always makes a distinction between her identity as a blogger, as opposed to being a journalist. If Uson is referring to her training and background, then she is not a journalist even as she has been given a column in the *Philippine Star*. However, Uson's distinction is also a matter of distancing herself from the "presstitutes" she decries even though her column is part of the mainstream press.

Uson is not alone in using a populist style. In his January 15, 2019 post, Nieto wrote: "Today is a new age, a new world, where self-proclaimed intellectual giants, propped up by mainstream media, are being exposed by Ordinary Tao with neither wealth nor pedigree." Like Uson, Nieto uses the "ordinary Filipino" tag as a rhetorical cue for anti-elitism. In one of his videos on Facebook, Nieto also refers to himself as a "pundit" (Thinking Pinoy, "#TPLive"). Both Uson and Nieto take a swipe at "intellectuals" and "mainstream media." The only difference is that while Uson clarifies in some of her posts that she is merely giving opinions with a statement like "NO law degree, OPINION only" (Mocha Uson Blog, "My Opinion"), Nieto struts his supposed technical know-how. Consider the following post in the Thinking Pinoy Facebook page on March 15, 2020, around the time the Duterte government imposed a month-long lockdown in Luzon, where the capital of Manila in the National Capital Region (NCR) is located:

WHY THINKING PINOY SUPPORTS THE NCR COMMUNITY QUARANTINE

This is for the pa-woke na intellectual elitists. Feel free to rebut this.

The NCR Community Quarantine is far from perfect, but we have to do it frankly because we have no other choice. It buys us time, valuable time than gives us a shot at surviving long enough for the cure to be available to the mass market.

If we do nothing, which is the alternative that some camps are proposing, then we stand to lose thousands, or even hundreds of thousands, of Filipino lives in the process.

While we can't avoid all of these deaths, the best we can do right now is to minimize them, and this is why I support the NCR Community Quarantine. It just sucks that the communicators of the government, who can do a lot, aren't doing much to mitigate the paranoia resulting from this policy.

Here's a more mathematically rigorous (yet still partial) discussion of my stance.

Note that the discussion relies heavily on the SIR model as it's meant to explain the COVID-19 situation to an audience with backgrounds in undergraduate Calculus and Basic Set Theory.

If the author were given complete freedom, he would've preferred stochastic epidemic models like what Youssef and Scoglio forwarded in 2013, but that is best reserved not for the general public, but to government policymakers who discuss the COVID-19 issue among themselves.

Please refer to the accompanying images for the said discussion.

Note that I also uploaded this on Scribd so you can read it here: <https://www.scribd.com/.../Why-Thinking-Pinoy-Supports...>

Nieto hedges that his post is meant to “explain the COVID-19 situation to an audience with backgrounds in undergraduate Calculus and Basic Set Theory” and it draws from his background as a former mathematics student. Notice, as well, Nieto's reference to “elitists” and how he seems to encourage debate with the statement, “This is for the pa-woke na intellectual elitists [This is for the elitists who think they're “woke”]. Feel free to rebut this.” In Nieto's statement, “pa-woke” suggests a pretentious understanding of political and social issues.

Nieto resorts to demagoguery or playing to in-group and out-group dynamics where the “other camps” comprise Duterte’s critics and/or the “intellectual elitists.” The way Nieto frames the “alternative that some camps are proposing”—to “do nothing”—is an oversimplification of the criticisms against government response at the onset of the COVID-19 situation. These criticisms include the delayed government response in banning flights from and to COVID hotspots in China, and the need for mass testing as the right intervention to a health issue rather than lockdowns involving surveillance and regulations by the police and military. Hence, the other “camps” never intended that the government “do nothing,” they wanted a more calibrated and appropriate response to the pandemic, something Nieto dismissed outright.

Aside from Nieto, another actor engaged in intellectualism is Sasot. As Sasot capitalizes on her background in international relations, she often writes critiques and commentaries on political issues as her model of opinion leadership. What is quoted below, however, is one of Sasot’s more general posts dated June 25, 2020:

3 Important things: What appeals to the voters, lessons from 2016/2019 for 2022

1. Astig vs Epal [cool vs. attention-seeking, trans. mine]

People want their politicians to be astig. Meaning, may sinasabi at hindi iyong may gusto lang sabihin. [People want politicians who have something to say and not those who just want to say something, trans. mine]

2. Relatable vs Self-Righteous

People no longer trust those who appear perfect, pure, etc., they want politicians they can relate to. They don’t want see pa-perfect, and pa-pure, they want to see flawed yet persistent folks.

3. Street smart vs Textbook Intelligent

People want politicians who are street smart rather than simply intelligent. They wanna see a ma-diskarte [street smart] individual and not someone who just knows what to do. They want someone who know how to do things (For the Motherland, “3 Important”).

Sasot’s post highlights the theme of anti-elitism. In Sasot’s words, people no longer trust those who project themselves to be “perfect, pure. . . . People want politicians who are street smart rather than simply intelligent” (For the Motherland, “3 Important”).

Sasot also dichotomizes (i.e., “relatable vs. self-righteous; street smart vs. textbook intelligent”) as though the characteristics mentioned are mutually exclusive. Like Nieto, the opinion leadership and intellectualism endorsed in the Facebook page of Sasot is one that is supposedly sincere, authentic, and common sense. For Sasot, what matters is knowledge that is practical, “relatable” and “street smart,” as opposed to “textbook intelligent” (For the Motherland, “3 Important”). Nieto maintains the primacy of insight by the Filipino everyman: “Today is a new age, a new world, where self-proclaimed intellectual giants, propped up by mainstream media, are being exposed by Ordinary Tao [regular Filipino] with neither wealth nor pedigree” (“Today is a New Age”). These are examples of the alternative epistemic regime that the bloggers or pundits aim to advance. They are not anti-intellectuals per se; rather, they promote knowledge that is practical, commonsensical, and politically expedient.

Spreading Falsehoods

A final thing to note about the said Facebook pages is their involvement with spreading falsehoods. Misinformation became more prevalent on Facebook after the 2016 national elections (Alba, “On Facebook”). Later appointed as the Overseas Workers Welfare Association (OWWA) deputy administrator, the most notorious pro-Duterte blogger Uson was the subject of an investigation in May 2020 in connection with her post “crediting the government for the distribution of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), which were later fact-checked to have been donated by SM Foundation” (Buan, “NBI Probes Mocha”). In August 2016, Uson also shared a photo of a nine-year-old girl whom she insinuated was a victim of rape and murder that happened in the Philippines, except the photo was taken in Brazil (de Jesus). Uson’s blog is also known for churning and sharing misleading content that supports Duterte and attacks figures of the political opposition such as Robredo, de Lima, Trillanes, and Ressa.

Meanwhile, in January 2017, Uson, Nieto, and Sasot used the hashtag #LeniLeaks which claimed that “‘leaked’ emails...proved the existence of an international anti-Duterte propaganda machine run by the vice president of the Philippines, Leni Robredo” (Alba, “How Duterte”). These claims were later debunked, but disinformation continued to spread including Nieto’s attempt to deflate the number of deaths in Duterte’s war on drugs. Nieto and Sasot also claimed that a victim of Duterte’s drug war was the work of Mexico’s Sinaloa cartel even as the body of the victim was wrapped in masking tape with a note bearing Duterte’s nickname, “DU30” (Alba, “How Duterte”).

In sum, the rhetorical cues of anti-intellectualism in the Facebook pages of Uson, Sasot, and Nieto include anti-elitism, punditry, and falsehoods where their populist styles become evident through the use of the vernacular, humorous memes, and visuals. The affordances of Facebook as a medium also allow these pundits to act as opinion leaders and influencers as their posts are publicly accessible, can be shared, garner reactions, and elicit questions from the DDS and even critics who read and follow their pages. Their model of opinion leadership, however, is limited to stoking public feelings or fanning the flames of discontent instead of encouraging rational and civic debate. Hence, their influence functions to harden partisanship even as they claim to promote an alternative epistemic regime.

Rhetorical Effect: Critical Analysis and Reflexivity

The Need for Critical Analysis

There is a need for netizens and rhetorical citizens to be critical of the Facebook pages and their role in public conversations. Fact-checking the content of these Facebook pages is one way to combat disinformation. However, as the sections on rhetorical context and argument have shown, these Facebook pages do not only trade in issues of truth or falsehood or “right” or “wrong” information. Sharing opinions and punditry are also the tools of the trade which may sometimes evade fact-checking efforts. Thus, critical analysis is necessary not to rule whether a statement is true but how statements, such as those about anti-elitism and intellectualism, gain traction and what they imply. Fact-checking and critical analysis can go together, the former dealing with verifiable information and the latter concerned with opinions, claims, and arguments. In line with critical analysis, there is also another point of reflection: What lies behind the pundits’ anti-elitism?

Based on the sentiments raised by Uson, Nieto, and Sasot, anti-elitism stems from the attitude of “elitists” who belittle the “less educated.” Consider the following posts from Sasot and Nieto:

Why is there smart-shaming and antagonistic attitude to knowledge?
BECAUSE knowledge has often been used to abuse, manipulate, insult,
and ridicule the less educated ones. (For the Motherland, “Why is There”)

**

#MayMastersKaBa? [#DoYouHaveAMaster’sDegree?—sarcasm directed at
“elitists”]

FROM A READER:

It's funny how the intellectuals view the opinions in public discourse as immaterial since most of us don't have their level of education. They dismiss it as if we are not stakeholders and just mere Spectators in the stand. I believe the opinion of those marginalized is the most important of all and that we should strive always for them to be heard.

May masters ka ba? [Do you have a master's degree?, trans. mine]

Letse, di yan makakain ng maralitang Pilipino. [Damn it, that won't feed the Filipino poor, trans. mine] (Thinking Pinoy, "#MayMastersKaBa?")

For Sasot, knowledge has been weaponized against the poor or the "common people" or "used to abuse, manipulate, insult, and ridicule the less educated ones" (For the Motherland, "Why is There"). Meanwhile, Nieto scoffs at the supposed arrogance of those who think that their level of education is what gives them the right to speak. As Nieto wrote, "the intellectuals view the opinions [of the less educated] in public discourse as immaterial since most of us don't have their level of education" (Thinking Pinoy, "#MayMastersKaBa?"). These are specific statements on their Facebook pages, allowing the bloggers to claim that they represent the masses in their alternative epistemic regime.

The statements of Duterte's propagandists about anti-elitism serve as points of reflection for those who wish to engage with the DDS. Is the opposing camp belittling the DDS by implying they do not have the right to speak because of their level of education? Are Duterte critics dismissing insights from the masses supporting Duterte? Reflecting on these can help bridge gaps in the political divide between critics and supporters of Duterte. Critical analysis also requires caution when assigning blame and responsibility apparent in condescending terms like "bobotante" (idiot voter) which is often used to label the DDS.

Meanwhile, critical analysis implores Filipino voters to investigate the ways in which Duterte's propaganda machine uses anti-elitism to create a common enemy out of the "elitists." "Elitist" has become an amorphous term that refers to all Duterte critics. The propaganda machine would make it look that they are simply against "elitists" yet whom they label as "elitists" include journalists who critically report on the "war on drugs" (e.g., Ressa), political figures speaking out against Duterte (e.g., de Lima, Trillanes, and Robredo), and individuals and groups they red-tag or claim as communists and insurgents. It is in this sense that the epistemic regime advanced by Duterte's propaganda machine through its anti-elitist stance is one that is politically expedient. The machine is not against intellectual elites per se but supposed "elitists" that criticize Duterte and his administration.

A look at some posts on these Facebook pages and the comments of the followers also show that the insults against Robredo do not engage *logos* (e.g., the content of Robredo's speeches or arguments) but *ethos* (e.g., "Is she really a lawyer? She's so bad even in grammar and math") and *pathos* (e.g., "she's acting like a victim, grandstanding, and creating her own drama to gain the public's sympathy"). When Robredo accepted Duterte's challenge to be co-chair of the Inter-Agency Committee on Anti-Illegal Drugs (ICAD), Uson made a video commenting on Robredo's manner and delivery instead of the content of the latter's actual speech. In the video, Uson stated: "It's obvious that you have a writer, you're not using your own words. If you're really speaking from the heart, then you don't need a script, you should speak impromptu" (Mocha Uson Blog, "Sabi ni Madam Leni"). Finally, when Robredo criticized the government for its poor response to the pandemic in one of her taped addresses to the nation, she was also attacked by Duterte supporters with comments that dealt with her appearance and inanities such as her hair, eyeglasses, and outfit (Punzalan, "Criticized").

While the attacks against Robredo seem superficial, they hint at a bigger issue in which Duterte's propaganda machine is a central player: the anti-elitism of these Facebook pages is an attack on any form of criticism against the government. Any criticism against the government is met with insults and hatred (e.g., #arrestmariaressa, #jaildelima). This is dangerous because the target of Uson, Nieto, and Sasot's anti-elitism might not actually be intellectuals or experts but dissent and disagreement in general, which are essential to a functioning democracy.

Reflexivity in Rhetoric

A critical analysis of Duterte's propaganda machine also requires reflection on the kind of rhetorical practices that resonate with the public. Duterte had a trust and approval rating of 91% for the last quarter of 2020, the highest among recent Philippine presidents (Elemia). Additionally, no opposition candidate won in the midterm election of 2019, which is considered a referendum on the Duterte government (Buan, "Last Time"). These raise questions about what can be done to effectively communicate with the public.

At the height of the pandemic, the Mocha Uson Blog defended Duterte's rather rambling address to the nation:

At this time, the President knows that it's important for everyone to understand what the government is doing - especially ordinary Filipinos. That's why he talked about the [community quarantine] guidelines one by one. He doesn't explain just for the benefit of his "intellectual" critics, this is for all Filipinos. (Mocha Uson Blog, "Duterte Explains")

In her defense of Duterte, Uson is intentional about the need to mind the audience. Therefore, the many reasons for the popularity of the Facebook pages, aside from Duterte's grassroots popularity, may include the simplicity, directness, clarity, and use of humor with which they communicate with the masses which include the poor, blue collar workers, and overseas Filipino workers.

Second, as the bloggers claim to represent the masses, call out the hypocrisy and snobbishness of "elitists," and emphasize knowledge that is practical, commonsensical, and convenient (being "street-smart," analysis for the "common *tao*"), the propaganda machine may have also captured the imagination of a public with its alternative epistemic regime. Third, the pages may also resonate with the public because they are sources of pro-Duterte "information" and popular opinions of the day that do not pass journalistic muster in mainstream media. The pages successfully serve as alternatives to mainstream media which the DDS regard as "presstitutes" or "fake news."

Finally, while Philippine mainstream media serves as a watchdog of the government, the Facebook pages do not have obligations to the public as they are not official forms of government communication, a complicated matter given the appointments of some of the bloggers in government posts. Nonetheless, these pages underscore the need to speak in a language that the masses can understand, if the goal is to communicate to as large an audience as possible.

Meanwhile, the Facebook pages have repeatedly highlighted how "intellectuals" are supposedly so arrogant to allow the pages to gain sympathy from the "common people." The term "Dutertard" is used as a rallying cry by these pages to prove the arrogance of "intellectual elitists." The lesson here is for the educated and other intellectuals to avoid labels such as "Dutertard" and "bobotante" even as they remain critical of the Duterte government. Moreover, if some of Duterte's supporters are indeed paid hacks or trolls, then critics must not act like the DDS they condemn.

Calling out disinformation and engaging in criticism without resorting to smart-shaming, slut-shaming (as what happened to Uson), and "stupid"-shaming (also, Uson—"Mochang tanga") is possible if all political camps agree to abide by civil rules of engagement. I say "all camps" because no camp—DDS or otherwise—has the monopoly of "decency" which has been the Liberal Party's watchword in the 2016 campaign, much to the consternation of the DDS.

The temptation to use smart-shaming, slut-shaming, and "stupid"-shaming is always present in demagoguery where division is evident among different identities. Demagoguery emphasizes "us" versus "them" based on political beliefs, values, ideologies, race, color, gender (Roberts-Miller, "Demagoguery," 33). However,

in seemingly mutually exclusive categories of difference, commonalities and similarities may exist. For instance, the DDS and the “others” might have agreed that what was needed in the 2022 presidential election is a government that is transparent, honest, and action-oriented. Political camps can start bridging differences by emphasizing these common frameworks for choosing a leader.

For meaningful deliberation to occur, perception-based barriers should then be broken down. The “less educated” are not all dupes and not all of those with education and who criticize the government are “elitists.” Only through such an understanding can mudslinging be addressed in favor of debate and discussion. The suggestion is to never belittle or underestimate the audiences’ or voters’ level of knowledge and intelligence if we wish to encourage more people to speak truth to power and speak truth to power clearly.

Ways Forward: Investigating Rhetoric as an Act of Citizenship

This study investigated the ways in which anti-intellectualism operates in and through the Facebook pages that comprised Duterte’s propaganda machine. The examples that open this study show a traditional form of anti-intellectualism that attacks institutions of knowledge such as science and research. The pundits in Duterte’s propaganda machine, however, use anti-intellectualism to attack those that they perceive as “elitist” or more specifically, critics of Duterte. Their form of anti-intellectualism is populist anti-elitism as they eschew knowledge that is supposedly exclusionary in favor of an epistemic regime that values knowledge that is practical, commonsensical, and convenient. They wage a war against critics and intellectuals who always “belittle” the Filipino poor and the mainstream media or the “presstitutes” they label as corrupt or paid hacks. The bloggers and pundits also claim to act as opinion leaders with “neither wealth nor pedigree” (Thinking Pinoy) who cater to the “ordinary Filipinos” (Mocha Usong Blog) and who provide commentary through “tongue-in-cheek posts, written in street-style language” (Sasot).

Through anti-elitism, the Facebook pages vow to speak for the masses with sincerity, simplicity, and humor. Nonetheless, these pages must be analyzed critically for the ways they collectively created a hub for DDS punditry instead of enabling and cultivating spaces for debate and deliberation. The anti-elitism is often meant to attack perceived opponents of the Duterte administration and muzzle criticism. Hence, the rhetorical performances in the machine should be interrogated fervently and countered through acts of rhetorical citizenship that take advantage of the affordances of the medium. Critical analysis and reflexivity in rhetoric are the two suggested potential exercises of rhetorical citizenship.

As the present study investigated the rhetoric of political actors in Duterte's propaganda machine, future studies could explore the role of the followers, subscribers, and "likers" that populate the Facebook pages. How the pundits form rhetorically mediated relationships with the rest of the DDS online could be investigated to understand the extent to which rhetoric and populism become mutually constitutive. Second, the reality of trolls, bots, deep fakes, and phony accounts should increasingly be recognized to understand how disinformation operates both rhetorically and technologically. The agency to use rhetoric is equally hijacked by algorithms and technology in a "posthuman era in politics—one in which human agency must be shared with (and is likely exceeded by) algorithms and other technological elements" (Kalpokas 9). The rhetoric of a "posthuman" form of disinformation can be examined to provide recommendations for Facebook's adjudication boards.

Finally, as "algorithms perform very precise actions (association or correlation, classification, ordering, recommending mostly) that alter the sayable and the unsayable, the visible, and the invisible" (Dillet 5-6), their potential to limit and shape rhetorical practices and acts of citizenship in digital spaces such as Facebook must be accounted for. This raises the need to reconsider notions of "public sphere" or "open market of ideas" on social media (Dillet 5) not only because of how pundits and their echo chambers detract from meaningful deliberation, but also due to the ways in which algorithms popularize certain forms of content. Thus, an angle that could be explored in future studies is how hashtags, handles, content, and posts by pundits in Duterte's propaganda machine optimize the algorithms for maximum impact.

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