

Wiki warriors

Martial Law & Wikipedia: activists fighting to keep truth of brutal Marcos regime in Philippines alive

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Revisionism becoming rife amid signs the descendants of the former dictator have never been closer to a political comeback.

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“It’s basically like playing in the sandbox. You build a sandcastle and then another kid comes along and just kicks it over.” That’s how it feels to be on the front lines of information warfare in the Philippines, explains computer programmer Carlos Nazareno.

The 39-year-old is one of a handful of committed “Wikipedians” who edit sensitive pages about Philippine history, including that of former Philippine dictator Ferdinand Marcos and the years he ruled the country under martial law.

The task has taken on greater significance in recent months, amid concerns the former ruling family is closer than ever to making a political comeback, and fears the incumbent president Rodrigo Duterte is using similar tactics. Duterte declared martial law in May to crush an Islamist insurgency on this island of Mindanao – a state that has since been extended until 31 December.

Narazeno will spend hours ridding a page of untruths, cleaning up historical revisionism and backing it up with sources, even though there is a high chance another user will come along and kick over the sandcastle – deleting it all in one go.

Back and forth the cyber tussle goes, a series of deletions, restorations and revisions, until it finally spirals into what is known in Wikipedia world as an “edit war”.

“It’s emotionally draining,” admits Nazareno, who nevertheless feels compelled to continue.

Marcos family a spectre over Philippine politics

For decades there has been a concerted campaign to paint the Marcos family in a more benign light, but it was ratcheted up on Wikipedia late last year, and the controversial edits continue.

A spike in changes coincided with the controversial hero’s burial for Marcos, who perpetuated his

20-year-rule over the Philippines through a combination of martial law, rights abuses and corruption.

On the Ferdinand Marcos Wikipedia page, which over the past decade has been edited on average about 300 times a year, changes increased from 375 in 2015, to 1,328 in 2016.

Changes made on pages about martial law, and son Ferdinand “Bongbong” Marcos Jr also showed attempts to manipulate the facts in a pro-Marcos manner.

One prominent example in the fight for the legacy of Ferdinand Marcos is the use of the word kleptocrat in the first line of his page. It has previously been erased, because, as any search on Google invariably throws up the Wikipedia page and a short excerpt of that article, the opening line is crucial.

Other small but significant edits – deleting the word “stolen” from the term stolen wealth – help sculpt a more palatable picture of the late leader, a president, who along with the infamous excesses of his wife Imelda, is accused of plundering an estimated \$10bn from the poverty stricken country.

But since fleeing the presidential palace via helicopter in 1986, the Marcos family has staged a remarkable political comeback.

“They are just at the doorstep of Malacañang palace right now,” says Raissa Robles, a Filipina investigative journalist, of how close the Marcos family is again to power.

After losing the vice presidential vote by 260,000 votes last year, Bongbong – a 59-year-old former senator – contested the results and the case is ongoing.

When it comes to the Marcos family, the reshaping of history is a widespread enterprise. It is evident in school textbooks, historical websites, and in a series of slick YouTube videos, usually with the same lines of attack: vilification of opposition figures, exaggeration of Marcos family achievements and propagation of unverified fact.

One claim reportedly made by Imelda Marcos herself in 1992 is that the family is fabulously wealthy because her husband discovered the mythical Yamashita gold – alleged war loot from the second world war rumoured to be hidden in a series of underground caves in the Philippines.

The Wiki warriors

It is somewhat inevitable that that fight over the past has made its way onto Wikipedia, the online, open-source encyclopaedia read by 500 million people a month.

“It’s huge,” says Joshua Lim, a Filipino-American Wikipedia administrator of the site’s reach. “It is no surprise people are going to want to co-opt the largest megaphone they can find for their own personal agenda.”

That anyone can edit a Wikipedia page if they know how, is what makes the site both beautiful and vulnerable, he says.

“We want to make sure the information people get is as accurate and truthful as possible,” he explains. “That is undermined, unfortunately, when people make edits like this, when people try to whitewash the Marcos narrative, and simply try to portray Ferdinand Marcos as a good guy when clearly there are more sides to him.”

There are about 500 Filipino Wikipedia editors, but only a handful work on the Marcos pages. They're mostly low-profile computer programmers, web developers and young professionals, those old enough to remember the days of martial law and young enough to understand the Wikipedia mainframe.

When Nazareno started editing Wikipedia a decade ago, he worked on pages about martial arts and sci-fi movies. These days he is more interested in tackling pernicious, historical untruths.

"The editing has been really active this past year and I think this has been a result of [president Rodrigo] Duterte's win because they're seeing the internet is a really powerful tool and that a person on the internet, especially in politics, it can help make or break them," he says.

Armies of trolls sending out copy-and-paste messages and memes helped drum up widespread support for Duterte's swashbuckling presidential bid last year, and have remained a force in support of his drug war, harassing and at times threatening critics and journalists.

The battle for truth has played out intensely in the Philippine cyber sphere, and not just for domestic purposes. When Donald Trump launched his presidential bid, the largest proportion of his Facebook fans were inexplicably from the Philippines. Analysts said the data was an indication of troll farms.

On Wikipedia there is no way to know for sure who or what might be behind questionable edits, given there is an option to do so anonymously. Ultimately though, it's a numbers game. The more edits made, the greater the chance of shaping the narrative.

Lamenting that Wikipedia is often looked upon as an unreliable source, editors such as Nazareno hope more academics, especially history professors, might get involved to form a bulwark against the tide of misinformation.

"Because you know what's faster than the speed of light?" asks Nazareno, somewhat dryly. "The speed of a rumour."

Kate Lamb in Manila

P.S.

* The Guardian. Wednesday 2 August 2017 01.24 BST Last modified on Wednesday 2 August 2017 01.35 BST:

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/aug/02/wiki-warriors-activists-fighting-to-keep-truth-of-brutal-marcos-regime-in-philippines-alive>

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