On Transistor Radios and Authoritarianism: The Politics of Radio-Broadcasted Distance Learning

Regletto Aldrich D. Imbong

Abstract: As the Philippines continues to grapple with the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, new modalities of instruction are being devised by the administration of Rodrigo Duterte, through the Department of Education (DepEd). Among these are what the DepEd provided as self-learning modules (SLMs) combined with "alternative learning delivery modalities" which include radio-based instruction (DepEd 2020). The SLMs and radiobased instruction are the most common modalities of learning, being the most accessible especially for the poor students of the country. This paper will examine the pedagogical and political dimensions of a radio-based instruction. Coming from the tradition of philosophy of technology that emphasizes the political nature of technology, I will argue how the logic of radio broadcasting predetermines a specific pedagogy and form of communication. I will further argue how this predetermined form of communication carries the danger of being an effective support for authoritarianism.

Key words: radio transistors, radio broadcasting, pedagogy, distance learning, authoritarianism, COVID-19

Technology is by no means neutral. From the ancient Greek conception of techne, where artifacts are purposefully designed to materialize objectively pre-existing ideas or ends (Feenberg 2003), to contemporary engineering that considers how artifacts can embody values through Value Sensitive Designs (Van de Poel and Kroes 2014, 103), the instrumentalist notion that technology is simply a means toward human ends is questioned. Current theories posit technology as an ensemble of techniques, devices, and architecture through which certain ways of being and

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doing are determined. While the direction of this determinism varies according to the philosophical tradition concerned (Feenberg 2003), what rather ties these various strands together is not only the belief that technology is by no way a mere instrument, but also the assertion that ways of life are embodiments of how technology is itself structured and deployed.

In a provocative tone, Langdon Winner (2014, 668) advanced the idea that technical things are not only not neutral but also political. Winner (2014, 668) claimed that machines, systems, and structures should not be judged simply on the basis of their efficiency and productivity. At issue also is how their very organization "embody specific forms of power and authority" (2014, 668) so that in organizing an ensemble of technology, a specific form of social order is likewise established. The atom bomb, for example, is a political artifact. The potentially lethal consequences of the atom bomb require a social system that by its very nature is non-democratic and authoritarian (Winner 2014, 675).

Even technical progress itself creates ways of life and forms of power. This is Herbert Marcuse's contention upon examining the industrial and technological society. Rather than the openly terroristic means for domination and repression, Marcuse (1964, 4 and 9) elaborated how technical and technological coordinates become the new and prevailing forms of social control by manipulating the very desires and needs of the people. Marcuse (1964, 11) emphasized the form which ideology assumes in today's technological society. Ideology has ceased to be a mere abstract conceptual system as it is absorbed into material reality itself. Ideology is always-already located in the processes of production and distribution, including and especially those of knowledge and information. These are ideological processes designed for the preservation of the existing order and the containment of all forms of opposition. For Marcuse (1964, 11), contemporary culture is more ideological compared to its predecessor.

It is from this highly political and ideological take on technology that one should examine the Duterte administration's integration of the transistor radio in the current educational setup. While the administration admits, through its science and technology arm, that "radio remains as the most accessible medium in the rural area" (Science Education Institute 2020), the obvious accessibility of the said technology must not obscure its inherent political and ideological dangers.

It appears that socio-economic problems pushed the current administration to adopt the more financially accessible modalities of learning. According to DepEd data, most basic education students prefer modular over online learning (Hernando-Malipot 2020b) because of the lack of gadgets and internet connectiv-

ity. The self-learning modules (SLMs) are distributed to the individual homes of students combined with an instruction delivered through a highly accessible technology among the Filipino households: radio. Citing financial constraints, Duterte expressed how he would opt for radio transistors and find the financial means to distribute these throughout the country (Salaverria 2020). Consistent with the president's plan, the DepEd instructed its regional directors to negotiate with local radio stations to come up with a reduced cost of airing educational shows (Salaverria 2020). Today, the DepEd claimed that it has made 3, 445 radio episodes to be aired in 162 radio stations nationwide (Salaverria 2020).

However, what is altogether obscured in the adoption of such modalities is the administration's neglect of the demands summed up under the call *#LigtasNaBalikSkwela* (safe schools opening). Under the call, students, teachers, and parents petitioned the Duterte government for a "safe environment and quality education" (Change.org 2020). The petitioners raised five demands. First, to resolve the current pandemic through medical solutions (and not through militaristic responses). Second, to make schools safe by downsizing class sizes, providing classrooms with adequate water supply, installing facilities for sanitation and disinfection, and distributing free hygiene kits. Third, to ensure access to quality education by providing government subsidy to gadgets and internet connectivity. Fourth, to protect the right to livelihood of Filipino parents and ensure that they receive financial subsidies and hazard pays. Fifth, to conduct democratic consultations for the sentiments of teachers, students, and parents to be heard and be considered in the formulation of policies.

Raymond Basilio, the secretary general of the Alliance of Concerned Teachers (ACT), the national labor union of elementary and secondary public-school teachers in the Philippines, insisted that the "national government should set aside a budget that would fund the requisites of safe schools" (Hernando-Malipot 2020a). The ACT Teachers Party List, the union's party representation in the Congress, challenged the Duterte administration to rechannel the funds of the National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict (NTF-ELCAC) to education (Umil 2020). The NTF-ELCAC has been notorious for its campaign of red-tagging which targets legitimate activism and dissent as communist fronts. Congresswoman France Castro of the ACT Teachers Party List proposed the "rechanneling of half or one-third of the P19.1 billion ($393 million) budget" for the NTF-ELCAC to education (Umil 2020). Castro further charged that the bulk of NTF-ELCAC's money amounting to P16.4 billion ($341 million) will only be utilized as "general's pork."[1]

However, the sentiments and proposal for a *#LigtasNaBalikSkwela* were not heeded by the Duterte administration. This action ignored the call for safer schools and higher government subsidy for education which would have granted accessibility to gadgets and internet connectivity especially among the poor. In the absence of such subsidies, poor Filipino families are forced to opt for modalities of learning that are anchored on monological or uni-directional forms of communication (which I discuss below).

Note that people have already charged that the Duterte administration as opting for authoritarian measures in responding to the pandemic (MacArthur 2020). Despite the united calls for a *#SolusyongMedikalHindiMilitar* (medical not militarist solution), Duterte unleashed a pandemic response similar or even worse than of a martial law (Robles 2020). This has caused more than 100,000 individuals arrested and several others killed (Talabong 2020). Three retired military generals head the inter-agency task force the administration created in response to the pandemic, and former military officers lead most of the agencies mobilized.

Duterte's insistence on distance learning (including radio-based instruction), which neglects the call *#LigtasNaBalikSkwela*, is a reflection of what in the macrocosmic scale is his persistence on authoritarian measures that completely disregarded the demand *#SolusyongMedikalHindiMilitar*. In other words, it is a matter of authoritarian policy and not of science-based necessity that the Duterte administration opted for militaristic and authoritarian measures, both in the general pandemic response and in the particular ways education today in the country is designed. In this regard, the pandemic has been and continues to be used to justify an authoritarian policy.

Radio broadcasting follows the logic of radio transmission and reception. Through the method devised by Guglielmo Marconi, wireless transmission of sound became possible (Keith 2010). Through radio waves, signals travel from a transmitter to a receiver. Amplification is a functionality of the radio transistor where weak atmospheric signals are then amplified through a speaker. Through this functionality, Shawn Vancour (2018, 13) illustrated that the radio becomes the "medium for electric voice amplification." An audio content is transmitted wirelessly from one end and received in another.

The logic of transmitter-receiver governs the entire process of radio broadcasting. When employed and deployed in education, the latter follows the same logic: transmission and reception. Radio broadcasting determines in advance specific ways of delivering distant learning, a pedagogy structured according to the logic of transmitter-receiver. The same logic of transmitter-receiver becomes

the model of pedagogy mediated by the radio. One end transmits while the other simply receives.

Education through radio broadcasting follows a peculiar model of communication, monologue. This monological form of communication is important to emphasize as education ought to be modeled on dialogical forms of communication, one which does not follow the banking system of education criticized by Paulo Freire. For Freire (2000, 72), a banking system of education follows the act of depositing, where teachers are the depositors and the students the mere depositories. The depositor-depositories distinction is no different to the transmitter-receiver model. The essentially one-way direction of radio-based instruction is emphasized as a challenge, for example, in a study on Guyana's Interactive Radio Instruction (Elliot and Lashley 2017, 27).

A monological form of communication is by its very nature uni-directional. In the political sphere, authoritarian leaders exhibit uni-directional communicative tendencies (Bulovsky 2018, 6). In this model of communication, the speaker becomes less present, less willing to engage, and less willing to listen (Bulovsky 2018, 6). The hegemonic rule of authoritarianism is bred in a social formation supported by a uni-directional form of communication. As Andrew Feenberg explains, such a hegemony would become "so deeply rooted in social life that it seems natural to those it dominates" (1992), thus normalizing the content of such a hegemony, authoritarianism. In the Philippines, as basic education is characterized by a unidirectional form of communication embedded in radio-based instruction, this problematic and authoritarian-enabling form of communication is rather normalized and internalized. The danger here is in an educational system both becoming an effective breeding ground for and conditioning minds to submit to authoritarianism.

The overall political and ideological function of radio-based instruction in the realm of basic education in the country must not be underemphasized for three reasons. First, the radio is still the most accessible medium especially in the rural areas whose population composes the majority of the country (The World Bank 2019). The radio still remains to be a frontrunner in terms of information dissemination (Lau et al. 2020). Its effectiveness as a media extends not only to the rural but also to urban areas thus reaching 85% of Filipino households. In this case, its supplemental role might turn out to be a crucial one as students and parents would rely on the radio being their only available technology to aid them with the assigned SLMs. But this also means popularizing the very logic of transmitter-receiver in education.

Second, since they come from poorer families, many students enrolled under the radiobased modality of instruction do not have other means for verifying or interacting with the information delivered through radio. For example, it is quite easy for middle- and high-income families to hire tutors and/or access the internet to verify whatever information they received via a particular modality. As emphasized by Raymond Basilio, "the rich will have access to technology and can hire a teacher-assistant in their own homes" (Westfall 2020). In this case, the "poor will have to make up with anything that's available" (Westfall 2020), i.e., radio-based instruction. This is also the reason why the transmission of information from books, while seemingly following the same transmitter-receiver logic of the radio, would not so much enforce a uni-directional form of communication if received and verified by other modalities of learning like the internet or a tutor. However, as the administration neglected to alleviate the miserable socio-economic situation of the Filipino students through the *#LigtasNaBalikSwela*, this misery reinforced a uni-directional form of education devoid of interaction. The danger of a uni-directional communication in education is peculiar to radio-based instruction especially as it is transmitted to students deprived of the needed socio-economic and infrastructural supports. The logic of transmitter-receiver is especially inculcated among the impoverished members of society, the majority of the student population.

Third, radio-based instruction is in danger of state censorship. Radio stations are regulated by the National Telecommunications Commission (NTC), an attached agency of the Department of Information and Communications Technology (DICT), which is currently headed by a retired military general. Materials broadcasted by these stations most likely will go under state scrutiny. This is a likely scenario since the DICT is both a member of the notorious NTF-ELCAC and the equally notorious Anti-Terrorism Council, entities condemned by civil rights groups for their atrocious attempts to curtail civil liberties (Africa 2019). In this regard, not only is the form of communication of radio-based instruction problematic and dangerous but also is its content. This is also where books are better compared to radios, at least in the Philippine setting. As their publication is not directly regulated by a military-headed government agency but published by competing private publishers, books are less likely to be censored.

Authoritarianism not only means direct physical violence but also ideological control. The latter aims at the normalization of authoritarianism itself. Technology and its design or logic can play an important role in the process of normalization. But while such a danger is imminently present, such could also be curbed or

avoided by way of democracy. Coming from Feenberg and Jandric (2015, 138), the notion of democracy must extend to mean not only elections but also participation, i.e., the democratic intervention of the people in the realm of technological development and politics. In this regard, democracy is a procedure (Feenberg and Jandric 2015, 139) that constantly intervenes in the level of policymaking.

In the case of the Philippines, the dangers of authoritarianism could not be curbed or avoided only in the level of the educational but also in the political. Since the dangers of the country's pandemic response emanate from an authoritarian policy, such dangers could also be curbed by confronting such a policy. The confrontation could only happen through civil society's democratic intervention in politics, which means heightened parliamentary struggles, increased democratic consultations, and intensified mass demonstrations. Civil society in the Philippines must be united more than ever to confront a policy that has mobilized a traditional technology laden with the danger of reinforcing authoritarianism.

Note

1. The pork barrel system in the Philippines has already been notorious not only for patronage politics but also for large scale corruption (De Guzman 2013).

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