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**Information Vulnerabilities in the Gray Zone:
An Overview of the Republic of the Philippines**

John Robert Bussolari

A paper submitted to the Faculty of the United States Naval War College, Newport, RI in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations.

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Contents

Abstract	iv
Introduction	1
Understanding Gray Zone Conflict in the Information Battlespace.	2
Commercial Media	5
Social Media Landscape	11
Manila’s Government Communications: Ready for life in the Gray Zone?	16
Conclusion	21
Recommendations	22
Bibliography	24

Abstract

Information Vulnerabilities in the Gray Zone: An Overview of the Republic of the Philippines

This topic focuses on the Republic of the Philippines preparedness to function within the modern strategic environment presented by the information revolution, and the changed character of state-on-state geopolitical competition known as “gray zone” conflict. This consideration of the Philippines’ information environment includes exploration of the country’s privately-owned media giants, the explosive growth of social media among Filipinos, and efforts by Manila to reform its strategic communications apparatus. By considering recent malign actions of Russia using gray zone techniques in the information domain to undermine the sovereignty of its neighbors, this analysis explores the Philippines’ vulnerability to these types of threats. The paper asserts that public and private information conduits in the Philippines are vulnerable, making Manila susceptible to gray zone tactics and malign influence from an unfriendly state actor. This paper includes an overview of the vulnerability of Philippine commercial media to subversion and influence that could undermine public trust, the increasing reliance of the population on social media for communication, and the vulnerability of government strategic communications to malign influence. Finally, it provides recommendations for building the Philippines’ resilience to actions in the gray zone information space.

“In war, everything is uncertain and variable, intertwined with psychological forces and effects, and the product of a continuous interaction of opposites.” – Clausewitz, *On War*.¹

Introduction

The United States and its allies must contend with all forms of contemporary warfare, many of which are characterized by malign activities short of conflict that rely more on non-attributable information campaigns, propaganda, and fabricated news rather than kinetic action. The Republic of the Philippines, a critical treaty ally of the United States located in key geostrategic terrain, is no exception. Though the bilateral relationship between Washington and Manila is turbulent, it is critical for the two countries to remain closely linked in the diplomatic, military, economic, and *information* domains to keep regional competitors and adversaries who seek to change the status quo at bay, and ensure continued peace and prosperity for both countries in the western Pacific.

This topic focuses on how the Philippines is prepared to deal with the revolution in information capabilities and the changed “gray zone” character of state competition and conflict. This consideration of the Philippines’ information environment includes its privately-owned media giants, the explosive growth of social media among Filipinos, and efforts by the government to reform its strategic communications apparatus. By considering Russia’s malign actions using gray zone techniques in the information domain as a baseline, this analysis explores Manila’s vulnerabilities to these types of threats. Its methodology includes analysis of

¹ Carl von Clausewitz. 1976/84. *On War*. Translated by Michael Howard and Peter Peret. Princeton University Press.

open-source media reports, polling data, statistics on information consumption, and scholarly articles. Its findings serve as a starting point for the United States to consider approaches to assist Manila in girding itself from potential threats in the information domain by those who seek to change the regional status quo.

Public and private information conduits in the Republic of the Philippines are vulnerable to gray zone tactics and techniques, making Manila vulnerable to malign influence from an unfriendly state actor. This includes: 1) the vulnerability of Philippine commercial media to subversion and influence from hostile foreign actors, 2) the growing reliance of Filipinos on social media platforms for communication, and 3) the vulnerability of government media to malign influence through the use of hostile counter-narratives.

Understanding Gray Zone Conflict in the Information Battlespace

To frame the discussion, this topic applies the definitions and characteristics of gray zone conflict used by Michael Mazarr in his December 2015 report for the U.S. Army War College. That report asserts that regardless of the name describing it (such as hybrid, unconventional, unrestricted, and others), gray zone conflict will be the “dominant form of state-to-state rivalry in the coming decades.”² Mazarr asserts that states will seek to achieve their objectives not by direct military challenge, but rather take subtle, yet hostile steps across the Diplomatic, Information, Military, and Economic (DIME) spectrum to secure “strategic leverage.” Mazarr identifies Russia, China, and Iran as using the gray zone to advance their national goals.³

² Michael J. Mazarr, 2015. *Mastering the Gray Zone: Understanding a Changing Era of Conflict*. Strategic Studies Institute, United States Army War College, Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College Press, Page 1

³ Nathan Freier, 2016. *Outplayed: Regaining Strategic Initiative in the Gray Sone*. Strategic Studies Institute, Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College, Page 33

In reflecting that gray zone conflict has a long history, new tools “...such as cyber weapons, advanced forms of information campaigns, and elaborate tools of civilian statecraft...”⁴ change the characteristics of how modern gray zone conflict manifests itself. Non-attributable actions and activities by a state actor in the “gray zone” can also be termed *malign influence*. Most importantly, Mazarr

suggests that gray zone “campaigns” are slower, and represent a deliberate “long game” played by an adversary determined to change the status quo.⁵ Asia expert Andrew Shearer of the Center of Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) notes that China’s gray zone strategy “draws on many elements also employed by Russia and Iran: exploiting the ‘gray zone’ created by the West’s binary notion of ‘war’ and ‘peace’...”⁶ Russia’s successful use of gray zone techniques in the information sphere will be explored in further detail in subsequent sections.

With this broad understanding of what is considered by the term “gray zone,” it is necessary to further scope a definition of malign activities within the information category of the DIME construct. In the information domain, an adversary will leverage psychological and

Gray Zone Conflict:

- **Pursues political objectives through cohesive, integrated campaigns**
- **Employs mostly nonmilitary or non-kinetic tools**
- **Strives to remain under key escalatory or red line thresholds to avoid outright, conventional conflict**
- **Moves gradually toward its objectives rather than seeking conclusive results in a specific period of time. (Mazarr)**

⁴ Michael J. Mazarr, 2015. *Mastering the Gray Zone: Understanding a Changing Era of Conflict*. Strategic Studies Institute, United States Army War College, Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College Press, Page 3

⁵ Ibid, pg 33

⁶ Andrew Shearer, 2017. *The Evolution of Hybrid Warfare and Key Challenges*. Congressional Testimony, Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS).

information operations, with the goal to “target the public opinion of publics in states waging war, both to reinforce the commitment of friendly publics and destroy the morale of adversaries.”⁷ As the goals of gray zone efforts are to take incremental steps to change the strategic status quo, information operations play a crucial role in any campaign’s chance of success. Malign actions in the information domain may include, in increasing levels of assertiveness: general information diplomacy, low-level cyber activities, moderate propaganda campaigns, publicizing historical narratives, cyber-harassment, major propaganda campaigns, large scale deception and denial, and large scale cyber-attacks.⁸ The use of these techniques over the last five years shows that gray zone activities can take place in the commercial and public media domains, within a wide range of social media, and against a government’s strategic communications. Both Russia and China have used these tools in their gray-zone approaches as part of their information and cyber operations.⁹

In summary, gray zone conflict can be employed by malign state actors who seek to change the status quo in cases of disputed border regions or grievances, and the information elements of gray zone conflict are one of the earliest indicators of such an effort. Adversaries seek to influence, and if possible, dominate, the information domain as a necessary preliminary step as part of a wider gray zone effort. Allied countries considered likely to be the target of such efforts must consider how they are vulnerable, and identify indicators that highlight their use, and develop means to counter them. With a population of over 100 million, the Philippines

⁷ Michael J Mazarr, 2015. *Mastering the Gray Zone: Understanding a Changing Era of Conflict*. Strategic Studies Institute, United States Army War College, Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College Press, Page 45

⁸ Ibid, pg 59

⁹ Nathan Freier, 2016. *Outplayed: Regaining Strategic Initiative in the Gray Sone*. Strategic Studies Institute, Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College, Page 33

has a rich media market, large audience for government communications, and a society increasingly connecting through social media platforms. This information environment will become the critical battleground in any gray zone effort by a malign actor that seeks to influence Manila and change the regional geopolitical status quo – with China almost certainly being the salient state-based threat to the Philippines’ near and long –term security.

Commercial Media

In gray zone conflict, adversaries are likely to take deliberate steps to undermine the function of and public confidence in major media outlets of a targeted country. This includes television broadcasters, radio, newsprint, or any other form of commercial media. The paths to undermine these types of media can be via direct interference, through surreptitious influence and hostile acquisition of media properties, and through use of the platforms themselves for subversion and counter-narratives. Using the opponent’s own media to advance propaganda or false messaging is one of the simplest means of co-option. In her report on Russia’s information operations against Ukraine in 2014, Maria Snegovaya notes that disinformation provides flexibility to the adversary, allowing it to question the validity of all information about an incident and to “broaden the potential spectrum of diplomatic solutions” available to the enemy.¹⁰ She identifies that Moscow’s disinformation campaign against Kyiv, advanced by both Russian domestic and international medial channels, obscured facts on the ground in Crimea and the Donbass.¹¹ – actions that delayed or paralyzed government decision-making and kept the strategic initiative with Moscow during the crisis.

¹⁰ Maria Snegovaya. 2015. *Putin's Information Warfare in Ukraine*. Institute for the Study of War, Washington DC: Institute for the Study of War. Page 9

¹¹ Ibid, 13.

One finds notable examples in western media reports following the July 2014 shoot-down of Malayan Airlines flight 17 (MH-17), an incident widely determined by the international community as having been caused by pro-Russian separatists using Russian-supplied equipment. Nevertheless, immediately following the event, even media outlets in the United States reported on Russian claims that the Government of Ukraine, or even the CIA as behind the tragedy.¹² Another recent example of disinformation “growing legs” in reputable media can be found in the 2017 case of an accusation of rape against German troops as part of NATO’s Enhanced Forward Presence in Lithuania, which is largely believed to have originated as subversion from Moscow.¹³ Ultimately, the goals of these malign activities are to sow doubt and obscure facts.

The Philippines possesses one of the most vibrant commercial media in Asia, and its wide scope and characteristics makes a full accounting challenging. Rather, this section introduces the media environment through the lens of identifying potential vulnerabilities it may have in gray zone information competition. With a market of 104 million inhabitants, the Philippines possesses over 1,500 cable television stations with 2 million active subscribers, and 1,400 radio stations serving an archipelago of some 300,000 square kilometers.¹⁴ University of the Philippines professor Rene Guioquio describes the media environment as “...commercial enterprises controlled by political and economic interest groups. As commercial enterprises, they

¹², Taylor Wofford, 2014. *RUSSIAN STATE MEDIA SAYS CIA SHOT DOWN MALAYSIA AIRLINES FLIGHT MH17*. 7 22. Accessed 2017. www.newsweek.com.

¹³ Reuters Staff, 2017. *Lithuania Looking for Source of False Accusation of Rape by German Troops*. 2 17. Accessed 9 2017. <http://in.reuters.com/article/lithuania-nato/lithuania-looking-for-source-of-false-accusation-of-rape-by-german-troops-idINKBN15W1LA>.

¹⁴ Central Intelligence Agency. 2017. *World Fact Book: The Philippines*. 10 7. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/rp.html>.

are focused on profitability, or at least the minimization of losses, which at the outset creates a conflict between the private interests of the mass media and their public service function.”¹⁵

Television. Television media in the Philippines is primarily a private enterprise, focused predominantly on a commercial sponsorship, for-profit model similar to that of the United States. Television ratings drive programming decisions, and is described by the Oxford Business Group as the “dominant” form of media in the country.^{16, 17} In the immediate post-Marcos era of the 1990s, two dominant outlets emerged: the Alto Broadcasting System and Chronicle Broadcasting Network (ABS-CBN), and the Global Media Arts (GMA) Network, with strong competition between the two. ABS-CBN is the largest mass-media platform in the Philippines, with an annual revenue of \$813 million in 2015. This property is 55 percent privately owned by the Lopez family (native Filipino), with the remaining 45 percent a mix of public shareholders and holdings publically owned by the same Lopez family. With 80 television stations, eight cable channels, 20 radio stations (both FM and AM), 12 print magazines, and comprehensive online platforms, it is the first pillar of the Philippine media “dualopoly.”¹⁸ (*See Figure 1*)

¹⁵ Rene Guioguo, 2016. "An Overview of the Mass Media Situation in the Philippines." 3 22.

¹⁶ Cherish Brillon, Aileen A. 2015. "From Local to Global: Philippine Broadcast Networks and the Filipino Diaspora." *International Journal of Commication* 9, 2202-2220.

¹⁷ Oxford Business Group. 2012. *Tuning in: Radio and television remain strong as print declines*. <https://www.oxfordbusinessgroup.com/overview/tuning-radio-and-television-remain-strong-print-declines>.

¹⁸ Media Ownership Monitor Philippines. n.d. *ABS-CBN Corporation*. <http://philippines.mom-rsf.org/en/owners/companies/detail/company/company/show/abs-cbn-corporation/>.

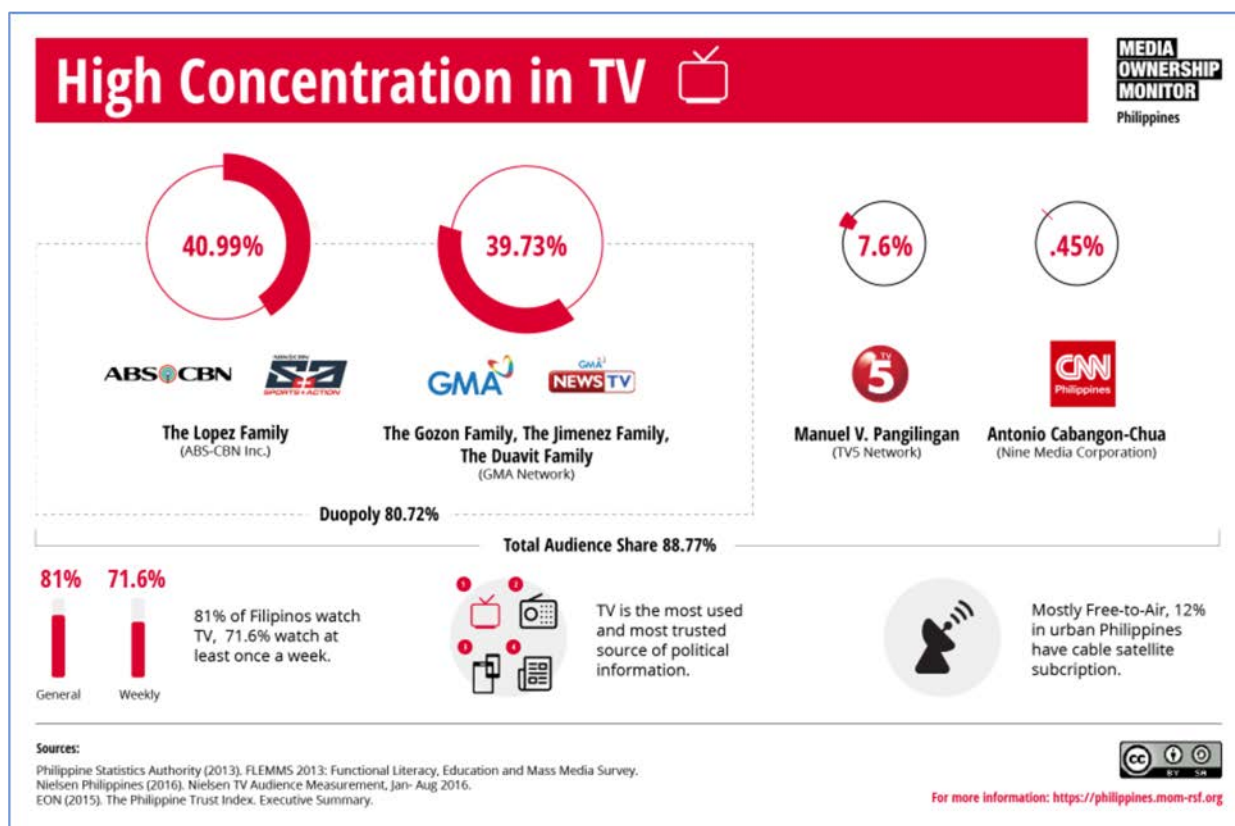


Figure 1: Television Concentration in the Philippines (Media Ownership Monitor, 2017)

The competing GMA Network is the second of the two super-media outlets in the Philippines, with an annual revenue of \$293 million in 2015. GMA stations use standard VHF transmission (is also available through cable TV providers) and in 2016 its flagship station GMA-7 had an audience share in the Philippines of approximately 36 percent.¹⁹ Its properties include numerous television and radio stations under the GMA banner, and the 75 percent of the company is privately owned and operated by three Filipino families, and the other 25 percent owned by public shareholders, according to its Security and Exchange Commission disclosure documents. GMA controls 88 VHF and UHF television stations, 23 AM and FM radio stations,

¹⁹ Media Ownership Monitor Philippines. n.d. *GMA Network, Inc.* Accessed 2017. <http://philippines.mom-rsf.org/en/owners/companies/detail/company/company/show/gma-network-inc/>.

and has a robust online presence like its ABS-CBN competitor.²⁰ For Filipinos, television is the most trusted source of news and information.

Radio. According to watchdog organization Media Ownership Monitor Philippines, “...radio is the second most used and [second] most trusted source of political information in the Philippines. In 2013, roughly two-thirds of the country’s population listens to radio, with 41.4 percent listening at least once a week, according to the Philippine Statistics Authority. It also remains to be the most pervasive medium, reaching even the remotest areas of the country.”²¹ Given the distribution of the Filipino population across vast remote and isolated territory and the relative poverty of a large segment of the population, radio is the most affordable and far-reaching form of mass communication. With 416 AM and 1,042 FM radio stations and transmitters country wide, radio can reach every citizen. GMA and ABS-CBN actively compete in the radio domain for market share, with 22.3 and 24.9 percent of market share, respectively. The remaining radio market share belongs to the government-run Presidential Communications Operations Office (via its PBS-BBS network; 22.3 percent market share), and the Manila Broadcasting Company (15 percent market share).²² Radio is vulnerable to malign influence, jamming, or broadcasts that overpower established transmissions that can disrupt Manila’s means to communicate to its population in a crisis, cause delay in decision making, or inject doubt in the truthfulness of reporting.

Newsprint. Print media in the Philippines is not nearly as prolific a source of news and information for Filipinos as television or radio. According to the Media Ownership Monitor, less

²⁰ Media Ownership Monitor Philippines. n.d. *GMA Network, Inc.* Accessed 2017. <http://philippines.mom-rsf.org/en/owners/companies/detail/company/company/show/gma-network-inc/>.

²¹ Media Ownership Monitor Philippines. n.d. *Radio.* Accessed 10 2017. <https://philippines.mom-rsf.org/en/media/radio/>

²² Ibid.

than 10 percent of Filipinos read a newspaper every day, and slightly more than 25 percent read a newspaper about once per week.²³ Print media in the Philippines, like television media, is largely a privately-owned enterprise controlled by three Filipino families. The four largest print media produces each control about 21 percent of the market share, with no one company dominating the landscape. Overall, newsprint ranks third among media outlets used by the population, and has seen a steady decline in favor of television and radio – which aligns with trends worldwide.²⁴

Commercial Media Analysis. Finally, it is useful to consider two elements of the media: how much it is trusted by the public, and its relationship with the government. A disconnect in trust between the people, the government, and the media creates fissures that can be exploited by an adversary through gray zone techniques. One indicator is the public’s perception of trust in the media. According to the 2017 Philippine Trust Index bank of statistics, 50 percent of the public moderately trusted the media, and 28 percent had extreme trust in the institutions – reflecting growing trust since 2015.^{25, 26} The same report notes that citizens under 45 years old are more likely to trust the media, which could indicate a long-term trend of increasing trust. However, with the popular President Duterte attacking the credibility of the “mainstream” media

²³ Media Ownership Monitor Philippines. n.d. *Print*. Accessed 10 2017. <http://philippines.mom-rsf.org/en/media/print/>

²⁴ Oxford Business Group. 2012. *Tuning in: Radio and television remain strong as print declines*. <https://www.oxfordbusinessgroup.com/overview/tuning-radio-and-television-remain-strong-print-declines>.

²⁵ EON Group. n.d. "2015 Philippine Trust Index." 2015, EON stakeholder relations group; Slides 11 and 13.

²⁶ Tricia Aquino, 2017. "EON Philippine Trust Index - Trust in Government highest since 2011 as of March-April Survey." *Interaksyon*, 09 29.

in the Philippines – to include giant ABS-CBN, it is unclear if the population’s trust in the media will continue.²⁷

Another significant problem in the Philippines is a continuing record of violence against local journalists. In an environment where President Duterte says on the record that “[j]ust because you’re a journalist you are not exempted from assassination, if you’re a son of a bitch,”²⁸ it will be challenging for a critical media environment to thrive.

Evidence suggests that much of the Philippine media is controlled by Filipino-owned companies and Filipino families, not by entities outside the country. One could argue that as long as Filipino-origin controlling powers of these media outlets remain loyal to the people of the Philippines, they are less vulnerable to external malign influence. Nevertheless, the diverse commercial media environment of the Philippines is vulnerable, particularly in light of the anti-media hostility by the sitting government, which undermines the media’s ability to fully report events and undermines its credibility. Control of commercial television and radio is concentrated by a few oligarch families and dominant media platforms. Finally, Filipinos are reliant on air broadcast or satellite TV and radio for information, which is vulnerable to disruption, co-option, or interference. This makes the population of the Philippines vulnerable to media exploitation in a time of gray zone conflict.

Social Media Landscape

With its exponential growth, social media will play an increasingly important role for adversaries in gray zone conflict as a means to spread disinformation and undermine the morale

²⁷ Kristine Daguno-Bersamina. 2017. "Duterte uses SONA time to lash out at media." *Philippine Star*, 7 24.

²⁸ Iris Gonzales. 2016. "Philippines' Duterte threatens assassination of journalists." *New Internationalist*, 6 22.

of a targeted country's population. In effect, social media has been weaponized, and used by malign states such as Russia in pursuance of its gray zone goals.²⁹ Max Boot, a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, describes Russian malign activity in this area as "Social Media Blitzkrieg" and identifies how Moscow has used bots, hostile bloggers, trolls, and the purchase of advertisements to advance its disinformation campaign in pursuit of its goal of sewing doubt and causing discord in Ukraine.³⁰ In particular, gray zone activities in the social medial sphere are especially difficult to attribute to a sponsoring state actor.

The internet and social media platforms play a growing role in the Philippines' information environment, and as their use increases, so too will vulnerabilities to subversive gray zone activities. With the proliferation of smartphones, Filipinos now are able to access the internet in remote locations not serviced by land-line telephone or broadband access. For example, the CIA World Factbook notes that there are about four land line telephones per 100 inhabitants, compared with 113 cell phone subscriptions of the same number of citizens.³¹ The Philippines is ranked 13th in the world by the CIA for the number of cell phone subscriptions – more than Germany or Mexico. (note: for regional comparison, Vietnam is ranked 10th, Indonesia ranked 4th, China ranked 1st).³² Despite the high number of cell phone subscriptions per capita, the CIA estimates about 56 percent of the population (about 57 million users) is

²⁹ Carnew, Sean and Furlong, Jason. 2017. "Social Media is a Weapon." *U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings* (U.S. Naval Institute Online) 143/8/1,374.

³⁰ Max Boot, 2107. "Russia Has Invented Social Media Blitzkrieg." *Foreign Policy* (Foreign Policy online - www.foreignpolicy.com).

³¹ Central Intelligence Agency. 2017. *World Fact Book: The Philippines*. 10 7. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/rp.html>.

³² Ibid.

connected to the internet – 17th in the world and similar in rank to Vietnam (16th) and Indonesia (14th). The Philippines’ internet and cell phone penetration rate is about average regionally.

To better understand the character of the online environment, it is important to understand how the adult population connects to the internet. According to statistics collected by Third Team Media, a regional digital media agency, 87 percent of adult Filipinos own a mobile phone, 55 percent own a smart phone, 43 percent own a computer, and 24 percent own a tablet device. (see Figure 2) In terms of growth in electronic device ownership, from 2015 to 2016, the number of users of social media platforms via a computer increased by 20 percent, and the number of users of social media by a smartphone increased by 28 percent..³³ (see Figure 2) As a share of web traffic, 64 percent is from computers and laptops (down 12 percent from 2015), and 29 percent of page views is from mobile phones, an increase of 53 percent since 2015..³⁴

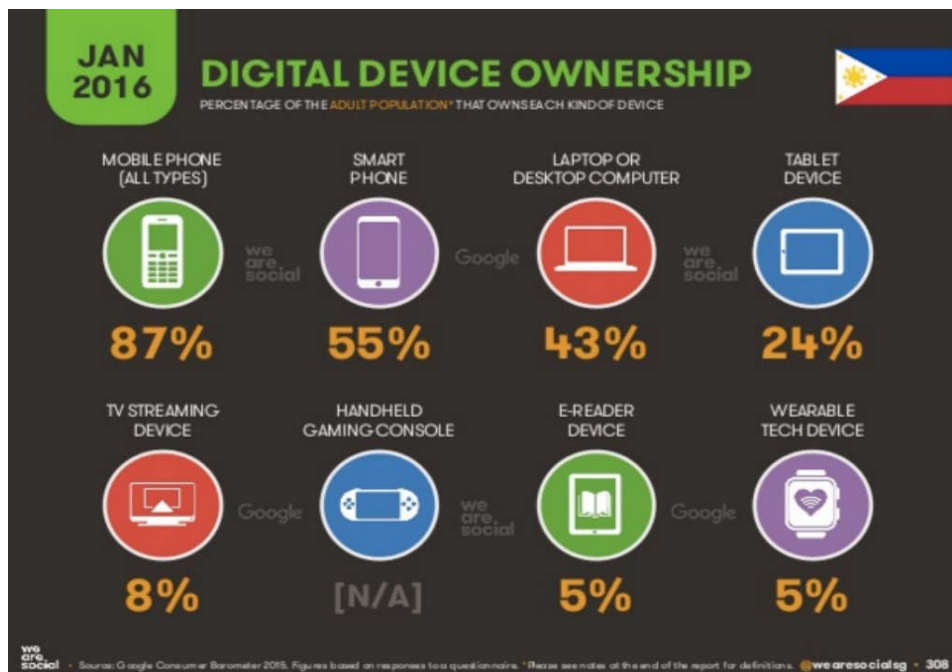


Figure 2: Digital Device Ownership in the Philippines (Third Team Media, 2016)

³³ Third Team Media. 2016. *State of Social Media and Digital in the Philippines in 2016*. Third Team Media, 22.

³⁴ Ibid.

To amplify the character of Filipino's internet presence and underscore its exposure to gray zone efforts against information sources, it is important to consider two important pillars of social media in the Philippines: Facebook and Twitter.

Facebook. Facebook is the top social media platform in the Philippines as assessed by 26 percent of Filipino social media users surveyed, and Facebook Messenger is the number one message/chat application at 23 percent.³⁵ (see Figure 3) Regardless of how often they use Facebook, it is a tool used by over 93 percent of Filipino internet users.³⁶ In times of crisis, Filipinos have turned to Facebook to assist in communication with friends and family members. This was especially prevalent in 2016 when Super Typhoon Yolanda hit the Philippines. Facebook users used the platform to “check in” that they were safe from harm, share photos of damaged areas, and cope with the psychological effects of the disaster.³⁷ The number of Facebook users is expected to continue robust growth with about 3-4 million Filipino users joining its ranks every year through 2022.³⁸

Twitter. Twitter is the third most-used social media platform in the Philippines, with 13 percent of social media users ranking it as their top application.³⁹ The number of Twitter users is expected to grow from 8.5 million in 2017 to 10.4 million by 2019 –an almost 20 percent increase.⁴⁰ Twitter is not only used for day-to-day social media activities, but has also played an

³⁵ Third Team Media. 2016. *State of Social Media and Digital in the Philippines in 2016*. Third Team Media, 13.

³⁶ Paolo Montecillo, G. 2012. "Philippines has 9.5 M Twitter Users, Ranks 10th." *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 9 9.

³⁷ PLDT. 2016. *We're Alive: How social media posts help in post-disaster coping*. Report, Philippine Long Distance Telephone Company, Philippine Long Distance Telephone Company.

³⁸ statista- the Statistics Portal. 2017. *Number of Facebook User in the Philippines from 2012-2022*. Report, statista.

³⁹ Third Team Media. 2016. *State of Social Media and Digital in the Philippines in 2016*. Third Team Media, 16.

⁴⁰ statista - The Statistics Portal. 2017. "Philippines: number of Twitter users 2014-2019." www.statista.com.

important role during crisis, similar to the “warm” and frozen conflicts in Europe to the Arab Spring in the Middle East. Like Facebook, Twitter plays an important communication role in the Philippines during natural disasters to spread critical information and mobilize relief operations.⁴¹ Chat-based and video phone applications such as Skype feature prominently in the Philippine’s social media space for person-to-person communication, especially among families.

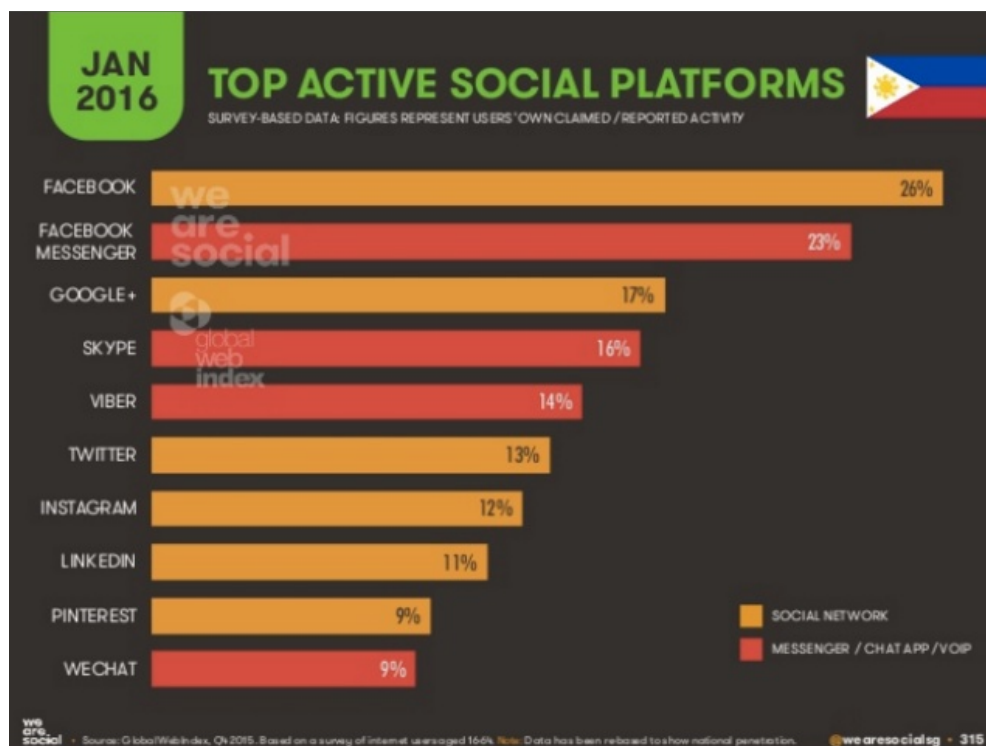


Figure 3: Top Active Social Platforms (Third Team Media, 2016)

Social Media Analysis. As a demographic, Filipinos who use social media trust it more as a news source than traditional media by more than 10 percentage points (9/10 trust social media, 7/10 trust traditional media).⁴² Regardless of the explosive growth in social media,

⁴¹ Montecillo, Paolo, G. 2012. "Philippines has 9.5 M Twitter Users, Ranks 10th." *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 9 9.

⁴² Johanna Ballaran. 2017. *Online Filipinos trust social media more than traditional media – poll*. Technology/Internet. 09 29. <http://technology.inquirer.net/66402/filipinos-online-trust-social-media-traditional-media-poll>.

citizens still place their trust in traditional media such as television, radio, and newspaper.⁴³ One can counter-argue that the vulnerability of the Philippine population to gray zone actions in the social media environment is offset by only 56 percent (according to the CIA) of the population having an internet presence – leaving 44 percent unaffected. Further, though there is a high rate of cell phone penetration, the number of smart phones is relatively low as a percentage of the overall population.⁴⁴ However, the Philippines’ young population, close family connections, increasing use of social media applications, and strong growth in smartphone ownership will combine to continually increase the population’s reliance and dependence on social media as an important source of information. As the connected Filipinos rely on social media for their information in times of crisis – it will be increasingly vulnerable to subversion from malign actors. Social media has already demonstrated itself as a battleground between Beijing and Manila over sovereignty issues in the South China Sea.⁴⁵

Manila’s Government Communications: Ready for life in the Gray Zone?

The third information pillar this research explores is the use of gray zone conflict techniques against a government strategic communications capability. Government messaging, counter messaging, and counter-counter messaging must be considered in integral part of any information campaign, and bears similarity to measures that must be taken to make and counter electronic attacks. As observed in Moscow’s ongoing conflict with Kyiv, pro-Russian activists

⁴³ Adobo Magazine. 2017. "2017 Philippine Trust Index Results Show Rising Trust In The Government - EON Group." *Adobo Magazine*, 09 30.

⁴⁴ On Device Research. 2014. "The Philippines Mobile Internet Crowd." on Device Research - ondeviceresearch.com, 38.

⁴⁵ Linh Tong, 2016. "The Social Media 'War' Over the South China Sea." *The Diplomat - Asia Life*, 7 16.

(both independently and under direction from the Russian government) targeted western government communications to selectively expose private diplomatic interactions that undermined friendly efforts to build international coalitions and challenge hostile propaganda. This eavesdropping included the interception of U.S. officials speaking about the diplomatic situation in Kyiv, which included tough language about the actions of the European Union – which was intercepted and intentionally exposed by Moscow in the media.⁴⁶ This revelation was a departure from normal signals intelligence protocol, where public disclosure is rare in order to carefully protect sources and methods of collection. In addition, Russia embraced a whole-of-government gray zone approach in the information domain, through a coordinated campaign that leveraged diplomats, academics, politicians, social elites, and others to advance Moscow’s message against the government in Kyiv and the West.⁴⁷ Careful preparation and organization must occur in order to counter such a “whole of government” effort in the information sphere. When considering ways to defend against gray zone conflict in the information segment of the DIME, it is essential to: 1) develop a clear government narrative, 2) defend your communications against subversion, and 3) prepare contingencies to expose adversary disinformation campaigns. All these elements require a capable and smoothly functioning strategic communications organization.

Based on the record of gray zone techniques against government messaging, it is necessary to consider the Government of the Philippines’ strategic communications apparatus, its ability to perpetuate a narrative to the population, and the level of trust Filipinos have in Manila.

⁴⁶ Elina Lange-Ionatamisvilli and Sanda Svetoka, *Strategic Communications and Social Media in the Russia Ukraine Conflict*. 2015. NATO Cooperative Cyber Defense Center of Excellence (CCDCOE), Tallinn: NATO CCD COE.

⁴⁷ Valdimir Sazonov, et al. n.d. *Russian Information Campaign Against Ukrainian State and Defense Forces*. NATO Strategic Communications Center of Excellence, NATO SC-COE, 130.

For President Duterte's administration, the Presidential Communications Operations Office (PCOO) is the prime conduit for communicating the actions and intentions of the government to its citizens. According to its website, the mission of the PCOO is to "serve as the primary vehicle for consciousness-raising, constituency-building, and social mobilization in support of the policies, programs, and projects of the Presidency."⁴⁸ (see Figure 4) The government's three television properties and radio property all fall under the PCOO.⁴⁹ In recognition of the challenges posed by the evolution of cyberspace, the Philippines' 2017-2022 National Security Policy notes the importance of expanding the capabilities of its information technologies and capabilities in law enforcement and security sectors, including partnership with academia and the business community.⁵⁰

Over the past year, the PCOO has taken steps to integrate social media into its communications efforts, revitalize and update the government's aging television properties, and broaden its scope of programming- to include Muslim cultural programming.⁵¹ However, on May 30, 2017, the PCOO disbanded the government's subsidiary Strategic Communications Office following a scandal where that office was accused of laudatory and revisionist coverage of former President Ferdinand Marcos, who was widely known to have committed human rights violations and deposed from power in 1986.⁵² Scandals such as this can serve to further undermine the credibility of government media. In this case, the Duterte administration

⁴⁸ Republic of the Philippines. 2017. *Presidential Communications Operations Office*. <https://pcoo.gov.ph>.

⁴⁹ Media Ownership Monitor Philippines. n.d. *State-Run Media*. Accessed 10 2017. <https://philippines.mom-rsf.org/en/media/state-run-media/>

⁵⁰ Republic of the Philippines. April 2017. *National Security Policy 2017-2022 for Change and the Well-Being of the Filipino People*. Republic of the Philippines.

⁵¹ Mary Ann Reyes, 2017. "Improved Government Communications." *Philippine Star*, 09 17.

⁵² Alexis Romero, 2017. "PCOO Scraps Strategic Communications Office." *Philippine Star*, 5 31.

implemented quick action to disband the office and reassign personnel. Of additional concern, on October 4, 2017 the chief of the Philippine National Bureau of Investigation (NBI) Cybercrime Division reported to senate investigators that no government agency was monitoring fake news sites on social media,⁵³ further underscoring a potential gray zone vulnerability.

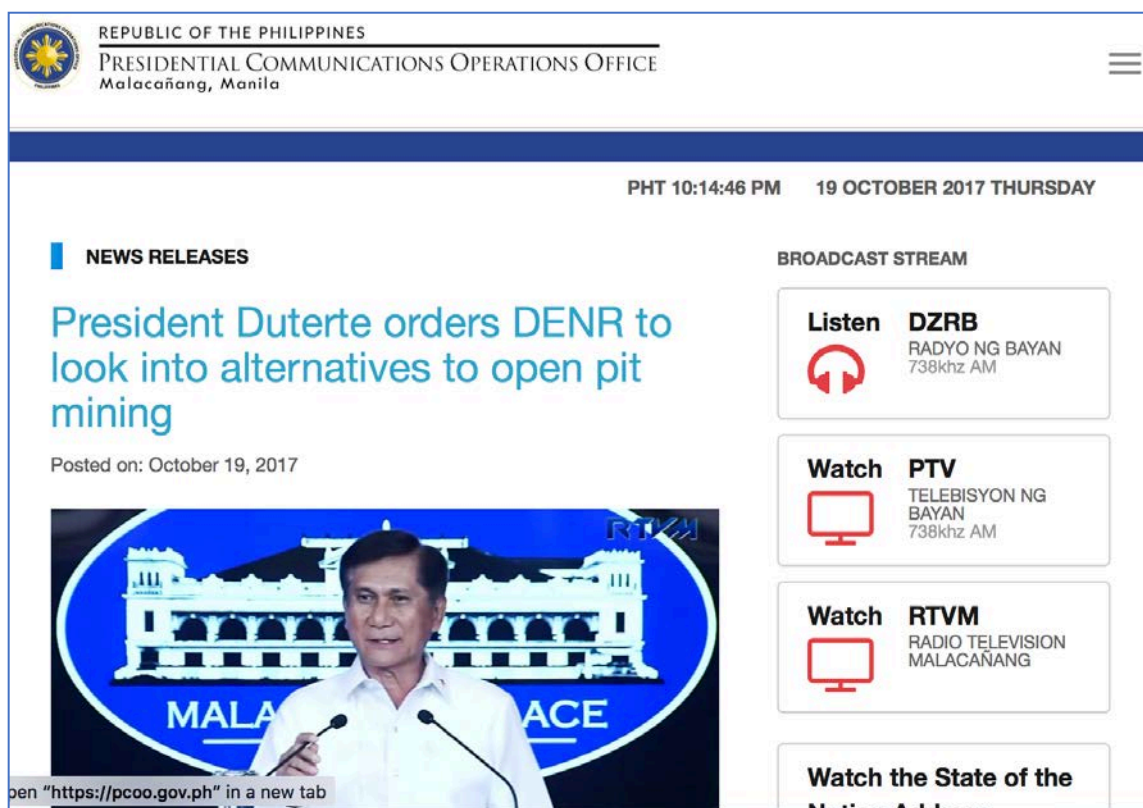


Figure 4: The Presidential Communications Operations Office Website – <https://pcoo.gov.ph>

The primary means for the government to advance strategic messaging, outside commercial media reporting, is through the Philippine Broadcasting Service. For distribution, this government-owned entity has 31 country wide radio and television stations.⁵⁴ For content development, the Government has three television properties: PTV-4, IBC-13, and RPN-9

⁵³ Kristine Joy Patag, 2017. "No government agency monitoring fake news on social media, NBI exec says." *The Philippine Star*, 10 4.

⁵⁴ Rene Guioguo, 2016. "An Overview of the Mass Media Situation in the Philippines." 3 22.

(which is CNN Philippines). The government also runs the Radyo ng Bayan, its radio network.⁵⁵ However, according to Rene GuioGuio, Manila's broadcasts "...are perceived as the propaganda arm of the state and suffer in terms of viewership, having the lowest audience share in the market."⁵⁶ The perception by Filipinos that government media is not a trustworthy source of information make it more vulnerable to gray zone information efforts that seek to undermine or discredit a government narrative. However, the body of polling sampled in this research paper was not able to isolate views on the population's trust in government versus its trust in government information.

Though Filipinos may be less inclined to trust government media sources, this does not bear out when considering their view of the government itself. When viewed through the statistical lens of Filipino trust in government, the direction is resoundingly upwards. According to the 2017 Philippine Trust index, citizen's trust in the government has risen 30 percent since 2015 to an average of 80 percent, with the office of the President most trusted at 82 percent - only the church in the Philippines is a more trusted institution.⁵⁷ With its efforts to revitalize the government's media platforms and properties, to include expanding its strategic communications presence into the social media domains, the administration is on a positive path to correct its communications deficiencies. However, this trust could be undermined in a sustained gray zone effort, especially if government strategic communications are unable to keep pace in gray zone competition or are directly disrupted by an adversary. In one example, numerous Philippine

⁵⁵ Media Ownership Monitor Philippines. n.d. *State-Run Media*. Accessed 10 2017. <https://philippines.mom-rsf.org/en/media/state-run-media/>

⁵⁶ Rene GuioGuio, 2016. "An Overview of the Mass Media Situation in the Philippines." 3 22.

⁵⁷ Adobo Magazine. 2017. "2017 Philippine Trust Index Results Show Rising Trust In The Government - EON Group." *Adobo Magazine*, 09 30.

government websites were attacked (largely suspected by China) in 2016 following the Permanent Court of Arbitration ruling on the South China Sea.⁵⁸

Conclusion

In her report on Russia, Maria Snegovaya's assertion that military and strategic objectives of an information campaign include confusion, obfuscation and constraining friendly government decision making almost certainly holds valid for any gray zone conflict.⁵⁹ The overall goal is to *inject doubt* in the early phases of a campaign, allowing an adversary to gain the initiative in the diplomatic or military space. While at peace with its neighbors, the Philippines is in a complex geopolitical region where gray zone actors such as China and transnational terrorist groups operate. China's gray zone approach seeks to change the strategic status quo, and according to Indo-Asia-Pacific Defense Forum contributor Arthur Tulak, the Chinese are "implementing a coordinated supporting "information campaign" that is planned at the strategic level and is transmitted globally."⁶⁰ Though tensions between Beijing and Manila have somewhat eased since President Duterte took office, regional competitors such as China have gray zone cyber capabilities able to execute malign actions in the information domain that target Philippine commercial, social media, and government information outlets.

This paper has argued that the Republic of the Philippines is susceptible to "gray zone" tactics and techniques in the information domain. The Philippines' commercial media,

⁵⁸ Javanic Mateo, 2016. "68 gov't websites attacked." *The Philippine Star*, 07 16.

⁵⁹ Maria Snegovaya, 2015. *Putin's Information Warfare in Ukraine*. Institute for the Study of War, Washington DC: Institute for the Study of War. Page 17

⁶⁰ Arthur N Tulak, 2016. "Hybrid Warfare: New Challenges in the Information Environment." *Indo Asia Pacific Defense Forum*. August 16. <http://apdf-magazine.com>.

consolidated under the control of a select few wealthy Filipino families, is potentially at risk of subversion and influence from hostile actors who would undermine its leadership or its already limited public trust. As Filipinos increasingly turn to social media platforms in times of disaster and crisis, manipulation and infiltration could co-opt critical information during a national emergency. Finally, though Filipino's trust in Manila is increasing, the government is not fully prepared to deploy a trusted, coherent message that will be believed by the population during a time of acute danger. Moving forward, the United States and the Republic of the Philippines should partner to develop systems and countermeasures to reinforce against and build resilience to gray zone threats in the information domain.

Recommendations

In his consideration of gray zone conflict, Mazarr notes that if countries in East Asia, to include the Philippines, build resiliency and abilities (through both active and inactive methods) to counter China's gray zone efforts, Beijing's efforts to adjust the region's strategic status quo can be countered.⁶¹ As a starting point, this paper makes the following recommendations for the United States to partner with the Republic of the Philippines to improve the region's gray zone defenses:

- The United States intelligence community should develop, in concert with Philippine government, Indications and Warning (I&W) benchmarks to aid in quickly identifying a malign influence campaign. By identifying "gray zone" encroachment in the information

⁶¹ Michael J Mazarr, 2015. *Mastering the Gray Zone: Understanding a Changing Era of Conflict*. Strategic Studies Institute, United States Army War College, Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College Press, Page 59

domain as soon as it begins, Manila can develop and deploy effective countermeasures to blunt the adversary's efforts, contain the malign effect, and prevent escalation.

- The United States military should increase security cooperation with Philippine defense intelligence services to increase capabilities to counter gray zone efforts increasing by building capacity in open source and social media collection, exploitation, and analysis. This includes the use of complex analysis tools able to dissect “big data” trends in social media and identify signs of manipulation. The resulting effect would ensure that Manila is able to quickly and adequately process a wide range of gray zone open source material to promptly identify when I&W tripwires are crossed.
- To build the population's “information resilience” in the gray zone, the government of the Philippines should consider media education and training to the public, to include in grade schools. Building a polity that thinks critically strengthens both democracy and resilience to propaganda. The government of Lithuania is incorporating media literacy and critical thinking skills into school curriculums that are designed to “inoculate future citizens against disinformation.”⁶²
- Finally, China and Russia have successfully used gray zone techniques within the information sphere. Moving forward, the government, military, and intelligence community in Manila must carefully assess threats in the information domain and develop counter-messaging strategies to mitigate the impact of a malign influence campaign and regain strategic initiative.

⁶² Reid Standish, 2017. "Russia's Neighbors Respond to Putin's Hybrid War." *Foreign Policy* (Foreign Policy Online - www.foreignpolicy.com).

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