



# #IWASFAKE

## COURSE 2 | BEYOND FAKE VS FACT: Post-truth, Algorithms, and Media Distrust

Course 1 (“Dealing with Disinformation Amidst the Infodemic”) of the #IWASFAKE Remote Learning Resources discussed the fundamentals of disinformation in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. We learned about the key terms, the different categories and examples, and, most importantly, the habits we must practice to deal with disinformation — healthy skepticism, verification, reporting and empathetic conversations.

In Course 2, we will zoom out our lenses and explore the bigger picture. The problem of disinformation is way more complex than the simple binary of fake versus fact. It is a product of diverse and intersecting factors (i.e., commercial, technological, political, social, psychological, etc). There are various social issues that we must look into so that we can better understand the situation our world is facing today. Why is there so much fakery and deception around us? Why are people so easily fooled? Why are some quick to dismiss facts while easily believing in lies? How can our society function when there is so much hate, disagreement, and distrust?

To answer these questions, we must unpack some important concepts and theories. But do not be intimidated because these concepts are not abstract, vague, nor complicated. Instead, they can help us better understand the information crisis that the world is going through today.

### LESSON 1

#### Are we living in a post-truth world?

- What is post-truth?
- Which events led to the naming of ‘post-truth’ as the Oxford Dictionaries 2016 Word of the Year?
- Why is post-truth relevant to the spread of disinformation in present-day societies?
- Why is post-truth better understood as a case of collusion between leaders and audiences instead of manipulation according to scholar Ignas Kalpokas?
- What makes social media platforms a perfect environment for post-truth to thrive?
- How is the post-truth condition related to the breakdown of social trust?
- What can people do to survive the post-truth condition?

### LESSON 2

#### Are social media platforms to blame for the spread of “fake news”?

- Why can we consider the Philippines as one of the most vulnerable countries to disinformation?
- How is social media designed to be addictive?
- How do algorithms and micro-targeting assist the spread of online disinformation?
- How does social media create an “echo chamber effect”?
- Why is the business model of social media platforms suspect in the spread of political disinformation?
- What reforms can you recommend to digital platforms (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Google) to curb online disinformation?
- What laws and policies are needed to address disinformation on social media? How can we make sure that these policies are within the scope of freedom of speech and expression?
- Which digital consumption habits can you do to prevent the spread of disinformation?

## LESSON 3

### Have Filipinos lost trust in the media?

- How do the changes in news consumption of Filipinos affect their attitude towards the news and its sources?
- How does the “fake news” label used by politicians and other groups affect the watchdog function of journalists and independent news organizations?
- What kind of attacks did Filipino journalists and news media face under the Duterte presidency? Were these just coincidental or deliberate?
- Why is social trust crucial in crisis situations like the COVID-19 pandemic?
- Why is press freedom a right and responsibility of everyone and not just those who work in the media?
- How can audiences and independent news media support each other in revitalizing social trust?



## #IWASFAKE Remote Learning Resources

This learning course is part of the #IWASFAKE Remote Learning Resources project developed by Out of The Box Media Literacy Initiative (OOTB) in response to the shift in remote learning of schools caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. OOTB is a SEC-registered non-government organization that works to mainstream media literacy in the Filipino culture through education. It was founded in 2014 by three alumni of the University of the Philippines Diliman. This project is made possible with the support of the US Embassy in Manila and TechCamp Taipei.



© This learning resource is made available by Out of The Box Media Literacy Initiative under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International license (CC BY-NC 4.0). You can copy and redistribute the material, remix, transform or build upon it so long as you attribute #IWASFAKE as the original source. You may not use the material for commercial purposes.

View detailed license information at [creativecommons.org](https://creativecommons.org).





## COURSE 2 LESSON 1

# Are we living in a post-truth world?

This lesson is part of the **#IWASFAKE Course 2: BEYOND FAKE VS FACT: Post-truth, Algorithms, and Media Distrust**. Here, the problem of disinformation is explored as more than the simple binary of fake versus fact. We raise the following questions:

1. Are we living in a post-truth world?
2. Are social media platforms to blame for the spread of “fake news”?
3. Have Filipinos lost trust in the media?

*“The greatest enemy of knowledge is not ignorance, it is the illusion of knowledge.”*

- Stephen Hawking

Each year, the Oxford Dictionaries look for words or expressions that have attracted a great deal of interest over the last twelve months. Among several candidates, a Word of Year is declared to “reflect the ethos, mood, or preoccupations of that particular year.” In 2016, the **Oxford Dictionaries Word of the Year** was post-truth, an adjective defined as “relating to or

denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.”

Oxford attributes the spike in the usage of the word to the presidential elections in the US and to Brexit, United Kingdom’s withdrawal from the European Union. Meanwhile, at the home front, the 2016 Philippine national elections also drew the attention of scholars who saw parallels between the events in the West and in the Philippines.

Watch the news, go on social media, listen to your relatives discuss political issues and you will observe that many citizens and politicians seem to no longer respect facts. They simply accept whatever they believe or feel as the truth or the correct version of the facts. This is the post-truth condition, and as the cartoon below perfectly illustrates, truth becomes a matter of assertion: “I believe therefore I’m right!”

## Fake News and Post-truth

Disinformation fits right into this post-truth picture. False and misleading information are spread by unscrupulous actors simply because they can. In the post-truth era, anyone can claim anything to be true, and for as long as there



are audiences who believe in such a claim and contribute to the narrative by also sharing it to others, the false claim lives on. Now this is truly dangerous. If we can't agree anymore on the facts, how can we make informed decisions as citizens in a democracy?

Here are other defining qualities of post-truth from key scholars:

- Blurring of boundaries between lying and truth-telling and, likewise, fact and fiction (Keyes, 2004)
- Making up facts to support whatever narrative one is promoting (Mair, 2017)
- “Co-created fiction” in which the distinction between truth and falsehood has become irrelevant (Kapolkas, 2019)
- Effectiveness becomes a measure for truthfulness: a claim must be true simply because people believe in it (i.e. it has been asserted effectively) or because people would like to believe in it (Kalpokas, 2019)

voice, the biggest megaphone, is heard by most. The powerful amplification of a message — regardless of its authenticity or accuracy — becomes the deciding factor whether an idea becomes accepted as ‘true’. Verified information? Fact-check articles? On social media, it becomes harder and harder for these to reach the audiences who need to see them.

Add to this dilemma the existence of private chat groups, closed groups, and hyperpartisan pages online. These are the spaces where post-truth claims usually emerge, are cultivated, and intensified. **Lesson 2 delves deeper into the huge role of social media technologies in the spread of networked disinformation.**

*Imagine having group mates who do not only fail to contribute to your task but also constantly pester the rest of the group. They seem to only want to sabotage your group work. You have tried explaining yourself repeatedly to them but it does not work. What else could you do? If you are not allowed to expel them from the group, and at the end of the day, you still need to work together, what could be the solution?*



*“I’m sorry, Jeannie, your answer was correct, but Kevin shouted his incorrect answer over yours, so he gets the points.”*

This cartoon shows humorously how the post-truth logic might operate in a hypothetical game show. In the real world, we know how this works on social media: the one who has the loudest

## Is there a way out of the post-truth trap?

One important insight that scholar Ignas Kalpokas (2019) offers is that post-truth “is not manipulation of some sort — it is collusion.” He means that audiences are not merely passively acted upon by post-truth leaders as if they are brainwashed to believe certain ideas and make certain decisions. Post-truth exists because it is co-created through the joint interaction of the communicators and their audiences. This is an important reminder because to solve the

post-truth dilemma, we must recognize the agency of ordinary people who engage post-truth conversations. This means we must make an attempt to understand why people choose to share false information and dangerous propaganda. What satisfaction do they get out of it? Why would they want certain narratives to be true even if these aren't?

It is easy to be angered by and be hostile to post-truth publics. But one thing is definite, shaming and abolishing them will do more harm than good. So if not through aggressive fact-checking and verification, how else can we deal with post-truth actors? Empathetic conversations may be one of the ways. Looking for common ground other than cold, hard facts might be counterintuitive but maybe it's what the post-truth dilemma demands. [Read more about empathetic conversations in Module D of the Course 1.](#)

## Post-truth as the breakdown of social trust

If democratic societies today are going through some sort of severe illness and it's called post-truth, we can think of disinformation as one of its symptoms. Clearly, the post-truth condition contributes to the creation and spread of false and misleading information. Looking further, we may still wonder: Why do people reject facts? Why do they rely on their personal beliefs? What has changed over the past few decades?

Jayson Harsin (2018) explains that the post-truth phenomenon is actually a breakdown of social trust. This includes the deep decline of trust in what was formerly the major institutional truth-teller: the news media. The many changes in journalism — from downsizing of staff to the rise of citizen journalism (which means that everyone can now be a journalist); from infotainment (television programming that presents news

and information in a manner intended to be entertaining) to the “fake news” label given by politicians to independent media — have all contributed to the worsening case of media distrust in our societies. [Lesson 3 will explore the topic of media distrust and “fake news” as a label to delegitimize news media.](#)

So, is the Philippines a post-truth society, and are we living in a post-truth world? Whether we like it or not, we are. Like with other political conflicts and phenomena happening in the world today, we may not easily feel or notice its impact in our everyday lives. However, this does not mean that it's unimportant. As we navigate our world full of truths and untruths and everything in between, we must develop new information habits that focus more attention on where we are getting information from and determining what are grounded on facts and what are not. At the same time, we must continue to demand accountability and commitment to truth from our information and knowledge producers — the news media, digital platforms, academia, and government institutions.

### References:

- Chotiner, I. (2019, January 21). *Does Democracy Need Truth?: A Conversation with the Historian Sophia Rosenfeld*. The New Yorker. <https://www.newyorker.com/news/q-and-a/does-democracy-need-truth-a-conversation-with-the-historian-sophia-rosenfeld>
- Harsin, J. (2018). Post-Truth and Critical Communication Studies. In J. Harsin, *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Communication*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228613.013.757>
- Kalpokas, I. (2019). Post-truth: The Condition of Our Times. In I. Kalpokas, *A Political Theory of Post-Truth* (pp. 9–49). Springer International Publishing. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-97713-3\\_2](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-97713-3_2)



## COURSE 2 LESSON 2

# Are social media platforms to blame for the spread of "fake news"?

*"Technological progress has merely provided us with more efficient means for going backwards."*

- Aldous Huxley

This lesson is part of the **#IWASFAKE Course 2: BEYOND FAKE VS FACT: Post-truth, Algorithms, and Media Distrust**. Here, the problem of disinformation is explored as more than the simple binary of fake versus fact. We raise the following questions:

1. Are we living in a post-truth world?
2. Are social media platforms to blame for the spread of "fake news"?
3. Have Filipinos lost trust in the media?

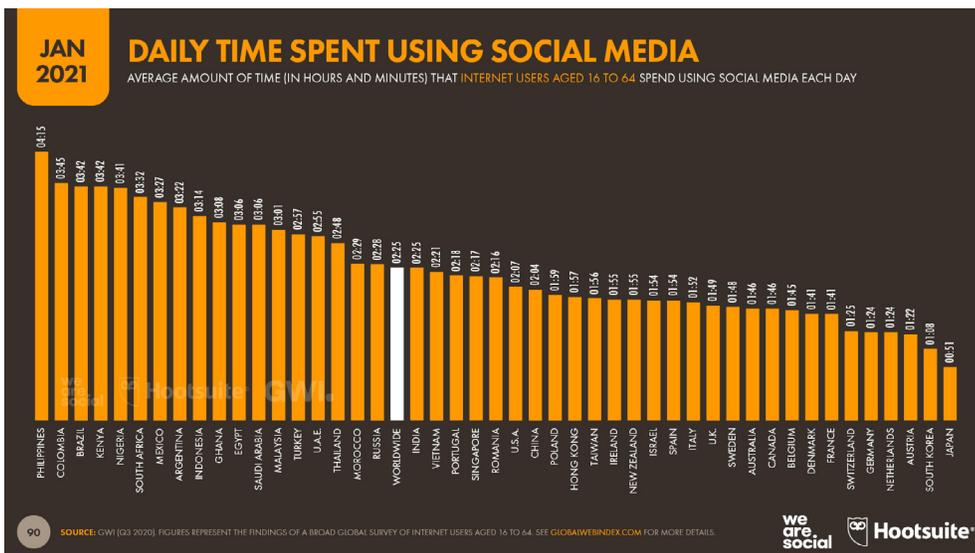
**W**e already know what we must do to help address the "fake news" problem. That's what the four #IWASFAKE steps are for. But we know very well that these practices can only go so far. We need to advocate for structural changes in our social media platforms to extinguish disinformation and the causes of its spread. As much as social media is part of the problem, it is also crucial to the solutions we want to achieve.

## The many problems that social media has created

There's no doubt Filipinos are so immersed in social media. We have been topping global usage rankings for at least six straight years now. According to the **2021 annual report** from Hootsuite and We Are Social, Filipinos spend nearly 11 hours per day on the Internet and a little over four hours on social media.

Truly, we are the world's biggest social media buffs, addicts, dependents, patrons, users — whatever you want to call it. We won't be spending countless hours on Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, or Twitter, if we aren't getting what we want from it. From entertainment, news,

connecting with friends, to expressing ourselves, it's easy to list down the reasons why social media is such a big hit for us. The tricky part here is the flipside: Have "fake news", trolls, hate speech, cyberbullying, identity theft, and surveillance discouraged us from spending our much-valued time on social media?



*Reflect on your social media habits and choices. Think about three things that you love, hate, and hope to see on social media.*

- *LOVE: What things do you enjoy doing on social media?*
- *HATE: What problems do you experience on social media?*
- *HOPE TO SEE: What improvements can be done on social media platforms?*

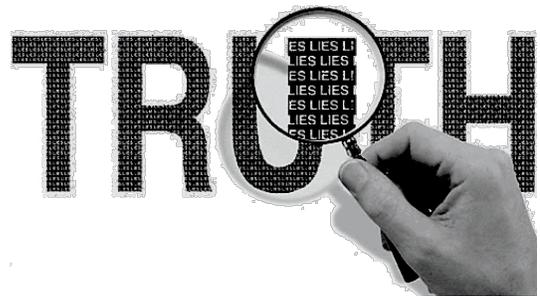
This is the main problem that social media technologies have created. They have become virtually indispensable to us, and in the process, turning us into a captive audience. This does not mean we have ceded power over ourselves to our devices, but the fact that we rely on social media for so many things, it could be hard to imagine our lives without it.

All technologies are designed for maximum usability. Social media platforms heavily rely on algorithms in order for its functions to run. Algorithms determine what kinds of content show up on your feed and which pages, groups, and people you might be interested in subscribing to. Your posts, preferences, and activities are recorded as data, which are then fed into algorithms that design your social media experience. This leads to the echo chamber effect, where you may find your own opinions constantly “echoed back” to you. An echo chamber reinforces an individual’s belief system due to his or her lack of exposure to other opinions.

Private chat groups, closed groups, and hyper-partisan YouTube pages are examples of online spaces where the echo chamber effect can be very strong and apparent. “Fake news” that circulate in these spaces effectively strengthen the beliefs and worldviews of its members. There’s less chance for them to encounter fact-checks and verified information if their social media algorithms are not programmed for such.

This also explains why online disinformation usually operates like a network where related pages and accounts systematically amplify each other.

Another dangerous phenomenon that seems to pervade in social media is the illusory truth effect, a term used in cognitive psychology. According to studies, **belief in all statements, be they truthful or not, increases with repetition.** When statements are repeated to you, they seem more truthful than new ones. Again, through algorithms, social media often emphasizes (i.e., shows on top of the feed and/or repeatedly shows up as you scroll) messages that you may have interest in.



Comparing the gross positive versus negative effects of social media in our lives may be pointless. We don’t have to debate anymore if social media is ultimately good or bad for us because, as it is right now, social media is a tool that can be used for either ends. Instead, a more proactive conversation that we need to have is on the kind of changes and solutions that we must advocate for so that social media can better serve the common good.

## Fixing social media for the common good

Prominent social media critic Tristan Harris has been advocating for radical changes in the core design of digital platforms. His critiques form a key part of the Netflix documentary, *The Social*

*Dilemma*, which successfully visualized the business model of social media, how people’s personal data are mined and turned into profit. He used the term “attention casinos” to describe these platforms because, just like casinos, the Big Tech’s primary motive is to make money out of the time you spend within their walls, therefore keeping your attention for as long as they can.



Moreover, Harris believes that the social isolation that these platforms cause makes people more vulnerable to conspiracies and radicalization. For him, the screen-based version of socialization is nothing compared to real world connections.

One important fix he suggests is removing micro-targeting completely. This is the practice that allows social media companies to collect so much data from its users, and then use these to determine which other contents to serve the user. Another idea is banning Facebook Groups that are political in nature, because according to him, Facebook does not know how to do this safely. [You may read more about Tristan Harris’ ideas here.]

These critiques and suggestions are part of a broader movement referred to as “techlash”. It captures the growing concerns over the role that internet and technology companies — especially social media — now play in our democracy. In the last few years, many politicians, journalists, scholars, and civil society

groups from around the world have all come into understanding that the Big Tech companies must be under some form of regulation. Governments must step in to ensure that the welfare of platform users are prioritized over profits and political machinations that lead to disinformation. Moreover, these tech platforms must be continuously engaged in multi-sectoral collaborations that shape decision-making around flagging and moderation of “fake news”, hate speech, and other problematic content.

As we advocate for reforms that take enormous political will from governments and the Big Tech, here are some of the little things that you can do (according to the Center for Humane Technology) to increase your well-being and take control of your digital experience.

1. Turn off notifications
2. Remove toxic apps and download helpful tools
3. Eliminate outrage from your diet
4. Follow voices you disagree with and be compassionate
5. Set boundaries
6. Support local journalism

References:

Gonzales, G. (2020, November 10). *In social media’s battle for our attention, real connection becomes the casualty*. Rappler. <https://www.rappler.com/technology/features/social-media-attention-battle-connection-love-tristan-harris>

Knight Foundation. (2020). *Techlash? America’s Growing Concern With Major Technology Companies*. <https://knightfoundation.org/reports/techlash-america-growing-concern-with-major-technology-companies/>

Martinez-Conde, S. (2019, October 5). *I Heard It Before, So It Must Be True*. Scientific American. <https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/illusion-chasers/i-heard-it-before-so-it-must-be-true/>



### COURSE 2 LESSON 3

# Have Filipinos lost trust in the media?

This lesson is part of the **#IWASFAKE Course 2: BEYOND FAKE VS FACT: Post-truth, Algorithms, and Media Distrust**. Here, the problem of disinformation is explored as more than the simple binary of fake versus fact. We raise the following questions:

1. Are we living in a post-truth world?
2. Are social media platforms to blame for the spread of “fake news”?
3. Have Filipinos lost trust in the media?

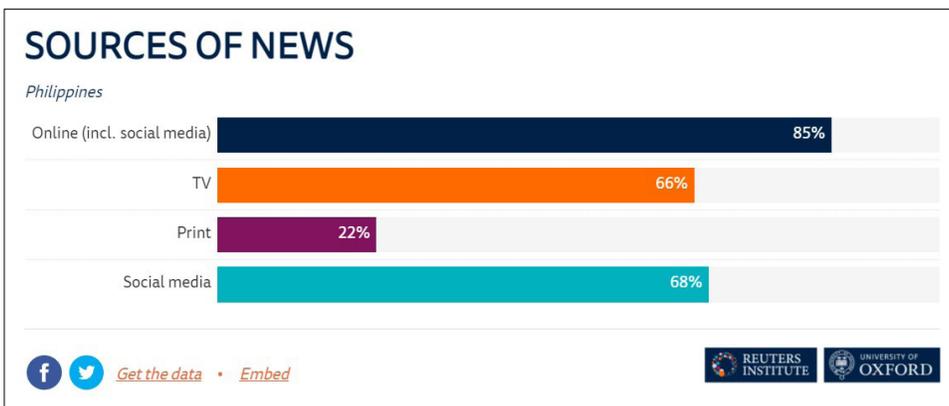
*“The further a society drifts from the truth, the more it will hate those that speak it.”*  
- George Orwell

A study conducted at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic revealed that Filipinos have high interest in news but have low trust in it. Isn't it ironic that many Filipinos think the news is important and that journalism is vital to society, but cast doubt on it? The **2020 Digital News Report** finds the Philippines, with only 27% rating, in the 35th spot among 40 media markets in terms of overall trust in news.

Another important finding of the study is the shift towards social media in accessing news. Eighty-five percent of Filipino online users consume news through digital platforms, a trend that is also evident globally. While television remains dominant in the news media landscape, news websites and social media are more widely used by urban-based adults.

Ironically, this shift towards online news consumption does not equate to an increased trust in news. In fact, it appears to be the opposite in some cases. Take the news website, Rappler, for example, which ranked fifth in the list of online media brands with most reach. But when it comes to trust, it was second to the last among 15 brands in the Philippines (49% said they trust Rappler while 28% said they don't). Meanwhile, prior to its shutdown last May 2020, ABS-CBN broadcast and online outlets have the widest reach among all media brands. Despite being number one in that department, ABS-CBN ranked just 10th in terms of trust. (See next page for the graph from the 2020 Digital News Report)

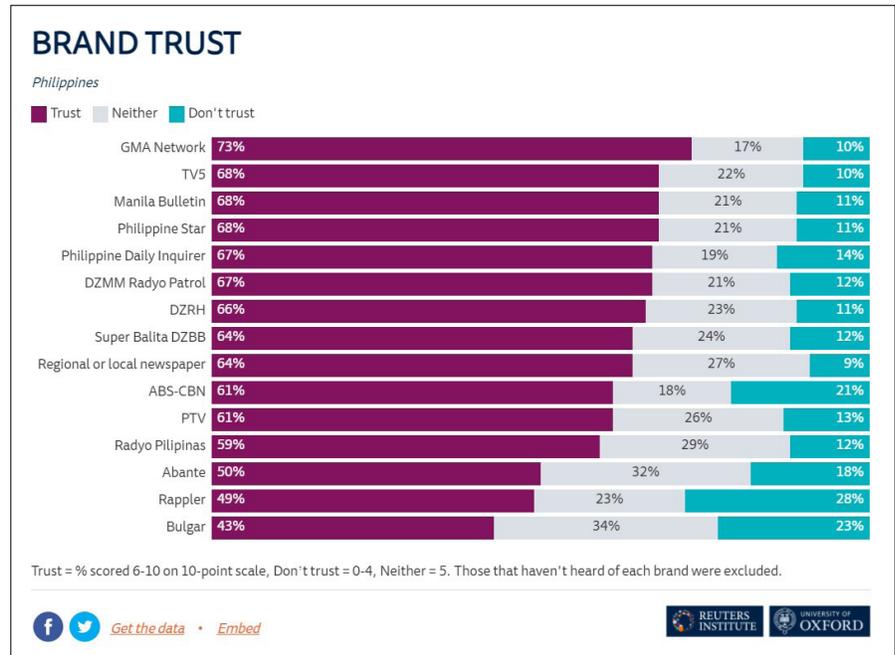
Some scholars explain that the shift to online news consumption has led to a rift in the relationship between news audiences and their trusted news outlets. Online users see social media platforms as their news source even if the platforms merely serve as distributors and not the actual producers of news. This implies that the attitude of audiences towards



social media platforms might also have an effect on their trust towards news in general.

## “Fake news”: a rhetorical device to discredit the media

Besides the changing news media landscape, there’s one evident reason why trust in news media in the Philippines is among the lowest in the countries included in the survey. Journalists and publications, especially those that are critical of President Rodrigo Duterte and his policies, have been at the receiving end of attacks over the past few years, ranging from public insults to state-initiated court cases. Like



former US President Donald Trump, Duterte, along with his supporters, repeatedly label journalists and independent news media outlets as “fake news”, “presstitutes”, and “state enemies”, among many other tags.

Against the backdrop of eroding public trust, Filipino journalists battle against accusations of being peddlers of “fake news” or disinformation themselves. This creates a tense working environment where journalists find it difficult to perform their watchdog role while “fake news” accusations continue to sink their trust ratings. By delegitimizing media sources that oppose the government, state-run social media channels provide an unchallenged version of reality.

It is important to note, however, that, if one is going to look at public polls and surveys, Duterte’s assault on the media and his critics seems to not affect his popularity. Political scholars and commentators attribute this to his populist style of governance. **These opinion polls are useful tools, but they must be taken with a grain of salt.**

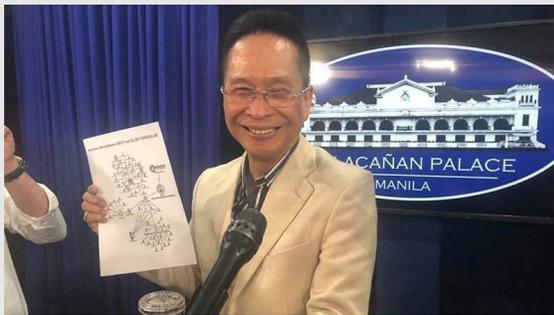
### Attacks against journalists and independent news media during the Duterte presidency



**ABS-CBN | May 2020:** ABS-CBN, the country’s leading radio and television network, was forced to stop broadcasting after its 25-year legislative franchise to operate expired. Packed with Duterte allies, the House of Representatives had slapped down ABS-CBN’s application for franchise renewal since 2014. [Source: [BBC.com](http://BBC.com)]

### **Attacks against journalists and independent news media during the Duterte presidency**

**Maria Ressa and Rappler | June 2020:** Maria Ressa and a former colleague at Rappler were convicted of a contentious cyberlibel case, sentencing them to between six months and six years in prison. This is just one of at least seven other court cases filed against Rappler, including the revocation of their operating license and claims of tax fraud. [Source: [Rappler](#)]



**VERA Files and the Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism (PCIJ) | April 2019:** Malacañang released a “matrix” that linked news site VERA Files, Rappler, and PCIJ in a supposed plot to oust Duterte. The alleged conspiracy was first published by newspaper, *The Manila Times*. Both the presidential palace and the newspaper failed to provide evidence to back up the allegation. [Source: [Politifact](#)]

**Alternative media outlets like Manila Today, Bulatlat.com and Kodao | February 2019:** Alternative media outlets such as Bulatlat.com have been plagued by DDoS attacks (distributed denial of service). A DDoS attack is an attempt to make a website unavailable by overwhelming it with traffic from multiple sources. Journalists from these outlets are also often targets of “red-tagging” – labelling activists as communists or terrorists [Source: [Inquirer](#)]

## **Mistrust leads to cynicism**

Cynicism is when citizens lose trust even in trustworthy sources. This is amplified by the deliberate exploitation of bad actors who spread false information and further destabilize public confidence by sowing confusion and hatred. This crisis has greater implications amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. When scientific authority of public health experts is challenged, people turn to bogus sources for health information and advice.

Like in all kinds of relationships, trust is vital. If it is damaged or lost, it takes effort to earn it back. With their backs pushed against the wall, many news organizations are working double for its survival. For them to distinguish themselves from misinformation and poor quality content, they must improve on the reliability of their own craft by tightening journalism standards or finding innovative ways to do fact-checking.

These are truly tough times for journalists and news organizations, but they should not be facing this battle alone. If we support independent journalism and we do our part in fact-checking and sharing verified information, we contribute to upholding and protecting press freedom as everyone’s right and responsibility.

#### References:

Balod, H.S., and Hameleers, M. (2019). *Fighting for truth? The role perceptions of Filipino journalists in an era of mis- and disinformation*. SAGE Journals. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884919865109>

Chua, Y. (2020). *Philippines: Digital News Report*. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. <https://www.digitalnewsreport.org/survey/2020/philippines-2020/#fn-11717-2>

Son, J. (2020, June 19). *Southeast Asia: Shift to online news rising but trust low*. VERA Files. <https://verafiles.org/articles/southeast-asia-shift-online-news-rising-trust-low>