

# Cutting Across the Waves of the Web: The “Care of the Self” as an Ethical Response to Post-truth Politics in Social Media

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## **Abstract**

Uttering “facts are passé” captures the spirit of post-truth. However, it often leads to addressing facts rather than why they pass off as passé. “Post-truth” was dubbed the 2016 Word of the Year due to its increased usage during the Brexit referendum and the US presidential election in the same year. The issue presses at least twenty-six countries, including the Philippines, as they face widespread disinformation and misinformation. This paper offers an overview of the social media manipulation from Samantha Bradshaw and Philip Howard, and networked disinformation in the Philippines from Jonathan Corpus Ong and Jason Vincent Cabañes. This paper also draws from the definitions of Claire Laybats, Luke Tredinnick, and Kathleen Higgins and investigates Michel

Foucault's insights on *stultitia* and flattery in relation to controlled interactivity and volatile virality. The content of post-truth is enriched by the discussion of the internet medium. Marshall McLuhan's "the medium is the message" and "global village" are used to explore the key shifts and the unanticipated consequences that ensured post-truth's arrival. Lastly, the Hellenistic model of self-care is explored as an ethical response to the post-truth attitude as it addresses *stultitia* and flattery with the exercises of *mathesis* and *askesis*.

**Keywords:** *askesis, care of the self, ethics, fake news, Foucault, mathesis, post-truth, social media, stultitia*

## I. The Advent of Fake News

The bane of fake news defined as "a false story or headline written, published, and designed to look like a real news online"<sup>1</sup> rose to an alarming scale that prodded policymakers, journalists, educators, and civil society organizations to huddle together. They confront a disinformation economy of a strategically-placed supply and a vigorous demand. Propaganda machines are operated by state-funded assembly lines of

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<sup>1</sup> Nick Rochlin, "Fake News: Belief in Post-Truth," *Library Hi Tech* 35, no. 3 (2017): 386–392. <http://www.emeraldinsight.com/doi/abs/10.1108/LHT-03-2017-0062>.

“cyber troops and bots” used for social media manipulation.<sup>2</sup> They are managed by “architects of disinformation” or advertising and PR strategists,<sup>3</sup> who are using a filter bubble social media platform to target netizens who are indifferent to facts.

Solutions have been proposed. Scientists and philosophers are urged to “speak up when scientific findings are ignored by those in power or treated as mere matters of faith.”<sup>4</sup> Nora Martin writes about “digital natives” having the “need to develop critical thinking skills in order to evaluate media content.”<sup>5</sup> Melissa Zimdars came up with a list of websites and website types she calls False, Misleading, Clickbait-y, and/or Satirical ‘News’ Sources.<sup>6</sup> A thrust in information literacy is emphasized by Rochlin in his article “Fake News: Belief in

<sup>2</sup> Samantha Bradshaw and Philip N. Howard, “Troops, Trolls and Troublemakers: A Global Inventory of Social Media Manipulation,” *COMPROM Working Paper Series* 12 (2017). <http://comprop.oii.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/89/2017/07/Troops-Trolls-and-Troublemakers.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> Jonathan Corpus Ong and Jason Vincent Cabañes, “Architects of Networked Disinformation: Behind the Scenes of Troll Accounts and Fake News Production in the Philippines” (Newton Tech4Dev Network, 2019). <http://newtontechfordev.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/ARCHITECTS-OF-NETWORKED-DISINFORMATION-FULL-REPORT.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> Kathleen Higgins, “Post-Truth: A Guide for the Perplexed,” *Nature* 540, no. 9 (November 2016). <https://www.nature.com/news/post-truth-a-guide-for-the-perplexed-1.21054>.

<sup>5</sup> Nora Martin, “Journalism, the Pressures of Verification and Notions of Post-truth in Civil Society,” *Cosmopolitan Civil Societies: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 9, no. 2(2017): 42. <http://epress.lib.uts.edu.au/journals/index.php/mcs/article/view/5476/6102>.

<sup>6</sup> Melissa Zimdars, “False, Misleading, Clickbait-y, and/or Satirical “News” Sources.” Google Document (2016). [https://docs.google.com/document/d/10eA5-mCZLSS4MQY5QGb5ewC3VAL6pLkT53V\\_81ZyitM/preview](https://docs.google.com/document/d/10eA5-mCZLSS4MQY5QGb5ewC3VAL6pLkT53V_81ZyitM/preview).

Post-Truth.”<sup>7</sup> There are also fact-checking organizations like FactCheck.org, American Press Institute, and Politifact that center on US politics while Snopes focuses on urban legends, celebrity rumors, and much more. Tech initiatives like the “meta-level crap-detecting engine in the form of an add-on or app that provides a reliability estimate for the source of any news link”<sup>8</sup> proposed by the University of Nevada’s Hal Berghel are also present. Similarly, the National Union of Journalists in the Philippines and Center for Media Freedom and Responsibility launched Fakeblok. There is also a direct collaboration between media groups and Facebook in their fact-checking system.<sup>9</sup>

In the Philippine context, Jason Vincent Cabañes and Jayeel Cornelio zero in on the role of journalists. They suggest that either mainstream media outlets present supportive and critical perspectives on the Duterte administration side by side or be “clear about their partisan leanings.”<sup>10</sup> In a later and more exhaustive work about networked disinformation, Ong and Cabañes<sup>11</sup> recommended

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<sup>7</sup> Rochlin, “Fake News.”

<sup>8</sup> Hal Berghel, “Lies, Damn Lies, and Fake News,” *Computer* 50, no. 2 (February 2017): 83. <http://icceexplore.ieee.org/document/7842838/?part=1>.

<sup>9</sup> Sam Levin, “Facebook Promised to Tackle Fake News. But the Evidence Shows It’s Not Working,” *The Guardian*, May 16, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/may/16/facebook-fake-news-tools-not-working>.

<sup>10</sup> Jason Vincent Cabañes and Jayeel S. Cornelio, “The Rise of Trolls in the Philippines (and What We Can Do About It),” in *A Duterte Reader: Critical Essays on Rodrigo Duterte’s Early Presidency* (QC: BUGHAW, 2017), 244.

<sup>11</sup> Ong and Cabañes, *Architects of Networked Disinformation*.

political campaign finance regulation, news media coverage and investigative reportage of fake news and trolling, platform intermediary regulation responding to particular concerns of fragile democracies in the global South, and the self-regulation of advertising and the personal relations industry.

The suggested and implemented recourses emphasize the role of the media, the government, the owners and managers of social media platforms, and the users themselves. The dedication of fact-checking organizations, the capacity to craft comprehensive penalizing legislations or the ability to develop a highly complex algorithm to act as a spam filter, and the commitment of journalists and other information professionals in conducting skills training for information and media literacy all cover an expansive ground. However, such initiatives fail to tap a much smaller yet no less crucial space in responding to the overwhelming presence of online disinformation and misinformation: how one relates to one's self.

### **Self-care**

This philosophical undertaking rethinks the issue in terms of the preparation of the netizen's character in the face of disinformation and misinformation. As such, it enriches the tech initiatives by focusing on the work needed not only on the self but by the self. In the context of post-truth, the mentioned political and sociological perspectives offer an elaborate account of the shrinking space of freedom. However, this paper takes up the challenge of working on a

responsible practice of freedom, no matter how small its space. In this sense, philosophy tasks the netizen to both own the discourse he engages in and to own himself.

In Foucault's account of the care of the self, a responsible practice of freedom necessitates a certain quality of attention devoted to one's thoughts and the actual exercises practiced by the self on the self. A practice of ethics entails making a considered use of freedom that results in a rigorous work on the self as it relates to others. It is the deliberate, considerate, and unwavering use of freedom in the care of the self that allows an ethical response to the passivity perpetuated by post-truth.

Post-truth refers to an attitude to discourse in which the relevance of facts is disregarded in favor of the appeal to one's emotions and personal beliefs. This paper will illustrate that two key concepts drawn from Michel Foucault's *Hermeneutics of the Subject*, *stultus* and flattery, animate the post-truth attitude. A *stultus* is "someone blown by the wind and open to the external world . . . to get mixed up in his own mind with his passions, desires, ambition, mental habits, illusions, etc."<sup>12</sup> A flatterer is "the person that prevents you from knowing yourself as you are. . . . Flattery renders the person to whom it is directed impotent and blind."<sup>13</sup> The

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<sup>12</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège De France 1981-1982*, trans. Graham Burchell (New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005), 131.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 376.

aforementioned concepts are amplified in intensity and extend to the influence of the internet medium and its content.

## Post-truth Attitude

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, post-truth is “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.” Claire Laybats and Luke Tredinnick wrote that it is “characterized by a willful blindness to evidence, a mistrust of authority, and an appeal to emotionally based arguments often rooted in fears or anxieties.”<sup>14</sup> For Kathleen Higgins, “post-truth refers to blatant lies being routine across society, and it means politicians can lie without condemnation.”<sup>15</sup>

In online political discourse, the potency of personal beliefs constitutes a “personal reality” that is erroneously claimed as an alternative fact.<sup>16</sup> It is when “my truth” or “our truth” becomes so compelling and self-evident that any contrary view, no matter how well-substantiated, will be dismissed as a personal attack or simply ignored. It is not just

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<sup>14</sup> Claire Laybats and Luke Tredinnick, “Post-Truth, Information and Emotion,” *Business Information Review* 33, no. 4 (2016): 204. <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0266382116680741>.

<sup>15</sup> Higgins, “Post-Truth,” 540.

<sup>16</sup> A term mentioned by US Counselor to the President Kellyanne Conway during a press briefing on January 22, 2017. It was in reference to the erroneous statement of White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer about the number of attendees in President Donald Trump’s inauguration.

about a good story trumping an accurate one. It is “my story” or “our story” trumping all others.

The first definition of post-truth focused on how emotions and personal beliefs dislodged the appreciation of objective facts. The second definition elaborated its consequences to the individual. The third definition referred to the post-truth attitude in terms of its consequences to society. Unlike the more general character of the two previous definitions, the third explicitly situates the post-truth attitude in politics. Higgins’s definition zeroes in on either acceptance or indifference to lies spewed by politicians because of the public’s lack of condemnation of it. Furthermore, she mentions lying as routine across society implying that lying is a normalized practice and characterizing post-truth not just as a widespread phenomenon but a persistent way of thinking or feeling.

An often-recurring theme in the comments section of a news Facebook post includes condescension and ridicule to the Diehard Duterte Supporters (DDS) as they are painted as mindless fanatics by the administration’s critics. Conversely, they view the critics as unpatriotic, pawns of the Liberal Party, or Communist rebel sympathizers. It is the potency of emotions such as fear, anxiety, or anger that puts one’s hands over one’s ears or raises one’s voice to drown out the others’. As will be seen in succeeding discussions, this attitude that deafens the self is placed in a porous environment where it is dangerously cultivated by the self and those who stand to gain from it. To lose control of one’s self is the crux of the post-truth attitude.



## Networked Disinformation in the Philippines

If disinformation is false information deliberately designed to harm, networked disinformation is an organizational structure that ensures the delivery of such information. Eliciting the post-truth attitude is apparent in the aim of disinformation architects to fan the flames of resentment of political supporters through the work done by digital influencers (who have between 50 thousand to 2 million followers on Facebook and Twitter) and community-level fake account operators (who manually operate fake profiles to infiltrate community groups and news pages but rely minimally on automated bots).<sup>17</sup>

The campaign design and campaign implementation of networked disinformation use two vital principles: controlled interactivity and volatile virality. Controlled interactivity is “where political campaigners aim to disseminate a common script by carefully and strategically putting enthusiastic supporters to work as peer-to-peer conduits for organizational messages.”<sup>18</sup> Volatile virality occurs in “individual operators’ attempts to weaponize popular vernaculars to maximize the reach of social media posts.”<sup>19</sup>

Branding is essential to controlled interactivity. “Branding is storytelling elevated to narrative, often embellished with myth to enhance a product’s identity. The branding story conveyed

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<sup>17</sup> Ong and Cabañes, *Architects of Networked Disinformation*.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

through signs, symbols, and other elements results in a manufactured legacy that appeals to consumers.”<sup>20</sup> A brand bible is a document that contains guidelines that ensure the delivery of the product’s enhanced identity and manufactured legacy to the public. As such, the brand bible that the public relations and advertising executives craft for their politician client projects a carefully constructed identity that influences the public for political gain.

Volatile virality’s principal techniques, according to Ong and Cabañes,<sup>21</sup> include positive branding, digital black ops, diversionary tactics, trending, and signal scrambling. Signal scrambling will not be discussed in this paper because it is of a more technical nature and is irrelevant to the discussion. Positive branding focuses on projecting the qualities that serve the image that the high-level strategists have designed for their client. It highlights the features that put their client in a favorable light in line with their personal brand. Conversely, digital black ops attack the personal brand of the client’s competitor. It is a smear campaign that emphasizes putting the concerned party in a completely negative light. Both strategies tend to highlight the angle they are focusing on, either totally exalting or vilifying the personality in the eyes of the public. The use of diversionary tactics entails employing an irrelevant point without offering a sound

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<sup>20</sup> Steven Heller, “Foreword,” in *Brand Bible: The Complete Guide to Building, Designing, and Sustaining Brands*, ed. Debbie Millman (Beverly, MA: Rockport Publishers, 2012), 4.

<sup>21</sup> Ong and Cabañes, *Architects of Networked Disinformation*.

argument in the discussion. Trending is a technique that focuses on core campaign messages. Through Twitter, the issues or personalities are reduced to buzz words. The use of hashtags makes it easier to find the used buzz words in bulk and amplify their social media presence. Coupled with digital black ops like #Trilliling or positive branding like #DutertePaRin, it tends to zero in on a bottom line statement regarding a particular issue or personality.

The techniques of volatile virality prey on the inability of netizens to have enough control over themselves. The techniques rely heavily on emotional appeals that lead netizens to reinforce their beliefs on supporting or criticizing a particular issue or personality in a particular way. Clicking share or retweeting the content delivered by such techniques tend to worsen the polarization between the critics and the supporters.

### **Targeting *Stultitia* and Designing Flattery**

The content of positive branding, digital black ops, diversionary tactics, and trending not only amplify but cultivate anger across the political spectrum. Divisiveness marks the comments section of news articles posted on social media where heated exchanges between supporters and critics of the current administration occur. It is often seen in the quick dismissal of journalistic and scholarly works as biased reporting. Such encounters go beyond the plethora of logical fallacies or a propensity to embrace alternative sources of information (i.e., blog posts, memes) over established media

outlets. This signals a subtler problem at work that limits the possibility of a civil and fruitful online political discourse.

The concept of *stultitia* in Michel Foucault's *Hermeneutics of the Subject* sheds light on the matter. A *stultus*, someone who has not cared for himself, the "raw material" that self-care works on, easily partakes in the flatterer's discourse and loses control of itself. A flatterer is "the person that prevents you from knowing yourself as you are. . . . Flattery renders the person to whom it is directed impotent and blind." Foucault discusses the flatterer<sup>22</sup> in terms of an inferior and a superior. The inferior can gain leverage over the superior by exaggerating the qualities he possesses, thus misleading him and slyly putting him in a weaker status than the inferior. Due to the misrepresentation of the superior's relation to himself, the inferior gains power over him.

Flattery is apparent in online political discourse. Exchanges in the comments section would often include the statement that supporting President Duterte is "patriotic." This notion of being "patriotic" leads actual supporters to think that their love for country is tantamount to their support of President Duterte and all his policies. There is a misplaced sense of pride as their view of patriotism is very limited; and misrepresentation occurs as the relation to the self as a patriotic citizen is narrow. This misrepresentation is also expressed in instances when the supporters encounter those

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<sup>22</sup> Foucault, *Hermeneutics*, 376.

who voice out their criticism of such policies. The critics are then immediately labelled as unpatriotic. Although the targeted netizen might feel good thinking that he or she is patriotic, the disinformation worker gains power over the netizen. By using flattery, disinformation architects and workers can make netizens dependent on the kind of discourse that they supply. It is likewise problematic on the other end of the political spectrum.

From the content, there is now a shift of focus to the medium. Media theorist Marshall McLuhan sheds light on the post-truth attitude with the concepts of “the medium is the message” and the global village.

## II. Navigating the Internet Medium

What does “the medium is the message” mean? McLuhan writes in *Understanding Media: The Extension of Man*, “This is merely to say that the personal and social consequences of any medium—that is, of any extension of ourselves—result from the new scale that is introduced into our affairs by each extension of ourselves, or by any new technology.” Furthermore, such consequences of the medium or technology “amplify or accelerate existing processes. For the ‘message’ of any medium or technology is the change of scale or pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs.”<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Canada: McGraw-Hill Education, 1964), 9–10. [http://robynbacken.com/text/nw\\_research.pdf](http://robynbacken.com/text/nw_research.pdf).

The impact made by new technology is the medium of a moving target in which its users continue to shape and re-shape each other. As with both Federman and Paul Levinson, the impact of the medium is greater, subtler, and bears unanticipated consequences over time. Using the McLuhanian lens, the kind of influence tackled here is not about the text, images, and videos but the internet itself, where all such content is accessed. In this sense, political discourse is to be reflected on from the change of scale, pace, or pattern introduced by the internet medium. To cite examples, the message of the medium of theatrical production may be its effect on tourism rather than the play or musical *per se*. The message of a newscast may be the perception on crime and the feeling it garners from the general public rather than the news stories themselves.<sup>24</sup>

According to Barichello and Carvalho, “The socio-technics of the digital era inaugurate new ruptures between poles of emission (centralized within mass media), allowing an infinitely greater number of actors to participate in processes of production, distribution and content and information sharing.”<sup>25</sup> The internet and social media created a more complex communication flow by accommodating all into its

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<sup>24</sup> Mark Federman, “What is the Meaning of the Medium of the Message?” (July 23, 2004). [http://www.academia.edu/26657186/What\\_is\\_the\\_Meaning\\_of\\_the\\_Medium\\_is\\_the\\_Message](http://www.academia.edu/26657186/What_is_the_Meaning_of_the_Medium_is_the_Message).

<sup>25</sup> Eugenia Maria Mariano da Rocha Barichello and Luciana Menezes Carvalho, “Understanding the Digital Social Media from McLuhan’s Idea of Medium-Ambience,” *Matrizes* 7, no. 1 (2013): 236. [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/270643477\\_Understanding\\_the\\_digital\\_social\\_media\\_from\\_mcluhan's\\_idea\\_of\\_medium-ambience](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/270643477_Understanding_the_digital_social_media_from_mcluhan's_idea_of_medium-ambience).

fold and for the first time, provided an extensively participatory role to a historically passive audience. The ruptures from the advent of fake news are evident in the tensions between bloggers and journalists on social media. This influx of content producers and distributors triggered the proliferation of alternative sources of information. Hence, it gave way to alternative sources of news and, in effect, alternative sources of facts, which both set the stage for alternative facts. The competition between bloggers and the official account of established news outlets in terms of the magnitude of their following show not just a subscription to different sources of information but a subscription to different ways of seeing the world in a matter-of-fact manner.

Tracing the key shifts in technological advancement of the medium, Paul Levinson alludes to the figures of the child, the voyeur, and the participant. The child, he says, is characterized by the passive audience of the radio. The process is one way as the listeners are not afforded any opportunity to answer the speaker they hear.<sup>26</sup> The voyeur arrived with the advent of television. Fascination for the excitement of TV trickled down to politics as the glamour of scandals and extra-marital affairs proliferated in public discourse. It was with the TV voyeur that the love for spectacle reflected on the starry-eyed audiences and their hunger for juicy details on the lives of public figures

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<sup>26</sup> Paul Levinson, *Digital McLuhan: A Guide to the Information Millennium* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1999). [http://shora.tabriz.ir/Uploads/83/cms/user/File/657/E\\_Book/Communication/Digital%20mcluhan.pdf](http://shora.tabriz.ir/Uploads/83/cms/user/File/657/E_Book/Communication/Digital%20mcluhan.pdf).

gained momentum. The third figure, the participant, is fully expressed in the internet medium. Whereas the two previous figures (the former docile and the latter eager) ultimately remained as passive audiences, it is only with the internet that the capacity to respond instantaneously was given.

If the TV and the radio allowed the audiences to share the experience of listening and seeing the town crier, the internet took it further and allowed the townsfolk to respond, reconstituting the global village. Barichello and Carvalho cite researchers tagging the shift from broadcast media to the internet as “a more democratic and inclusive way of inhabiting the present” and a media of “dialogue and conversation.”<sup>27</sup> However, it bears unanticipated consequences.

### **Unanticipated Consequences**

Breaking off from the one-sided communication of broadcast companies and introducing technology that caters to the multiplicity of participants as they generate and share content reflect the “more democratic” character of the internet. Seen in this light, the mistrust of authority characteristic of the post-truth attitude mentioned in the earlier discussion is now clearer and more resonant. The audience, having the capacity to produce content themselves, levelled the playing field with the gatekeeper. The nuances between the journalist and the blogger meet and clash within this space.

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<sup>27</sup> Barichello and Carvalho, “Understanding the Digital Social Media,” 241.



Due to the widespread accessibility of the internet and the proliferation of information sources, the blind side of media outlets in straight news and commentaries are well-covered by individuals who have the platform to share their views. The inclusive and thereby egalitarian environment of the internet provided the avenue for what Simon Ravenscroft refers to as a “wholesale rejection of authority figures.”<sup>28</sup>

Facebook pages with witty albeit vitriolic monikers like “Crabblar,” “Abias-cbn News,” or “Superficial Gazette of the Republic of the Philippines” explicitly exemplify the predominant cynicism of their groups against their perceived political foes. Whereas mistrust of authority is directed toward particular organizations or individuals, willful blindness to evidence is directed at the contribution or findings of such parties. Hence, this brand of cynicism signifies a trait of the post-truth attitude.

To “like” a specific public page or to join a group page on Facebook causes one’s newsfeed to constantly feature updates and posts on the said pages. To gravitate toward groups with political views results in a reinforcement of shared personal beliefs. Such gravitation not only makes it easier to form an echo chamber but also tends to instinctively antagonize those with opposing political views. The internet medium does not only accelerate or amplify the kind of

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<sup>28</sup> Simon Ravenscroft, “Elephants and Cynics: Rehabilitating Truth in a Post-Truth Age,” *ABC News*, May 22, 2017, <https://www.abc.net.au/religion/elephants-and-cynics-rehabilitating-truth-in-a-post-truth-age/10095770>.

thinking that people have such as confirmation bias or “us vs. them” thinking but it creates an environment that sustains it and is sustained by it.

Being able to reply quickly to a post with an opposing political view is made possible by the immediacy of the internet medium. Oftentimes, kneejerk reactions spiral down to vitriolic comments. Such interactions, defined by the severe lack of understanding of each other, make individuals highly vulnerable to the emotionally-based arguments often rooted in fears or anxieties as well as appeals to emotion and personal beliefs.

The “democratic” character of the internet medium eliminated the gap between the gatekeeper and the audience. It had an unanticipated consequence of allowing the questioning of narratives originating from deemed totalitarian-like institutions such as well-established media outlets. This articulates the mistrust of authority in the post-truth attitude. Due to the scale of inclusiveness and accessibility of the internet, it granted a proliferation of perspectives bearing a certain brand of cynicism—one that is corrosive and dismissive of well-established media organizations and its findings. Like any other organization, mass media organizations are susceptible to corrupt practices. The proliferation of perspectives brought about by the internet leads to a healthy interrogation of such organizations and its practices. However, due to the amplification of personal biases and emotions involved in such cynicism, it runs the risk of a total rejection of verified reports and

exhaustive research. Hence, the cynicism born from the proliferation of perspectives entails a willful blindness to evidence. Finally, the dialogue that was made possible in the imagination of a harmonious global village had the unanticipated consequence of bringing about polarized groups. The immediacy of the internet medium coupled with the harsh realities of the political backdrop made the online environment conducive to emotionally-based arguments. Pieced together, these unanticipated consequences make a conducive environment to lose control of the self and cultivate the post-truth attitude.

It is important to recall how Barichello and Carvalho reject a deterministic view of McLuhan's work. They write, "Digital media tools bear significant potential for re-creation, leaving possibilities for social appropriation that are much wider than in the case of other media, less susceptible to social re-configuration."<sup>29</sup> The medium not only allows us to go beyond specific human limitations as it extends the reach of experience of the self, but hints at a possibility to transform the use of the medium along with the self.

### **III. The Care of the Self**

Confronted with the vastness of the internet medium and the surges of its content from disinformation workers, there is a need for the netizen to cut across its waves. Michel Foucault's words on power in *The Ethics on the Concern of the*

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<sup>29</sup> Barichello and Carvalho, "Understanding the Digital Social Media," 237.

*Self as Practice of Freedom* provides a sense of direction. Since power is the “relationship in which one person tries to control the conduct of the other,”<sup>30</sup> it is embedded in human relationships. Power relations might be as apparent as teacher-student and employee-employer relationships or as subtle as the situatedness of gender, sex, skin color, or profession in a specific society. Power relations are always present because they are relational. In this light, power relations become “mobile, reversible, and unstable”<sup>31</sup> because they are negotiable. The existence of power relations necessitates a space for freedom for it does not only entail power to control but power from control. Hence, this creates a “possibility of resistance.”<sup>32</sup>

Such a possibility of resistance in the power relations of the disinformation workers and the targeted netizens (primarily expressed in disinformation) and the netizens among themselves (primarily expressed in misinformation) offer a space to respond ethically to the post-truth attitude. As such, this paper proposes to tackle the matter through Foucault’s discussion of the care of the self.

In the *Hermeneutics of the Subject*, Foucault writes:

The *epimeleia heautou* is an attitude towards the self, others, and the world; . . . [it] implies a certain way of attending to what we think and what takes place

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 291.

<sup>31</sup> Foucault, *History of Sexuality Vol. 3*, 291.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 292.

in our thought. . . *epimeleia* also always designates a number of actions exercised on the self by the self, actions by which one takes responsibility for oneself and by which one changes, purifies, transforms, and transfigures oneself.<sup>33</sup>

Firstly, the *epimeleia heautou* or care of the self is described as an attitude. It connotes a pattern in the way the self thinks, feels, and behaves. The post-truth attitude is a force that creates a direct tension against self-care. The lack of self-control ultimately affects how the self views others and the world. To lose control of the self is to lose control of how one views others and how one views the world. Whereas the post-truth attitude necessitates and perpetuates the self's loss of control, self-care is an attitude that necessitates and perpetuates the self's retention of control.

Secondly, Foucault elaborates on what the attitude entails as he mentions “attending to what we think and what takes place in our thought.”<sup>34</sup> This does not only include the thoughts themselves but how the self processes such thoughts. The approach taken by the self in the way it grasps thoughts is significant. To be watchful of what takes place in thought is to be watchful of the self.

Thirdly, the attention directed by the self to the self includes an accompanying set of practices by the self. This is not merely

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<sup>33</sup> Foucault, *Hermeneutics*, 10–11.

<sup>34</sup> Foucault, *Hermeneutics*, 11.

an intellectual exercise. It is woven as a guide for the direction of the set of practices. As will be seen in the discussion of *askesis*, the set of practices entails repetition or continuous work. It sets up how one “takes responsibility for oneself.”<sup>35</sup>

Finally, one takes responsibility for one’s self through the acts of attention and exercises, by *mathesis* and *askesis*. It is on this note that the vulnerability in *stultitia* and the exploitation in flattery as well as their widespread presence in online disinformation and misinformation is problematized. To take responsibility for the self directly addresses the loss of control of the self.

Foucault discussed the relational aspect of self-care in “The Ethics of the Concern of the Self as a Practice of Freedom.” He rejects the notion that the care of the self could run the risk of dominating others as the process of care admits a management of power on relationships in a “non-authoritarian manner.”<sup>36</sup> Ontological clarity entails ethical clarity. The quality of attention directed to the self then determines the quality of attention directed to the other. Simply, “He who takes care of himself to the point of knowing exactly what duties he has as master of the household and as a husband and father will find that he enjoys a proper relationship with his wife and children.”<sup>37</sup> In

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Michel Foucault, “The Ethics of the Concern of the Self as a Practice of Freedom,” in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth* (New York, NY: The New Press, 1994), 287.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

other words, the depth and clarity by which one is able to manage the self helps manage the relationship the self enjoys with others.

## Hellenistic Model of Care

Foucault writes in the *Hermeneutics of the Subject* that the care of the self was made the primary locus in relation to the knowledge of the self. As such, the self is the “objective to be attained.”<sup>38</sup> The Hellenistic model preoccupies the self with a kind of transformation that makes it the master of itself. Considering the individualistic tenor (tailor-fit profile accounts, newsfeeds, contacts, etc.) in which social media operates, retaining individualism and tweaking its preoccupation could be a more effective strategy than using the care for the community as a starting point. As such, the capacity to care for the community emanates from the capacity to take care of the self without making the care for the community the primary goal.

The Hellenistic model was also discussed in Foucault’s *Technologies of the Self*.<sup>39</sup> Unlike the Platonic model, which prepares the adolescent disciple for his participation in politics, the Hellenistic model advises a retreat from it. The retreat of the self to the self is not to be taken as an act of cutting off

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<sup>38</sup> Foucault, *Hermeneutics*, 257.

<sup>39</sup> Michel Foucault, *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, eds. Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman, and Patrick H. Hutton (London: Tavistock Publication, 1988). [https://monoskop.org/images/0/03/Technologies\\_of\\_the\\_Self\\_A\\_Seminar\\_with\\_Michel\\_Foucault.pdf](https://monoskop.org/images/0/03/Technologies_of_the_Self_A_Seminar_with_Michel_Foucault.pdf).

from the community. The Hellenistic model primarily, though not solely, preoccupies the self with its own lot, and hence, limits its preoccupation with what it has control over. Regarding self-care in the context of social media, the control described here does not force itself to cover a vast ground but dwells in a more manageable scope.

Foucault refers to the Roman Empire in the first two centuries when he discussed the feature of pitting self-care against political participation in the Hellenistic model. He writes in the *History of Sexuality Vol. 3: Care of the Self*, “It was a space in which the centers of power were multiple; in which the activities, the tensions, the conflicts were numerous; in which they developed in several dimensions; and in which the equilibria were obtained through a variety of transactions.”<sup>40</sup> Imperial Rome’s conquests opened up the possibility of having more complex power relations through the interaction of people not only from nearby but far-off lands. This is a shift from the imagination of a community that is of a small city-state into a much bigger and open one.

The opening of such possibilities mirrors the shift from the kind and scale of interaction allowed in electric technology to the digital as tackled by Levinson. The audio and audio-visual transmissions sent through the radio and TV offered a much simpler and smaller imagination and interaction of community. The internet medium, by virtue of

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<sup>40</sup> Foucault, *History of Sexuality Vol. 3*, 82–83.



its participatory element, opened a much broader “complex space” with “multiple centers of power” dispersed across continents. The Hellenistic model contains a general call to both action and attention as it prescribed “a way of living for everybody throughout their lives.”<sup>41</sup> It is a kind of self-care that is addressed to more complex and diverse relationships that lasts indefinitely. It is a general call to the citizenry as it is addressed to all. It is also a sustained attitude as it necessitates continuous work on the self. Lastly, it has an analogous context with that of imperial Rome given its “complex spaces” and “multiple centers of power.”<sup>42</sup> For these reasons, the Hellenistic model of care is an apt model to use in responding to the problem of the post-truth attitude.

The emphasis on character and self-control by the Stoics in the Hellenistic model offers a promising response to the potency of emotions and the influences magnifying it in the context of post-truth. The self-mastery that stands firm against the battering of fate could be of aid when confronting the self’s vulnerability toward disinformation and misinformation. Furthermore, the notion of cosmopolitanism, which cuts through the rigidity of tribal thinking and embraces humanity as one community, offers an opportunity to expand the self in its encounter with the reason of others. The post-truth attitude participates in a kind of conflict that is reinforced by both medium and content and puts the self in its own prison.

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<sup>41</sup> Foucault, *Technologies of the Self*, 31.

<sup>42</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Vol. 3*, 83.

Perhaps when conflict is aggravated and exploited intensely and on a scale unimaginable to Roman emperors, Stoic wisdom could be put to practice—beginning with the exercises in *mathesis* and *askesis*.

#### IV. Self-care in Practice: *Mathesis*

*Mathesis* is the knowledge of the world.<sup>43</sup> The practices in *mathesis* involve a process of establishing an orderly view of the world. Foucault elaborates Seneca’s “view from above.” He writes, “First, this movement is a flight, a tearing free from one’s self that finishes off and completes the detachment from flaws and vices. . . . Second, this movement which leads to the source of light, leads us to God . . . in the form that allows us to find ourselves again . . . in a sort of co-naturalness or co-functionality with God . . . Third . . . we rise towards the highest point.”<sup>44</sup> The flight mentioned is an act of breaking off from flaws and vices. It is to gain ascendancy and thus freedom from “everything that seemed good to us.”<sup>45</sup> In other words, the movement sets the self on a path to question what seems desirable or empowering.

*Mathesis* carves out a space to question the set of signs and marks of status displayed on social media. It interrogates the feeling of empowerment that the self feels in its projected image and participation in the platform. The affliction of

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<sup>43</sup> Foucault, *Hermeneutics*, 315.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 275.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 277.

*stultitia* festers as the self is lured by reinforcing or exaggerating such an image through flattery. This is exemplified by the earlier discussion of netizens who identify with a fixed caricature of patriotism—that is, vigorously supporting President Duterte and his policies. The projection of patriotism can often be desirable and empowering. In view of the first movement of the Senecan ascent, the self puts into question what seems to be desirable. In this case, it is the fixed caricature of being patriotic. The act of tearing the self from the self necessitates a reassessment of the self's biases. As such, it helps the self turn toward the attitude of forming a proper relation of the self to the self.

Secondly, the movement that Foucault describes here proceeds to a “co-naturalness or co-functionality with God.”<sup>46</sup> The participation with divine reason as it orders the world implies participation with human reason. The self's co-naturalness with God extends its co-naturalness with others. This expanding movement of reason enshrined in the self and its encounter with the reason of others is vital in the interactions found in social media.

Lastly, ensuing from such participatory co-naturalness, the self “rises to the highest point.”<sup>47</sup> Dislodging the self from its own pettiness and narrow-mindedness, the Senecan ascent offers the self a panoramic view of the world. This view helps the self see its own smallness—its punctuality. Foucault refers

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<sup>46</sup> Foucault, *Hermeneutics*, 275.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

to the acknowledgement of the punctuality of existence as that which “enables us to dismiss and exclude all the false values and all the false dealings in which we are caught up.”<sup>48</sup>

The first movement brings the self to question the notion of patriotism that one holds or is influenced by. The second movement allows the self to encounter other notions of patriotism through reason. The third movement offers a panoramic view of the self’s place and its notion of patriotism along with that of other participants’ in the digital world. The expansion of the self’s reason as it encounters others is an act of opening up to the human community vis-à-vis the self’s reason. Hence, this exercise loosens the grip of a group-centered thinking and takes the netizen a step further to becoming a citizen of the world. In doing so, “it controls itself in its actions as in its thoughts.”<sup>49</sup> Hence, by having encompassing knowledge and continuous contemplation of the events, activities, and processes on and by the internet and particularly social media, Seneca offers the possibility of constituting a self that has control over its thoughts and its actions online.

### **Marcus Aurelius’s Plunge**

Foucault alludes to another Stoic figure in the discussion of *mathesis*. With an opposite trajectory to Seneca’s view from above, Marcus Aurelius plunges in. If Seneca’s panoramic

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 277.

<sup>49</sup> Foucault, *Hermeneutics*, 280.

view approached the constitution of the self through acknowledging the punctuality of existence by stepping back, Marcus Aurelius shows a relentless intellectual dissection of the world up close.

The first part of Marcus Aurelius’s plunging view “must consist in giving definition in logical and semantic terms, and then, at the same time, fixing a thing’s value.”<sup>50</sup> Foucault mentions a gaze that is directed toward a “flux of representations”<sup>51</sup> that examines its totality and its minutest parts. The flux of representations here is to be understood as the self’s passive encounter with its surroundings. On this note, it is apt to recall the ease of accessibility and the immediacy of the internet medium mentioned earlier. Given the vast array of content found on a newsfeed, social media users often find themselves absent-mindedly scrolling down and clicking from one post to another over extended periods of time. The focus of the platform’s design is to expose the user to as much content as possible. Placed in such a context, the kind of meticulousness involved in the exercise of defining and describing is counterintuitive as it is focused on limiting the attention and taking time to digest the representations that come to mind from an encounter with selected content. Since social media is a melting pot of facts and opinions, an active engagement would entail having a detailed account of what the self encounters in the platform.

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<sup>50</sup> Foucault, *Hermeneutics*, 292–293.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

This kind of meticulousness directed toward political content in social media arrives at a conceptual clarity. This kind of gaze is a crucial element in online discourse because it lessens the risk of misunderstanding between netizens and benefits media literacy campaigns as it helps come up with a methodical approach to the encountered content.

After the intellectual rigor of defining and describing, Foucault introduces the exercise of seeing and naming. From a meticulous looking into, the exercise transitions to an exercise of looking in. It is a recalling of what was seen clearly and relating it to a particular set of principles. It is not only to meticulously name what was encountered but to name the principles on which one's response is anchored.

This is where philosophy adds to the skills-focused approach of media literacy campaigns. It goes beyond the meticulousness needed to sift through information. This exercise leads the self to go back to itself and ask how such sifting is done in relation to the principles that the self holds or tries to build and work on.

The last movement is evaluating and testing. Here, the Stoic's emphasis on the practice of austerity and self-control is apparent. The self is pitted against the event. Foucault writes that the representation is to be subjected "to suspicion, possible accusation, moral reproach, and intellectual refutation which dispels illusions, etcetera."<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Foucault, *Hermeneutics*, 297.

Part and parcel of this movement is the question of the self's autonomy in relation to what was encountered. The thinking involved in the movement neither preoccupies itself with the facticity of the claim nor its moral implications. The purpose is to see to it that the self is stronger than the lure to passively accept or reject the claim. Whether or not the self agrees with the claim, the exercise puts into suspicion the position prescribed or taken. As such, the exercise of evaluating and testing ensures that as much as possible, the stand made on an issue originates from the self's own volition.

## **Decomposition Exercises**

The moral reproach and intellectual refutation involved are apparent in Marcus Aurelius's decomposition exercises. The first exercise is the decomposition of the object in time or discontinuous perception. A feeling of bewilderment is evoked from the self when it hears a sweet melody or watches an enchanting dance. To dispel the bewilderment, Marcus Aurelius suggests breaking down the melody per note. By breaking it down, the approach lays bare the constitutive moments of its allure.

The decomposition of the object in time offers a recourse to a simple yet compelling narrative. By cutting a narrative into individual moments, it unmask its feigned coherence and leads the self to reconsider the story being told. This discontinuous perception dispels the bewildering bias that the

self is afflicted with and offers a possibility of transforming the self in a space of freedom.

The second decomposition exercise is decomposing objects into material elements. Whereas the first decomposition exercise strips the bewilderment of the melody by breaking it down to its notes, the second strips the bewilderment down to its material parts. A sumptuous meat stripped down to a dead carcass, wool into sheep's hair, and copulation as a rubbing of nerves with each other, were the examples given by Marcus Aurelius. This is not only to investigate the representations like in the process of definition and description, but to look down on them.

Consistent with the two decomposition exercises, the third is a description that aims to discredit. The description that Foucault gives involves the similar movements of looking into and looking down on that lead to a breaking free of. In this decomposition exercise, Marcus Aurelius shows a confrontation between the self and a powerful man. He wrote, "Imagine him eating, sleeping, copulating and excreting."<sup>53</sup> This is to remind the self that no matter how much larger than life the figure may seem, he or she is a human being like the self.

Strongman, "Dirty Harry", and *tatay* (father) have all been used to refer to President Rodrigo Duterte. In concert, the offhanded jokes, the incomplete sentences, the rolled-up

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<sup>53</sup> Foucault, *Hermeneutics*, 306.



sleeves, the Tagalog-Davaoño codeswitching, the nonsense talk with expletives transformed the image of the “presidentiable,” the president, and ultimately, the presidency. The radical contrast to his soft-spoken and prim and proper predecessor has become an object of condemnation, ridicule, and to some, admiration. The candidness and lack of concern for political correctness resonates with the frustration of certain sectors with the leaders of previous administrations. The plain and ordinary language that he employs and the personality he projected during the 2016 election season conjured an image of a decisive and strong-willed leader. There is nothing wrong with tapping the support of people with similar sentiments. However, the danger lies in capitalizing on the charm of his persona that makes it conducive for his followers to lose control of themselves—hence encouraging the post-truth attitude. The charisma and presence of President Duterte evokes the range of emotions characteristic of the aforementioned encounter. Such emotions need to be kept in check to ensure the effectiveness of the decomposition exercise.

Foucault writes that the common objective of the decomposition exercises is “establishing the subject’s freedom by looking down on things from above, which enables us to penetrate them thoroughly . . . and thereby show us the little value they possess.”<sup>54</sup> The movements

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<sup>54</sup> Foucault, *Hermeneutics*, 305.

present in Marcus Aurelius's plunge as an act of looking into are enriched by the decomposition exercises as they add the element of looking down on. The emotional distance garnered by the common theme of suspicion and discredit in the exercises not only sets a critical view of what to think but how to feel in the encounter with the representation or online content. Whether for or against the self's political view, it sets to question the predominant emotions evoked by such an encounter.

The exercises under *mathesis* are primarily geared toward mending *stultitia*. Its repudiation of the feeling of bewilderment primarily addresses the emotional vulnerability of sincere political supporters who are intended or unintended targets of disinformation workers. With the flight that breaks free from the preoccupation of status in Seneca and the vigilant gaze pursued in Marcus Aurelius, an ontological clarity is arrived at and helps to address the loss of control of the self in *stultitia*.

## V. Self-care in Practice: *Askesis*

Foucault defines *askesis* as “the set, the regular, calculated succession of procedures that are able to form, definitively fix, periodically reactivate and, if necessary, reinforce this *paraskene* for an individual.”<sup>55</sup> The *paraskene* is a preparation for an occurrence that affects the life of the individual. The

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<sup>55</sup> Foucault, *Hermeneutics*, 327.

*paraskeue* is work done to attain a stability of the self that withstands both tragedies and temptations. From the encounter with the representations or content online, *askesis* is when the self draws not just knowledge but a “supply of true propositions, principles, axioms, etcetera,”<sup>56</sup> which are examined and reinforced to form an ethos.

The amplification and acceleration of the internet medium of existing processes through its accessibility and immediacy makes it difficult for the self to prepare for its encounter with the content. The lack of preparation and thus self-control in an encounter with the events and the discussions that ensue, encourages a culture of misunderstanding rooted in raw emotions—a culture of post-truth. This results in the need to practice philosophical listening, philosophical reading, philosophical writing, and philosophical speaking.

## Philosophical Listening

Listening is described as a sense that receives the *logos* but is inevitably intertwined with pathos, which “makes hearing dangerous, even hearing the word of truth.”<sup>57</sup> Foucault writes, “We can listen in a completely pointless way and without getting any benefit, and we can even listen in a way that is to our disadvantage.”<sup>58</sup> The variety of the ways to listen should lead the self to ask what kind of listening the self

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<sup>56</sup> Foucault, *Hermeneutics*, 322.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 338.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 339.

is in the habit of doing especially when confronted with widespread disinformation and misinformation.

Foucault alludes to a general demeanor that safeguards against the sway of the pathos from what is heard. It is a kind of attention that does not concern itself with “irrelevant points of view . . . beauty of the form . . . grammar and vocabulary . . . and refutation of philosophical or sophistical quibbles.”<sup>59</sup> This kind of attention does not only pierce through the flattery-induced misrepresentation of the self to the self but also sees through the bewilderment with the speaker. Most importantly, the exercise directs itself to the possibility of transforming what is heard into a “precept of action.”<sup>60</sup>

Firstly, the attention sifts through the kind of language employed as it turns away from the form of its delivery. It is a kind of attention that is not swayed by an appeal to emotion through a spectacle of sincerity (sometimes littered by expletives) by government officials. It does not blindly accept or immediately reject detailed expositions of issues from veteran journalists. The attention exhibits patience as it dives into what is being said and pushes out the tendency to give in to kneejerk reactions regarding how it is said. It suspends rash judgment on the crassness of the language employed by hard-hitting supporters and gives them the chance to air out their thoughts and feelings. The diction, the lack of eloquence, and

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<sup>59</sup> Foucault, *Hermeneutics*, 349.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

bad grammar are not considered to have a bearing on what is heard. The mindful ear filters the irrelevant details as it persists to arrive at what is being said. In this respect, the kind of attention present in philosophical listening sifts through the kind of language that is employed and preoccupies itself with the question of what is heard. The kind of attention in philosophical listening addresses a dismissive attitude toward expletive-laden language. It leaves a space to hear out the genuine frustration behind an unconventional delivery of political commentaries.

Secondly, the kind of attention present in philosophical listening sifts through the bias of the self with the personality or the institution that it hears from. As the attention helps distance the self from its misrepresentation to itself as what occurs in flattery, it distances itself from the flatterer *per se*. The attention directed is similar to that of listening to a salesman. The self is equally watchful not only of what is said but of the charm and influence of the person who is saying it. This applies to social media influencers who have gained a massive following online. The charm and wit of online personalities are perhaps a few of the reasons why people gravitate toward them. The kind of attention characteristic of philosophical listening dispels such bewilderment and strives to draw the essence of what they are saying.

Lastly, the kind of attention that characterizes philosophical listening not only listens to what is being said and who is saying it but listens to the value of why it is being

said. With the aid of memory, it directs the ear to viewing propositions in terms of “precepts of action.”<sup>61</sup> It engages what is heard in terms of its prescription. A call to action is being conveyed in various degrees whenever there is a televised speech or political commentary on a radio show. Whether it is by an avid supporter or a vocal critic, the statements delivered through the airwaves elicit an emotional response geared toward a prescribed action. Philosophical listening demands a mindful reception of such a prescription. The ear stands guard as it listens to the assimilation of the prescription into the self’s ethos. Foucault detailed the work of attention as: “The soul that listens must keep watch on itself. In paying proper attention to what it hears it pays attention to what it hears as signification, as pragma. It also pays attention to itself, so that, through this listening and memory, the true thing gradually becomes the discourse that it clutches to itself.”<sup>62</sup>

## **Philosophical Reading**

Philosophical reading does not entail identifying the credibility of the sources, the structure, and the tone of the article. Foucault introduced philosophical reading as an “opportunity for meditation.”<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Foucault, *Hermeneutics*, 349.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 351.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 356.

According to Foucault, the meditation that occurs comprises an appropriation of thought and a kind of identification that results in action. Firstly, the appropriation of thought involves the self to be “profoundly convinced”<sup>64</sup> of a thought. It is repeated and surfaces as the need for it arises. This becomes a “principle of action”<sup>65</sup> so that when one confronts a force that challenges the self and its autonomy, the self will be well-prepared. Secondly, the identification involves “the subject in which, through thought, he puts himself in a fictional situation in which he tests himself.”<sup>66</sup> The notable example given by Foucault here is that of death. This kind of meditation does not entail a preoccupation with death as a concept but instead, assumes the position of a person who is dying. It is in this respect that the value of philosophical reading in the discussion of post-truth surfaces.

Reading on social media ordinarily involves information gathering and dissemination. It is seldom taken as an opportunity for ethical formation. Though it is equally important, this exercise does not help preoccupy the self with the accuracy of the information that is being read. Philosophical reading is not to be taken merely as having to receive information but to receive a prescribed action. This ethical dimension on what is read brings more weight to the

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<sup>64</sup> Foucault, *Hermeneutics*, 357.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 358.

responsibility of reading. More than the accuracy of information to consume and to share, it tells of a precept of behavior to live by and espouse. As such, it is done with utmost care and caution. Reading an article either from an established media outlet or shared by a well-known blogger on Facebook is to be taken as an opportunity for meditating on the prescribed action. By assuming the position of what is read, its value is weighed and tested by the self as a precept of action. By doing so, the self can gain a sympathetic understanding of the writer of the text or the topic at hand. In effect, the self reflects on what is read, which the self does not necessarily agree with and considers to embed into the self's own character.

### **Philosophical Writing**

Philosophical writing has two uses. Firstly, philosophical writing benefits the self because to write what has been read is to reactivate its principle of behavior. It is to embed in memory and thus embed in repeated action that which is written. It thus becomes “a kind of habit for the body.”<sup>67</sup> Secondly, it stands to benefit others as the practice of philosophical writing involves correspondence. Foucault writes, “The correspondence involves allowing the one more advanced in virtue and the good to give advice to the other: he keeps himself informed about the other’s condition and

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<sup>67</sup> Foucault, *Hermeneutics*, 359.



gives him advice in return.”<sup>68</sup> Placing this kind of correspondence in social media offers an opportunity for those who are more careful to reach out to those who need more guidance. Here, the relational aspect of the care of the self is more prominent than it is with philosophical listening and philosophical reading. In the process of writing prescribed principles of behavior for the guidance of others, the self also guides itself. Though the context of writing referred to here is different from the context of writing in social media, the responsibility for the self and others is unchanged.

### Philosophical Speaking

The last of the techniques of true discourse which Foucault alludes to is philosophical speaking or truth-speaking—otherwise known as *parrhesia*. The truth involved here puts on equal footing the belief of the speaker that he or she speaks the truth and its actuality. Foucault writes, “*Parrhesia* refers both to the moral quality, to the moral attitude or the ethos, if you like, and to the technical procedure or *tekhnē*, which are necessary, which are indispensable, for conveying true discourse to the person who needs it to constitute himself as a subject of sovereignty over himself and as a subject of veridiction on his own account.”<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 361.

<sup>69</sup>Foucault, *Hermeneutics*, 372.

Philosophical speaking should not be construed as a no-holds-barred speaking of truth. It is a stringent expression. The specificity that it entails does not only point toward the delivery of truth, but the delivery of truth in a specific way. In the earlier discussion, the facticity of the content is the major concern. In the parrhesiastic expression, however, the focus is not so much on the statement's facticity as on the conditions that enable its proper enunciation. Foucault writes, "It is a specific, particular practice of true discourse defined by rules of prudence, skill, and the conditions that require one to say the truth at this moment, in this form, under these conditions, and to the individual inasmuch, and only inasmuch as he is capable of receiving it, and receiving it best, at this moment in time."<sup>70</sup>

By considering "the situation of the individuals with regard to each other and to the moment one speaks to him,"<sup>71</sup> philosophical speaking offers a rich approach to the discussion of truth and thereby, post-truth. It does not limit itself to the question of a statement's facticity that many initiatives have focused on. It encompasses the individuals involved in delivering or receiving truth, in what manner it is best delivered or received, and finding the right time for it to be delivered or received. Philosophical speaking is a carefully woven communication that allows the possibility of an actual transformation of the individuals who practice it.

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<sup>70</sup> Foucault, *Hermeneutics*, 384.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*

The emancipatory goal in the practice of *parrhesia* strives toward a transformation. Its goal is to free the individual being spoken to from his or her dependency on the discourse given by the flatterer and allow the possibility of a transformation to an autonomous self. Through *parrhesia*, the speaker remedies the misrepresentation of the self to the self that occurs by being targeted by flattery. Philosophical speaking frees the self and others from a state of dependency. As with philosophical listening, philosophical reading, and philosophical writing, what is spoken of is to be viewed as prescribed actions or principles of behavior. Hence, there is again a sense of responsibility involved toward the self and others when one speaks philosophically.

## VI. The Care of the Self and Post-truth Politics

The practices under *mathesis* that include Seneca's ascent and Marcus Aurelius's plunge offer a possibility of responding to the affliction of *stultitia*. Whether through the perspective of the highest point or from up close, by looking into and looking down on, the self is then able to detach from the bewilderment with "the passions, desires, ambition, mental habits, illusions, etc."<sup>72</sup>

Under *askesis*, the exercises of philosophical listening, philosophical reading, philosophical writing, and philosophical speaking allow the possibility of responding to the systematic

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<sup>72</sup> Foucault, *Hermeneutics*, 131.

placement of the flatterer. By being able to engage with the text or what is heard, or what is spoken of in terms of prescribed actions and principles of behavior, the self can test its acceptability and reflect on how it affects the self's process of formation or re-formation.

The dynamic nature of forming or re-forming the self severs the hold of the post-truth attitude. The self does not attain a “full, perfect, and complete relationship of oneself to oneself”<sup>73</sup> on a fixed point. It is a moving target and is not finished once attained. Freedom from the push and pull of misinformation and disinformation necessitates continuous work. Just like the never-ending waves that push and pull, indefatigable effort is needed to swim and cut across the waves.

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<sup>73</sup> Foucault, *Hermeneutics*, 320.

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