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

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

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

WHEREAS, in recent years, the Philippines has become a hotbed of political
opportunism and manipulation wherein social media is weaponized to influence
public opinion and political outcomes through the use of deliberate and strategic
disinformation campaigns. This phenomenon was explored in a 12-month study
conducted by researchers in the University of Massachusetts, University of Leeds, and
De La Salle University, entitled, “Architects of Networked Disinformation: Behind the
Scenes of Troll Accounts and Fake News Production in the Philippines”. Published in
2018, the study uncovers the professionalized and hierarchized group of political
operators who design disinformation campaigns, mobilize click armies, and execute
innovative “digital black ops” and “signal scrambling” techniques for any interested
political client. Their report revealed that disinformation architects have become a
crucial and common part of Filipino political campaigns at both national and local levels — employed by many politicians regardless of party and ideology;¹

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

NOW THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED AS IT IS HEREBY
RESOLVED, to direct 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.

Adopted,

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