Agonistic Pluralism or Information Cocoons?

The Case of Muslim Separatist Discourses in Philippine Blogs

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Philippine minorities, Democracy, & Internet

- Minority groups within Philippine democracy

- Muslim struggle is historical and has multiple roots
  - Christians 92.6%
  - Superficial power sharing, minoritization within ancestral lands
  - Struggle for the right to self-determination & governance (Bangsamoro)
  - Muslim dominated communities remain poorest and with lowest HDI (UNDP 2007)
  - Armed conflict and diplomacy (peace talks)

- Limits of news and broadcast media for articulation of minorities' claims and issues
  - Anti-Muslim sentiment

- Recent use of online spaces by `Muslim avtivists
  - Internet as an alternative arena for expression of minority claims and building solidarity

Moro Herald

THE BIG EXTRA CHALLENGE →

Search

Is there life for the Peace Process after Arroyo?

Posted on April 3, 2010 by jun

By Maulana Bobby Alonto

As the Armed Forces of the Philippines intensifies its aerial and ground bombardment of Moro communities in Mindanao and starving of Moro refugees with military food blockades to collect the multi-million peso rewards on the heads of MILF commanders Ameril Ombra Kato and Abdurrahman 'Bravo' Macapaar, President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo has been repeatedly announcing to the public the 'new peace strategy' of her regime in confronting the conflict in Mindanao. The President, says her spokesmen, has changed the rules of the game. No longer will she be holding peace talks with armed groups but directly with the communities. Also, any dealings with the MILF shall be in the context of DDR: demobilization, disarmament and reintegration (rehabilitation, as her spokesmen erringly put it).

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Categories

- Bangsamoro
- Blogosphere
- Business and Economy
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RQs

What is the internet's democratic potential for minority groups?

- How do ethno-religious minorities articulate their claims in the online space and what characterizes their online interaction with others?

- To what extent is the character of online discourse on religious minority issues shaped by religious divides, and how are religious divides and minority identities replicated or renegotiated in online discussions?
  - analysis of power & religious difference playing out in the discourse

Agonistic Pluralism (Mouffe)

- Vision of democracy with multicultural emphasis
- It is through a continuous struggle of conflicting views through which democracy can be achieved: Ongoing confrontation, mutual reflection, and absence of consensus is the marker of deepening and vibrant democracy
- Expands the site of the 'political' : What happens online that may seem irrational, chaotic or have no direct impact on politics are often disregarded or not taken seriously
- Internet's democratic relevance lies within informal political processes for engagement in issue-based discourse (Dahlgren, Dahlberg);
- But will the online sphere reinforce the same structures of offline discussions? (Bimber, Barber, Fraser)

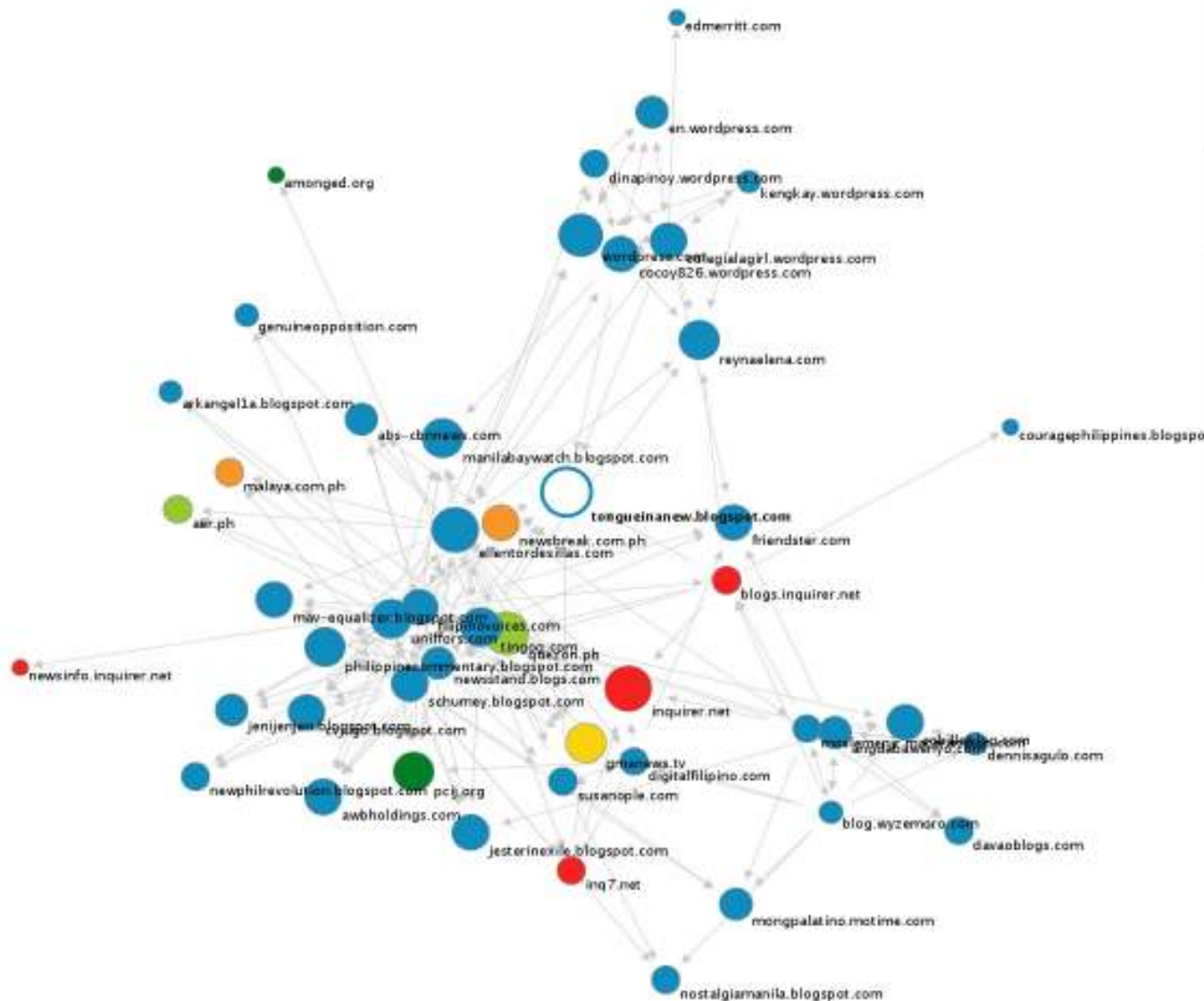# Information Cocooning and Group Polarization (Sunstein)

Online space as a space for minority representation?

- Information Cocooning
  - Sieving information agreeable to one's views
  - People will read and link to blogs that conform to their beliefs

- Group Polarization: informational and social influences will make members of the deliberating group end up in more extreme positions
  - Group polarization is heightened when people have a sense of shared identity and if exposed to those with competing identity
  - "if the group's identity is made especially salient, the in-group norms are likely to become more extreme'
  - Can lead to extremism, with potentially harmful results! (p. 188)

*These can limit the relevance of online spaces for democracy

Methods

- **Finding blog threads**
  - Search of key terms via google/blogger & Issue Crawler
- **Criteria for selecting blog threads**
  - Must discuss Muslim separatist issue (August 2008-Jan 2009-MOA-BJE period)
  - Must have at least 3 comments from 3 different bloggers
  - Must not be organisational/news websites
  - 20 blog threads and over 200 messages
- **Analysis**
  - Thematic textual analysis / close reading of text (online conversation); 'method of instances' (Denzin)
    - Method to examine the features and structures of online discussions and has been used in the investigation of the social distribution of power, <u>specifically</u> <u>in online conversations</u> (Psthas, 1995; Denzin 1998, Noelle-Ignacio, 2000).

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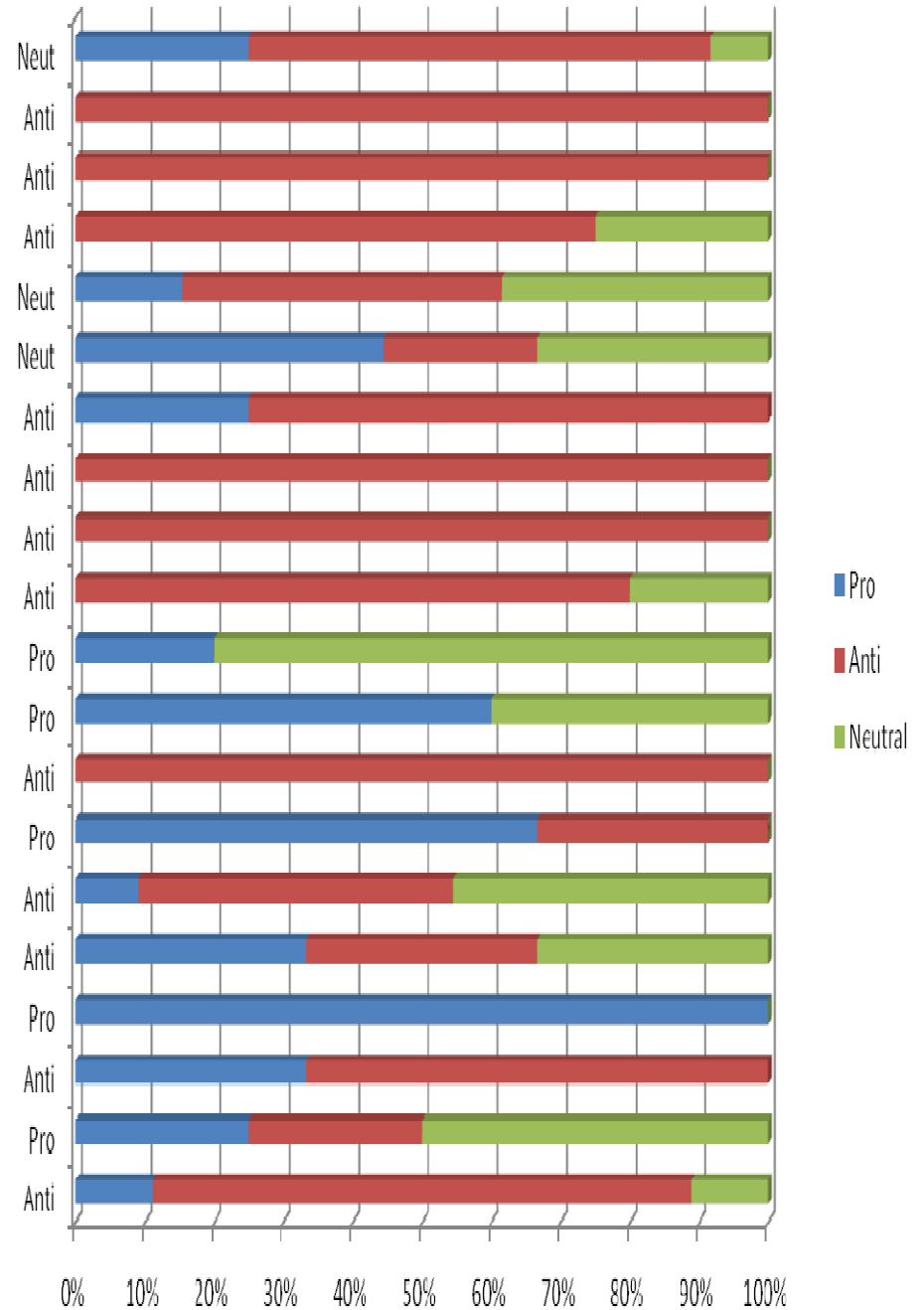mongpalatino.motime.com

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Findings and Discussion: A. What is the character of online discussions?

1. Who were blogging?
    – Most of those who can be identified are non-Muslims; fewer Muslim women
    – Diversity of occupation; Mostly educated and blog generally in English & Taglish
    – Muslim blogs have lower participation (many had to be removed from the list due to zero comments)
        • Unequal access to material means of participation
    – But Muslim groups are developing online space for representation of issues & organizing but not as an active space for deliberation amongst them

2. Polarization and cocooning

- Common pattern of bloggers of the same viewpoints flocking together within a thread

- In 7 of 20 blog threads, 100% of bloggers' opinions are totally on same boat!

- And in many threads, strong opinions are mixed with only neutral posts or questions

- Those who take unpopular positions (i.e. Christians supporting separatism or Muslims against separatism) are often discredited as fakes!

But reciprocity and reflexivity can be rethought across blogs

- Some would seem to be monologues (not responding directly to the previous posts within a thread), but they attempt to build a dialogue with postings from another blog or thread

- There is an active exchange across threads and blogs; bloggers citing and antagonizing each other across spaces, although not commonly within
  - Reinforced by Filipino culture (?)

- The online space can be specifically targeted, yet publicly available at the same time thus allowing the occasional blurring of cocoons and divides that groups in a multicultural society set

3. Some forms of collective reflection about Islam and Separatist cause

"Are Moros really scary and dangerous? Why do they want to separate from us" (Mary Deoda Gay Remedio, March 6, 2009)

" What if the Bangsa-moro people gets what it wants? How about the ancestral lands of the non-Muslims as well? What will happen to us non-Muslims? These are questions that need to be answered. If the control of Mindanao land will be given to the Bangsamoro nation without consideration of current reality, it will be a problem. You will be instigating civil war if that does happen..Just my 2 cents. (Tim, translated in English, 8 October 2008)

- Instances when non-Muslim bloggers would re-post, cite or link to a blogpost written by a Muslim blogger (generating wider readership and comments on the post)

4. Heterogeneous perspectives among Muslims

- Voices beyond the front liners of the separatist cause

- Women's voices?

5. Issues exchanged across media. Muslim radio newscaster / blogger allows radio listeners to sms their queries about Muslims/Islam/separatist struggle and blogs them

B. How does the ethno-religious divide influence the discourse?

1. Dominance of Hate Speech, Essentialism, and
"Othering"- generalizations undermine heterogeneity of Muslims & causes (e.g.terrorism and Abu Sayyaf)

"But some brothers here can't just live without war—you know, the chance to pull some muscles, tighten some fingers, cool some boiling blood…we can't blame 'em. They're built for that-their race is like that: warlike…" (a suggestion, Sept 7, 2008)

Views, including racist and hate discourses, find an outlet in the Internet (not the type of discussions we would observe in newspapers, TV or radio debates—which are commonly formal and by prominent persons)

-- anonymity, some disconnectedness to subject of hate, no controls on the limits of free speech online–(Cammaerts, 2008)

-*"Why don't we just give the AFP 20 years worth of bombs, nukes and bullets and all the necessary shit to kick these assholes into hell...kill them all in one go... Why talk peace with these assholes, they don't even believe they are Filipinos, their the motherfucking Bangsamoro. This is the Philippines, if you don't like it, get the fuck out. We should either banish them to Malaysia or give them their 40 fucking virgins"*

-- (pao, sept 9, 2008)

2. Global character of online spaces seems to reinforce the hate speech

- The global scare of terrorism drags the ancestral domain discussion to issues of terrorism that reinforce existing orientalist views of the Muslims as "backward" and "violent".

- Global character of the internet allows international actors to participate with or without sufficient understanding of the conflict context; the open and uncontrolled nature of blogs reinforce this

Implications to Theory and Policy?

1. Limits of what is acceptable in a democracy?

THEORY Offers an alternative perspective for understanding what constitutes a "democratic space"– where passionate speech `and ongoing confrontation is critical in politics

-– to what extent is theory tenable when taken to extremes?

"Where and how do we draw the line as a democracy between what is acceptable within a pluralist perspective and what is not?"
(Cammaerts, 2007, p. 570)

- What is the line dividing hate speech and passionate speech?
- As blogosphere discussions are generally ungoverned, the quality and richness of conversation lies with the participants
- The lack of mechanisms to adjudicate difference risks condoning abusive actions that can be disguised as participatory processes
- Agonistic pluralism theory of democracy has Western roots, and when taken in empirical terms and in other societal contexts, its intricacies and limits manifest

- The essentialist, and wounding discourses produced are considered 'real freedom of speech'
  - Expression of personal views & concerns (even fears)
  - Enables different voices that may aid in opinion formation for those with no strong views

- Policy Question: should something be done to set a limit or control to freedom of speech online?
  - Internet now plays an intricate role in current debates re freedom of speech
  - To what extent is free speech tenable and when and to what extent must it be curtailed? But isn't it paradoxical to limit "freedom", esp in an online space?

- Does technoculture undermine control? (Poster, 2007)

Implications to Theory

2. On information cocooning and group polarization

- Individuals of socially or culturally diverse roots deliberate not as equals, but as people with cultural, religious, and political differences that taint their judgment and reasoning
- But within a space, similar opinions tend to converge into cocoons
- Yet, the publicness of the online medium makes the closure seemingly enacted by cocoons to be displaced and destablized by the users
- This offers the possibility and means to exchange opinion across dissenting views – and this could be the contribution of the internet for multiculturalism
- The tech capabilities that enable online spaces to be both one-way and interactive at the same time appears particularly suited for everyday multicultural politics

3. Agonistic pluralism bridging information cocoons:

- Online space as an outlet to express competing views and opinions of groups
  - Issue of representation & who get to blog for whom

- Online discourse represents the large political terrain (which broadcast media often leaves out) lying between agreement, street revolt, and armed conflict
  - May reinforce essentialist discourses and globalizes a formerly local aggression, but it also globalizes the arena for representation of local minority struggles & views

- This makes us rethink the political value online discussions as it may possibly aid in identity expression and opinion formation
  - How do we reconcile free speech when taken to extremes?

Thank you!

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