Public Opinion on the Duterte Administration’s COVID-19 Period through Editorial Cartoons on Facebook

Brian Saludes Bantugan

St. Paul University Manila, Philippines

Abstract

This study explores the images and ideas presented by the editorial cartoons that have appeared in the author’s Facebook timeline during Duterte’s enhanced community quarantine (ECQ). The study analyzed 70 editorial cartoons posted between March 14, 2020, when Duterte declared ECQ in the National Capital Region of the Philippines, and June 22, 2020, a few days before the emergency powers of Duterte expired. This study used (visual-verbal) textual analysis as the research method to surface discourses embedded in the selected editorial cartoons. The editorial cartoons were clustered according to the roles the powerful people play in the images, and the details of each image were compared and contrasted to surface nuances in representation. The 70 editorial cartoons were classified into seven categories: (1) invisible (non-suffering) persons, (2) front liners, (3) privileged homeowners, (4) priority clients, (5) judges, (6) gatekeepers, and (7) dysfunctional public officials. They gravitated towards the tragic realities that call for acts of social justice and equity, and underscore specific contexts that need to be fixed by those in power.

Keywords: public opinion, editorial cartoons, Facebook, Philippines, Duterte, COVID-19

1 All correspondence concerning this paper should be addressed to Brian Bantugan at St. Paul University Manila, 680 Pedro Gil Street, Malate, Manila, Philippines or by e-mail at bbantugan@spumanila.edu.ph.
In the Philippines, COVID-19 brought to the foreground of public opinion contestation over nomenclature related to COVID-19, which has not happened in other countries. The government chose “enhanced community quarantine” or ECQ instead of “lockdown” in its public communication to avoid scaring people; the term “lockdown” was never used even after a month, when selected local government units within Metro Manila decided to impose a non-negotiable “stay-at-home” order after a spike in the number of infections in the previous weeks. Nevertheless, Al Jazeera used “Coronavirus lockdown strikes fear among Manila’s poor” as its headline (Aspinwall, 2020). “Flattening the curve” became a phrase that was debated in the public sphere after the Department of Health (DOH) declared that the Philippines is already “flattening the curve” of the coronavirus spread, to which a mathematician countered “it’s not flattening” (Ranada, 2020, para. 6). Recently, DOH Secretary Francisco Duque III announced that the country is already on its “second wave,” which sparked public uproar (Calleja, 2020). The Office of the President later debunked the DOH claim (Esguerra, 2020). These cases, alongside the government’s double standard in implementing the “physical distancing” and “travel bans” during the ECQ (Baizas, 2020), led to public confusion over quarantine rules (Antonio, 2020) and earlier violent public response to Duterte’s downplaying of COVID-19. All these contribute to a hyper-activated exchange of public opinion on ECQ, which the government, threatening the declaration of martial law, claims is welcome (Kabiling, 2020).

There has been a resurgence of editorial cartoons on Facebook during the ECQ as observed by the author on his Facebook timeline – something that has not happened since Duterte took office. The researcher was particularly attentive to editorial cartoons because he graduated with a specialization in editorial design and from a university known to use editorial cartoons to critique centers of power inside and outside of the university. Editorial cartoons, whether part of a news publication or a personal work uploaded on social media are “intended to make readers think about current political issues” (Ohio State University, 2020, para. 1) and direct public opinion. Through the use of caricatures, stereotypes, symbols, analogies, and humor, editorial cartoons “express a recognizable point-of-view or opinion” (para. 3). In countries ruled by dictators, “editorial cartoons provide a necessary antidote to all the abuses heaped upon (people) by the powerful” (Husband, 2016, p. 1). Thus, editorial cartoons that were so rare on
Facebook before Duterte’s ECQ present a case worth understanding within the context of Duterte’s “new kind of dictatorship” (Syjuco, 2018) during ECQ where his “shoot them dead” (Nortajuddin, 2020, para. 6) and “martial law” (para. 12) threats seem to be the only way to overcome “World War C(OVID-19)” (Villanueva, 2020, para. 16).

Statement of the Problem

This study explores the images and ideas presented by the editorial cartoons that have appeared in the author’s Facebook account during Duterte’s ECQ. While editorial cartoons on Duterte abound on many websites, particularly online news sites, editorial cartoons that circulate and influence public opinion by going viral are found in social media like Facebook. According to the Bradshaw and Howard’s 2019 report, “Facebook remains the most popular Internet platform among governments manipulating public opinion online (Blake, 2019, para. 1) and is believed by 46% of the active users of Consumer Reports to create “an environment that fosters free speech where people can hear and share perspectives on all sides of an issue” (Raymond, 2020, para. 13). The other 44% believe that “Facebook fosters division in society by showing people only certain issue-oriented news items” (Raymond, 2020, para. 12). This study presents the public opinion that editorial cartoons in the author’s social network favor more during Duterte’s ECQ.

Study Framework

The study was guided by the power elite theory, proposed by C. Wright Mills in 1956, who asserted that “the power elite is composed of government, big business, and the military, which together constitute a ruling class that controls society and works for its own interests, not for the interests of the citizenry” (University of Minnesota, 2010, para. 6). Mills’s theory is not without its weaknesses; hence, readers of this paper must recognize that it takes on the position that “the ruling class acts as a unified force in protecting its interests” where, in fact, “corporations sometimes do oppose each other for profits and sometimes even steal secrets from each other, and governments do not always support the ruling class” (University of Minnesota, 2010, para. 11). While the current situation seems to point at the ruling class being a solid block of power, politicians will likely play with kingmakers when they can to remain in power, especially dictators who
tend to desire more power than what they were initially given. That side of the power equation, while interesting and relevant, will not be part of the analysis in this paper.

Methodology

The study analyzed 70 publicly posted editorial cartoons between March 14, 2020, when Duterte declared ECQ in the National Capital Region of the Philippines, and June 22, 2020, when his emergency powers expired. The editorial cartoons that circulated in the Facebook timeline of the author were posted mostly on personal and group Facebook pages of his Facebook friends but originated from sites that were not directly linked to the researcher's personal Facebook account. All editorial cartoons that referred to issues concerning the community quarantine period which were posted by 70 out of the author’s 4,915 Facebook friends and were shown on his timeline during the quarantine period imposed by the Duterte administration were downloaded for analysis. Editorial cartoons not related to the quarantine were not counted and were considered irrelevant to the study. The location of the editorial cartoons downloaded, their date of posting, and the number of emoji responses, shares, and comments were recorded to identify the editorial cartoon that had the most influence on readers of the poster in the author’s network (not in the original post). There was no intent to measure and focus on reactions to the post (they were used as data anchors), regardless of the sentiments that were expressed. There were a total of 70 purposively sampled editorial cartoons downloaded. Only the cartoons that elicited the most responses per representation category surfaced are discussed in this paper in order to focus on the images that were able to stimulate the most reader responses or public opinion. A number of the samples were editorial cartoons published by Filipino news organizations like Rappler.net, Inquirer.net, Manilatoday.net, and Manilatimes.net, and editorial cartoon sites on Facebook like Kapitan Tambay, Cartoons and Philippine Politics, Sat's Ire, and Kikomachine Komix!

This study used (visual-verbal) textual analysis as the research method to surface messages embedded in the selected editorial cartoons, which implicate people in power. Each editorial cartoon was repeatedly read verbally and visually to
determine how the “powerful” are represented as they came together or converged to send a singular message. The powerful is defined in this study as those people who are able to assert power over others, economically, socially, politically, and culturally. Editorial cartoons that depicted the powerful in a similar manner were put together in one cluster. Editorial cartoons that overlapped clusters were noted. After the clustering into distinct and overlapping categories, themes that refer to how the powerful are depicted were generated. That said, the themes were emergent and not pre-determined. For purposes of limited discussion in this paper, the editorial cartoons that elicited the most reactions from Facebook readers in the form of emoji responses of any kind, comments, and shares were isolated and explained with reference to the other editorial cartoons that belonged to their cluster to underscore the theme or category that they represent. The manner of description of each category and those that were highlighted in the context of their capacity to stimulate public response and opinion made use of critical discourse theory.

Through critical discourse analysis, the author attempted to bring to light “the dominant and subordinate discourses on offer in society and... the notions of resistance and appropriation of discourses among various social actors” (Hammersley, 2003, p. 758) by classifying the editorial cartoons according to the common depictions of people in power found in them vis-à-vis the powerless or less powerful in society in the Philippines. Critical discourse analysis asserts that “power, and more specifically the social power of groups or institutions... (lay in their ability) to (more or less) control the acts and minds of (members of) other groups. This ability presupposes a power base of privileged access to scarce social resources, such as force, money, status, fame, knowledge, information, “culture,” or indeed various forms of public discourse and communication (Mayr 2008, in Wodak & Meyer, 2015, p. 469). The editorial cartoons were clustered according to the contexts powerful people are portrayed in the images. For discussion purposes in this paper, the researcher highlighted and showed the editorial cartoons that elicited the greatest number of emoji responses, comments, and/or shares, making this paper a combination of quantitative and qualitative research in terms of data analysis and reflective of popular public opinion and sentiment within and outside his social network circle.
Results

The 70 editorial cartoons were classified into seven categories that relate to the portrayal of powerful people in Philippine society during the community quarantine period covered by President Duterte’s emergency powers. These categories are: (1) invisible (non-suffering) persons, (2) front liners, (3) privileged homeowners, (4) priority clients, (5) judges, (6) gatekeepers, and (7) dysfunctional officials. These categories are discussed starting with categories that had the highest reader responses, expressed as emojis, comments, and/or shares, and ending with those with the category with the lowest in the group. It should be noted that some editorial cartoons fall under more than one category and that some categories overlap, particularly those that relate to public officials (privileged homeowners, priority clients, judges, gatekeepers, and dysfunctional officials). Hence, while the editorial cartoons unique to the last category, dysfunctional officials, have the lowest reader responses among the other categories, the editorial cartoons that transcended one category were not only the most highly responded to by readers but also related to dysfunctional officials.

Invisible (Non-Suffering) Persons

Sixteen editorial cartoons depict dire situations that powerful people are not visibly part of during the period of community quarantine. Four of those initially downloaded could no longer be found a day after the signing of Duterte’s Anti-Terrorism Act. The most viewed and responded to by readers came from the Facebook page of Kapitan Tambay, an illustrator’s page that contained both political and apolitical illustrations. The editorial cartoon in this category that had the most influence (Figure 1) was posted on March 14, 2020 and received 73,000 emoji responses, 1,000 comments, and 88,000 shares. It showed a poor child who was buying the leftover medicine in the drugstore for his sick grandmother who was shown as already dead when he arrived. Neither the salesperson in the store nor the child and his grandmother belong to the powerful class. As this category suggests, powerful people are missing in the cartoons. In contrast, the other cartoons with fewer viewer responses are not as emotionally loaded and moving as the one previously described; however, they also show the powerful as missing from the farms (posted April 6 and May 25, 2020), the sidewalk (posted April 16, 2020), the cemeteries where the victims of extra-judicial killings and
COVID-19 are buried (posted April 30, 2020), the shanty areas (posted April 26, May 23, and June 22, 2020), under the pouring rain (posted June 22, 2020), spaces lacking electricity (posted June 18 and 22, 2020), and in COVID-19 data visualization (posted May 9, 2020). They are also depicted as not subject to the laws they create (posted June 5, 2020), drinking with the common folks with Anti-China sentiments (posted April 26, 2020), or stressed at home fearing COVID-19 infection (posted May 21, 2020). The powerful people are not depicted as suffering from the social impacts of COVID-19, which resonates with the idea presented by the following themes. This theme presents the other side of society not populated by powerful people during the COVID-19 community quarantine period. As the posting dates suggest, the suffering of the non-powerful stretched for months and was an issue that was always relevant to the editorial cartoonists who were communicating to people with whom it resonated.

**Figure 1**

*Powerful people invisible in situations of illness and death experienced by the poor (posted March 14, 2020) on Filipino Kapitan Tambay’s Facebook page*
Front Liners

Three editorial cartoons depict powerful people as front liners – mostly medical professionals. One cartoon (on Iranian Mahnaz Yazdani’s Facebook page posted March 29, 2020) shows them as medical personnel who go beyond their role as they attend to the patients – they wear smileys on the back of their personal protective equipment while working in the patient ward. Another cartoon (from Filipino Kim Martin Guevarra Gallegos posted on his Facebook page on March 21, 2020) depicted them as trying to raise a Philippine flagpole weighed down by a rock labelled “Undisciplined Filipinos.” Figure 2 (by Filipino Jerameel Lu, posted on his Facebook page on March 24, 2020) depicts a front liner being stabbed in the heart by a patient’s elongated nose (reminiscent of Pinocchio) who was lying about his COVID-19 status.

Figure 2

A powerful front liner hurt by a patient who refuses to reveal his COVID-19 status while being attended to (posted March 24, 2020) on Filipino Jerameel Lu’s Facebook page

This last image received 49,000 emojis, 126 comments, and 168,000 shares, more than ten times above what the two other editorial cartoons in this category received. In the three images, persons who have power are depicted as agents of well-being who have to go through difficult situations during the community quarantine period. These images show that there is a positive side to people in power but, like the
poor people, they are at work and not enjoying any privileges which their non-front liner counterparts take advantage of. The upload dates on personal Facebook accounts reveal that public opinion concerning the tragic plight of more well-to-do front liners, insofar as they are employed, not helpless, and hungry, and could perform life-saving tasks, were more prominent during the first two weeks of the community quarantine period in the Philippines. The powerful are perceived more as do-gooders and become victims as a result of their life-saving responsibilities. The following categories indicate that this category is more an exception than the rule for people in power.

**Privileged Homeowners**

Eight editorial cartoons were found depicting people in power as experiencing comfort during the community quarantine period. One cartoon under this category illustrates the comfort of powerful people in the large spaces they occupy (posted March 20, 2020, on DengCoy Miel Facebook page) which is visually compared to a cramped house in the shanties. Two editorial cartoons (from Filipino Mapanikwa’s Facebook page posted on April 1, 2020, and Malaysian Shankar K. Nair III’s Facebook page posted on April 7, 2020) also compared the homeowners’ capacity to buy food and their poor counterparts’ inability to get any. Two weeks after the community quarantine was imposed, the burning issue based on the editorial cartoons was housing and food security, which favors the powerful. Simultaneously, the aspect of online technology access was also an issue that was illustrated in three editorial cartoons (one posted on March 25, 2020, on the Filipino Young Investors Club’s Facebook page, another on April 25, 2020, on Filipino Baldomero Paelmo Bejosano’s Facebook page, and the last posted on June 10, 2020, on the Filipino Booky’s Facebook page), in which more well-to-do persons had more access to the Internet and so were envied by the poor (as illustrated in the first cartoon in this category). The latter two cartoons depicted the diverse experiences of people who have connectivity, particularly, the different needs that are addressed using online technologies and how videoconferencing technology is used by those who have access to it. They put to the foreground the various and diversifying preoccupations and concerns of the well-off in the comfort of their homes and underscored non-survival concerns. These images point to the digital divide which became more apparent because of the limited mobility
of the powerful and the powerless during the community quarantine period.

The group Filipino Dangerous Minds’ Facebook page’s post on April 7, 2020, showed a rich family’s limited mobility as something favoring wildlife since, as after the quarantine was imposed, animals were free to roam outdoor spaces usually occupied by people, which homeowners can only observe from the comfort and confinement of their homes. The Filipino news site Manila Today’s editorial cartoon posted by Filipino Derek Alviola on his personal Facebook page on May 17, 2020, however, showed that the most powerful in society, the politicians especially, were beyond the quarantine rules, and only the powerless were subject to it. Quarantine time at home, hence, was just one of many options for the most powerful who can move around freely and do whatever they please anywhere.

Figure 3.

*Powerful people above the strict quarantine law (posted May 17, 2020) on Filipino news agency Rappler’s Facebook page.*

Figure 3, an editorial cartoon from the Filipino news organization Rappler’s Facebook page posted on May 17, 2020 (two months after the imposition of the
enhanced community quarantine), received 33,000 emoji responses, 2,400 comments, and 560 shares, which makes it the editorial cartoon in this category that affected online readers the most. Titled “Justice is Served”, it showed political personalities rejoicing during the quarantine period. Three of the four personalities were reported to have violated strict quarantine rules and were hardly scolded or penalized after their violations. The fourth personality remains untouched by any penalties despite any of her violations in the past. The editorial cartoons under this category present the idea that the most powerful in society are the least badly affected by quarantine; and if they are affected, they have the comfort of their homes to shield themselves from COVID-19 and wildlife, as well.

**Priority Clients**

Four editorial cartoons related to COVID-19 testing were found depicting politicians as priority testing clients. The one with the most responses, 15,000 emojis, 466 comments, and 31,000 shares, (Figure 4, posted March 22, 2020, on Filipino Tarantandong Kalbo’s Facebook page), depicts a conversation between a front liner and an older adult waiting to be tested; the latter ended up running away out of fear of being tested after a priority client gets in the way to demand attention. A similar cartoon, which particularly identifies the priority client as a public official (posted March 22, 2020, on Filipino Revilo Guiao Casile’s Facebook page), shows a mother and two of her children suffering from COVID-19 symptoms. The third cartoon (posted March 23, 2020, on Filipino Cartoons and Philippine Politics editorial cartoons Facebook page) further identifies these politicians as senators who end up being served before infected front liners. The last cartoon shows a conversation between two devils in hell preparing the boiling ocean of blood for testing VIPs (posted March 24, 2020, on the Filipino Kikomachine Komix!’s Facebook page). All four cartoons show the powerful as people who demand and, consequently, receive preferential treatment when the lives of those who deserve testing are on the line.
A very important person demanding preferential treatment at the expense of a senior citizen who is about to receive medical treatment (posted March 22) on Filipino Tarantandong Kalbo’s Facebook page

Judges

There are 25 editorial cartoons that relate directly with powerful people judging over persons, groups, and data, five of which disappeared on Facebook after the signing of the Anti-Terrorism Act. Those already-removed cartoons showed vulnerable Filipinos as bowling pins subject to the judgment and action of a powerful bowler (posted June 1, 2020), deserving of arrest on mere suspicion (posted June 5, 2020), passive consumers of political stories on television (posted June 17, 2020), taking advantage and undeserving of the social amelioration program (posted May 6, 2020), and insatiable complainers (posted May 27, 2020). The cartoon that had the
most responses from readers among the other editorial cartoons that stayed online was posted in the Filipino Kapitan Tambay editorial cartoon Facebook page on June 12, 2020. It had 7,700 emoji responses, 506 comments, and 9,600 shares. The cartoon (Figure 5) depicts protesters lined up arm-to-arm confronting someone who looks like China’s Xi Jinping, a global power. Jinping states in the cartoon that he has decided to control only one powerful man in the Philippines – President Duterte (cast in shadow while on stage).

Other cartoons in this category that were classified in the previous and later categories included cartoons that judged a poor person as “stubborn” or “hard-headed”; a Filipino farmer as “lazy” (posted April 6, 2020, on Filipino Modernong Pepe’s Facebook page); all Filipino non-front liners “undisciplined” (posted March 21, 2020, on Filipino Kim Martin Guevarra Gallego’s Facebook page and April 22 on Inquirer.net); a poor Filipino front liner as “uneducated” (posted April 7, 2020, on Filipino Billy Candelaria’s Facebook page); Filipinos unrelated to government officials as “unqualified for financial aid” (posted May 3, 2020, on the Filipino Vlogger Guard Page’s Facebook page and May 7, 2020, on the Filipino Samahang Ilocano UAE’s Facebook page); and all Filipino non-government officials as “deserving of a lockdown” (posted May 17, 2020, on Filipino Derek Alviola’s Facebook page).

The remaining cartoons featured President Duterte as a judge of Filipinos, individuals, communities or groups, and corporations, and powerful people making judgments over other powerful people and government data. Editorial cartoons showing the president depict him as judging all Filipinos as disposable, persons that can be subjected to a gladiator-like fight to the death over limited resources (posted April 13, 2020, on Filipino PRISM Philippines’ Facebook page), public execution by hanging via the Anti-Terrorism Act (posted June 2, 2020, on the Filipino Millennials PH’s Facebook page), or media restriction (focusing on the ABS-CBN franchise non-renewal by Philippine Congress posted May 5, 2020, on Filipino Sat’s Ire’s Facebook page) - because their lives do not matter (posted on June 4, 2020, on the Filipino Cartoons and Filipino Politics’ Facebook page - reminiscent of the “knee on the neck” police brutality protested by Black Lives Matter in the US). The rest of the remaining cartoons in this category show powerful people making judgments on constitutional
scholars acting like infectious disease experts (posted April 13, 2020, on African McAllan Mapinda’s Facebook page), China judging itself as the hero of the COVID-19 pandemic (posted April 16, 200, on the Filipino The Spratly Islands’ Facebook page), businessmen judging consumers as being more enlightened on COVID-19 (posted May 22, 2020, on the Canadian Good Work Canada’s Facebook page), the Philippines’ Department of Health Secretary making a flawed judgment about COVID-19 data (posted May 23, 2020, on the Filipino We the Public’s Facebook page), and empowered Filipinos judging Duterte’s emergency powers as martial law in disguise (posted March 23, 2020, on Filipino Darren Bendanillo’s Facebook page).

**Figure 5**

*Powerful people above the strict quarantine law (posted May 17, 2020) on Filipino news agency Rappler’s Facebook page.*

The 25 editorial cartoons show less powerful Filipinos being judged by international, national, and local political leaders, revealing layers of subordination and judgment calls made during the community quarantine period that editorial
cartoonists and Facebook users deemed relevant to share and think about. They are also being judged by more educated people, implying that while education could lead to more empathy, instead the community quarantine period brought to the foreground namecalling and undue judgment from intellectuals. These editorial cartoons showed that COVID-19 made oppression of the less powerful in Philippine society more visible, and that government is perceived as taking part in, and not minimizing, unfair judgment that leads to much disservice and oppression during the community quarantine period.

**Gatekeepers**

Eight editorial cartoons comment on the task of gatekeeping acts of powerful people during the community quarantine period. A cartoon showing a group of protesters saying “China: Get Out” posted on April 24, 2020, and identified with Aishwarya Telecom disappeared from Facebook after the signing of the Anti-Terrorism Act. One cartoon, posted on the Filipino A&K Medport’s Facebook page on March 13, 2020, suggests that the power to open the gates for the working class coming from the countryside lies in the hands of a few who benefit from them.

Another, posted in the Filipino Typical Igorot Guy’s Facebook page on April 12, 2020, shows the president as a game master pitting the middle class against the poor people like a Roman emperor opening the gates of the Coliseum to opposing gladiators. In another cartoon, posted on the Filipino The Spratly Islands’ Facebook page on March 23, 2020, the president is presented as seeking emergency powers (granting him more gatekeeping capacity) after the negative consequences of his initial response to COVID-19 force him to fall on the ground as he is riding a flimsy bicycle. On May 3 and May 6, 2020, images showing the president sustaining diplomatic and trade relations with China (from the Filipino Manila Times website shared on Facebook) and allowing crimes associated with the Philippine Offshore Gaming Operations (POGOS) of China (from the Filipino Manila Today and posted by the Filipino Laban ng Pilipino, Laban sa Baliw na Pangulo’s Facebook page), respectively, were posted. In both cartoons, the president is shown as someone who keeps the gate unconditionally open to China.
Figure 6

The president opening the gates of the country to POGOs and closing the gates of ABS-CBN (posted May 5, 2020) on Filipino Sat’s Ire’s Facebook page

![Image of a cartoon showing a monkey opening gates labeled "POGOS" and closing gates labeled "ABS-CBN".]

Figure 7

A non-poor friend asserting power over her poor peer by insisting that she should stay indoors in compliance with orders of higher authorities (posted March 18, 2020) in Filipino Gwen Gutierrez’s Facebook page

![Image of a comic strip showing a conversation between two characters about staying indoors. The left character says, "Ang tigas naman ng ulo mo eh. Diba sabi nga bawal ang lumabas?" and the right character says, "Wala akong pera! Hindi ako puwedeng tumigil sa trabaho dahil wala kaming kakainin!!"

The second panel shows the left character saying, "Alin ba dun ang hindi niyo maintindihan? Mahirap maging mahirap." and the right character responding, "KALBO".]
Two editorial cartoons that received the most emoji responses, totalling 3,900 (posted on Filipino Gwen Gutierrez’s Facebook page on March 18, 2020), and the most number of shares at 1,400 (posted on Filipino Sat’s Ire’s Facebook page on May 5, 2020), are presented in Figure 6 and 7, respectively. Figure 7 underscores gatekeeping through peer pressure by the non-poor peer – showing discrimination against the poor. Figure 6 highlights gatekeeping by the president who favors Chinese business over a large media corporation in the country – showing marginalization of the politically unfavored.

**Dysfunctional Public Officials**

Editorial cartoons implicating public officials in very unsatisfactory scenarios are found in five of the six previous categories (all except the Front Liners category). In the category “Invisible (Non-Suffering) Persons,” public officials are still implicated in the conversation of bystanders (posted April 26 on Filipino Kapitan Tambay’s editorial cartoons Facebook page) about China’s takeover. In the category “Privileged Homeowners,” the editorial cartoon receiving the most responses (Figure 3) shows politicians as a group of citizens not subject to or bound by the rules of community quarantine, specifically, or the laws the land, in general. As such, they fail to rule by example. In the category “Priority Clients,” the public officials take the service that is due to less powerful people who might be infected with COVID-19 (Figure 4). In such a case, they deprive regular people of urgent medical services that might save their lives. In the category “Judges,” the president of the Philippines acts as judge over ordinary citizens at the service of China’s highest leader (Figure 5). In short, the highest public official rules by sacrificing the country’s sovereignty and serving a foreign power, instead of Filipinos who entrusted to him so much power. In the category “Gatekeepers,” the president grants a Chinese business operation beleaguered with criminal activity unconditional support instead of a media institution that has served the country since the advent of broadcasting (Figure 6). The highest public official, then, is a gatekeeper at the mercy of a foreign power.

All the other nine editorial cartoons found solely under this category, foreground the image of the corrupt (posted April 1, 2020, on Filipino Eh Shared Post Mo Lang’s Facebook page), irresponsible and finger-pointing (posted May 8, 2020, on Filipino Phon’s Facebook page), missing-in-action (posted March 24, 2020, on the
Filipino Kikomachine Komix!’s Facebook page) or late-responding (posted June 21, 2020, on Filipino Michael De Guia Estrada’s Facebook page), habitually lying (posted April 7, 2020, on the Filipino news agency Manila Today’s Facebook page and another posted on April 27, 2020, on Filipino The Spratly Islands’ Facebook page), and debt-hungry (posted June 8, 2020, on Filipino James Solo Palispis’ Facebook page) public officials with special accommodations in hell (posted March 24, 2020, on Filipino Kikomachine Komix!’s Facebook page). The editorial cartoon from the Filipino news organization Manila Today depicting President Duterte as a habitual liar (Figure 8) received the most responses among the cartoons uniquely belonging under this category, 2,400 emojis, 633 comments, and 3,000 shares.

This category implies that the worst in public officials surfaced during the community quarantine period and did not escape the eyes of editorial cartoonists. A cartoon that shows a man trying to help someone trapped in a pit but who has no real intentions of saving the latter (posted April 27, 2020, on Motivational and Biblical Quotes’ Facebook page) suggests the act of pretense and lack of genuine concern for the welfare of people that have become the norm among public officials during the period of community quarantine.

Figure 8

The habitually lying most powerful person in the Philippines (posted April 7, 2020) on the Filipino news agency Manila Today’s Facebook page
Discussion

The 70 editorial cartoons point to images that draw the public’s attention and opinion to the suffering of the powerless during the community quarantine period as the powerful sectors fail to address the need of the powerless due to actions betraying the public trust. The poor, not having the luxury of a comfortable home and secure livelihood, put themselves at risk of infection by being outdoors more and being judged as incapable of complying with quarantine rules. As such, they become politically, economically, socially, and legally marginalized by the very people they expect will help them. This marginalization emerges in a situation where people with power, mostly government officials, show a sense of entitlement, lack of moral judgment, unethical gatekeeping, and dysfunctionality in public office.

The editorial cartoons that had the most reactions from readers, essentially eliciting the most number of narrative and symbolic opinions from the public, were mostly responding to dysfunctional public officials who did not share the plight of the economically poor and socially marginalized. This suggests that, despite the migration of editorial cartoons from print to social media spaces, they continue to function as an opinion-oriented medium like their print predecessors. The themes discussed show that they remain politically charged and their resonance with Facebook readers suggests activation of basic background knowledge of the public on the focal issue among netizens (Knieper, 2007). Hence, they express points of view or opinions familiar to their readers, and the public at large (Ohio State University, 2020). The findings show that public opinion in this context is stimulated by assertions of editorial cartoons that are related to “spatialities of power and governance” (Dodds, 2010, p. 113). This affirms that editorial cartoons online, like in newspapers, can be used to “reorient and shape public opinion through recurrent depictions mirroring current socio-political issues at a given period” (Sani et al., 2012, p. 156).

The editorial cartoons, overall, continue to critique disparities in power, even in the time of COVID-19 when the already powerless are rendered even more powerless due to lack of mobility, resources, options, and support from the government. The categories indicate that while powerful people also find themselves in positive role model positions being front liners in hospitals, and editorial cartoons can also show
positive or less critical images, political cartoons remain a critical force not just in society, in general, but also on social media, in particular. The editorial cartoons gravitated toward the tragic realities that call for acts of social justice and equity, and underscore specific contexts that need fixing by those in power but have remained unattended despite the situation being a matter of life or death.

In the time of community quarantine in the Philippines, a situation where the government must act more effectively to save lives, the 70 editorial cartoons draw public opinion towards a state that has become more anti-poor and the structures of power that have only intensified oppression and negligence. The editorial cartoons have shown that more than the health threats posed by COVID-19, the greater threat to social security are those in power – the rich. The rich people have become even more detached from the lives of the poor during the pandemic by complying and not complying with quarantine rules, and even more so in non-compliance, and the state, composed of officials who care very little about the most vulnerable and at-risk populations. The front liners, while the sole role models found in the editorial cartoons, have very little to do to uplift the non-medical conditions of those whose lives were ruined by the pandemic and the powerful and unjust Filipinos. In the editorial cartoons, front liners are heroes trapped in a bubble, dealing only with one aspect of human life – physical health – which has very little to do with the rest of people’s lives.

The study recommends in future studies that the quality of the public opinion elicited by the selected editorial cartoons in the form of emojis, shares, and comments be studied in detail to see how they relate to specific narratives and messages used in the editorial cartoons. It is also recommended that there be a comparison between the editorial cartoons used by mainstream and alternative media to understand how editorial cartoon content varies according to their relationship to popular media. Finally, it is suggested that editorial cartoons affiliated with the Duterte administration be analyzed as well to understand the manner they represent the powerful during the same period, if the said editorial cartoons can still be found in its original post site.
References


**Biographical Notes**

**Brian Saludes Bantugan,** PhD is the Director of the Center for Research, Innovation, and Development of St. Paul University Manila. His research interests include topics related to culture, gender, migration, media, innovation, and technology. He has presented his papers in numerous international organizations since 2007 and has four books published based on his research projects on gender and migration.

He can be reached at St. Paul University Manila, 680 Pedro Gil Street, Malate, Manila, Philippines or by e-mail at bbantugan@spumanila.edu.ph.

Date of Submission: 2020-06-28
Date of the Review Result: 2020-08-01
Date of the Decision: 2020-10-16