It is obvious what makes “fake news” and the coronavirus somewhat similar: both spread quickly and widely. While they do not exactly spread the same way (i.e. “fake news” typically gets spread through social media while the coronavirus gets transmitted from person to person through close contact), in our present day, the proliferation of both “fake news” and the coronavirus results in big problems for everyone. What’s even worse is when it’s “fake news” about coronavirus that spreads and infects thousands of people.

For the next four weeks, your goal is to know everything you need to know about “fake news”. Much like COVID-19, to defeat “fake news” means to prevent oneself from being infected by it. We are always reminded to put face masks on, observe physical distancing, disinfect our surroundings, and keep ourselves fit and healthy. As for “fake news”, Out of The Box has created a 4-step strategy to avoid and protect oneself from it and we call it #IWASFAKE:

[1]kalma ang sarili
(Pause and calm down)

[W]ag basta maniniwala
(Be skeptical)

[A]lamin ang source at konteksto ng impormasyon
(Check the source and context of the information)

[S]alain bago i-share at Sitahin ang nagkakalat ng mali
(Filter what you share and call out disinformation)
The rise of “fake news” can be traced to the year 2016 when the United States and the Philippines both held their presidential elections. Hoaxes, rumors, false and misleading content dressed up to look like news articles about political candidates spread like wildfire on social media. This easily became one of the most discussed phenomena in the aftermath of the elections.

How did all these “fake news” spread so quickly and vastly? Did it affect the results of the elections, and how? What are its implications on the public’s perceptions of the media, of the government, and of democracy?

These questions have led to countless research and investigations on “fake news” by the academe, governments, the tech industry, and civil society groups worldwide. From 2016 to today, we’ve seen some breakthroughs and some fallbacks in what has become a global combat against “fake news”. Here are some headlines:

Revealed: 50 million Facebook profiles harvested for Cambridge Analytica in major data breach

Facebook takes down 200 pages, accounts, groups linked to Duterte campaign soc-med manager

Jail time, up to P1-M fine await peddlers of fake COVID-19 news

Have you heard about these? While many of these events are significant, these are not nearly enough to show that we have already figured out the “fake news” dilemma. As if we thought things could not get any worse, in 2020, we face an unprecedented global crisis: the COVID-19 pandemic. This pandemic has revealed to us how far we still are in solving the “fake news” crisis.
“Fake news” about COVID-19 may be even more dangerous than COVID-19 itself. Why? Because the spread of false and inaccurate information about a highly contagious disease entails higher chances of misinformed people getting infected by it.

The World Health Organization (WHO) coined the term Infodemic, a combination of the words “information” and “pandemic” to describe our current world situation characterized by “an over-abundance of information – some accurate and some not – that makes it hard for people to find trustworthy sources and reliable guidance when they need it.”

Four Themes of COVID-19 “Fake News”

In this lesson, we are going to look at some of the most common COVID-related “fake news” that are categorized into four main themes according to First Draft, the leading nonprofit organization conducting research on misinformation and disinformation.

1. WHERE IT CAME FROM

“Fake news” thrive in a situation where verified facts are lacking. Since we are naturally curious, we always try to fill in the gaps of our knowledge. We tend to make sense of every new piece of information we encounter based on what we already know. When news came out about this new strain of coronavirus in December, as reported by Chinese authorities to the World Health Organization (WHO), theories about where it came from quickly flooded social media. There are conspiracy theorists who claim that the coronavirus is a bioweapon concocted by the Chinese government to target the United States.

head up!
List down 3 “fake news” stories that you have heard about COVID-19.
Example: Eating bananas is an effective cure for COVID-19.

VOCABS
infodemic: “an over-abundance of information – some accurate and some not – that makes it hard for people to find trustworthy sources and reliable guidance when they need it” (as defined by WHO)
conspiracies (or conspiracy theories): an attempt to explain harmful or tragic events as the result of the actions of a small, powerful group. Such explanations reject the accepted narrative surrounding those events.
2. HOW IT SPREADS

Many false claims about the coronavirus bank on our sense of fear and confusion. This is especially true when it comes to information about how coronavirus spreads. The WHO website has devoted a section to countering such false claims like the chances of COVID-19 being spread on shoes and infecting individuals (Yes it can, but it is very low); the transmission of COVID-19 through houseflies (No, there’s no evidence for it); and the transmission through 5G mobile networks (No, virus cannot travel on radio waves and mobile networks!).

3. SYMPTOMS AND TREATMENT

Bad advice about treatment and cures are the most common and widely spread “fake news” about COVID-19, and it can have serious consequences. Not only does it prevent people from getting the proper care they need, it can cost lives too. In Iran, 44 people died and hundreds were hospitalized after drinking home-made alcohol to protect themselves from the disease. Every day, new speculations about home treatments like drinking hot water mixed with salt, symptom checks, and vaccines go viral online.

4. HOW WE ARE RESPONDING

As most people try to observe stay-at-home protocols, many rely on social media to get updated on how other people are doing. From photos or videos that show people panic buying to news about relief distribution or the transport situation, many of these are shared online without verification. As the government introduces new measures, loads of misrepresented pictures and rumors emerge. It is unfortunate to see an outbreak of political “fake news” in the midst of a health crisis. But this is something we expect in a polarized society such as ours. For instance, photos from the Independence Day rally held in UP Diliman amidst the COVID-19 lockdown were digitally altered to show that the protesters comprised a smaller crowd than the actual.

THIS IS THE END OF MODULE A. Are you ready to test your knowledge and practice your skills? Get from us or your teacher the Module A quiz and worksheets.