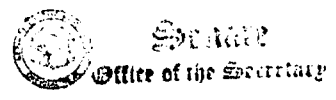


EIGHTEENTH CONGRESS OF THE)
REPUBLIC OF THE PHILIPPINES)
First Regular Session)



SENATE

P.S. Res. No. 401

20 MAY 12 AIO :58

Introduced by **SENATOR LEILA M. DE LIMA**

RESOLUTION
DIRECTING THE APPROPRIATE SENATE COMMITTEE TO
CONDUCT AN INQUIRY, IN AID OF LEGISLATION, INTO THE REPORTS
OF PUBLIC FUNDS BEING SPENT TO PAY AND MAINTAIN ONLINE
TROLLS TO DISTORT AND MANIPULATE ONLINE INFORMATION IN
VARIOUS SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS IN ORDER TO INFLUENCE
PUBLIC OPINION AND POLITICAL OUTCOMES

1 WHEREAS, Article VI, Section 24 of the 1987 Constitution vested the exclusive
2 power of appropriating government funds to the Legislative Branch;

3 WHEREAS, Section 29 (1) of the same states that “[n]o money shall be paid out
4 of the Treasury except in pursuance of an appropriation made by law.”;

5 WHEREAS, in recent years, the Philippines has become a hotbed of political
6 opportunism and manipulation wherein social media is weaponized to influence
7 public opinion and political outcomes through the use of deliberate and strategic
8 disinformation campaigns. This phenomenon was explored in a 12-month study
9 conducted by researchers in the University of Massachusetts, University of Leeds, and
10 De La Salle University, entitled, “Architects of Networked Disinformation: Behind the
11 Scenes of Troll Accounts and Fake News Production in the Philippines”. Published in
12 2018, the study uncovers the professionalized and hierarchized group of political
13 operators who design disinformation campaigns, mobilize click armies, and execute
14 innovative “digital black ops” and “signal scrambling” techniques for any interested
15 political client. Their report revealed that disinformation architects have become a

1 crucial and common part of Filipino political campaigns at both national and local
2 levels – employed by many politicians regardless of party and ideology;¹

3 WHEREAS, according to a University of Oxford study published in July 2017
4 entitled, “Troops, trolls and troublemakers: A global inventory of organized social
5 media manipulation”, the earliest report of organized social media manipulation in the
6 Philippines was done in 2016. In that year, “keyboard trolls” were hired to spread
7 propaganda for then presidential candidate Duterte while many of them continued to
8 amplify messages in support of the president’s policies when he won the presidency;²

9 WHEREAS, according to the aforementioned study, a total of \$200,000 or
10 approximately ₱10 million was spent to hire trolls who would spread propaganda for
11 the Duterte Administration and target his opposition. The study also cited that
12 Duterte’s team of 400 to 500 cyber troops posted nationalistic and pro-government
13 comments and interacted with dissenters through harassment and individual
14 targeting. Per the report, membership in cyber troop teams in the Philippines is
15 “liminal” but with some coordination;³

16 WHEREAS, news reports in November 2017 featured a separate study by US-
17 based human rights group Freedom House which claimed that the government had
18 been paying a ‘keyboard army’, which “could earn at least ₱500 a day operating fake
19 social media accounts supporting President Rodrigo Duterte or attacking his
20 detractors”. The report claims that the keyboard army’s focus was to make it seem that
21 the Duterte administration’s controversial and deadly war on drugs had been gaining
22 widespread public support;⁴

23 WHEREAS, the Washington Post has even labelled the Philippines as a “hub”
24 of international troll farms which they described as “dramatically altering the political
25 landscape in the Philippines with almost complete impunity — shielded by politicians

¹ Ong, J. C. & Cabanes, J. (11 February 2017). *Chief disinformation architects in the PH: Not exactly who you think*. Retrieved from <https://www.rappler.com/thought-leaders/195743-disinformation-architects-philippines>. Accessed last 5 May 2020

² *Ibid.*

³ Matsuzawa, M. (24 July 2017) *Duterte camp spent \$200,000 for troll army, Oxford study finds*. Retrieved from: <https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2017/07/24/1721044/duterte-camp-spent-200000-troll-army-oxford-study-finds>. Accessed last 4 May 2020

⁴ GMA News (14 November 2017) *PHL gov’t paying ‘keyboard army’ P500 a day to ‘amplify’ public support for drug war — watchdog*. Retrieved from: <https://www.gmanetwork.com/news/news/nation/633100/phi-gov-t-paying-keyboard-army-p500-a-day-to-amplify-public-support-for-drug-war-watchdog/story/>. Accessed last 5 May 2020

1 who are so deep into this practice that they will not legislate against it, and using the
2 cover of established PR firms that quietly offer these services”;⁵

3 WHEREAS, the aforesaid news article also mentioned that their interview of
4 over half a dozen paid trolls revealed, under conditions of anonymity, that they worked
5 round-the-clock to flood platforms such as Twitter and Facebook with seemingly
6 organic messages of support, but in reality, these were “all an illusion, manufactured
7 by hundreds of fake accounts all meticulously tracked on a spreadsheet”;⁶

8 WHEREAS, in March 2019, Facebook identified and removed around 200
9 pages and accounts organized by President Duterte’s social media manager in his 2016
10 campaign, Mr. Nic Gabunada, which were fake accounts that flooded social media
11 feeds with pro-Duterte content — much of which were false and used to attack political
12 opponents. According to Facebook, these pages were highly influential, with at least
13 one reaching 3.6 million followers. This network, which can impact millions of
14 Facebook users, is an example of how inauthentic campaigns can warp political
15 discourse with artificially bolstered messaging;⁷

16 WHEREAS, on March 15, 2020, CNN Philippines reported that Vice President
17 Leni Robredo had called on fellow government officials to provide coronavirus disease
18 (COVID-19) frontliners with protective gear, instead of allocating funds for social
19 media “trolls”. To corroborate the claim, the same report cites yet another study
20 published by an international, non-governmental organization, Reporters Without
21 Borders, which revealed that supporters of the president have been using “call centre
22 hubs” in the country to disseminate “fake or maliciously edited content and fake
23 memes”, as well as to conduct “targeted harassment campaigns”;⁸

24 WHEREAS, the Duterte administration has appointed several bloggers and
25 social media personalities in various departments and agencies of the government. It
26 is public knowledge that some of these bloggers have been accused of peddling fake

⁵ Cabato, R. & Mahtani, S. (26 July 2019) *Why crafty Internet trolls in the Philippines may be coming to a website near you*. Retrieved from: https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/why-crafty-internet-trolls-in-the-philippines-may-be-coming-to-a-website-near-you/2019/07/25/c5d42ee2-5c53-11e9-98d4-844088d135f2_story.html. Accessed last: 5 May 2020

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Gonzales, G (7 April 2019) Facebook takes down fake account network of Duterte campaign social media manager. Retrieved from: <https://www.rappler.com/technology/news/226932-facebook-takes-down-fake-account-network-duterte-campaign-social-media-manager-march-2019>. Accessed last 5 May 2020.

⁸ Limpot, K. (15 March 2020) *Funds for trolls should be used to provide protective gear for COVID-19 frontliners — VP*. Retrieved from: <https://cnnphilippines.com/news/2020/3/15/vp-robredo-government-funds-for-trolls-protective-gear-frontliners-coronavirus.html>. Accessed last: 5 May 2020

1 news and spreading hateful comments against critics of the administration. Some of
2 whom still maintain such pages as “admins”, thereby leveraging their name and
3 current position in government in order to amplify and lend legitimacy to their claims
4 which may imply serious conflicts of interest;

5 WHEREAS, with the seemingly consistent findings of various studies of state-
6 backed “troll armies” in the Philippines, it is imperative for Congress to verify the
7 integrity of these reports and probe if any appropriated government funds are used to
8 maintain and pay online trolls by various bloggers and social media personalities with
9 their capacity as appointed officials in various government agencies or by the President
10 himself under various discretionary budgets under his office;

11 WHEREAS, manipulation of public opinion through misinformation
12 diminishes the level and quality of our national conversation and is ultimately
13 detrimental to our democracy;

14 WHEREAS, in order to protect our democracy, we need citizens with critical
15 thinking rather than those who merely parrot political propaganda;

16 WHEREAS, it is against the interests of our country to fund online trolls who
17 manipulate online discussions on national issues for political ends. These funds are
18 better spent on education, alleviating poverty and improving our healthcare system;

19 **NOW THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED AS IT IS HEREBY**
20 **RESOLVED**, to direct the appropriate Senate Committee to conduct an inquiry, in
21 aid of legislation into the reports of public funds being spent to pay and maintain
22 online trolls to distort and manipulate online information in various social media
23 platforms in order to influence public opinion and political outcomes.

Adopted,


LEILA M. DE LIMA