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## Research Article

### Infodemic amidst the Covid-19 in the Philippines: Spotted By Vera Files.Org

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#### ABSTRACT

This study analyzes the infodemic in the Philippines during the intense lockdowns during the early stages of the covid-19 pandemic. With the said lockdown, people are observed to be more present in social media. World Health Organization pronounced that "infodemic" poses a severe problem in public health. This article analyzes the fact-checked articles of Verafiles.Org, fact-checkers certified by non-partisan International Fact-Checking Network, during the first six months of covid-19 era. Using content analysis, the researcher examines the sources, claims, treatment, and access to the voice of Verafiles fact-checking articles. The researcher quantifies the variables and coded the data using the tables in order to obtain the findings of the study. Results show that most fact-checked "fake news" claims found in vera files.org are disinformation. It is also noted that Facebook and Youtube are the top platforms as a source of disinformation. The treatment of the fake information is usually done as facebook post or youtube video. It also found out that most of the claims are about Covid- 19 pandemic and political propaganda. Troll accounts, Facebook groups, pages, and websites supported Duterte, and even government officials listed as a source of "fake news."

**Keywords:** *infodemics, fake news, Vera Files. Org, Philippines, framing*

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#### Introduction

The world faces a global pandemic; however, the problem worsens because of another global issue. World Health Organization pronounced that "infodemic," or spreading misinformation and disinformation in the social media platforms and other outlets, poses a severe problem in public health (Zarocostas, 2020). The Philippines is one of the high-risk countries from covid-19 and recorded the first death of

the virus outside China (Ramzy & May 2020). The country is no exception in spreading "infodemic." The Center for Media Freedom and Responsibility (CMFR) in the Philippines issued solidarity to all journalists and media outlets to call out misinformation and disinformation (Abano, 2020). Verafiles.org is one of the two online news platforms certified by the non-partisan International Fact-Checking Network that review news stories, check their facts, and rate

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their accuracy on Facebook (Magsambol, 2018). This study analyzes the misinformation and disinformation fact-checked by Verafiles.org during the Covid19 crisis from March 14- September 14, 2020, in the Philippines.

According to Luis Teodoro, former dean of UP Diliman's College of Mass Communication, the country is vulnerable to spreading false information on social media. The correct information is essential and crucial in forming an opinion and giving responsibility to the decision-making. Meanwhile, having inaccurate information makes the democracy "problematic and dangerous." (Teodoro, 2018) World Health Organization (WHO) noted that infodemics could hamper the government's health response and create confusion and distrust of the public. United Nations (UN) warned the people from selling fake coronavirus cures online to cyberattacks on the information systems of different hospitals.

On the other hand, WHO emphasized that it is hard to find a solution to the said phenomenon. Meanwhile, Neil Walsh, Chief of Cybercrime and Anti-Money Laundering Section of United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), urged the public to get information from trusted sources such as WHO and UN (UNDGC, 2020).

According to Professor Carl Bergstrom from the University of Washington, the public is driven too much privilege in social media platforms and cannot verify information in a limited time. On the other hand, Twitter and Facebook, among the top social media platforms, responded in taking steps to stop this infodemic (O'Reilly, 2020). Facebook partnered with one of the two online media platforms in the country, Verafiles.Org. Verafiles.org is among the 37 organizations worldwide that are part of Poynter's International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN). IFCN is a program of Poynter to promote excellence in fact-checking and a forum for fact-checkers worldwide. Clair Deevy, Facebook Director for Community Affairs for the Asia Pacific, said that reducing and identifying false information in their platform is their way (Magsambol, 2018).

No study yet has attempted to investigate the infodemics in the Philippines, particularly to the two online media outlets. Ordway (2017)

documented that there are many studies about fake news. Moreover, Hu et al. (2020) published infodemiological research on the pandemic and the infodemics; however, they did not tackle the contextualization identified in this study.

One of the critical issues of this pandemic is obtaining correct information. This paper tries to analyze the context of the infodemics in the country and provides an initial analysis of it.

### **Objectives**

This study aims to analyze the fact-checked articles of Verafiles.org.

Specifically, this study looks to:

1. Identify the classification of the infodemics in the country;
2. Determine the sources, treatments, and access to the voice of the infodemics;
3. Analyze the relationship of those categories to the infodemics.

### **Review of Related Literature**

#### **Broader Definition**

"Fake news" is defined as "fabricated material that is similar in appearance to news media content but differs in organizational procedure or goal." (David et al., 2018). It was defined as a "virus" spreading among users in social media. (Chen, 2017) UNESCO (2018) suggests there are three categories that fall the "orchestrated campaigns of spreading untruths" on social media. These are the following:

1. Disinformation is false information that intentionally spreads to harm an individual, a social group, an organization, or a nation.
2. Misinformation: False information that is not spread with the intent of harming others.
3. Mal information is accurate information used to damage an individual, a social group, an organization, or a country.

Vosoughi et al. (2018) found out that false information spreads much faster, farther, and broader than the truth in all categories and aspects of communication. False stories are more novel than accurate news, suggesting the public share them more than truthful ones. According to the Global Disinformation Order of the Uni-

versity of Oxford in their Computational Propaganda Research Project, evidence showed that social media manipulation campaigns had taken place in 70 countries, each of which has one political party and government agency in social media users to shape public attitudes. China has become the top player of disinformation order, and Facebook remains the leading manipulation platform. (Bradshaw & Howard, 2019). Features that make social media engaging, such as the ease of sharing and rewiring social relationships, make it easier for highly influential and political individuals (and bots) to manipulate them and transform them into helpful disinformation outlets. (Menczer, 2016).

### ***Fighting "Fake News"***

Misinformation can lead to bad decisions on important issues that are difficult to correct. Debunking the false information effectively is the most effective counter. (Chan et al., 2017) Moreover, Pennycook & Rand (2019) suggest that analytic- thinking plays an essential role in recognizing misinformation. Another proposed solution is to give more importance to critical thinking in our educational system. The public will effectively analyze and debunk conspiracy theories and false claims with this. (Timmer, 2017). UNESCO (2018) noted that people must think critically about digital technology and social media platforms, fight back against disinformation and misinformation through media and information literacy, fact-checking 101 and social media verification, and combat online abuse to solve this problem.

In the Philippines, Poynter documented the government action on this problem. In 2018, the bill was filed by the Senate's Committee on Public Information and Mass Media to hold government officials accountable for spreading false information. It could impose penalties of up to 2 million pesos and or imprisonment on those found guilty. No less than President Duterte himself, the measure was challenged, assuring he would not pass the law. The president is controversial as many accused him of spreading misinformation himself and using "fake news" to epitomize the media organizations he dislikes. Presidential Communications Operations Office announced that the bill

would need to be reviewed further not to violate the constitution (Poynter, 2019).

Assistant Professor Dustin Carnahan, Ph.D., said the covid-19 pandemic had caused an 'infodemic,' making misinformation about the disease spreading online. "Stakeholder's participation and stricter regulation" are required to reduce the impact of this problem in the generation of modern media. (Hue & Shaw, 2020)

### ***Attitudes and Behavior Towards "Fake News"***

The truth could rest among the social media users online. It changes our interpersonal communication where family members and other connections may be the only ones to point out errors. Others are afraid to compromise their relationship with them. The articles issued by the press most often find the correct information. Misinformation creates fear and confusion. It causes stress, anxiety, and depression to the public. (Priebe, 2020)

Ketchell (2020) recommended ways to get rid of the infodemic. These are the following: (1) Be critical when looking at social media, (2) Don't spread misleading information across your social media networks. You may politely request that the individual who posted it take it down, (3) Report the false information to the platform administrators. (4)When in doubt, double-check the details that have been exchanged, (5) Make more noise than people who share false information.

Indeed, fact-checking and rational debate is essential in combatting the infodemic. However, it could have "adverse effects." A study on the zika virus showed that the public lashed out their confidence in the accuracy of the WHO's information. One reason is that people cling to simplistic explanations rather than more complex information in a chaotic environment. (Carey, 2020) However, we can always reduce the scope of infodemic without demystifying the said misinformation. (Ketchell, 2020) Emily Vraga, an Associate Professor of Health Communication at the University of Minnesota, has found out that corrective messaging can effectively change attitudes. (Stix, 2020)

### **Theoretical and Conceptual Framework**

This study is anchored to Framing Theory, Agenda-Setting Theory, and Propaganda Model Theory.

Framing theory is related to the agenda-setting theory, but it expands by focusing on the essence of the issues. According to framing theory, the media focuses on such events and then positions them into a field of significance. Framing is an exciting subject because it can have a significant impact, and as a result, the definition of framing has grown to include organizations. (Framing Theory, n.d.)

Gregory Bateson posited the first concept of framing theory in 1972. Framing theory explains that the media create this frame by introducing news items with pre-defined and little contextualization. Frames can enhance understanding or are used as cognitive shortcuts to link stories to a bigger picture. (Arowolo, 2017) The frame describes how the media presents a particular piece of knowledge to the viewer and is arranged or structured. People's attitude (perception) is influenced by frame, which affects their decision-making on a subject influenced by media. The changing of perception can be taken as the second level of agenda-setting. (Bajracharya, 2018)

Agenda-setting theory gives the power of media to the public what to think about. The beginning of the idea can be traced to 1922 when Walter Lipmann expressed concern about how mass media molds public opinion. In later years, the theory was popularized by one of the significant researches done by McCombs and Shaw in 1972. (Mohd, 2014)

The media's effect on the coverage of news stories and issues impacts the public's mind. The news reports are written so that when one news story is given more weight and content than others, the viewer will immediately interpret it as the most relevant news and facts. The media determines the information comes first and comes second based on how people think and how much impact they will have on the audience. The cognitive method of "accessibility" is used to set the agenda. The media offers content essential for thinking, depicts significant societal problems, and represents people's thoughts. (Agenda-setting theory, n.d.)

On the other hand, infodemics can be associated with the Propaganda Model Theory. This theory explains how misinformation in the media works. The model aims to comprehend how the populace is manipulated and how misinformation shapes people's social, economic, and political attitudes. In their book 'Manufacturing Consent - The Political Economy of the Mass Media,' Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky proposed the theory. Herman and Chomsky mainly concentrated on the American population and media for their research, but this theory is universally applicable. Here the news is being misshaped and reformed from its original form. They call the factors which misshape news filters. These factors filter the information before reaching its audience or the general public. (Propaganda Model, n.d.)

In this study, framing theory is used to know how the information was framed to be believed by the public. It will identify the treatment, access to voice, and classification of "fake news." On the other hand, the people shared these infodemics as they were perceived to be accurate and affected the public's mind of what to take about (Agenda-setting). Moreover, this study will also investigate the sources of the said infodemics and identify the propaganda used to manipulate the public's opinion.

### **Methodology**

The study uses a content analysis research design approach. This study will use quantitative content analysis to understand the range and frame of the infodemics, such as the treatment, access to voice, and the sources. In communication and media studies, content analysis is a well-established research tool. (Herring, 2009) It has been used to understand better how political action, regime change, and digital control communicate with the Internet and social media. (Bradshaw and Howard 2018a, 2017b; Edwards, Howard, and Joyce 2013; Joyce, Antonio, and Howard 2013; Strange et al. 2013).

Anchored by theories, the researcher quantifies the variables in the articles of VeraFiles.Org using the table. The researcher then coded the data and discuss the relationship of the findings of the study.

Using the purposive sampling, the researcher chooses Verfiles.Org, one of the two news online portals credited by the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) at Poynter and the 3<sup>rd</sup> parties of the social media platform Facebook. The scope of this study

focuses on the gathered “infodemics” during the start of the lockdown from March 14 up to its six months to September 14. The researcher will code the data collected in the different specific variables in the fact-checking articles.

## Results and Discussions

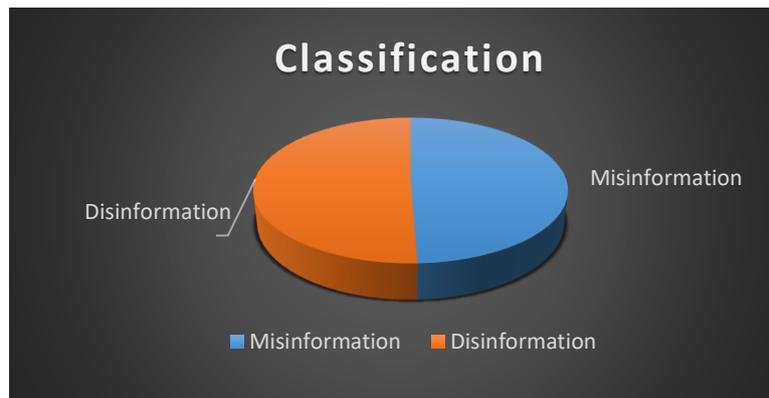


Figure 1. Classification of “Fake News”

Results show that 51 % of the “fake news” is disinformation while 49% of “fake news” is misinformation. It is noted that false information harms a specific person, organization, and institution. Vosoughi et al. (2018) noted that false information spreads much faster, farther, and broader than the truth. It means that it is not only the misleading claims of the people on covid-19 pandemic but the hatred spark in different societal issues against some individuals and organization particularly during the Marawi siege and the ABS-CBN shutdown. Online propaganda against some people and organizations is rampant at the start of the lockdown.

The literatures focus their discussions on the misinformation during the covid-19 as it generates confusion and insecurity among the public (Tagliabue, Galassi, & Mariani, 2020). This finding noted that fake claims on social media does not focus only to misinformation but intentionally giving harm to certain individuals or organization for personal intentions.

The findings show that fake claims of covid-19 pandemics have the most significant number with 41%. The covid-19- related claims are

mostly misinformation. This finding agrees to Barua *et al.* (2020) who noted that misinformation comes from different negative influences such as religious misinformation beliefs, conspiracy beliefs, and general misinformation beliefs. Guy Berger, Director for Policies and Strategies on Communication and Information said that falsehoods related to all aspects of covid-19 pandemic have become a commonplace (UN News, 2020).

Politics, ABS-CBN shutdown, and propaganda were followed by 17%, 11%, and 5%. The three categories could also be coded as political, with 33 %. It shows that the public is not only fed with misconceptions of covid- 19, but at the same time with the political propaganda on the different societal issues while having the lockdown. It is evident in the study that infodemic reigns during these times.

Complementary to the Agenda-Setting theory, this shows that one of the tremendous strategies of giving the public an agenda of what to think and to talk about is during these days when people have more time doing their business online during the lockdown. The public is more exposed and can easily be manipulated than usual.

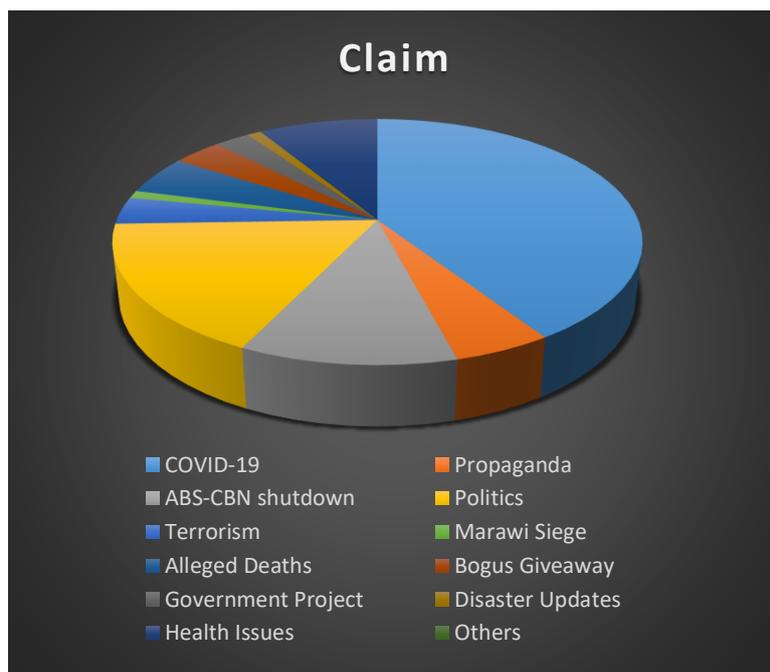


Figure 2. Claims of "Fake News"



Figure 3. Sources of "Fake News"

Results show that 48% of the sources come from social media accounts, particularly Facebook. Most of them supported President Duterte and his daughter, Davao City Mayor Sara Duterte. This includes some facebook pages namely *Duterte- Marcos Real Change*, *In-day Sara Para Sa Masa*, and *Ang Pagbabalik Namin Mga DDS @ Sarah Duterte & BBM Para Sa 2022*.

Trolls are also rampant in the lockdown. According to the report of Howard Johnson of British Broadcasting Company (BBC News), Philippines plays a key role in the wave of disinformation around the world. It is observed in the article that some "pro-government facebook accounts" were attacking protesters amid the Marcos burial issue at the Libingan ng mga Bayani in 2020. However, Presidential

Communications Operations Office (PCOO) undersecretary Jose Joel Sy Egco denied these allegations saying that the administration has no troll farm since the Duterte presidency.

But a University of Oxford study by Samantha Bradshaw and Philip Howard found out that then former presidential candidate Rodrigo Duterte spent around P 10 million in hiring trolls to spread propaganda and attack the opposition during the 2016 polls. Moreso, Billing (2020) noted that pro-government trolls are deflecting the criticisms on how President Duterte handle the covid-19 crisis. Furthermore, a study of Reporters Without Borders pointed out that supporters of

President Duterte acted as cyber-trolls are using “call center hubs” in disseminating fake and malicious edited content and conducting targeted harassment campaigns especially in blocking the renewal of the franchise of ABS-CBN.

Previous results show that political propaganda and disinformation are at the top of the classification and claims. This proliferation is done on social media platforms where everyone has more time amid lockdown. It is also noted that some government officials and government agencies are also involved as a source of spreading "fake news."

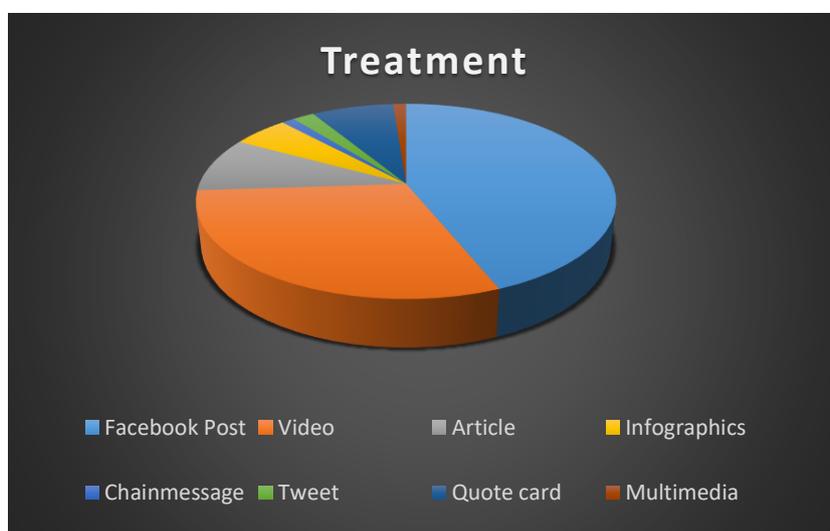


Figure 4. Treatment of "Fake News"

Results show that 44% of the fake claims are disseminated through a Facebook post, 30% are from youtube videos. Facebook and Youtube are two of the top social media platforms in the country. The public usually used these platforms, especially during the lockdown. This platform manifests that spreading lies could quickly spread to the public.

Maria Ressa, Nobel Peace Prize winner and CEO of Rappler, asks the lawmakers to make a law in the Philippines that holds accountable to social media giants for spreading false information (Cepeda, 2022). She emphasized that facebook became the largest distribution of news however, “studies have shown that lies laced with anger and hate spread faster and further. . .” Facebook, through its company

Meta, already started its battle on mis- and disinformation in 2016 by partnering to the 3<sup>rd</sup> party fact-checkers which were certified by non-partisan International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN). The network includes Rappler and Verfiles.Org in the Philippines.

While facebook have already mechanism to fight “fake news”, youtube has none. Samson (2021) noted that the trend of spreading false information in youtube became more prominent. Verfiles.Org evaluate this as “worrisome” because it only takes one video of false information to spread in the different platforms in the digital space. In January 2022, more than 85 fact-checking groups from around the world asked youtube to do more to

stop disinformation. In an online letter addressed to youtube, the groups emphasized that the platform “failed” to stop against disinformation as it leads in content promoting of

“covid-19 conspiracy theories, hate speech, and election- related falsehoods” (Kern, 2022).



Figure 5. Access to Voice of “Fake News”

The findings found out 19% of the sources to verify the information are coming from the credible people who are the authorities such as the World Health Organization and the Department of Health. Most of the claims are all about covid-19, and that is why most of the verification sources are from health organizations.

However, Pennycook & Rand (2019) and Timmer (2017) suggest that analytic- thinking and critical- thinking play key roles in identifying misinformation. A person cannot just rely on the authorities but also need to fact-check with their own before believing the information. It is noted in the sources of mis- and disinformation in the study that there are also authorities that made dubious claims during the press conferences. UNESCO (2018) noted that people must think critically about digital technology and social media platforms.

It is followed by 18% and 17% from News Organizations and credible social media accounts. This result is a manifestation that even if online platforms are used to spread "fake news," it is also considered an instrument to lessen or stop the proliferation.

## Conclusion

Based on the results, it is noted that there is a lot of disinformation during the lockdown in the Philippines. Troll farms are present as many people are enjoying digital space while in the lockdown. It is also noted that most of the sources of disinformation came from the supporters of President Duterte. Youtube and Facebook also became the two platforms that spread the false information more. Facebook already got mechanism through its 3<sup>rd</sup> party fact-checking, meanwhile youtube has none. The study manifests that the public should believe information coming from authorities, however, must be critical of believing information right away as some government officials also guilty of spreading false information. The findings also manifest that the public should verify the data from reliable and credible institutions or news media organizations.

## Recommendations

This study would like to recommend the following:

Media organizations in the country should not just tell what the officials as their news sources would tell but also fact-check them like what US media did to former President Donald Trump. It is also suggested that press briefings

and press conferences should have a moderator to fact-check the statements from the government agencies. Moreover, youtube must also have mechanism in their battle against mis- and disinformation like having their own 3<sup>rd</sup> party fact-checking entities. It is also recommended for this study to conduct further researches on mis- and disinformation in the country. The public is highly advised to be critical of the information that they received and to unfollow, unfriend, or unlike suspicious social media accounts used by the troll on all social media platforms. Lastly, this study recommends to conduct fact-checking and media literacy workshops to fight against false information.

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