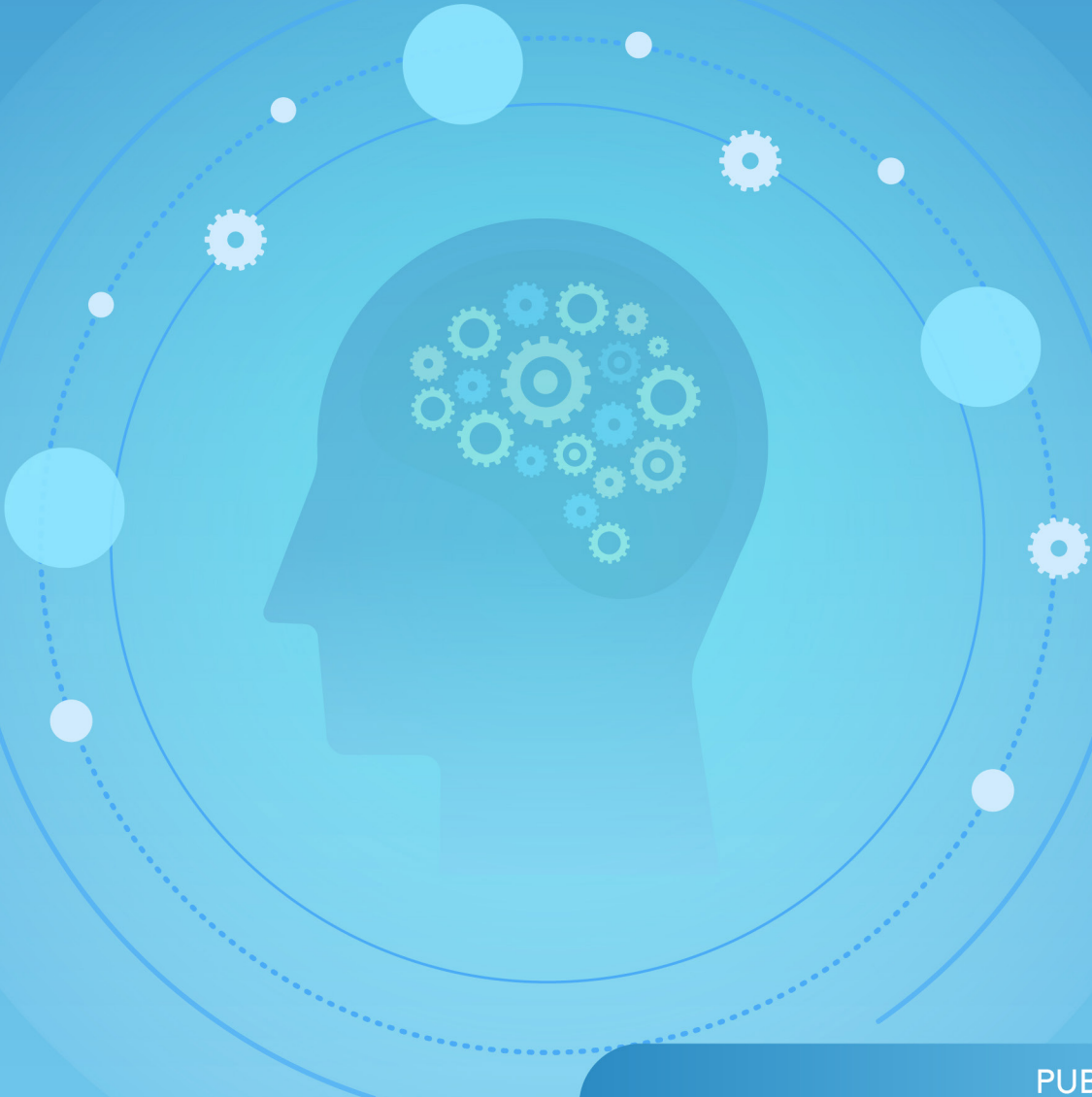




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## Discourses of Power in the 2016 Philippine Presidential Debates and Online Debate Commentaries

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### ABSTRACT

This study examined the discourses of power in the 2016 Philippine Presidential Debates and online debate commentaries. It specifically used Foucault's Power/Knowledge Analytic to analyze the discourses of power in the 2016 Philippine Presidential Debates and online debate commentaries. In examining the discourses of power, the "space" given to the co-agents of discourse was analyzed. Specifically, "space" was analyzed by examining the opportunity given to voices of the aforementioned co-agents of discourse, the processes and struggles undergone by them, and the consequences/effects of such "space" given to them in the circulation of knowledge/flow of discourse. The opportunity given to voices of the co-agents of discourse, namely, Duterte and the rest of the candidates (Poe, Santiago, Roxas, and Binay), the media (GMA, ABC-5, and ABSCBN), and prospective voters enabled them to articulate/convey their thoughts, views, and reactions on selected issues and, consequently, undertake the processes and struggles in the debates, which resulted in further discourse and more importantly, dispersion of power or power in itself, and knowledge. Notably, the aforementioned processes and struggles appeared to be the transformative and productive aspect of the study's framework as these promote further discourse, which results in the dispersion of power and knowledge. Undoubtedly, the co-agents of discourse are "vehicles of power", in Foucault's words. These likewise affirm Foucault's argument that "power is a productive force," that it is "dispersed" in society, and that indeed, nobody has the "monopoly of power".

### INTRODUCTION

This study sheds light on/concretizes Michel Foucault's notion of power, which argues that power is a productive force, that it is dispersed throughout society, that power is non-subjective, that when there is power, there is resistance, that discourse results in power, and that power produces discourse as well. In particular, it describes the workings of power in the 2016 Pilipinas Debates as well as in the electorate's commentaries, having examined the "space" given to the co-agents of discourse (namely, the media/debate moderators, the presidential candidates, and prospective voters/debate commenters); the processes they implemented/undertook; as well as the struggles (instances of opposition and strategies they undertook) they had undergone. Thus, it contributes to that body of knowledge examining power, not in the traditional sense (which assumes that power is merely repressive and that certain individuals or institutions have the monopoly of power), but in the sense that power is a productive force and that nobody has the monopoly of power.

As this study provides a more operationalized/concretized notion of power (using Foucault's perspective), it is especially helpful for future researchers examining this concept of power. This study also mirrors the debate moderators' good and bad practices, that is, in the way they implemented the debate processes, as well as how they moderated the debates. Such inputs from this study can thus serve as lessons for the moderators. The study can likewise promote vigilance among the candidates and

prospective voters/debate commenters, specifically on how the debate processes are implemented, in an effort to uphold objectivity. As demonstrated in the results of the study, partiality affects the implementation of the debate processes and violation of the debate processes, in a way, affects the "space" given to the co-agents of discourse, as well as their struggles.

This research specifically aimed to: 1. Describe and critically examine opportunity given to voices of the co-agents of discourse (media, presidential candidates, and electorate/prospective voters/debate commenters) in the 2016 Philippine Presidential Debates; 2. Describe and critically examine the processes and struggles undergone by the aforementioned co-agents of discourse; and 3. Explicate the consequences/effects of power or "space" in the circulation of knowledge/flow of discourse.

### MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study utilized the critical qualitative approach. It is critical as it examined the discourses of power in the 2016 Philippine Presidential Debates and online debate commentaries, which specifically looked into how power operates among the co-agents of discourse, namely the presidential candidates, the media, and the electorate. On this account, Foucault (n.d., cited by Chang, 1988), notes that this is often taken for granted as it is already deeply ingrained in society.

Discourse analysis using Foucault's Power/Knowledge Analytic was used to examine the discourses of power

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in the 2016 Philippine Presidential Debates and online debate commentaries. The Power/Knowledge Analytic (which comes from one of Foucault's works, "Genealogy of Power") postulates that first, power is productive; second, power is multiple; third, power is non-subjective; and fourth, domination and resistance are everywhere (Foucault, 1980; Chang, 1988).

The research instrument, which aimed to examine the discourses of power in the 2016 Philippine Presidential Debates and online debate commentaries, applied the Foucauldian approach to discourse analysis. Specifically, it examined the opportunity given to voices of the co-agents of discourse, the processes they undertook, their struggles, as well as the consequences/effects of such "space" given to the co-agents of discourse in the circulation of knowledge/flow of discourse. The opportunity given to voices of the co-agents of discourse is essentially the voice of the media, presidential candidates, and prospective voters in the debates and debate commentaries. Processes, on the other hand, were examined by looking into the mechanisms of discipline/disciplinary techniques (debate rules and pre-agreed mechanics, such as the candidates' turn-taking, matching-off with the other candidates), implemented by media in the televised debates, as well as the media's gazing/surveillance function; it is assumed that media's implementation of these mechanisms of discipline requires them to perform the gazing function, which demonstrates the media's disciplinary power and this gazing function of the media is what brings about dispersion of power or power itself, as well as knowledge. Struggles were examined by looking into instances of opposition or strategies taken by the co-agents of discourse in an effort to achieve their goal/objective (candidates - instances of opposition: to challenge their opponents, citizens, or government; strategies: to woo prospective voters by clarifying issues, putting their best foot forward/showing off; media - instances of opposition: to challenge or "roast" or "corner" candidates; strategies - to interrogate, to probe/clarify issues, to intrigue; prospective voters/debate commenters - challenge or campaign for candidates; challenge media personalities); it is assumed that as the co-agents of discourse undertake such processes and struggles, they perform the gazing (surveillance/sousveillance) function, as well.

Data were specifically obtained from the coverage of the 2016 Philippine Presidential Debates (composed of three debates, which were conducted in Cagayan de Oro, Cebu, and Pangasinan) and online debate commentaries from the electorate/netizens. For the debate part, data were downloaded from YouTube, specifically from the following online news sites: GMA, ABC-5, and ABS-CBN, where Duterte discourses were examined. As for the debate commentaries from the electorate/netizens, data were also downloaded from the aforementioned online news sites. For the direct quotations used in the study, transcripts of the three debates from GMA News Online and Inquirer.net were especially useful.

The study applied convenience sampling. Specifically, the accessibility of online data relating to the 2016 presidential campaign in the country, its practicality, and the observation that the co-agents of discourse, namely the presidential candidates, media, and prospective voters, were found to be active in the 2016 presidential campaign discourse in the country were the author's reasons for applying such a sampling method.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

It was clear how the media, the candidates, and the electorate/prospective voters/debate commenters took part in the discourse where each seized the opportunity to articulate their thoughts, views, and reactions; where they all took part in the processes implemented in the debates and commentaries; and where they actively strategized and opposed each other. Undoubtedly, the co-agents of discourse are "vehicles of power", in Foucault's words.

### Opportunity Given to Voices of the Co-Agents of Discourse ("Space")

#### The Media's Power

Before the debate proper, the media (through the moderators) articulated the importance of the debates as a democratic exercise and therefore called on the electorate to take part in the discourse and to carefully evaluate the candidates. This is the media's voice, reminding the electorate of its responsibility in this democratic process. The debate moderators' articulation of the debate rules also demonstrates the media's power in terms of "space". Again, this is the media's voice, telling the candidates, "These are the rules, which you need to observe".

More importantly, the debate moderators' adherence to such rules during the debates, where they would remind and call the attention of the candidates to adhere to such rules, also demonstrates the media's voice. It is the media, seizing their "space" in an effort to make the debates productive; in an effort to promote a smooth flow of discourse.

When the media/moderators do the task of "gazing", by pointing out the candidates' weaknesses or by highlighting their weak points; when the media oppose or challenge the candidates they disfavor/despise, or when they strategize for the candidates they favor, this, again, is the media's voice.

When the media would seize this "space" or opportunity to practice partiality, for instance, by giving more "space" to the candidates they favor, or reducing the allotted time for those they disfavored, again, this is the media's power. The media set the rules yet they also break these rules.

#### The Candidates' Power

The presidential candidates are vehicles of power as well. While the media (through the moderators) had demonstrated their power in the three debates as essentially, they were the implementers of this democratic exercise, the power of the candidates was very apparent. Indeed, each candidate seized the "space" given to them

by voicing out their thoughts, views, and whatever they wanted to express in an effort to woo voters. In this case, it is the candidates' voice --- introducing themselves, expressing their thoughts about issues, and boasting about themselves, what they are capable of doing, and what they would do for their motherland and the Filipinos if they became President. It is their voice, telling the electorate, "This is what's going to happen, this is what you will be experiencing, this would be the new Philippines, if you voted for me".

Besides this, the debates were an opportunity for the candidates to "gaze"/look at their opponents, even at the media and the citizens.

When the candidates look at their opponents' weaknesses and try to moralize them/or promote discipline, this is their voice, telling/reminding their opponents to refrain from doing this and that, to avoid certain practices, in an effort to protect the citizens.

Zeroing in on Duterte, he did not merely "gaze" at his opponents as he was also looking at criminals and warning them to reform or else...

Poe was looking at Duterte and was trying to moralize him in terms of how Duterte treats women.

The candidates' power is also evident in the way they challenge their opponents, in the way they strategize, in an effort to "elevate" themselves and persuade voters.

Along this thought, whatever challenges they would get from their opponents, the candidates had that "space", they had the opportunity to respond, rebut, and argue their way out. In this case, this is the candidates' voice, clarifying their stand, explaining the issue and their side: "This is what happened; this is what I have done; this is what I will do".

Also, while the media had shown partiality towards certain candidates, the latter never lost the opportunity to rise up and articulate their views.

While the favored candidates may have obtained more "space", in general, the candidates were able to seize such "space" and use it to their advantage.

While there were instances when the moderators twisted the debate rules for the candidates they favored (by extending the allotted time or by deliberately shifting to another issue) or when the moderators demonstrated partiality by modifying their manner of questioning (asking open-ended questions, instead of asking questions answerable by yes or no; or by asking personal questions, instead of asking issue-based questions), the concerned candidates remained vigilant and exerted effort to respond to the issues.

#### **The Electorate/Prospective Voters/Debate Commenters' Power**

The electorate is likewise a vehicle of power as concretized by their participation in the debates.

This was demonstrated in the electorate's involvement in the questioning of the candidates, as well as in their participation in the discourse (online commentaries during the debates).

While the presidential candidates were the main actors in the debates, and while the media were the implementers of this democratic process, and while both demonstrated their power in the debates, with each seizing their "space" and observing/undertaking the processes, as well as actively undergoing struggles (be either challenging or strategizing), the power of the electorate was very apparent as they, as well, had that voice that the media and the candidates had.

Before the debate proper, the moderators underscored the vital role of the electorate in such democratic exercise. Indeed, the participation of the electorate was highlighted when selected citizens were directly questioning the candidates, which, according to the moderators were the citizens' own questions.

This then is the electorate's voice, expressing their thoughts and asking the candidates issues that were relevant to them. This is the electorate's voice conveying their own issues and asking how the candidates will resolve the issues. It is the electorate laying down the cards, essentially saying, "This is how Filipinos are suffering, especially the less fortunate ones; this is how we had been living. Is there hope for us? What are we expecting from you if you became President?"

In the debate commentaries (online), the power of the electorate is likewise evident in the way they seized their "space" to talk about the candidates they either favored or disfavored. Again, this is the electorate's voice campaigning for the candidates they favored, boasting about their favorable qualities and strategizing to persuade voters. This is the electorate's voice, as well, challenging or opposing the candidates they disfavored. In this case, it is the electorate's voice, highlighting the candidates' unfavorable qualities and essentially trying to put down the candidates.

Additionally, it is the electorate's voice on important issues. It has demonstrated their knowledge on various issues. This also tells us that in this digital age, nothing remains hidden. With the new media, things have become more transparent and the citizens have become more informed on issues and workings of the government. They very well know what government officials have done and failed to do. More than ever, the electorate seized this "space"/opportunity to express themselves.

The fact that there were no rules in terms of what commentaries can be/what cannot be posted, the electorate took such opportunity to freely articulate/express their thoughts and views. This is evident in the unpleasant rhetoric that came out. This is the electorate's voice, "gazing"/looking at the moderators' partiality/prejudices. They actually went to the extent of badmouthing Ms. Luchi Valdes and Ms. Karen Davila. It is also the electorate's voice, looking at other candidates, condemning them for their mistakes or bad practices.

As power is not limited to one co-agent of discourse, as demonstrated by the active involvement of the three co-agents of discourse (the presidential candidates, the media/debate moderators, and prospective voters) in the

debates, as well as in the online commentaries, power then is dispersed. Thus, nobody has the monopoly of power as all co-agents of discourse are empowered in the process. Each co-agent of discourse has its own role to fulfill in such democratic exercise and the opportunity given to voices of the co-agents of discourse, which enabled them to voice out their thoughts and views, which allowed them to implement certain processes, which permitted them to challenge the other co-agents of discourse, as well as use/apply strategies, proves that democracy is alive in the country.

Besides the foregoing, in the author's re-examination of the power of prospective voters, their power was not limited to the consequences of the opportunity given to their voice. Notably, they have that unique power in them as the votes that the candidates clamor for, lie in the hands of these prospective voters. It has to be noted that they are the actually the ones being wooed by the candidates.

### **Processes and Struggles of the Co-Agents of Discourse**

As exemplified in the debates, power is productive and likewise, dispersed. Besides these though, as processes and struggles of the co-agents of discourse are evident in the debates, power is then non-subjective. Indeed, such processes and struggles are regular occurrences in the debates and these do not imply relations among the co-agents of discourse but these (processes and struggles) can be seen as elements of the debates that are crucial in achieving the objectives/goals of each co-agent of discourse. Processes, are, for instance, inherent in the debates as these provide structure and organization to such democratic exercise. Without these, the debates can result in chaos. Thus, the proper implementation of such processes enables the co-agents of discourse to properly use/utilize the opportunity given to them, and, consequently, gives them the chance/opportunity to undertake their struggles, by either challenging the other co-agents of discourse (instances of opposition) or using/applying strategies in an effort to achieve their goals/objectives in the debates. While there were instances in the debates when the co-agents of discourse did not strictly adhere to the processes, in general, such processes were properly implemented/observed, thus, making the debates a productive democratic exercise.

In the author's re-examination of processes and struggles as components of the revised framework of the study, such aspects of the framework are crucial as these proved to be the transformative elements. Notably, it was observed that it is these processes and struggles that make the debates productive as it is in these processes and struggles that the co-agents of discourse are able to undertake their "gazing"/surveillance function which brings forth power and knowledge. This task of gazing is further discussed in latter part of the results (The consequences/effects of power or "space" in the circulation of knowledge/flow of discourse).

Moreover, while the debates demonstrate that all co-

agents of discourse are empowered, apparently, resistance is notable. It can be recalled that Foucault interpreted resistance as a form of struggle. However, he noted that there are other forms of struggle and thus, it should not be limited to anti-authority struggles. In this study, struggles had been defined as instances of opposition and strategies undertaken by the co-agents of discourse to achieve their objectives/goals. In this case, as struggles among the co-agents are inherent in the three debates, with each co-agent of discourse undergoing its own struggles, either by challenging the other co-agents of discourse, or by using/applying strategies to achieve their goals/objectives in the debates, it can therefore be concluded that when there is power, indeed, there is resistance.

Zeroing in on the struggles of the co-agents of discourse, the candidates' power is evident in the way they challenge their opponents, in the way they strategize, in an effort to "elevate" themselves and persuade voters.

Along this thought, whatever challenges they would get from their opponents, the candidates had that "space", they had the opportunity to respond, rebut, and argue their way out. In this case, this is the candidates' voice, clarifying their stand, explain the issue and their side: "This is what happened; this is what I have done; this is what I will do".

As for the media, they would point out the candidates' weaknesses or highlight their weak points; they oppose or challenge the candidates they disfavor/despise, or strategize for the candidates they favor. They would likewise seize the "space" or opportunity to practice partiality, for instance, by giving more "space" to the candidates they favor, or reducing the allotted time for those they disfavored. Indeed, the media set the rules yet they also break these rules.

The electorate, on the other hand, campaigned for the candidates they favored, boasting about their favorable qualities and strategizing to persuade voters. They challenged or opposed the candidates they disfavored. In this case, it is the electorate's voice, highlighting the candidates' unfavorable qualities and essentially trying to put down the candidates.

### **The Consequences/Effects of Power or "Space" in the Circulation of Knowledge/Flow of Discourse**

While the media may have demonstrated their prejudices in the debates, it is important to note that they had a vital role, not only in this democratic exercise but in society, as a whole, being the "watchdogs" of society. And we should, indeed, be grateful to them as they have proven in these debates that they are truly good in what they do. Minus the prejudices that they had shown, it is noteworthy that they did a very good job in capturing the issues (the sensitive ones and even the most controversial issues) that needed to be addressed by the candidates. While some of the media's questions may have been personal and controversial, these had to be tackled, as the position sought out by the candidates was the highest in the country --- the Presidency. Indeed, a good leader

should be capable and competent; a good leader should lead by example; a good leader should be a model that citizens can look up to. And via these debates, the citizens can compare and evaluate the candidates and eventually choose the best that can lead the country. So far, this was the best act of “gazing” that the media did. The fact that they were able to capture the most crucial issues and were able to get the candidates respond to such issues was a job well done. This made the debates more meaningful as the issues were asked for the sake of the people; the citizens. While for the candidates, the debates may be an opportunity to woo voters and win the Presidency, the media were there to do surveillance, ultimately, for the citizens.

Indeed, this opportunity given to the voice of the media, got the ball rolling, not only for the presidential candidates but for the citizens, as well. It got the presidential candidates and citizens talking and through these “talks” (via processes and struggles), not only were they empowered to voice out their thoughts. Via these “talks” or discourse, issues were clarified for the benefit of citizens.

During the debates, while the presidential candidates were seizing the opportunity given to their voices, the citizens likewise seized the same opportunity to take part in the discourse through various means (via direct queries or interaction with the candidates, via social media platforms). While the presidential candidates were actively campaigning or actively participating in the discourse to woo voters, citizens were likewise engaged in their own discourse via social media platforms and it is crucial to note that they likewise undertook their own “gazing” by looking at either their preferred candidates or the ones that they loathed. They were also undertaking their own struggles by either campaigning for their preferred candidates or challenging the candidates they despised.

The debates are then productive, not only because these triggered the proliferation of discourse; not only because the co-agents of discourse are empowered in the process but more importantly, these may have guided and educated prospective voters in making the right choice; in choosing the best candidate for the benefit of the nation. This is essentially, knowledge. And the media are vital in the realization of this important democratic process. While the candidates and citizens were also given the opportunity to voice out their thoughts and views, which likewise resulted in them undertaking their processes and struggles, the media should be given credit for the greater role they assumed as initiators of this democratic exercise. Hence, if we look at all discourses, the media had an even greater task as they were the ones who started these debates; they were the ones who organized and sponsored these debates. Unfortunately, this study did not include the debates’ preparatory phase. Future studies can look into this though to shed light into what transpires before the debates; the “talks”/interactions in the preparatory stage. While all co-agents of discourse may be involved in such phase, it would be good to

examine what power actually does in such “talks”. In fact, this may have something to do with the tactics (breaking a number of debate rules/mechanisms of discipline in the debates, in favor of certain candidates) demonstrated by the debate moderators. Hence, they should not be blamed for such tactics or violations as they were merely representing the sponsors (other media entities, KBP, and COMELEC) of the debates. However, credibility matters in media and some citizens really look up to certain media personalities and consider them as role models. As such, citizens tend to be critical of the media when the latter seem to not act accordingly. With the emergence of the new media, citizens’ “gazing” at what media do, however, is inevitable. Thus, the media could actually consider this as a form of check-and-balance on what they do. In the same manner, citizens’ “gazing” at the candidates (who are leaders of the nation) also protects our democracy as it guards against abuses and excesses of the government. Additionally, the presidential candidates’ gazing at their opponents is part of the picture, which is likewise an act of surveillance, as the candidates were opposing/challenging each other; they were looking at each other’s weaknesses, which was also a check-and-balance act.

The media (though merely representatives of the debate sponsors), however, assumed the greater role of gazing as they were the ones who safeguarded the mechanisms of discipline, which were crucial in the conduct of orderly/organized debates. Essentially, this is the media’s disciplinary power and it is crucial to note how the candidates became docile bodies, silently and automatically submitting to such mechanisms of discipline. Besides this act of gazing in the implementation of such mechanisms of discipline, it was the media, as well who served as debate moderators. While a number of citizens were, at times, given the chance to directly interact with/question the candidates, it was generally the media who acted as moderators. It was generally the media who interacted with/questioned the candidates. And again, in this task of moderating the debates, the media were definitely gazing at the presidential candidates. While this act is covered in the “struggles” aspect of this study’s framework, it is noteworthy that when the media undertake their “struggles”, simultaneously, they perform the act of gazing. While the presidential candidates and citizens also perform this act of gazing as they undertake their “struggles”, it is the media who implements the mechanisms of discipline.

## CONCLUSIONS

### Power as a Productive Force

Power, is, indeed, a productive force as it produces knowledge and, docile bodies.

In the three debates (2016 Philippine Presidential Debates), power, which equates to the “space” given to voices of the co-agents of discourse (namely, the candidates, the media, and the electorate) and the processes and struggles they undertook, promoted discourse among them. Such discourse gave the co-agents of discourse the opportunity

to convey their thoughts, views, and plans, which resulted in a productive democratic exercise.

On the media's part, such power enabled them to carry out/conduct the three debates successfully.

As for the presidential candidates, such power gave them the opportunity to voice out their thoughts, views, plans, as well as challenge their opponents and strategize, which were apparently done to woo voters.

The electorate also seized the "space" given to them by the media. Clearly, the electorate seized such opportunity to voice out their views and thoughts by utilizing the aforementioned "space" on Youtube. Additionally, they used such "space" to campaign for their favored candidates (they either challenged the other candidates or simply strategized for their favored candidates), and even "gazed" at the candidates, by either looking at their positive or negative traits, as well as by attempting to do some "policing"/trying to promote discipline, especially for the candidates whom they did not favor.

With the co-agents of discourse (specifically, the presidential candidates and the electorate) seizing the opportunity to voice out their thoughts and views, as well as undertaking/observing processes, and seizing the opportunity to challenge or strategize to woo voters, it is apparent how they had become docile bodies. Such docility made the debates a productive democratic exercise.

#### **Power is Dispersed throughout Society**

It was clear how the media, the candidates, and the electorate took part in the discourse where each seized the opportunity to articulate their thoughts, views, and reactions; where they all took part in the processes implemented in the debates and commentaries; and where they actively strategized and opposed each other.

#### **Power is Non-Subjective**

As exemplified in the debates, power is productive and likewise, dispersed. Besides these though, as processes and struggles of the co-agents of discourse are evident in the debates, power is then non-subjective.

Indeed, such processes and struggles are regular occurrences in the debates and these do not imply relations among the co-agents of discourse but these (processes and struggles) can be seen as elements of the debates that are crucial in achieving the objectives/goals of each co-agent of discourse.

#### **When There is Power, There is Resistance**

While the debates demonstrate that all co-agents of discourse are empowered, apparently, resistance is notable.

It can be recalled that Foucault interpreted resistance as a form of struggle. However, he noted that there are other forms of struggle and thus, it should not be limited to anti-authority struggles.

In this case, as struggles among the co-agents are inherent in the three debates, with each co-agent of discourse

undergoing its struggles, either by challenging the other co-agents of discourse, or by strategizing, it can therefore be concluded that when there is power, indeed, there is resistance.

#### **Discourse Results in Power, Power Produces Discourse**

Discourse, in the form of debates and online debate commentaries, indeed, results in power as observed/concretized by the "space" given to the co-agents of discourse, namely, Duterte and the rest of the candidates (Poe, Santiago, Roxas, and Binay), the media (GMA, ABC-5, and ABS-CBN), and the electorate; by the "processes" they undertook/observed; and by the struggles they had undergone, both in the debates and commentaries.

The implementation/observance of the "processes" in the debate and commentaries, on the other hand, was crucial in promoting a smooth flow of discourse as well as in articulating their views which promoted discipline either among Filipinos or among the candidates themselves.

"Struggles" were also inherent in the discourse where the vehicles of power/co-agents of discourse either strategized or opposed each other. Such power observed among the co-agents of discourse likewise triggered further discourse. The debates, for instance, triggered the influx of commentaries from the electorate/netizens, which were occasionally shown between breaks by the debate moderators. Numerous comments were likewise documented on YouTube where the debates were live-streamed.

The "space" given to the electorate in the debates where they articulated their views and questioned the candidates also brought forth discourse among the candidates.

On the other hand, the debate moderators' questions and comments triggered discourse among the candidates.

All these occurrences confirm Foucault's argument that discourse results in power and that power produces discourse as well.

#### **Recommendations**

Both the debates and commentaries demonstrate how power operates among the co-agents of discourse, with each co-agent of discourse seizing the opportunity to voice out their thoughts, views, and reactions; undertaking/observing the debate processes; and undergoing the struggles against each other.

However, while such workings of power led to a productive democratic exercise, there were aspects of the debates that were rather inhibiting. Thus, while power is viewed (in Foucault's perspective) as a productive force, it has its "repressive" aspect.

Going back to the debates, the networks and sponsors should have made the debate format more dynamic (not the question-and-answer type) to allow exchanges among the candidates, as more exchanges mean more discourse, which implies a more productive exercise.

The debate moderators (Luchi Valdes and Karen Davila) should have strictly adhered to the debate processes

(debate rules/mechanics) and made the rules clear to promote a smooth flow of discourse and to give equitable “space” to all candidates.

To abate partiality, the moderators should not have been permitted to question the candidates. The candidates themselves should have been the ones to question each other.

While power is, indeed, dispersed in society, as concretized by the “space” given to voices of the co-agents of discourse (the media through the debate moderators, the presidential candidates, and the electorate); the processes they implemented/observed; and the struggles they undertook, each debate was unique and consequently, the co-agents of discourse also had different experiences in terms of the “space” given to them; the processes; and the struggles they undertook.

For the First Debate (First Leg of the 2016 Pilipinas Debates), the candidates and the media/moderators were given the “space” to voice out their views, thoughts, and whatever they wanted to convey to the electorate and to each other, and were actively involved in the debate processes, as well as in their respective struggles. However, it was observed that the electorate was not actively involved in the debates. While they were given “space” to take part in the online discourse, and while their participation in such discourse was evident, they were never involved in the debate processes.

ABS-CBN’s Town Hall format was good as selected citizens were given the opportunity to interact directly with the candidates; were given the chance to directly question the candidates on relevant issues.

GMA should have adopted this format to give more “space” to the electorate, thus giving them the opportunity to actively take part in the debate as a democratic exercise. It would have been more democratic if the electorate was given the chance to actively take part in this democratic process. Additionally, while Soho and Enriquez generally adhered to the debate processes/rules, their partiality was noticeable. Enriquez, for instance, was very “personal” in the way he interrogated Duterte, compared to how he questioned Roxas.

As the moderators are the ones setting the rules, they should be the first ones to uphold such rules, not the first ones to violate/break the rules. Thus, they should avoid being partisan, by sticking to the issues.

For the second debate (Second Leg), while the co-agents of discourse (the moderator, the candidates, and the electorate) were given “space” to articulate and express their views and thoughts, to undergo the debate processes, and to undertake their struggles, the moderator’s partiality was apparent. As such, certain candidates were given more “space” than the other candidates. It was clear, for instance, how Valdes favored Roxas over the other candidates. Again, it was disheartening to witness Valdes being the first co-agent of discourse to break the rules. How then can she expect the candidates to adhere to the debate rules/mechanics when she herself did not abide by these?

It was then not surprising to see Roxas break the rules too as the debate moderator, who had set the rules, violated these herself.

Even before the debate started, Valdes’ partiality was very apparent when she and Binay disclosed about a certain misunderstanding on a certain rule. That is, on the issue of whether or not notes are allowed to be brought to the podium.

It was apparent that Binay was misinformed on the said rule. How could Valdes make this mistake? Additionally, she said she was taking responsibility for such mistake but did not really took responsibility, judging from her inappropriate moves in trying to resolve the issue.

Valdes did not stand by her words as well as she was not firm in the way she implemented such rule as Binay still brought his notes to the podium.

Valdes truly lost her credibility in this debate. It is a must for her to look back on what happened and try to do some reflection to ensure that such occurrence will not be repeated in the future. Moderators should be role models. They should practice what they preach if they expect observance of the rules they set.

Though “space” was given to the electorate, which, consequently gave them the opportunity to undertake their struggles (to oppose or challenge the candidates and the media; to strategize for the candidates they favored), it was clear that they were not given the “space” to take part in the debate processes. Valdes did not even urge them to participate in the online discourse though the electorate’s voice was evident in the commentaries that were documented on YouTube. Notably, the electorate seized this opportunity to express their views and thoughts. However, as the debate is a democratic exercise, they should have been given the opportunity to take part in the debate processes, just like what ABS-CBN did in the third debate. ABC 5 should follow the Town Hall format to give more “space” or voice to the electorate.

For the third debate (Third Leg), while the Town Hall format was implemented, which gave the electorate the “space” to take part in the debate processes, and while this was an ideal debate format, which made such exercise more democratic, apparently, the moderators demonstrated partiality towards certain candidates. Though in general, the candidates were given equitable “space”, there were instances when the moderators exhibited their bias towards certain candidates.

It can be recalled, for instance, that in the Fast Talk Segment, Davila essentially asked Duterte and Binay open-ended questions, instead of close-ended ones, which Davila only applied to the rest of the candidates. Probably, such questions were meant to challenge Duterte and Binay as these involved controversial and difficult issues.

Additionally, there was an instance when Davila gave more “space” to Roxas by specifically giving the latter more talk time. In such case, Davila gave Roxas one minute and thirty seconds while she gave the rest of the candidates merely thirty seconds.

In one instance (match-off between Poe and Duterte), more talk time was likewise given to Poe. There was an instance as well when Davila deliberately shifted to another issue when it was Roxas' turn to be interrogated. In the candidates' Closing Statements, it can also be recalled that during Duterte's slot, there was a 12-second lull where Duterte's speech was not heard. Specifically, this was observed at the start of Duterte's closing statement. Indeed, it is a must for Davila to review the debate, examine the electorate's commentaries, as well as herself, to let her see her weak points as a debate moderator. If she did these deliberately, however, then, it is another story.

While generally, the co-agents of discourse were given "space", were able to implement/observe the debate processes, as well as undertake their respective struggles (by challenging/opposing each other and by strategizing to essentially woo voters), it is crucial to note that the debate moderators' partiality in a way affected the debate processes and consequently, also affected the "space" given to the candidates, as well as their struggles.

Debate moderators should therefore stick to the rules and practice objectivity in order to give the candidates equitable "space" and consequently, allow them to undertake their struggles (to defend themselves, to give them the chance to challenge their opponents, and allow them to rebut). Setting a good example for the candidates will probably help the latter stick to the rules as well.

For future studies, examining the metadecade (or the debate on the debates) would be a crucial aspect to look into. This will hopefully shed light into the processes being undertaken by the co-agents of discourse prior to the conduct of the debates.

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