



Asserting disadvantaged communities' deliberative agency in a media-saturated society

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Abstract

This article investigates how communities experiencing poverty can exercise their deliberative agency in a media-saturated society. While empirical research on deliberative democracy tends to focus on the role of mini-publics in giving low-income households the opportunity in small-scale, carefully designed forums to characterise, justify, and reflect on their views, such conception of deliberative agency gets lost in the picture once deliberative theory begins thinking in systemic terms. This article proposes a remedy to this theoretical and analytical gap by characterising the hypermediated character of the deliberative system and identifying possibilities for communities experiencing poverty to maximise the affordances of digital media for them to make an appearance in the public sphere, speak in their own voice, and carry the embodied and storied character of their arguments. I present two illustrative cases drawing on the experiences of families with low income directly affected by the bloody war on drugs in the Philippines who utilise photojournalism and online music streaming to break in the public sphere and engage in systemic deliberations about the drug war. These examples demonstrate how communities experiencing poverty express their deliberative agency amidst fear, trauma and deprivation and democratise a media-saturated deliberative system under an increasingly authoritarian regime. Overall, this article hopes to strengthen the link between normative media studies and democratic theory and offering possibilities for reforming the public sphere that recognises the poor's deliberative agency.

Keywords Deliberative democracy · Deliberative agency · Poverty · Agency · Drug war

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Introduction

Deliberative democrats have long been concerned about including the voices of communities living in poverty in collective decision-making. Often, the focus of research and practice is on mini-publics or carefully designed forums that bring together a representative sample of people living in communities tasked to deliberate on shared problems to reach a mutually justifiable decision. The focus on mini-publics is backed by both normative theory and empirical evidence. A case has been made for the importance of crafting forums specifically designed for citizens to gain knowledge, weigh evidence, listen to each other's views and reflect on the conduct of discussion (see Setälä and Smith 2018). These forums have been described as 'circuit breakers' when a society is faced with divisive issues (Sodha 2019) or exercises in 'reformist tinkering' that enhance civic participation of marginalised communities in unequal societies (Fung 2003, p. 339).

What was once described as 'flying under the radar' of democratic theory (Fung 2003, p. 339), these forums have now evolved to become a regular part of democratic decision-making, at least in some societies. Prominent among many examples are *gram sabhas* in India, where over eight million people take part in constitutionally mandated community assemblies to deliberate on the allocation of their village budget for public goods (Sanyal and Rao 2019). In Europe and North America, deliberative forums are convened to get input from low-income communities on issues such as housing and the future of welfare (Chaskin, Khare and Joseph 2012; Taylor-Gooby, Chung and Leruth 2018). Often, opportunities for communities experiencing poverty to express their voice is scarce, as governance is captured by partisan interests or technocratic thinking. Through mini-publics, low-income communities, at least in principle, are given the opportunity to express their deliberative agency or performances of political justification in a micropolitical context to shape decisions that directly affect their lives.

The question deliberative democrats face today, however, is how the process and outcomes mini-publics can be extended the wider public (Sintomer 2018). Some (though certainly not all) mini-publics have a track record of giving voice to communities experiencing poverty but the extent to which these voices are influential in confronting the systemic distortions of communication in the public sphere remains an open question. One suggestion is to convene these forums on a global scale, as in the case of a proposed series of citizen assemblies designed to invite the poor to join deliberations about a post-2015 framework that succeeds the Millennium Development Goals (Wisor 2012). Others suggest a stronger institutionalisation of low-income community's role in public decision-making, as in the case of community-driven development programs that emphasise the role of dialogue and deliberation (Heller 2001) or participatory budgeting where communities themselves have a say on the allocation of public resources (see Baoicchi 2005). These programs have gained reputation for enhancing the delivery of social services thereby uplifting the welfare of communities.

While these suggestions are promising, they are incomplete. Discourses about poverty do not singularly unfold in carefully designed forums. They emerge, gain traction, get challenged, and recreated in the 'wild life' of the political public sphere (Habermas 2006, p. 10). To create a deliberative system that is hospitable to the voices of communities experiencing poverty, it is not enough that there are

carefully designed forums that welcome their input. To effectively amplify low-income community's perspectives in public deliberation, I argue that deliberative democrats must also turn their attention to opportunities for communities experiencing poverty to exercise deliberative agency in a hypermediated yet increasingly fragmented public sphere. This article aims to propose ways in which this can be achieved.

I develop this argument in four parts. I begin by describing how the literature on deliberative democracy engages the issue of poverty on a micropolitical level, in the form of mini-publics research. I argue that some of the deficiencies of mini-publics are rooted in the deficiencies of discussions about poverty in the wider public sphere. The battle for inclusion, therefore, does not just rest in making small-scale forums more receptive to the ideas of the poor. The battle for inclusion is also tied to how the mediated public sphere can be made more deliberative.

I then turn to the second section, where I argue that it is normatively desirable and empirically possible to amplify low-income communities' deliberative agency in the mediated public sphere. I situate this normative argument in relation to deliberative democracy's systemic turn, and argue that is not enough for the poor's interests and perspectives to be represented by social movements, humanitarians, or elected representatives and political parties, but it is important, as in the case of mini-publics, for the poor to express their deliberative agency by making an appearance in the public sphere, speaking in their own voice, and carrying the embodied and storied character of their arguments. Of course, there are limitations for these ideals to be realised in practice, especially when corporate media and big tech control the construction and circulation of discourses. One possibility, I argue, lies in maximising the spaces afforded by a fragmented media environment to assert the poor's deliberative agency.

I demonstrate this point in the third section by presenting two illustrative cases drawing on the experiences of urban poor families directly affected by the war on drugs in the Philippines, one which has been declared to reach genocidal proportions (Simangan 2017). The first case examines photojournalism's shift in focus of portraying disadvantaged communities as hapless victims to active citizens demanding justice. This case demonstrates not only how 'traditional' forms of journalism can amplify the deliberative agency of communities experiencing poverty but also how 'victims' themselves perform their suffering in traditional media to make political claims. Meanwhile, the second case draws on an edgier yet increasingly mainstream genre, in the form of online music streaming. I focus on independently produced rap music that not only tells a story about the miseries caused by the drug-related killings but also the reasons why disadvantaged families disagree with the state's brutal anti-narcotics policy. Through these examples, this article demonstrates how different genres can create space for communities experiencing poverty to express deliberative agency amidst fear, trauma and deprivation as well as the implications of asserting deliberative agency in democratising media-saturated societies under an increasingly authoritarian regime.

This article concludes by examining the implications of portraying disadvantaged citizens with deliberative agency in both formal political institutions and everyday political practice and propose ideas that can link the micropolitical practice of deliberation to the macropolitical public sphere. Overall, this article hopes to strengthen the link between normative media studies and democratic theory by developing a

vocabulary for critiquing contemporary media practice and offering possibilities for reforming the public sphere.

Disadvantaged communities in deliberative politics

The theory and practice of deliberative democracy has long placed disadvantaged communities at the centre of its agenda. By deliberative democracy, I refer to a normative and political project that places ‘meaningful communication at the heart of democracy’ (Bächtiger, Dryzek, Mansbridge, and Warren 2018). The aim of promoting deliberation—the process of exchanging and listening to each other’s views, weighing evidence, and reflecting on preferences—is to shape societies to be sensitive to good reasons, which, in turn, generates mutually justifiable outcomes. This definition is purposefully broad. Deliberative practices do not need to take place in structured forums or formal political institutions. They can take root in the informal public sphere, in everyday talk, and digital media (Mansbridge 1999b; Esau, Fleuß and Nienhaus 2020). Deliberative uptake can be asynchronous or distributed in different political moments (Goodin 2005). A political claim made, for example, in a television interview or a photo quote on Instagram, can prompt a reflective conversation among communities that contributes to the process of the formation of the public opinion and collective judgment (see Coleman and Moss 2012). In other words, deliberative democracy does not require a back-and-forth engagement with the same interlocutors, but, in its systemic conception, is concerned about the free circulation of contesting discourses that allows societies to be sensitive to good reasons.

As a normative project, deliberative democrats have theorised the principles that give status to communities experiencing poverty in political life. The principle of political equality is key in this regard, which means everyone, regardless of social and economic status, have,

equal access to the floor, equal participation in setting the ground rules for discussion, and a set of ground rules designed to encourage pertinent speaking, attentive listening, appropriate simplifications, and widely apportioned speaking rights (Schudson 2008, p. 307).

Political equality presupposes that all persons not only have the right to speak, but the opportunity for one’s views to be heard and seriously considered as making a valuable contribution to collective will formation. By setting out this normative principle, deliberative theorists do two things. First, they provide a vocabulary to call out dysfunctional practices in the public sphere that entrench the discursive privilege of the economically powerful, whether it is through lobbying, digital disinformation, or malicious media coverage. It also challenges micropolitical practices that focus on status markers as proxies for good reasons (Holdo and Sagrelus 2019). Second, they provide a normative agenda for a political project to transform how democracies (or even autocracies) operate by creating spaces where deliberative norms of inclusiveness, respect, and mutual justification can flourish.

Since the institutional turn of deliberative democracy, these spaces for reform are often associated to mini-publics (Dryzek 2010). Simply put, mini-publics are a series of

purposefully designed small-scale forums where a representative sample of citizens exchange their views, gain access to credible information, and decide on collective outcomes. Mini-publics vary in size, design, and purpose. For some, these forums create conditions where communities experiencing poverty can assert their equal status as citizens. Political equality is realised in deliberative mini-publics when they foster ‘an atmosphere in which everyone’s voice is valued’ (Fishkin 2014, p. 32). When forums are composed of diverse people, when rules of turn-taking and norms of respect and reflection are in place, when facilitators actively bring in the voices of traditionally marginalised groups in the discussion, mini-publics demonstrate how democratic conversations can take place under conditions of fairness and equality. James Fishkin’s decades-long work running deliberative polls provides evidence to this claim, where he finds ‘non-domination by the more privileged’ in their measures of opinion change (Fishkin 2014, p. 32). The views of more privileged participants do not sway the position of the group, while subjective evaluations of mini-publics reveal that participants think that all viewpoints were valued in the process. Today, deliberative mini-publics are gaining traction in shaping the critical policy areas (see OECD 2020). Among the most recent high-profile examples is the French Citizens’ Assembly on Climate Change. Convened by President Emmanuel Macron to respond to the Yellow Vest Protest, one hundred fifty randomly selected French citizens deliberated for months to recommend how France can cut its carbon emissions by 40% by 2030. One recommendation was to criminalise ‘ecocide.’ This recommendation will be subject to a national referendum (see Mellier-Wilson 2020).

In other parts of the world, micro-deliberative forums take an institutionalised form. The field of international development has long acknowledged the multidimensional character of poverty. Beyond absolute measures of income, the field has recognised that the lack of citizen voice is as much a part of the experience of poverty as it is the deprivation of material resources (Menocal and Sharma 2008, p. 15). Without voice, low-income communities are subject to shame and humiliation, inhumane treatment and exploitation which corrodes their esteem as participants in public life (The World Bank 2001; also Lister 2004; Walker 2014). Today, over \$21.6 billion worth of community-driven development programs emphasise the importance of listening to ‘the voices of the poor’ and letting communities take charge of determining their development needs and priorities (Narayan 2000). ‘Deliberative development’ is how some scholars describe this approach, where a series of dialogic forums empower citizens to diagnose problems, discuss ideas, weigh options and strategize responses to collective problems (Evans 2004; Gibson and Woolcock 2008; Donovan 2012). There is a growing body of evidence demonstrating the impact of this approach not only in delivering better social services but also in developing the ‘oral competence’ of economically disadvantaged communities in asserting their interests amidst sharp inequalities and deep cultural cleavages (Sanyal and Rao 2019).

Gram sabhas is an example of a governance innovation using this approach, where 800 million people collectively deliberate and decide on the allocation of village budget to public goods like roads and bridges (see Sanyal and Rao 2019). These constitutionally mandated, village-level assemblies are today’s largest exercises in deliberative politics. *Gram sabhas*, to be sure, do not always realise deliberative virtues. Often, what is expressed in these assemblies are household concerns instead of arguments

justified based on the common good. That said, these village assemblies are effective in forging civic relationships among citizens with low income socialised to listen to each other's perspectives and renegotiating the link between the state and citizens from one defined by patronage to one defined by accountability. In many instances, citizens call out malpractice, such caste-based discrimination of water allocation or village leaders siphoning off money. This mechanism for direct public accountability forces village officials and government bureaucrats to respond to citizens, regardless of their caste, gender, or class. This intervention also developed voices of women, some of whom later on take leadership positions in the community or in electoral politics. While citizens with low income have varying degrees of deliberative capacity, India's case, on the whole, demonstrates that a version of deliberative democracy can unfold in contexts of low literacy and extreme inequality. This, for Paromita Sanyal and Vijayendra Rao, 'is one of the most remarkable developments in Indian democracy in the last thirty years' (Sanyal and Rao 2019, p. 48).

The track record of mini-publics in giving voice to communities experiencing poverty has inspired many other proposals to implement these forum's norms and logics on a larger scale. Scott Wisor (2012), for example, considers citizens assemblies as 'one promising mechanism' to set the post-2015 development framework. Building on the critique of Millennium Development Goals' procedural shortcomings (see Fehling, Nelson, and Venkatapuram 2013), Wisor argues that constructing the post-2015 development framework should ensure that the most marginalised populations get a fair hearing and that 'geographic location, domestic political arrangements, religious orientation, as well as key developmental challenges facing individual countries' are given serious consideration (also see Tanasoca and Dryzek 2019).

As mini-publics increasingly become a popular democratic innovation, a number of normative and practical issues remain unresolved. One of these issues is the limitation of micropolitical forums to mitigate background inequalities that shape public deliberation (Young 2002). Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson provide an apt reminder that 'when power is distributed unequally and when money substantially affects who has access to the deliberative forum, the results of deliberation in practice are likely to reflect these inequalities, and therefore lead, in many cases, to unjust outcomes' (Gutmann and Thompson, 2004, p. 48). Indeed, mini-publics do not take place in a vacuum. No matter how well-designed and epistemically fruitful a deliberative forum is, its outcomes cannot be insulated from status subordination low-income communities experience in the realm of everyday politics. Mini-publics may build the oral competency and political efficacy of disadvantaged communities, but the emancipatory potential of these capacities is limited when they are constantly discredited, stereotyped, misrepresented, undervalued and silenced in the public sphere. What use, for example, are 'successful' deliberative forums on welfare, if tabloids constantly portray the poor as welfare scroungers? These portrayals are not benign. They distort the public's view of communities experiencing poverty not as peers but as inferior citizens who cannot be trusted to have a political voice. They affect policymaking, such as the rollback of welfare state for people with low income do not deserve them (Chauhan and Foster 2014). Without improvements in the public sphere, the democratic outcomes of mini-publics would make little difference (see Lafont 2020).

A case for deliberative agency

A systemic turn in deliberative democracy offers possible responses to this critique of mini-publics. A deliberative systems approach recognises that not one site of deliberation, whether it is mini-publics or the parliament, can host all norms of deliberation at any one time. Conceptually, a deliberative systems approach considers the division of deliberative labour across different sites of discourses, and examines how these different sites are connected to each other to generate epistemic, democratic and ethical outcomes (Parkinson and Mansbridge 2012). Viewed this way, one can argue that the voices of communities experiencing poverty can get a fair hearing in well-designed deliberative forums, and, these voices, in turn, can be amplified by other well-placed agents in the deliberative system to secure impact in other arenas for discourse formation and decision-making.

Elected representatives are obvious agents for they have the mandate to respond to public input and situate this input in relation to the range of interests in one's constituency. For this ideal to be realised in practice, there needs to be strategies for substantive inclusion of disadvantaged communities in the parliament. Jane Mansbridge's (1999a and b) work on descriptive representation comes to mind, where she argues that disadvantaged groups 'may need a critical mass for their own members to become willing to enunciate minority positions' and 'to convince others particularly members of dominant groups that their perspectives or insights they are advancing are widely shared, genuinely felt, and deeply held within the group' (Mansbridge 1999a, p. 636). This vision, of course, remains a distant possibility especially in contexts of 'diploma democracies' where an elite group of well-educated citizens compose the majority of parliaments, thereby creating a gap between representation and lay politics (see Bovens and Wille 2017). For deliberative systems theorists, this signals the need to broaden one's gaze to other bearers of disadvantaged communities' discourses, whether it is social movements, humanitarian organisations, or loose networks of civil society groups who can break through the public sphere and keep the voices of low-income communities on the agenda. The example of celebrity humanitarians come to mind. Pop culture icons are clearly not experiencing poverty, but they serve as 'surrogate representatives' who can provide 'political presence' for economically disadvantaged communities, whether it is testifying in congress about conditions in refugee camps or running campaigns to end world hunger (Montanaro 2012, p. 1104). For some theorists, the deliberative participation of all affected by a decision is 'infeasible,' if not 'futile' in the deliberative system (Dryzek and Niemeyer 2008, p. 485). A realistic hope is for the discourses of disadvantaged communities to remain on the agenda and be taken seriously enough in the course of public deliberations.

Amplifying the voices of communities experiencing poverty in various spaces in the deliberative system is certainly a welcome development, though I argue that this is not enough. Building on Martin Ebeling and Fabio Wolkenstein's argument, focusing on spaces, institutions and representatives of low-income communities in the deliberative system 'risks losing sight of the important connection between deliberative agency and autonomy, opening the door to a vision of deliberative democracy in which the deliberative engagement of citizens is no longer a central concern' (Ebeling and Wolkenstein 2018, p. 636). Deliberative democracy, at its core, is a 'participatory ideal' that values citizens' active participation in deliberation so they can influence the

exercise of political power (Ebeling and Wolkenstein 2018, p. 636). This is why mini-publics are often considered the concrete instantiation of deliberative democracy because citizens exercise their deliberative agency – they defend their position in a manner that is suitable to their speech styles and cultural backgrounds, they listen to others and process new information which allow them to reflect and clarify their preferences in relation to the common good, all while being present in the company of their peers. It is important to realise the same process in the deliberative system, albeit taking a different shape. The response to the diagnosis that some parts of the deliberative system are dysfunctional in enforcing the principle of equality is not to take it as given that not all deliberative virtues can be realised at any one time, at one place, and subsequently find other spaces or agents in the deliberative system that can make up for this dysfunction. The democratic response is to reform these dysfunctional spaces in such a way that the poor can exercise their deliberative agency.

Simply put, deliberative agency refers to *performances of political justification in the public sphere* (Curato and Ong 2015). It is deliberative as far as citizens explain their considerations to an imagined audience treated as a potential interlocutor. It is agentic as far as citizens give an account of their own views using their own voice, thereby asserting their co-equal status as citizens who should be spoken with, not spoken for. I use the term ‘performance’ purposefully to emphasise agents’ contingent, dynamic, and creative ways of expression and the wider context from which the performance of political justification is given meaning (see Bächtiger and Parkinson 2019, p. 75). Deliberative democracy is not limited to offering reasons in a systematic and dispassionate manner. Deliberative agents take part in deliberative democracy through affective, visual, and embodied forms of communication (Curato 2019). Why, one may ask, does the exercise of deliberative agency of the poor matter in the deliberative system?

At the heart of this issue, I argue is the principle of political autonomy. By wilfully taking part in public deliberation, communities experiencing poverty act as authors of shared norms that societies value and collective decisions that affect their lives. To perform deliberative agency in the ‘wild life’ of the public sphere is especially critical because the social status of ‘being poor’ has been an identity ‘imposed upon people, rather than one initiated or constructed by them’ (Beresford and Croft 1995, p. 89). Such status subordination is entrenched when they are essentialised as a single group ‘with one opinion, attitude and perspective’ that are ‘somewhat detached from mainstream society’ (Krumer-Nevo and Benjamin 2010, p. 705; Lugo-Ocando 2019, p. 1). The public sphere is vulnerable to cognitive shortcuts based on dominant narratives, which, in turn shapes the discourses in the deliberative system (see Holdo and Sagrelus 2019). Viewed this way, inclusion of low-income communities is not just about giving them voice to express their preferences as the development literature emphasises, but also an exercise for them to problematise their identities, reflect on their hopes and grievances in relation to other discourses in the public sphere, and recognise the intersections of different forms of marginality to contribute to conversations about the common good (see Wojciechowska 2019). All these are essential for a deliberative system if disadvantaged communities were truly to be included in consequential deliberations. By saying this, I do not mean to argue that only people with direct experience of poverty should be part of deliberations about poverty, but that those with direct experience of poverty specifically should not be excluded from this discussion

(Beresford and Croft 1995, p. 78). And here lies the challenge for deliberative democracy, to theorise the possibilities for deliberative agency to ‘make itself visible and be consequential in complex society’ and think about ‘how might citizens exercise deliberative agency in the messy democracies of our age’ (Ebeling and Wolkenstein 2018, p. 637).

Ebeling and Wolkenstein’s response to this challenge is to propose political parties as a space for citizens to develop their deliberative agency. My response to this challenge takes a different angle, and relates to one of the most underdeveloped aspects of the deliberative systems approach, which is to theorise deliberative agency in the context of a hypermediated yet increasingly fragmented public sphere (Maia 2018). It is not an overstatement to say that the deliberative system is sustained by a hybrid media environment composed of print, broadcast, and digital media. Media is no longer just a source of information, as it was the case in the era of broadcast where communication was one-to-many. Now, digital technologies enable many-to-many (or some-to-some) forms of communication. The public are not just audiences receiving information but creators of content, whether it is tweets, pictures, blogs, or videos. For many, especially young people, the digital is the first point of political participation (Vromen 2017). Smart phones now have a ‘taken for granted’ quality such that ‘being online’ is no longer a distinct state (Ling 2012). Instead, smartphones have become ‘an integrated environment of communicative opportunities’ which serves as a default position for constituting social and political relationships (Madianou and Miller 2012, p. 180). John Keane refers to this moment as ‘the age of communicative abundance’ where ‘cheap tools of communication’ such as multipurpose mobile phones have become accessible for many, while the proliferation of genres of programming and storytelling—news, chat shows, political oratory, bitter legal spats, comedy, infotainment, drama, music, advertising, blogs, and much more clamour and jostle for public attention’ (Keane 2009, p. 15). It is in this communicative landscape where citizens who do not have direct experiences with poverty encounter disadvantaged communities. Even the most carefully designed mini-public cannot be insulated from the influences of a media-saturated deliberative system. Our background assumptions, biases, and priorities in deliberation are shaped by these mediated encounters. Instead of arguing whether a hypermediated public sphere is good or bad for deliberative democracy, it is more productive to consider the conditions and practices that enable the mediated public sphere to serve to promote deliberative virtues (Maia 2018).

Rousiley Maia’s work on ‘deliberative media’ is instructive in this regard. Maia recognises the dysfunctions of today’s media ecologies, including the control of corporate media and big tech, the sensationalist tendencies of journalists, and the media’s bias towards elite views. In the regime of ‘new despotism’ (Keane 2020), surveillance takes place also through digital media – spaces that are once considered important for free expression but now also serves as listening devices for despotic regimes not to suppress opposing views but to respond to emerging issues to further legitimise their rule. This however, is not to say that today’s media landscape has no deliberative potential. Following Maia’s approach, the challenge is to examine these dysfunctions with an eye for the nuances of how media can serve deliberative functions. She places emphasis on ‘well established normative principles’ on the democratic functions of journalism which, despite the proliferation of disinformation, continue to provide a framework for accountability (Maia 2018, p. 350). Questions about the

selectivity of media coverage may be valid, but she also finds that in complex and pluralistic societies, it is rare to find a ‘cohesive common interest’ even among elite actors (Maia 2018, p. 350). Politicians, lobbyists, spokespersons and activists face unequal access to different forms of media, and so it remains ambiguous how exactly one interest group can shape public debates. The fragmentation of publics also makes the consolidation of interests even more challenging that is why techniques of microtargeting emerge as effective tools for political communication today. Analytically, therefore, Maia encourages an ‘open-ended perspective’ when examining media’s deliberative functions, instead of prejudging today’s deliberative system as rigged to benefit one discourse.

A line of enquiry related to this that is worth pursuing is the examination of ‘formats and styles of presentation.’ ‘Soft news and talk shows,’ for example, can serve as a space for political deliberation, especially for citizens who are typically disengaged from conventional forms of political communication (Maia 2018, p. 353). In a separate publication, my colleague and I examined the role of talk shows in giving voice to women who have no access to reproductive health facilities (Curato and Ong 2015). We found that women experiencing poverty had access to genres where they expressed narrative agency by telling stories about their suffering, coupled with affective visuals that bring to life their everyday miseries. We find, however, that while the demands of women were central to deliberations about reproductive health, their deliberative agency were muted in that they were treated as bearers of stories – as resource persons – not as deliberative agents who can challenge the views of others, and engage in active deliberation. The lessons from this study, as well as from Maia’s provocations, are two-fold. First, that there are spaces for low-income communities in a hypermediated public sphere to take part in public deliberation. Genre is key in this regard. Second, there is little debate about whether disadvantaged communities have capacity to express deliberative agency. As William H. Sewell puts it, ‘a capacity for agency is as much a given for humans as the capacity for respiration’ (Sewell 2005, p. 144). The challenge, is to find out the kind of agency low-income communities are afforded in the deliberative system, and how do they exercise them given the possibilities and constraints of a particular historical context (Awad 2014). I present two illustrative cases in the next section that provide insight into both traditional and creative ways in which deliberative agency can be exercised in the deliberative system by low-income communities facing threats of an increasingly authoritarian regime.

The poor's deliberative agency in an illiberal society

Photojournalism and online music streaming are two illustrative examples of how communities experiencing poverty express their deliberative agency in the hypermediated public sphere. These examples are drawn from the case of the Philippines under the regime of the populist strongman Rodrigo Duterte. The insights are informed by two years of field research in the Philippines (December 2017 to October 2019), including over 20 interviews with families affected by deaths related to the anti-narcotics campaign, secondary data analysis and direct observation of protests and everyday practice in communities that witnessed a spate of killings.

In 2016, one of Asia's oldest and most vibrant democracy became part of the global wave of populism when they elected a man who promised 'to kill all drug addicts' as cornerstone of his campaign (see Thompson 2016; Reyes 2016; Kine 2017). In the first three years of President Duterte's rule, human rights groups estimate over 27,000 drug-related deaths, whether in police operations or vigilante killings. Most of the casualties are young and middle-aged men in some of Manila's most disadvantaged communities. The drug war has reached genocidal proportions not only in rhetoric—as the President literally called for the genocide of addicts—but also in practice (Simangan 2017). Some scholars argue that Duterte's drug war constitutes crimes against humanity given the scale of extrajudicial killings, the dehumanisation of victims and exaggeration of threat in a country where the level of drug use is actually less than the global average (Gallagher, Raffle, and Maulana 2019). For historian Vicente Rafael, Duterte's rule is anchored on 'the workings of necropower' or the 'idea that freedom and authority stem from the right to kill' (Rafael 2019, p. 143).

In the first months of the Duterte presidency, media representations of the drug war revolve around reports of deaths. Major news organisations curated microsites such as The Kill List (The Philippine Daily Inquirer), Impunity Series (Rappler.com) and The Drug War, Unheard Voices (ABS-CBN News) to chronicle case files and death counts, accompanied by confronting images of corpses wrapped up in packing tape and labelled with a cardboard sign that says 'I am a pusher, do not imitate me.' Such visual tactics are reminiscent of 'public crucifixions, hangings and the display of decapitated heads on spikes along roadways from classical antiquity to the early modern period' (Rafael 2018). Media reports evoke a sense of fear as well as order, as the President is indeed keeping his word.

A character that sits alongside bloodied corpses are widows and mothers rushing to the scene. Images of 'hysterical' mothers being whisked away by police from the crime scene and wives grieving over the dead bodies of their partners have become staple features in the news. An image headlined in *The Philippine Daily Inquirer* and *The New York Times* called La Pieta has been iconic of these representations, where Jennifer Olayres sits alone in concrete, cordoned off by the police, inconsolable as she cradles the lifeless body of her partner Michael Siaron. The photograph needed little explanation for it 'captured something previously not captured by political rhetoric, other photos, or written words' (Phippen 2016).

There are various debates about media ethics of representing suffering and their implications to democratic politics (see Sontag 2003). Confronting images can mobilise new communities of solidarity and fellow feeling but they can also affirm existing opinions (Castillo 2019). In the case of the Philippines where 82% of the population support Duterte's drug war (Social Weather Stations 2019), these photos may elicit the response that victims deserve their suffering. Indeed, creative and spectacular forms of storytelling, whether photos, long form pieces, or short films, play an ambivalent role in deliberative politics (Curato 2019). They can provoke reflection or harden preferences, instigate conversations or put an end to emerging debates when sceptics declare the images as fake. They can empower the victims to claim space in the public sphere or they can contribute the 'marginalisation of women in the visual regime of the drug war' as passive victims and depoliticised actors (see Diaz 2019). The normalisation of portrayals also poses the danger that audiences start to feel nothing, or simply refuse to look (Castillo 2019).

These debates prompt an examination of possibilities for communities experiencing poverty to express their deliberative agency in a polarised public sphere under threat of illiberal rule. Specifically, it is worth examining how women's voices can be amplified in a fragmented public sphere where citizens, based on polling data, overwhelmingly support the Duterte regime despite of, or perhaps, because of, the violent anti-drug campaign (Social Weather Stations 2019). How can the hypermediated deliberative system be transformed to be hospitable to the voices of women experiencing poverty where their political claims and public justifications are taken seriously?

Photojournalism

One possibility lies in shifting the portrayal of women as hapless victims to active agents demanding justice. As the drug war unfolds, mothers and widows of drug suspects ambushed or killed in police operations started organising to process their traumatic experiences and demand justice from the state. Human rights groups and advocacy organisations have sponsored forums which serve as safe space for citizens to express their grievances, learn about their rights, listen to the stories of similarly-situated families, and clarify their preferences on how they plan to move forward from the tragedy. Others started filing cases in local courts against abusive cops, while there are those who took a step further and filed a case against President Duterte in the International Criminal Court. Like mini-publics used for community development, these forums often take the form of discursive enclaves. They make occasional connections to spaces of decision-making like courts and senate enquiries but are cautious from engaging the wider public sphere due to the sensitivity of the situation. Families fear the threat of retaliation from the police and drug syndicates if they publicly testify to the crimes. Others are attacked on social media by the state's troll army who dehumanise casualties and their families by calling them crackheads and zombies (see Ong and Cabañes 2019). There may be micropolitical forums available for low-income women to learn, express and reflect on their views, but reaching out to the public sphere remains a big challenge.

Photojournalism is one genre that bridges the micropolitical responses to the drug war to macropolitical engagement in the deliberative system. In the early days of the drug war, photojournalists earned the moniker 'nightcrawlers,' which is a 'self-deprecating nickname' of 'a band of freelance photojournalists who have dedicated themselves to documenting the human cost of Duterte's policy and rhetoric' (Jones 2019). Three years into Duterte's term the visual focus of the nightcrawlers expanded from covering families' grief to indignation. Far from the standard critique of melodramatic sensationalism, photojournalism has served as bridge for low-income women who wish to go beyond their discursive enclave, break through the public sphere and express their deliberative agency.

Women's deliberative agency are expressed through embodied and affective forms of claim-making (Curato 2019; Asenbaum, Ercan and Mendonca, forthcoming). Take the case of Nanette Castillo, a forty-nine-year-old woman who lost her only son Aldrin two months before Christmas in 2017. Aldrin was in Tondo, one of the roughest streets in Manila when he was killed. In our interview, Nanette told me that Aldrin was just about to buy brandy across the road when seven men wearing masks on motorcycles

shot him on the head thrice. Twice on the cheek. Once on the neck. According to the Commission on Human Rights, Aldrin was a case of mistaken identity. Like Jennifer Olayres, Nanette had her own La Pieta photo, cradling her son surrounded by on-lookers, as she screams of anger.

Months later, Nanette, together with a group of mothers, is photographed in peaceful protests against the killings. Nanette stands out in this group, for she wears a laminated sheet of A4 paper hung around her neck, as if it were an oversized name badge. On the left side of the paper is Aldrin's photo with a big smile. On the right are the words 'Justice for Aldrin Castillo' printed in big bold letters. Nanette's strategy challenges the 'dystopian master trope' of how low-income families experience the drug war (Jones 2011, p. 698). Instead of hiding in fear, Nanette is calling for attention. She wants to be photographed. She embraces the embodied character of public discourse and utilises the public sphere as a space where she can be heard, and as well as seen. She subverts social markers of status subordination which devalues their voices in the Philippines' elite democracy. Her sunburnt skin and the brashness in her manner of speaking come together in a powerful narrative of a mother who is simultaneously grieving, angry, and demanding justice. Together with other mothers and widows, Nanette uses the trope of sorrow in protests. Some wear mourning veils, others light candles, and then there are those who re-enact the scene of the crime, of mothers embracing the bodies of their dead children, this time, no longer isolated by a police cordon but surrounded by other grieving families and protesters bearing signs calling for the end of killings. These performances are strategic. They are organised as media events timed during milestones of the drug war, such as filing a case against President Duterte in the International Criminal Court, to merit media coverage.

This, however, is not to say that any type of media coverage is welcome. In an interview, Belen, a sixty-one-year-old laundry woman who also lost her son to the drug war, explained her ethical calculations when dealing with intensive media coverage. Belen worked with filmmakers who featured her story in German media. For her, agreeing to be the subject of the documentary is important to generate international attention to the case she filed in court. For months, filmmakers followed her movements, tailing her jeepney rides and court appearances. 'I was like an actress!' she said. But there are limits to Belen's performance. She told the producers off when they intrusively filmed her while she was praying inside a church, which disturbed other devotees. 'They annoy me,' she said, but nevertheless continued to cooperate in filming for it is a venue to explain her reasons why she filed a case. Belen, however, stopped cooperating with the filmmakers when they prevented her from inviting other widows to be part of the documentary. She wanted the filmmakers to show that she is not alone, that there are other mothers who filed a case with her, that there are other mothers grieving with her in the cemetery. The filmmakers explained that they are only focusing on her story, and rejected her pitch. For Belen, this was a betrayal of the system of mutual aid among victims, and so she decided to give cold treatment to the production team, and eventually pull out of follow-up documentary. This example, while not exclusively focusing on photojournalism, highlights how deliberative agency is also exercised in renegotiating portrayals of victims as isolated heroic actors and insisting on collective political presence. These affective, visual, and photograph-worthy performances break through the exclusionary public sphere that has been dominated by populist discourses that are othering and dehumanising to drug suspects. Nanette

recognises that speaking up bears risks, not only from her son's killers but also from her friends and neighbours who stigmatise her as the mother of an addict. Nevertheless, Nanette, like a few other respondents I have interviewed, finds speaking up in the public sphere a necessity to 'set the record straight' and contest dominant narratives that humiliate the legacy of her son. Accompanying these images are justifications for the protest. Local and international press often quote Nanette challenging the public over their silence. 'We have created a monster drunk with power and thirsty for the blood of poor Filipinos,' she said in a monologue. 'We've lost too many husbands, siblings, children and loved ones in the drug war' (in Ramos 2019). Like many mothers, Nanette places nuance in her claims. She admits that her son is a drug user, that they had many fights about it, demonstrating to her interlocutors that she too can admit fault, and her family is not entirely blameless. But her son is 'not violent,' she clarifies. 'He doesn't steal. It's not reason enough to kill him,' Nanette argues (in McCarthy 2019). 'If the government really wants to, it can rehabilitate him,' she adds, engaging with on-going debates among academics and technocrats about drug policy.

While some express scepticism over emotive imagery's capacity to promote deliberation in the public sphere, these examples, I argue, provide what John Louis Lucaites and Robert Hariman refer to as 'crucial social, emotional, and mnemonic resources for animating collective identity and action' that are necessary for democratic politics (Lucaites and Hariman 2001, p. 37). While photojournalism can normalise images of violence that lead publics to compassion fatigue, photojournalists can also normalise images of disadvantaged communities as participants in democratic life (Lucaites and Hariman 2001, p. 41). The 'traditional' character of photojournalism performs a particular deliberative function, in that it places women's deliberative agency on record in legacy media like *The New York Times* and local news organisations like *ABS-CBN*. Publishing photos of women making demands and contextualised in news reports where women's reasons are placed in the foreground are exercises in media power that places otherwise marginal claims on the centre of the public agenda. They broaden the reach of claims made in discursive enclaves, and invite responses from the global public sphere. This, of course, is not to say that photojournalism and legacy media are perfect conduits for drawing attention to poor women's deliberative agency. A separate catalogue of their faults can also be evaluated. For now, what this section seeks to underscore are possibilities for the deliberative system, with all the constraints of illiberalism and profit-driven media, for women to break through the public sphere and perform their deliberative agency.

Music streaming services

Music streaming services may also serve as hospitable space for communities living in poverty to perform deliberative agency. In a hypermediated public sphere, online streaming is the default for the production, distribution, and consumption of music. As in the case of photojournalism, the democratic potential of services like Spotify, SoundCloud, and YouTube is an empirical question. Some argue that streaming services have low barriers to entry, empowering artists to directly connect with their audiences without the gatekeepers of the music industry. For others, the power of streaming services lies with the way they order the musical landscape which privileges some artists over others (Spilker 2018).

Recognising the technological and profit-driven constraints of music streaming services, I argue that these platforms also offer particular qualities that create spaces for low-income communities to break in the public sphere. Illustrative of this case are independently produced music which criticise the drug war. There are several examples of these productions. One is the Manila-based hip-hop group One Pro Exclusive¹ who produced the songs *Yakap* (Embrace) and *Hustisya* (Justice) in honour of their friend, Michael Siaron – the pedicab driver killed in the streets of Manila, the subject of the viral photo *La Pieta* mentioned in the previous section. One of the producers, Jay, personally saw Michael the night he was murdered (see Freeman and MacPherson 2017; McKidry 2017). He described Michael to have joyful disposition, one whose voice is as powerful as Adele's. Writing a song about his friend is a meaningful way to honour his life, as well as draw attention to the pain and politics of the drug war.

The first song *Yakap* is rapped from the perspective of Michael's partner Jennifer.² The first verses of the song recaps Jennifer's unease as she waited for Michael to come home (translation: 'I asked myself/If I did anything wrong/I know I didn't/So why aren't you home?'). As the song unfolds, listeners are taken to Jennifer's emotional ordeal, of finding out about the shooting, the last night she held Michael, and the longing she feels today. On YouTube, the lyrics of the song are superimposed on the *La Pieta* photo, taking listeners to the scene of the crime. The lyrics allude to injustice, declaring that Michael was a good man, but masked men decided its fine for him to die.

Meanwhile, the song *Hustisya*, as the title suggests, demands justice for Michael's death.³ It begins with a clip of a primetime news anchor reporting that there have been over 4000 drug-related killings six months since President Duterte took office. As the anchor asked whether the public is willing to accept this as reality, the video transitioned to the photo of the *La Pieta*. Compared to *Yakap*, the song is clearly political. Michael's brother wrote the first verse. Among the powerful lines of the song included a question of how many more of President Duterte's supporters would be brought to the grave, insinuating that drug suspects killed in police operations pinned their hopes on the strongman too. The song also asks what happened to human rights as Filipinos, mostly low-income men, are being slaughtered like animals. It identifies the implications of deaths to families who are left to live a life of grief, and to cops who recklessly kill just to reach their 'quota' of five bodies a day. In between the verses are more clips of news reports that show the brutality of Michael's murder.

There are many more examples of rap music that contribute to the public conversation about the drug war. Notable in these examples is the thirteen-track album *Kolateral* (Collateral) produced by Sandata, a group of artists who conducted extensive interviews with families of those who were killed in the war. Like One Pro Exclusive, Sandata, which in Tagalog literally means weapon, uses the genre of rap and hip-hop to tell stories and make an argument from the perspective of affected communities. What makes One Pro Exclusive particularly remarkable, however, is that it is people from disadvantaged backgrounds themselves who wrote, sang, and produced the music, in a cramped room in the tenement where Siaron used to live. It is a direct expression of

¹ YouTube page accessible at, <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCKa8GvO7Qd20zDIUJ1FXgKA/videos>

² Available at, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hj8WCGFsDHc>

³ Available at, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fafEVkd5yaI>

deliberative agency, of the community using a creative style of claim-making that connects their discourses of the wider public sphere.

There are two ways in which online streaming made this possible. First, using music as main currency for engaging the public sphere, streaming services enable communities to contest the politics of cultural production that gives meaning to the drug war. Historically, hip-hop has been associated to both narratives of ‘struggle and resilience,’ articulated by an artist speaking directly from his or her lived experience of ‘the brokenness of the world’ (McLeod 2017, p. 132). Such narratives are powerful counterpoints to dominant cultural messages. President Duterte’s supporters as well as village-level police campaigns also use musical performances to justify the drug war to local communities in a relatable and amusing fashion. Producers like One Pro Exclusive, in effect, respond to these performances by performing their deliberative agency. The songs tell a nuanced story of vulnerability and resilience, of pain and indignation, of criticality and demands for accountability (Sule and Inkster 2015). These challenge portrayals of disadvantaged communities as objects of the drug war – those whose lives are disposable and undeserving of compassion (Butler 2006) – to political actors who question the reasons why many have to die. The legitimacy of policies is fought on the cultural level, and independently produced hip-hop allow low-income communities to take part in that deliberation by challenging the government’s position and provoking a reaction to citizens who support the war.

Second, it is not only hip-hop as a genre that facilitates the disadvantaged communities’ inclusion in a contested policy debate. The platform of online streaming facilitates the distribution and subsequent creation of counter-publics. In Michael Neblo and Avery White’s conceptualisation of the deliberative system, the media serves a mechanism for ‘effective translation’ of ‘messages understandable to its eventual audience’ (Neblo and White 2018, p. 451). Neblo and White see this function as an informational one where the media ‘repackages’ information to be legible to citizens and then distributed through channels like television and the internet. However, as discussed in an earlier section, a hypermediated public sphere no longer operates in a unilinear fashion but one where citizens can simultaneously be creators and consumers of content. Viewed this way, digital streaming serves as ‘a fulcrum and test bed for novel ways to distribute cultural content’ (Spilker 2018, p. 3). ‘Music discovery’ is central to the affordance of streaming, where citizens are invited to share their playlists, encounter artists they otherwise would not encounter, and invite reflection on how these digital experiences map on their own views and subcultures online and offline (Dhaenens and Burgess 2019, p. 1194). One indication of this are the comments section of One Pro Exclusive’s YouTube videos. Reactions included empathy, admiration for the producer’s courage, and critical argument against the drug war. Examples of comments include (translated)⁴:

this is so bad ass, it’s making me tear up (Johnmeinaard Mingoa, 2 years ago)

⁴ Available at, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fafEVkd5yaI>

you're good... keep working hard to make songs based on the truth... long live
(ronnie dela cruz, 2 years ago)

no wordplay, no arrogant lines... but the emotions of grief captivate our hearts
and soul (lyko, 2 years ago)

While these YouTube channels function as discursive enclaves and rarely invites conversations from those who do not share similar views, it remains important for counter-publics to claim an 'informal educational space to learn, discuss, vent, heal, resist, and escape from the stress and fatigue' of hostility towards poor communities (Love 2016, p. 320). These achievements, for a distant observer, may seem mundane, but for communities living the everyday realities of threats and authoritarian power, these achievements sustain the voice necessary for a critical public sphere and connect them to an audience they would otherwise not meet if it were not for algorithmic logics.

Deliberative agency in the deliberative system

What lessons can we learn from the illustrative examples of photojournalism and music streaming? I conclude this article by offering two propositions for deliberative democracy's account for communities experiencing poverty.

First, I argue that deliberative agency plays a central role if deliberative theory's systemic turn were to keep its commitments to participatory ideals. While the field generated compelling evidence on how disadvantaged communities can perform deliberative agency in micropolitical forums or mini-publics, it seems that deliberative agency gets lost in the picture when we start talking about distributed deliberations in the macropolitical sphere. In this article, I argue that it is not enough to find spaces and representatives that amplify the voices of communities living in poverty in the deliberative system. As examples of photojournalism and music streaming demonstrate, there is value for low-income communities to directly exercise their deliberative agency by purposefully curating their performances of claim-making in the public sphere. Status subordination cannot be overcome by giving voice to disadvantaged communities in discrete, community-level forums. The battle for discursive equality and recognition rests on the cultural level, fought in a hypermediated and fragmented public sphere. The politics of presence is as important as the politics of discursive representation.

One, however, might wonder, what exactly is the value of these creative forms of expression. Do they shift policy? Do they persuade citizens to vote out a murderous regime in the next elections? The short answer is no, they do not. Micropolitical performances of deliberative agency cannot singlehandedly solve macropolitical problems. What they do is contribute to the complex process of collective opinion formation that shape the course of public deliberation. They promote the deliberative virtues of inclusion and multivocal forms of reason-giving and redistribute the voice and visibility that has been denied to communities that experience status subordination. These are not

insignificant achievements in a public sphere distorted by spin, state surveillance and dark money.

Second, both examples provoke reflection on the ways in which the voices of disadvantaged communities in mini-publics can learn lessons from the voices of disadvantaged communities in the public sphere. One important lesson from the illustrative cases is about the role of creative, embodied and expressive performances that empower low-income households to take part in conversations in a media-saturated deliberative system. The same logics can be applied to mini-publics. Mini-publics need not be designed as rigid forums where systematic reason-giving are the only desirable norms. Mini-publics can be enriched by drawing on diverse multivocal traditions of claim-making that capture the miseries, grievances, and aspirations of communities experiencing poverty. Evidence presented in mini-publics, for example, can draw from evocative images and musical performances, which can provoke reflection and disrupt dominant paradigms of thought. Communicating the outcomes of mini-publics also can draw on creative communicative traditions beyond turning over a report to decision-makers and instead seek to influence how the public views disadvantaged communities as interlocutors or peers in public life. At the heart of deliberative democracy's promise is a vision of political equality, and, as I hope to have demonstrated in this piece, an important step to reach this vision is to recognise, amplify, and create spaces for deliberative agency even amidst murderous times.

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