#HOLDPOWERTOACCOUNT:
A VIRTUAL ETHNOGRAPHY OF COLLECTIVE ACTION TOWARDS GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY IN THE COVID-19 CRISIS

"These numbers are not just statistics for us, that's why we take so much care with our sources and every line item in that document — because it represents real people. And I think holding the government accountable means first, the truth, and then, people having a right to better governance and help."   – Citizens' Budget Tracker volunteer

The COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 has been one of the worst outbreaks in recent history, with over 23 million cases and 800,00 deaths and counting as confirmed by the World Health Organization, creating serious health, economic and social damage. In the face of such high stakes, governments around the world were challenged to manage the crisis by designing and implementing policies to save not just resources, but lives. In the Philippines, the setting in which our study takes place in, the first local transmission was recorded on March 7. This marked the beginning of a rising curve the country struggled to flatten as it became the country with the most COVID-19 cases in the Southeast Asian region. By March 23, Philippine Congress enacted a law, the Bayanihan[1] to Heal as One (BAHO) Act, which granted President Rodrigo Duterte emergency powers and the authority to control facilities such as public utilities and health facilities, and to allocate and spend a reported budget of Php 275 billion (4.9 billion €) from the national budget of Php 438 billion (7.8 billion €) allotted for 2020. The BAHO Act also mandated the President to report weekly to Congress regarding the utilization of such funds. On March 30 near midnight, Duterte boldly assured the public through a national address, *"There's no need to fear; I'm telling you, I have the money."* However less than a week later in another late night address, the President reversed his position on the budget saying, *"There's not enough money to go around"* and instructed the Secretary of Finance, *"Steal or borrow, I don't care. Produce the money."* (Punongbayan, Suzara, Mangilit, Abad, Villanueva & Morales, 2020)

With the country already facing fiscal difficulties (De Vera, 2020), President Duterte's inconsistent response shocked the nation, prompting citizens and the press to demand, *"Where did the Php 275 billion go?"* (Rey, 2020). A group of concerned citizens took it upon themselves to seek answers to that question. Through a virtual ethnography, this paper follows how these citizens self-organized for an initiative called Citizens' Budget Tracker (CBT) to hold the government accountable and ensure national funds were properly allocated and used for fighting the pandemic. From a team starting with only a few friends from a one-sentence Facebook post to over 60 volunteers ranging from data scientists and accountants to designers and copy-writers, the CBT team organized quickly to regularly analyze data, report their findings through a dashboard, website and social media, and advocate for their policy recommendations (see Appendix), all without ever meeting in person. The initiative received much acclaim and was prominently featured in the media, and their recommendations have been integrated in a succeeding act passed by Congress. As the CBT presents a unique case of collective action (Ostrom, 2000) in crisis due to its unprecedented nature, I contribute to the organization studies literature by answering the question, **"How does collective action organize for accountability in a crisis?"** and thus, aim to establish a framework for how actors collaborate and coordinate decision-making to hold power to account.

Theoretical Background

We draw on the crisis management (James, Wooten, & Dushek, 2011) and extreme context (Hällgren, Rouleau, & de Rond, 2018) literatures which have featured various crises

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[1] Bayanihan is a Filipino tradition of mutual aid and cooperation with one's community

of multiple types, such as natural disasters (Boin, Rhinard, & Ekengren, 2014; Weick, 1993) and accidents (Beck & Plowman, 2014). Antonacopoulou & Sheaffer (2014) state that the process and purpose of crisis management is it "entails the execution of well-synched activities aimed at containing and isolating damage" (p.6). The chosen empirical context of COVID-19 offers a rich setting to observe collective action in crisis and will be valuable to the literature for the following reasons. First, organization and governance are particularly salient and critical in a crisis situation such as the COVID-19 pandemic. During a crisis, actors must quickly respond to a changing landscape through decision-making and sensemaking (Weick, 1993). Considering that thought and action may be reversed in sensemaking as compared to traditional paradigms of rational decision-making, Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld argue, "action is always just a tiny bit ahead of cognition, meaning that we act our way into belated understanding" (2005: 419). Second, the process of coordinating in situations of crisis offers unique organizational behaviors and strategies, such as in the case of a study of a volunteer group acting as a sharing platform to help in the refugee crisis (Kornberger, Lexinerning, Meyer, & Höllerer, 2018; Kornberger, Leixnering & Meyer, 2019). Finally, with many institutions facing a crisis of accountability, our empirical setting allows us to build on current theoretical paradigms of audit, trust and public inquiry (Mueller, Carter, & Whittle, 2015). Institutional control can be exercised through accountability systems (Pas, Wolters, & Lauche, 2019) and hence, investigating the power relations in such would enrich the literature.

Method

We began this research project in May 2020 as the COVID-19 pandemic persisted, with the goal of observing the phenomenon as closely as possible, even with the limitation of social distancing and confinement. As the pandemic kept people at home, online spaces and communities became even more essential and hence, constructing a virtual ethnography (Kozinets, 2002; Puri, 2007) with multiple sources of qualitative data (see Appendix) allowed us to address the research question by capturing the unique nature of the crisis and how actors have organized in the midst of it. Through a media analysis of news articles, we first constructed a timeline of events that unfolded to contextualize CBT as it quickly arose. We then traced the project's development by scraping social media posts and internet forums and watching webinars over the course of several months from April 1 onwards to present day. Core team members also provided us access to organization documents and contacts. At present, we continue to conduct semi-structured interviews with key actors, including not just the CBT volunteers, but also journalists who have covered the COVID-19 national budget and members of coalition networks and local government units with which CBT has collaborated or is affiliated to gain a multiple stakeholder perspective. Interviews conducted have been over Zoom, each averaging 60 to 75 minutes, all of which were recorded and transcribed. We are also conducting participant observation through privileged access to CBT communication channels such as Slack and being included in online team meetings. As the synchronous experience of doing a virtual ethnography is different, we set a schedule for entering the online field regularly and systematically to observe any real-time interactions and take field notes to ensure greater methodological rigor (Tunçalp & Lê, 2014).

Preliminary Findings

Although we continue to collect data, at this point, some insights have emerged regarding the organizational process towards accountability, particularly on (1) the navigation of a rapidly shifting political landscape and information ecosystem and (2) the creation of safe and accessible spaces for dialogue. We find that the CBT volunteers straddle both the

subjectivity of personal feelings of anger and frustration and the objectivity of the audit process. Furthermore, the depoliticization and neutralization of their communication strategy has proven effective thus far in efforts towards public engagement and also avoiding political risk that may derail the project and their campaign for good governance amidst the pandemic.
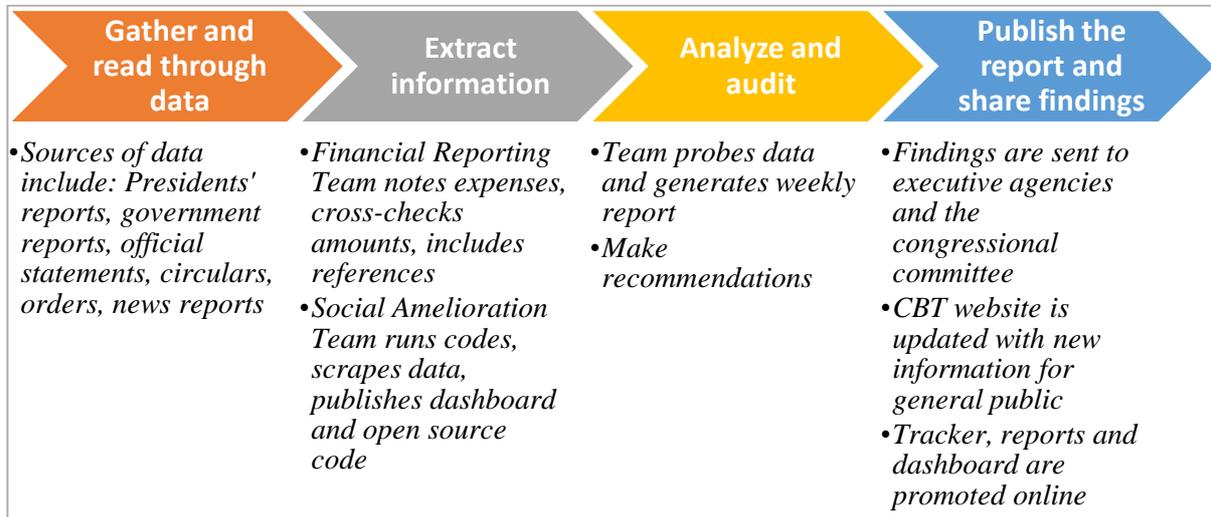
Appendix

Gather and read through data	Extract information	Analyze and audit	Publish the report and share findings
•*Sources of data include: Presidents' reports, government reports, official statements, circulars, orders, news reports*	•*Financial Reporting Team notes expenses, cross-checks amounts, includes references* •*Social Amelioration Team runs codes, scrapes data, publishes dashboard and open source code*	•*Team probes data and generates weekly report* •*Make recommendations*	•*Findings are sent to executive agencies and the congressional committee* •*CBT website is updated with new information for general public* •*Tracker, reports and dashboard are promoted online*

Figure 1 CBT Reporting Process

Qualitative Data Articles	Quantity or quality *(currently ongoing)*	Use in the analysis
News/media articles	21	• Tracing the CBT project's development in the context of national events
Webinars or Facebook Live videos	13	• Understanding of the organization's outputs and campaigns
Interviews	8 (7 with CBT volunteers, 1 with journalist) - over 400 minutes of audio	• Construction of the timeline of the organization's formation and members' involvement • Detailing the organization's activities and member's specific roles and tasks • Expressing volunteers' personal narratives with their individual insights and feelings
Social media posts	216 days worth	• Understanding the organization's campaign strategy • Characterizing public perception of and reaction to the CBT initiative
Organization documents	Powerpoints, spreadsheets, meeting agenda, chat logs	• Confirmation of consistency between public information released with internal information
Field notes of participant observation	Excel sheet	• Triangulation of observations

Table 1 Qualitative Data Collected

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