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I myself can attest to how riven the country has been in the wake of “Yolanda” and the public’s perception of how the government has dealt with it. There’s no gathering I’ve been to lately that hasn’t been marked, or marred, at some point, if not the entire length of it, by heated debate in defense or condemnation of government. The only comparable time I’ve seen it was during the Christmas of 1985, before the scheduled snap election of February the following year, when family reunions were marked, or marred, by violent arguments.

The overwhelming sentiment then was for Cory, who many, particularly the younger generation, saw as heralding the new dawn. The overwhelming sentiment now is against government, or so it was last week. Many, particularly Visayans who were among the ravaged or had kin among the ravaged, blamed it if not for Yolanda’s ravaging, at least for its aftermath.

Which is but an extension of the drift of discussion in the social media, such as you could call much of it discussion: You are hard put to know which howled more furiously, Yolanda’s winds or some of the voices there. The dominant sentiment was criticism of government for looking in the first few days as much in a daze and walking aimlessly like a zombie—everyone’s favorite word to describe the walking dead of Tacloban—as the walking dead of Tacloban.

The content of the debate in the social media has itself been debated at length—whether the recriminations have been fair or not, whether the defense or attacks are justified or not. What has not been as remarked upon is the phenomenon of the public ferociously weighing in on what happened. It’s not just fiercer storms, courtesy of global warming, that are changing the landscape of this country, it’s also the storm of public opinion, courtesy of the social media.

Like global warming, the public commenting on public life is the new normal. Unlike global warming, which is merely terrifying, the social media are terrifying and exhilarating at the same time.

The terrifying part is easy enough to see. I can buy raw emotion: As an expert on climate change said at CNN, you need emotion, too, to feel the sense of urgency to push the agenda. Emotion is not the natural enemy of reason. But the social media often do a good job of refuting it. Look at the vituperations and ululations masquerading as commentaries that have flooded those media more massively than Tacloban of late, and you’ll appreciate Mark Twain’s remark that it is better to keep your mouth shut and be thought of as a fool than to open it and confirm the fact.

Gracia Cassandra, whom Wired quoted in its recent issue, nailed it on the head when she said, “At its worst, social media amplifies idiocy on a scale never before possible.” I myself do not mind Monday-morning quarterbacking. It’s a temptation most of us yield to, hindsight being always 20-20 vision. But I do mind the cursing, the mindless chatter, the spewing of venom with abandon. Little wonder the social media have become the favorite haunt of PR groups. They’re the perfect place, with their anonymity and anarchy, for them to ply their shadowy trade. Little wonder, too, many people I know have told me they’ve recently taken a break from reading the social media; one supertyphoon laying the country low is enough for the month.

But from the other end, the social media are also one of the most exciting things to have happened to this country. Paraphrasing Cassandra, at its best, social media amplify public participation on a scale never before possible.

At their best, the social media can be a vigilant watchdog. I'm not at all surprised that the antipork campaign emerged from their loins. It's the social media that both aroused and gave voice to the public anger over pork. Which is well and good. Even the best of governments cannot stop corruption by itself. It needs the public itself getting angry at corruption, refusing to continue to allow the corrupt to get away, to stop corruption.

Indeed, at their best, the social media make democracy real. Our particular democracy has always been flawed or defective in one respect, which is that, outside of elections, the public doesn't really get to take part in public affairs, in public discourse, in the making of public policy. For the most part, the public is simply ignored, dismissed, humored. That is not so in other democratic countries where public opinion is one of the most dynamic elements of governance.

We've caught a glimpse of that possibility in the social media. For the first time in our lives, the public is able to express itself directly, the public is able to influence the course of events, the public is able to say, "Even at its best, a democratic government isn't just a government for the people, it is also a government of the people and by the people."

Of course you'll find excess, silliness and plain ignorance in the social media, as witness many of the witless comments on Yolanda's aftermath. But those are acceptable risks. It's part of the territory called democracy which, as Winston Churchill said, "is the worst form of government except for all those others that have been tried." The social media are giving soul and sinew to it in these parts as nothing has ever done before, and that is exciting.

The public weighing in on what has happened and is happening is here to stay. And will grow stronger in time, as the PC and Internet expand across the country and claim more users. Government can't fight it, nor should it, however stormy it gets, however contrary it gets. It can only engage it, in hopes of steering it in new directions, in more fruitful directions. The worst of the acrimonious debates are not behind us, they are in front of us.

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