Of Truth Decay and Post-Truth Worldview: MIL is the Key*

Ron F. Jabal, APR
CEO of PAGEONE Group and the Founder
President of the Reputation Management Association of the Philippines

Good morning ladies and gentlemen. Thank you for inviting me as the keynote speaker. Special thanks to former PAMIL president Dr. Joey Alagaran for inviting me to speak before this distinguished body of media and information literacy experts. Truly, an honor for me.

This conference is very appropriate, and I congratulate PAMIL, its members, and all attendees today because part of the solution to the crisis we are facing today is all of you. All of us.

Today more than ever, we are called to rise and face one of the most critical challenges in the fields of communication and education in the Philippines and the world.

What we need to understand today – the imperatives of communication in the 21st century – is what is happening, why is this even happening and what can we do about this?

Today, more than ever, our value as a communicator – as communication professionals and educators is supreme.

It is an accepted truism these days that more and more people are less influenced by facts in shaping their opinions. More and more people are dictated by emotional appeal disregarding verification and they are easily influenced by unsubstantiated information.

And this malaise is impacting the very core of Filipino's social fabric. Thus, we as professionals and academics must accept that we have a part in helping solve this crisis of global proportion.

And what is this malaise that is slowly destroying democratic ideals and institutions? This is Truth Decay. Truth Decay is the diminishing role that facts, data, and analysis play in a political and civic discourse that is largely fueled by a complex and rapidly evolving media, technology, and information ecosystem.

Thus, not a few scholars argue that due to truth decay – where facts are assailed at their very core paving the way for alternative facts, and distorted information which unfortunately results in misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation – we are in the middle of a perfect storm called post-truth.

The term "post-truth" is thought to be coined by Steve Tesich, in an essay published in The Nation magazine in 1992. Communication scholar, Timothy Williamson, in a conference in Bucharest, stressed 'post-truth' is neither a synonym with truth, nor an equivalent of lies, and falsehood, since it is simply making the distinction between truth and untruth irrelevant.

In a post-truth environment, there seems to be a sharp decline in the importance of facts, in favor of emotion. Repetition of unfounded statements, unsupported assertions even misleading images seems to be the "new" truth. In this social milieu, people make decisions based on gut feelings and emotional bonds – sometimes anger – despite the facts.

In this milieu, reality and truth are no longer based on evidence. Facts are altered, distorted, and transfigured to favor special, sometimes paid, interests to produce misconfigured mediated

reality. Today, there exists a parallel 'media eco-system' emboldened by social media where the network of users, producers, consumers, sharers, and digesters generate echo chambers and message silos where everybody's voice appears legitimate and where everyone claims to hold the only truth that matters – making learned experts and expertise useless and seemingly inutile.

In this environment, we live in a universe of memes and we seem to have a lack of criteria, sometimes mental facility to distinguish true from false, certain from probable, and definite from ambiguous. These days, I seem to agree more and more with Umberto Eco who once famously said that the Web and social networks have given "legions of idiots the right to speak," whereas before they had no voice.

Unfortunately, these days, universal truths are abandoned, and the idea of objectivity is rejected, even when supported by real facts. People now feel capable of creating their truths and beliefs—their customized gods—independent of values that in other times seemed unquestionable.

Post-truth is thus not simply about lies and false beliefs but also, perhaps even especially, about confusion amid a surfeit of information and influential appeals, the difficulty in discerning one from the other, the constant selective use and presentation of information and appeals for strategic political (and business) ends, and the incessant public disputes about what is (in) accurate and (dis)honest.

So what has been done?

Obviously, if there is a spate of false news and wild notions primarily spawned online, we could try to stop the flow at its source or at least warn people about the dubious nature of individual pieces of this stuff. Search engines and social media are beginning to take their roles in vetting online claims seriously, recognizing that they are more than just neutral platforms for discourse.

Facebook has now pledged to address false news with a combination of user reporting and third-party fact-checking. These approaches are essentially interventionist tools to warn the public of lies and errors under the assumption that cutting off or vetting the flow of falsehood will make a more honest world or at least an environment where fewer people are fooled.

A second way of addressing online falsehood is to debunk it directly. We have long had websites that dispute falsehoods, the most well-known being Snopes. There are fact-checkers too. The advantage is that other people, with hopefully more objectivity and better skills than the rest of us, do the vetting and provide us with the answer.

The most significant effort in this regard is the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) from the Poynter Institute for Media Studies. Not only does it monitor fact-checking efforts worldwide, publish articles on fact-checking issues, and provide fact-checking training, but it is the author of a code of principles used by a multitude of fact-checkers. This sort of approach is probably useful overall, as long as people pay attention to it.

Factmata, backed by Google, is working on a fully automated means to do fact-checking, arguing that human checking can't compete with the immense volume of online material needing to be investigated. Google admits that developing the required algorithms is a daunting task, but it is a game to try.

Finding ways to debunk falsehood may be a help, but those of us who believe in information literacy see another option—providing the public with tools to do their fact-checking.

So, what can we do?

I believe that media and information literacy is our best path to develop people who can meet

the post-truth era with the abilities that are required to conquer it. This is not elitist, because anyone can become information-literate. Nor is it part of any ideological agenda, since it counters ideology by urging us to follow the evidence.

The most pressing enemy at the gates today is conjecture and speculation masquerading as authority. What we absolutely must not lose are the pattern of critical thinking and the rules of evidence that characterize best practices in determining the reliability of information we encounter. A strong media and information literacy agenda will keep that pattern alive and teach the ability to use it well. No agenda is more important

AS UNESCO puts it, we should place MIL as part of our core constituency in professional circles and classrooms to develop competencies among media users so they can critically evaluate, use, and contribute information and media content. Thus, an important skill is critical thinking – which is fast becoming a "gap" skill even among journalists and academicians

Developing competencies towards media and information is especially relevant within the contemporary media landscape. The blurring of the lines between producers and consumers has challenged what we consider media messages and made information access universal: a news headline, a video, a meme, or a social media post or comment vie for our attention on social media platforms.

It is useful to think of media and information literacy as a continuum rather than an outcome — we can all be more media and information literate.

As our dependence on technology increases, thinking critically about media and information is a life-long learning skill that supports active and informed citizens who play a key role in ensuring democracy doesn't die online.

Here's my overall point: if the world of post-truth and fake news is going to be a concern for us, then we have to frame media and information literacy in such a way that it puts truth front and center: media and information literacy cannot address post-truth until it has addressed truth itself.

As MIL advocates, we need to call out falsity. We need to reject prematurely naturalized truths. But at all times, if we're going to address the post-truth world as educators we need to defend the idea of truth.

Indeed, today, more than ever, communication educators need to intensify their campaign to translate and articulate the intellectual, and knowledge capital at the core of organizations and institutions.

It is now, more than ever, part of our major responsibility to ensure that we continue to be reliable.

While a flagrant lie can easily be spotted, "shades of truth" aka "truth lite" are not that easy to call on. Hence, a more discerning eye and healthy mode of inquisitiveness are imperatives for all practitioners.

When confronted with distorted and misguided assertions even lies, fact check and recheck. Consumers and other stakeholders continue to respect accuracy.

If we find ourselves in a situation where we carry some post-truth statements – hopefully inadvertently, correct it. PLEASE! The public continues to respect those who can stand up to one's mistakes and follow them up with action. Truthfulness is an excellent trait all excellent academicians should continue to have and exercise.

Truly, communication professionals and educators have a lot to think about and work on as

we meander through the challenges and risks of the post-truth environment. But I know we are resilient, resourceful, intelligent, creative, and strategic enough to weather and overcome these challenges.

We can all fight fake news and weak unsubstantiated shades of truth with hard facts, accuracy, credibility, and a lot of authenticity.

We are the last bastion of truth. We need to illuminate, create, grow, and teach critical thinking to our students for their future.