

EDITORIAL

The Contours of Political Communication: Cases in Southeast Asia

Political communication is defined as “the process by which language and symbols, employed by leaders, media, or citizens, exert intended or unintended effects on the political cognitions, attitudes, or behaviors of individuals or on outcomes that bear on the public policy of a nation, state, or community” (Perloff 2014, 401). Although there is a lot to unpack in this definition, three key dimensions stand out as worthy of elaboration: the process of language and symbol use; the involvement of actors such as leaders, the media, and citizens; and the effects of the process and actors on political attitudes, behaviors, and outcomes.

First, political communication operates and is sustained through discursive practices such as the use of language, symbols, narratives, metaphors, and other instantiations of discourse. Such discursive tools are not only employed by actors for the purpose of communicating messages but also decoded and understood by receivers who make sense of the messages they receive on various platforms. Ultimately, political communication thrives in meaning-making, a process where senders and receivers mutually constitute and exchange roles as they engage in a discourse.

Second, political communication does not exist in a vacuum. There are actors involved in the process of meaning-making: leaders, the media, and citizens. What makes political communication unique is the interplay and overlap of these actors as they impact each other’s spheres in a nonlinear fashion. Leaders or politicians may initially set the agendas which are picked up or amplified by the media and fed to audiences. However, the audiences are not always passive, and the term *citizen* is preferred to connote their more active engagement in the public or political life. Although leaders may set the agendas, it would be too simplistic to assume that they merely influence the media and the audience in an unproblematic, top-down approach. With rapidly advancing technology today, citizens can set the agendas that capture the media’s attention and eventually impact leaders. Regardless of how agendas

are set, political communication understands and unravels the intricate relationships between and among leaders or politicians, the media, and citizens.

Finally, political communication bears certain outcomes whether on an individual or a societal, community level. When messages or discursive processes persuade a citizen to vote for a certain candidate, political communication has had an effect on one's cognition, emotions, or behaviors through persuasion. On the other hand, when a policy is drafted and implemented, it will certainly have a ripple effect, contingent on how effectively the benefits of such a policy is communicated and how competently its provisions are executed. Political communication may arguably have minimal or powerful effects, depending on the variables we examine, and as long as we are cautious to look at the factors and conditions that may moderate and mitigate its effects.

In this issue of the Southeast Asian Media Studies Journal, five articles deal with the varying aspects of political communication outlined above. It would be a mistake to regard one article as only focusing on a single aspect of political communication. As mentioned, the messages, actors, and effects in communicative practices in politics affect each other. Political communication may happen every day, on a micro level, such as when members of a family debate about the best candidate to vote for in an election. The media and social media's influence in such interpersonal interactions is undeniable, for the family members' debate will involve information absorbed from different channels. Political communication may also happen on a macro scale, the most evident example of which is an election where politicians, the media, and citizens relate to one another in complex ways.

Muthukumaran Kanasan's article, *Malaysia's 15th General Election Saga: Crisis and Party Politics in 2022*, is an example of an analysis of political communication that happens on a macro level. Through tracking the events in Malaysia's 15th General Election held on the 19th of November 2022, the author claims that "the recent political crisis in Malaysia witnessed acts of disloyalty within political parties, political self-interest, and character assassination," a finding that may not be unique to Malaysia but also exists and is evident in other countries within Southeast Asia. Kanasan's article argues that race and ethnicity remain significant considerations in the political choices of voters, while concluding that the youth vote and the formation of alliances and coalitions between political parties may impact Malaysian elections in the future.

Moving to the Philippines, the article *Rhetorical Motives of the Marcos Family in Select Media Statements* by Jethro Andrada, Imari Tamayo, and Nique Tarubal also deals with an issue in the contemporary Southeast Asian political scene: the return of the Marcos political dynasty to the presidential palace. Using Kenneth Burke's pentadic analysis, the authors examine the rhetorical motives of the Marcos family through their statements on various media platforms. They argue that "the Marcos political comeback in the Philippines is intimately tied with collective forgetting and historical negationism,"

emphasizing the need to combat disinformation and to instill in collective memory the misdeeds of political actors in the past so the present and future generations may learn from history.

While the first two articles more explicitly center on the roles of political actors and their messaging, the other three articles in this issue focus more on the media and citizens. Andreas Ryan Sanjaya's article, *Trends and Issues in Collaborative Investigative Journalism in Indonesia*, examines collaborative investigative journalism as a method that exposes not only political scandals such as cases of tax evasion and money laundering but also cases of sexual violence on campus. The study promises benefits of using collaborative investigative journalism in the context of declining press freedom and accuracy indices in Southeast Asia. Sanjaya's study is a reminder of the important role of a free press in a democracy, showing that political communication is not only about elections but also about the press and the journalists who safeguard the conduct of political affairs.

The next article in this issue continues with the thread on the role of journalism and the media in political communication. Gabrielle Carissa Marie A. Paras' article, *The Politics of Red-Tagging in Philippine Media: Framing the "Red October" Ouster Plot Controversy*, describes how a government-sponsored press amplified a supposed ouster plot against former Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte (Red October issue). Said ouster plot was allegedly spearheaded by leftist and opposition groups. Through the lens of the second-level agenda-setting by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw, the author recommends the need for critical attention on the frames by government agencies in their news coverage.

The last article by Annie Perez-Gallardo, *Sa Mata ng Agila (In the Eye of the Eagle): Interrogating Newscast Authenticity of a Philippine TV Network*. Using Erving Goffman's framing analysis, the author investigates *Sa Mata ng Agila (In the Eye of the Eagle)*, a flagship program of a church-owned television station, Net 25, in the Philippines. The author concludes that "Net 25's newscast did not exhibit authenticity" and "the negative frame established by the newscast tended to go against the ethics and standards of journalism." The importance of ethical journalism is emphasized especially in a context where disinformation easily spreads, given the rapidly advancing technology and the pervasiveness of media in an information ecosystem.

More than studies conducted by students and/or academics, the collection of articles in this issue are provocations of thought, hopefully prompting the readers to reflect on values that matter: continuity and change in political practices; the role of memory and history in political affairs; and the importance of a free press, ethical and quality journalism, and accuracy and authenticity in the face of disinformation.

We would like to thank all the referees from different Southeast Asian universities for taking the time to review the articles in this issue. We also thank the members of the SEAMSJ editorial board for all their efforts to make this issue happen.

Orville B. Tatcho
Baguio City, Benguet
and
Jose Carlo G. de Pano
Diliman, Quezon City
December 2023

REFERENCE

Perloff, Richard. 2014. *The Dynamics of Political Communication: Media and Politics in a Digital Age*. New York: Routledge.

ABOUT THE EDITORS

ORVILLE B. TATCHO is an associate professor and chair of the Department of Communication, University of the Philippines Baguio. In 2021, he completed his Ph.D. in Communication and Information Sciences from The University of Alabama as a Fulbright scholar. He has published in the areas of presidential debates, televised political advertising, and political rhetoric in the Philippines.

JOSE CARLO G. DE PANO is an associate professor at the University of the Philippines Diliman (UPD) Department of Speech Communication and Theatre Arts. He serves as director of the UPD Information Office. He earned his Ph.D. in Communication and Information Sciences from The University of Alabama through a Fulbright scholarship program. His research interests include persuasion, source credibility, social/interpersonal influence, and compliance gaining and resistance.

✉: obtatcho@up.edu.ph

✉: jgdepano@up.edu.ph