

Radioactive sushi (Part I)

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FAKE news comes in many forms. It's that article about a miracle cure that your uncle shared on his Facebook wall. It's that email warning against eating sushi for supposed radioactive properties. It's that headline that is in no way related to the actual news story below it, or an announcement about a holiday that turns out to be from two years ago.

It's a poster that tells a Hindu family to watch over their daughters because some Muslim man on a motorcycle will try to charm her, whisk her away from everyone she knows and then convert her to Islam.

It's a photo of soldiers who you think are fighting terrorists in Mindanao but who are actually Hondurans embroiled in their own troubles. From the national news agency, it's a story about dozens of nations expressing their belief that no extrajudicial killings are happening here when no such statements were made.

Sometimes it's your own justice secretary saying opposition figures went to Marawi a few days before the siege, lending political color to the crisis, even waving photos to support his claim.

Because of the deluge of information at our fingertips, it is so easy to fall prey to disinformation. At best it sows confusion. But it can also sow hate that might move some people to discord, even violence. It can provide wrong basis for business decisions and lead to loss of assets.

Not all of it is intentional. Some just share away indiscriminately, thinking they are doing others a favor. There are those, however, of more sinister persuasions. They know how powerful the Internet is, and spend time and resources to exploit people's ignorance, or fear, or other vulnerabilities to achieve their end.

If it's any consolation to us Filipinos, fake news is a concern in many other countries, too.

In fact, Temasek Foundation and the Institute of Policy Studies of Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at the National University of Singapore deemed it enough of a concern to organize a conference called "Reporting Facts and the Future of Journalism."

The forum, held August 17-19 at Orchard Hotel, Singapore, saw journalists from all over Asia—the Philippines, Indonesia, Hong Kong, Thailand, India, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Vietnam, Bhutan, Laos, Malaysia—compare their experiences with fake news and talk about what they could do to prevent it from inflicting further damage to our free societies.

"It undermines the premises of our profession," according to Hong Kong-based journalism professor Cherian George, one of the speakers.

Alan John, director of the Asia Journalism Fellowship, challenged the participants, "What is the point of journalism when people will believe anything, anyway?"

Really, what can we do?

George said it was not just about the Internet; disinformation has been around for a long time. Over the course of history, he said, humankind has fallen prey to at least four great hoaxes –

that smoking is safe, that climate change is ok, that everything that goes wrong is the fault of the minority, and that the enemy will kill us.

The existence of fake news is a market failure, George said. It requires intervention from multiple fronts. Media have a role especially in promoting literacy and critical thinking to pre-bunk fake news.

(Take note: Pre-bunk, not debunk. Fake news, once it has been consumed by the public, already creates damage that is not completely erased even when retractions and clarifications are later on made.)

Governments, too (assuming it is not leading the disinformation in the first place), have a role, and not just the enactment of laws as in the case of Germany. It can support or even initiate information campaigns or help establish independent press councils.

Will fake news ever go away? It does not seem likely. It's a trade-off, in this environment where everyone ideally has a voice. "We agree to tolerate a fair amount of risk and pollution in exchange for the freedoms we enjoy," George said. We must then be able to live with disinformation while taking steps to prevent it from achieving its ends.

Historian Farish Ahmad Noor from S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies agreed with George that fake news—distortion or selective framing—is not new territory. He talked about how printed or visual media from the 19th century all shaped narratives of overseas events depicting The Other negatively. Wars in Indonesia, Burma and the Philippines showed that The Other, for instance, was being belligerent when it was merely defending itself.

What is bad in all this, said Eric Wishart, former editor-in-chief of Agence France Presse, is that fake news mimics legitimate news so that people cannot easily tell the difference. In a country like the Philippines, for instance, where the two telecommunication companies offer free Facebook with mobile subscription, Facebook sometimes IS the internet, and people tend to immediately believe what appears on their feed.

Wahyu Muryadi, editor-in-chief of TEMPO Channel, said that even before "fake news" became a buzz word, Indonesia already had to deal with hoaxes. His compatriot, Septiaji Eko Nugroho, chairman of the Indonesian Anti-Hoax Movement, said people routinely fall for them because of illiteracy, polarized politics and even media participation.

"It's a complex country," he says, with five religions, 746 languages, 1,340 ethnic groups and more than 17,000 islands.