

The Antinomies of Friendship

Philosopher Jacques Derrida (1997) opens his book, *The Politics of Friendship* (1997), with a line that captures the paradoxes and anxieties of friendship, “Oh my friend, there is no friend” (p. 1). A quotation from ancient Greece, the line is a strange recitation of what could friendship be—recognition and negation, acceptance and rejection. Friendship also thrives on a promise, whose unpredictability may not please everyone, because making friends carries with it the danger of a decision built on calculability or treachery. This ambivalence of friendship, when transposed into a communicative experience, and made to bear on the present, in the time of fake news, hateful speech, insincerity, violence and incivility, and especially upon the internet where all these are taking place, is imbued with danger. Friendship, one can argue here, would have less value, given the antinomies.

This special issue examines the paradoxes of communicative relationships, of which friendship is generative, that are happening on many levels – personal, spiritual, spectatorial, technological, and political. It looks at these levels of engagement through analyses of production and reception of media and mediated text. The issue pays attention to the processes in which communication is generally understood as bringing about sympathy and mutual understanding, could simultaneously supply indifference and enmity. The current term for such instrumentalization of communication is “weaponization” and “weaponizing,” to refer to cultural artifact, like laws and language that are deployed to inflict harm.

This issue opens with an article on hate speech of President Rodrigo Duterte, “Duterte Polemic Against Catholic Church as Hate Speech,” which analyzes thirteen speeches containing his criticisms against the Catholic Church. Delivered during his first year in office, the time when he was setting the agenda for his presidency, the speeches were a foretaste of the Duterte administration’s approach towards crisis, criticism, and dissent. Instead of responding to problems, the study found that Duterte attacked those who pointed out where the problems lie. It also found that his retorts are couched in hateful words which attack personal dignity, dehumanize groups, incite discrimination, advocate hostility, create a social wedge, and impute a crime. It’s in this manner that Duterte has sullied the social pact between him and the citizenry that is akin to the promise of friendship built on respect and a regard for feelings, rights and tradition.

A similar study, “The Theological Squabble of Duterte against the Catholic Church: (A) Discourse Analysis of Duterte’s God-Talk Based on the Verses Found on Online News,” explores the intention of Duterte’s fiery statements. A Catholic himself and educated by religious orders, Duterte is presumed to have a trace of the Church’s charism of compassion and love for a neighbor or stranger. However, the study concluded that his God-talk is but a “subjective religious hypocrisy” or, worse, he was just pretending to be religious. Duterte constructed a convenient myth for himself by being a critic of religious tradition just for show. However this myth is a weapon to hit back at the Church that calls out his administration’s sordid human rights record. The underlying reason for all the tirades directed at the Church is politics, the business of amassing power. Therefore, the hostility in Duterte’s God-talk cannot be settled as a religious issue because it implicates a certain politics. It is the kind of politics purporting to care for the poor but after winning their trust, made them the enemy.

Human life is sacred. The crux of the critiques leveled by the Church against Duterte is on the disregard for the lives of thousands who were suspected to be drug users and sellers. The piece “Rafael Lerma’s Photojournalistic Take on the Duterte’s Administration’s Drug War: A Counter-Barthesian Semiological Study,” analyzed 25 photographs from the so-called war on drugs, also termed *tokhang*. The latter is a portmanteau of “tutok” (knock) and “hangyo” (request). This coined term is neither innocuous nor polite because a rap on the door announces death as what were suggested by the photographs. The study surmised that the powerful images must have left deep scars on Lerma, the photographer, and also upon the whole nation.

The question of how to call the Duterte’s administration, given the violence and suffering it has inflicted on the poor, is settled in “Mula

kay GMA Hanggang kay Duterte: Kritika sa Ilang Dokumentaryong Politikal at Pagmamapa sa Tunguhin ng Dokumentaryon sa Panahon at Pagpaslang sa Politikal.” The term, according to the study, is “fascist.” It is what people’s organizations call the Duterte government that targeted them for speaking out on human rights abuses, poverty, displacement, and extra-judicial killings. One of the ways in which grassroots organizations can seek justice is through documentaries. The latter render them visible and empower them to speak out intimately. In this instance, the camera is a friend that grants them presence and allows them to be vulnerable. The study inquires into the political intention of recent documentaries and subjecting them to aesthetics and political judgment.

Another piece on documentary form, “Generative Documentary: Posthuman Art in the Context of the Philippine Drug War,” raises the issue of ethics in representation that seeks justice for the victims of Duterte’s violent drug campaign. RESBAK, SIKAD and Sandata are the three organizations that turned the drug war statistics into stories of real people via moving documentaries. Through inventive documentaries, the divide between humans and technology are breached. Humanity that was denied to victims and their families is being restored, thanks in part to technology.

Social media, as a technological interface of human interactions, have been praised by some and cursed by others. Our screens became the portals through which we connect to families, friends, and strangers. We text, chat, and post and gain friends and join virtual communities. However, the article, “The Climate on Incivility in Philippine Daily Inquirer’s Social Media Environment,” argues that our mediated life has gotten us into trouble. Incivility has become pronounced online that it won’t surprise us anymore if we become targets of uncivil discourses. While uncivil speech often singles out an individual, its consequences are broader because, as the study asserts, uncivil speech undermines the democratic potential of political discourse. Indeed all of us lose out in the end. The piece ended by enjoining Facebook to safeguard its integrity as a platform for where meaningful conversations about politics can take place.

The three regular articles in this special issue are on gender identity and expression. “Cruising through Spaces: Exploring the mediatization of gay cruising in the Philippines,” examines how new communication technologies enable romantic and sexual relationships to begin and thrive. “Cruising” is a term for initiating romantic or sexual liaisons of gay people. It predates the internet. Notwithstanding the social risks, cruising these days is a productive engagement and could bring about meaningful and lasting relationships. How was represented through songs is the concern

of the piece, “Pambihirang Bakla: Ang Homoseksuwalisasyon sa Tambalang Bakla sa Bakla ng ‘Ang Boyfriend Kong Bading.” The study peeled away the sedimented meanings, milieu, and musical styles to understand the bakla desires and relationships. The study renders visible the missing identities in the culture industries. The third piece, “Mobile Sexuality: Presentations of Young Filipinos in Dating Apps,” examines the use of online dating applications like Tinder or Grindr, as spaces of self-presentation. It argues that users perform their selves whenever they access the apps that nevertheless set the parameters for interactions. All three articles reveal how friendships and intimacies are set in motion through the openness induced and demarcated by technology. Despite being circumscribed by technological accoutrements, the Filipino bakla is not stepping back from using the apps.

Two feature articles included in this special issue have a lot to contribute to the themes that emerged from the other articles by reinforcing their arguments and taking them to another plane of signification. The article “Electoral disinformation: Looking through the lens of Tsek.ph fact checks,” is an account of the establishment of the pioneering fact-checking project of academe and media during the 2019 midterm elections. The aim of the project is to expose disinformation, commonly known as fake news, that deliberately pollutes the political landscape and prevents voters from accessing accurate, truthful, and reliable information.. The study reveals that Facebook remains to be the center of disinformation while the targets of disinformation are mostly opposition candidates. As citizens, we should be worried about the implications of this study. Politicians who woo our votes, and present themselves as our “friends,” are in fact duplicitous by deploying disinformation to acquire or stay in power. So, what esteem and respect should we grant these politicians when deception is part of their electoral strategy?

Finally, the last feature is the transcript of a public lecture delivered by Bonifacio P. Ilagan when he accepted the 2019 Gawad Plaridel, the highest award given by the University of Philippines to media practitioners last November 2019. Boni, as he is fondly called both by his friends and enemies, recounted his experiences as a student activist during the First Quarter Storm, the shorthand for the historic uprising of students against the administration of President Ferdinand Marcos in 1970, just a couple of years before he declared martial law. Boni went underground to escape the dictator’s dragnet but was eventually caught and tortured by his military captors. Boni was arrested twice and he was tortured each time. As part of his healing after his release from prison, he wrote and directed plays, documentaries, and movies. Today, he continues to join rallies and speak before students whom he believe would continue the

fight for a just and humane society that he and his comrades struggled for. Boni belongs to the best of his generation that personifies the essence of friendship, which is marked by self-sacrifice. “Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13).



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Reference

Derrida, J. (1997). *The politics of friendship*. London and New York: Verso.