

Million People March Against Pork Barrel: From Potentiality to Actuality

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ABSTRACT

In this essay, I endeavor to ask how virtual reality becomes a public space for advocacies and a venue for crowd mobilization in the Philippines. I particularly analyze the Million People March (MPM) against pork barrel, which happened on August 26, 2013 at Luneta Park in Manila. I also discuss how micro-blogging sites (facebook and twitter) on the cyberspace stirred up the event even before becoming a physical and material event. I try to use the concepts of public sphere introduced by Jurgen Habermas (1989) and as expanded by Lincoln Dahlberg (2007) as cyberpublic, and as virtuality by Hayles and Deleuze (as quoted in A. de Souza e Silva & Sutko, 2011). I also discuss the limitations and constraints to the participative and democratic potentials of blogosphere as explained by Cammaerst (2008).

Keywords: Million People March, virtuality, actuality, blogosphere, public space, cyberpublic

Introduction

The interrelationship of media, politics and the Internet had been a major topic of research in the last two decades (Kenski and Stroud, 2006; Chadwick, 2012; Michaelsen, 2011). The trend seems to be gearing towards the utilization of the Internet media specifically the social networking sites like facebook, twitter, and the blogosphere for political and cultural intensions (Cammaerts, 2008). It is in this regard that I was incited to explore a specific event in Philippine politics where Internet technology, specifically blogs and micro-blogging sites, played a vital role in putting together the Million People March Against Pork Barrel, which heretofore will be referred to as MPM for brevity.

I endeavor to ask how virtual reality becomes a public space for advocacies, which call for crowd mobilization in the Philippines. I particularly analyze a specific event in the country's recent history, which is the MPM. I also ask how micro-blogging sites (facebook and twitter) on the cyberspace fired up the event even before becoming a physical and

material event at Luneta Park, Manila on August 26, 2013. I try to use the concepts of public sphere introduced by Jürgen Habermas (1989) and as expanded by Lincoln Dahlberg (2007) as cyberpublic, and as virtuality by Hayles and Deleuze. I also discuss the limitations and constraints to the participative and democratic potentials of blogosphere as explained by Cammaerts (2008).

Historical Overview

The MPM was the first of what was expected to be a series of protests against the Philippine Congressional Pork Barrel called PDAF. It started when Philippine Daily Inquirer (PDI) exposed the pork barrel scam in its issue dated July 12, 2013 identifying Janet Napoles as the mastermind of the scam and allegedly in conspiracy with several lawmakers including Senators and some Congressmen (Carvajal, 2013). The six-part exposé drew the attention and curiosity of the Filipino people, which thereby facilitated a widespread airing of sentiments and disgust over the issue through micro-blogging sites such as but not limited to Facebook and Twitter.

Ito Rapadas, a musician and artist, was the first to coin Million People March in his Facebook post which says:

What we need is a Million People March by struggling Filipino taxpayers- a day of protest by the silent majority that would demand all politicians and government officials (whatever the political stripes, color they may carry) to stop pocketing our taxes borne out from our hard work by means of these pork barrel scams and other creative criminal acts (Rapadas, 2013).

Ito Rapadas' post created a buzz among netizens which motivated other artists like Bernardo Bernardo and Ariel Pedrigal to create a Facebook Page entitled Abolish Pork Barrel (Lapena, 2013). Peachy Rallonza-Bretana was the first to call for action and actual protest by reposting Ito Rapadas' status announcing a specific date and venue for the protest. She said that the event is going to happen on August 26, 2013, Luneta Park, Manila. She invited every Filipino citizen who shares the same sentiment to come and voice out his or her protests in the said venue on said date (Lapena, 2013).

Hence, the MPM Against Pork Barrel was put together in cyberspace even before it finally ended up as a congregation of individuals yearning to put an end to the Pork Barrel System of Philippine Congress at Luneta Park, Manila on August 26, 2013. This is a clear demonstration of how advocacies in cyberspace could translate into real and physical crowd mobilization. This is a testament of a virtual reality becoming a physical political engagement.

Cyberpublic as a Public Sphere

Jurgen Habermas (1989) explicitly defined public sphere as a sphere of private people who come together as public and as such challenge and engage public authorities on a debate concerning regulations on “privatized but publicly relevant sphere of commodity exchange and social labor” (p27), which are relevant generally to economic and social relations. By extension however, public sphere, as conceived by Habermas, becomes synonymous with anything that has to do with public discourse involving civil societies or a group of private individuals or associations that intend to critically address important issues in governments, authorities and systems. The discourse may either result into affirmation or negation of the existing status quo.

In the discussion of Habermas, rational and critical thinking of the private individuals play an important part (Fraser, 1990) and as in the words of Dalhberg (2007), the “public sphere is constituted by open, reasoned and reflexive communication” (p828). Public sphere does not require a tangible space where the discourse and communication occur. In fact, the public sphere does not refer to any material sphere but it is something that is virtual or imaginary (Soules, 2007).

This imaginary nature of the public sphere caught the attention of scholars like Lincoln Dahlberg (2007) who called it as cyberpublic as he applied it in the era of internet technology; and Hayles and Deleuze (as quoted in A. de Souza & Sutko, 2011) who termed it as virtuality.

Dalhberg (2007) believes that the discourse in cyberpublic must not only emphasize the agreements of like-minded groups but should rather highlight a legitimate deliberation in order to strengthen the democratic and participatory process. The cyberpublic must also be studied in relation to power relations and dominant opinion offline (Dalhberg, 2007). In other

words, the discourse in cyberpublic as it is a public sphere must also be subjected to the same yardstick that the latter is measured and studied.

In the case of Hayles and Deleuze (as quoted in A. de Souza & Sutko, 2011), the common term used in web technology is virtuality became philosophical and sociological when it assumes an Aristotlean meaning. Hayles and Deleuze stressed that there is a link between the material and the information patterns and systems.

MPM, Cyberpublic and the Concept of the Virtual

The facebook status post of Ito Rapadas is just one of the many posts that flooded the networking site condemning what I considered to be the biggest scam to ever hit Congress both the Senate and the House. The mounting sentiments of the netizens on cyberspace could no longer be contained to remain on the virtual realm. And hence, after more than a month of public deliberation on cyberspace (blogsites, microblogs, etc), an agreement was finally arrived at—to translate the discourse into something actual. This is where Jurgen Habermas' concept of public space as expanded by Lincoln Dahlberg (2007) as cyberpublic could be best applied. The cyberspace has become a public space for the netizens to debate, deliberate, and to come to an agreement and call for action (Cammaerts, 2008).

This MPM event also manifested the correctness of Hayles (In de Souza e Silva & Sutko, 2011) concept of virtuality. Hayles (In de Souza & Sutko, 2011) argues that there is a link between material objects (which I think even material events are included in this claim) and information patterns abounding in cyberspace. This is demonstrated by the information generated by online blogsites, microblogging status and posts that cultivated much disgust and hatred towards the pork barrel issue which I think easily facilitated a physical call for protest and/or physical protest itself.

Hayles (In de Souza e Silva & Sutko, 2011) is correct in arguing that there is interdependency between the material and the virtual. The MPM event, which actually occurred in 2013 is entirely connected with the information generated by blogs and micro blogs over the virtual realm or cyberspace about the pork barrel issue. The event would not have occurred if it were not to the mounting sentiments on the cyberspace.

This is how Deleuze would look at it. He argues “that the process of the virtual is its actualization. The realization of a possible action eliminates its state of possibility, so the real resembles the possible, but there is no similarity between the actual and the virtual” (As Quoted by de Souza, 2011, p. 39-40). Meaning to say when the virtual like those information and various posts about the pork barrel issue and calls for action as generated in cyberspace, and when it becomes actual like MPM, it already eliminates its state of possibility because it has already transcended that state. It is already in its actuality state.

Hence, following the logic of Deleuze as he expanded Aristotle: the actual MPM is entirely not similar with the Abolish Pork Barrel Call on virtual reality. This is because the actual MPM is the actuality of the virtual call. Simply put, when the virtual becomes actual, it transcends its possibility and becomes another state. The metaphysics of it is simple, the virtual reality of the call to abolish pork is not eliminated; what is eliminated is just the state of its possibility to become actual.

Constraints and Limitations to Democratic and Participative Potentials of Blogosphere

The MPM claims and appears to be free, democratic and open participation but I think otherwise. MPM is not wholly democratic because the discourse that happened on cyberspace or cyberpublic is not entirely democratic and free. When MPM was conceptualized, debated and deliberated in cyberspace, there was a clear direction—that is to put a stop to the corruption being perpetrated by those government officials particularly the members of Congress. This means that the direction was already pre-determined even before it was rationally deliberated in cyberspace. If it was wholly democratic then even the end and ultimate objective of the call should be democratically discussed and debated in the public sphere (cyberpublic). In my mind, this never happened. This is where the constraints and limitations to the democratic and participative potentials of blogosphere and cyberspace as observed by Cammaerst (2008) come into play. According to Cammaerst (2008), the participative and democratic potentials of blogosphere are limited by the following: colonization by the market; censorship by states, organizations and industries; appropriation by political (and cultural) elites; social control by citizens; and anti-democratic voices.

Cammaerst (2008) observed that there is what we call social control by individual bloggers. It is usually used to intentionally hurl negative comments at another blogger, which, successful or unsuccessful, could humiliate and intimidate the blogger being maligned. This situation, according to him, could render the collapse of participation. I prefer to expand my interpretation of Cammaerst argument by including intentionally designed purpose/objective, which was brought to the public space such as the cyberspace, not to be debated over and deliberated but for the purpose of imposing the predetermined design to the participants of the discourse. This means that under the guise of democratic participation, the bloggers such as those who started the call for the MPM in cyberspace, constrained the democratic potential of the cyberspace by imposing, albeit indirectly, their pre-determined design for MPM.

Finally, not all who arrived at Luneta for the MPM that day participated in the discourse before going there. Some were only drawn to the crowd without any knowledge on the issue of pork barrel. Various intensions were also present. There are those who participated in the mobilization for monetary gains. Examples of these would be those entrepreneurs who anticipated influx of crowd in Luneta came prepared with their merchandises with designs and inscriptions condemning pork barrel such as T-shirts and pins. These merchandises were sold like hotcakes to those who are part of the crowd. Others came to cover the event like reporters, media practitioners, etc. Some came just to observe.

CONCLUSION

In the essay above, I was able to prove that the MPM started on virtual reality but transcended its virtuality and became an actuality—following the logic and metaphysics of Aristotle and his followers. In other words, MPM did not remain in its original state as cyber activism. It crossed the realm of the real, as MPM found its way towards a concrete activism with, perhaps, concrete effects. It should be highlighted that as to whether the actual mobilization at Luneta brought about more impact than the virtual or otherwise is something that the paper did not intend to explore.

The netizens brought their sentiments and hatred towards the issue of pork barrel before the altar of cyberspace or in the language of Habermas—the public space, where rational, democratic deliberation and debate, agreement and action could be made possible. The sum of these deliberations found its full fruition when the debates started to become a call for action. The call for action seems to have been the confluence of all the discussions against pork barrel.

I argued, however, that the MPM, though it appears to have been democratically deliberated in public space, was not wholly democratic and free because of the pre-designed or pre-determined objective or purpose—that is to stop and abolish the pork barrel which facilitated widespread corruption by government officials.

Finally, I would like to suggest to future researchers and scholars who would intend to explore concepts and studies on virtuality, cyberspace politics, mass mobilizations, public sphere and its sociological and philosophical implications to consider focusing on events and activities that are in many respects the same as the MPM. Researchers may also explore MPM, albeit using some other theories, methodologies and tools of analysis in order for that monumental event to be understood more profoundly.

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