

Separating the Wheat from the Chaff: Dissecting Good and Bad through Promoting Media and Information Literacy (MIL)

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The “global village” was once a concept coined by Canadian media scholar Marshall McLuhan in the early 1960s to describe what he predicted as a technology-driven world. Today, in a hyperconnected era, people realize what was once just a concept as they become more digitally wired and constantly exposed to a plethora of information through various media. But amid the advancements and connectedness brought about by the ever-changing media landscape is a reminder for people to champion media and information literacy (MIL) all the time — both in online and offline spaces.

Media proves to be a strong force in today’s society.

Wilson et al. (2011) underscore that media is instrumental in shaping one’s attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions of the world. This effect is very much likely in a media-saturated country such as the Philippines. According to the 2023 Digital Report of We Are Social and Meltwater, Filipinos spend nine hours and 14 minutes using the internet, while three hours and 43 minutes on social media every day (Kemp, 2023). Given this, Filipinos are exposed to a high volume of content online, from blogs and discussion forums to social networking sites and video streaming applications. In effect, they also find it hard to differentiate facts from false information (Stanford History Education Group, 2016).

When the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted several countries including the Philippines, every sector of society leveraged the benefits of digitalization. Almost all organizations, private and public, embraced digital technologies to survive and thrive amid the crippling effects of the pandemic. The use of digital payments, contact-tracing applications, e-commerce, telehealth, and online education enabled individuals, businesses, and the government to deliver and consume goods and services while observing minimum public health standards (World Bank Group, 2020). Strengths were found in these technological affordances.

However, the United Nations (UN) and World Health Organization (WHO) cited another crisis to reckon with – the infodemic of COVID-19 misinformation (United Nations, 2020). Misleading pieces of information, such as fabricated quotes, conspiracy theories, and medical hoaxes, affected people’s trust in medical science (Posetti & Bontcheva, 2020).

The shutdown of a media giant in the Philippines has likewise spurred Filipinos to watch TV less and seek news and information online instead (Merez, 2021). According to Y. Chua (2021), Filipinos were increasingly relying on social media as a news source at 72%, while Tik Tok became a destination for news aside from Facebook.

But these online spaces that are supposed to facilitate safe infotainment have also shifted to a fertile ground for hate speech, cyberbullying, polarization, and unfiltered information.

At a time like this when truth, peace, and compassion are challenged, MIL then becomes more critical than ever. While the media holds power, so is society. People can make efforts to prevent themselves from falling prey to disinformation architects and media messages that work under the guise of truth.

Doing so can only happen when MIL is integrated into formal and non-formal education systems.

For one, school is a place to educate its community about the importance of making MIL an everyday skill. It can be viewed from here that the role teachers play in classrooms is pivotal. Tuazon (2016) emphasizes that 21st-century learners should go beyond reading, writing, and arithmetic in this digital age. Hence, incorporating MIL in the senior high school curriculum becomes a significant achievement (Bautista, 2021). When teachers discuss the nature of media, they help their students learn to question the underlying motives of different information sources and the subtexts in any media content. Students in the process are trained to be critical thinkers and active prosumers in the media around them. They approach a wide array of information based on the values of ethics and responsibility, without trampling on someone else's rights and privacy. With a good MIL foundation, students are kept from accepting as facts any information they encounter and rather make decisions that are founded on empirical evidence.

Although apart from the formal education system, MIL needs to penetrate non-formal environments such as households, community assemblies, casual encounters, and most especially, social media. In the 2022 national and local elections in the Philippines, for example, people shared their different versions of reality online. Some formed echo chambers. Several fan pages were bought and converted into political support group pages. Other netizens engaged in banter and exchanged ad hominem attacks when they ran out of logical reasons to prove their points. Cancel culture was an easy resort to dismissing someone who went against the norm and dominant ideology. Clickbait headlines gained more traffic and engagement than legacy news outlets. All these scenarios paint a polluted information and communication ecosystem.

It is important to note that several bodies continue to challenge and change the status quo by championing MIL campaigns and projects.

UNESCO takes the lead by spearheading Global MIL Week annually, developing massive open online courses (MOOCs), forming an alliance with MIL advocacy groups, and initiating social media initiatives like MIL CLICKS.

Locally, the Philippine Association for Media and Information Literacy (PAMIL) and the Communication Foundation for Asia (CFA) collaborated in the creation of the MIL Innovation Hub, which serves as a conduit for MIL education in the Asia-Pacific region (PAMIL, 2021). Out of the Box Media Literacy, a nonprofit organization that won the 2021 Global MIL Awards, published a practical handbook on MIL for democracy, conducts mentorship programs for Filipino teachers and youth leaders, and designs more learning resources and activities for students under the ambit of its #IWASFAKE campaign.

The journey does not end with these organizations though. Everyone is at the heart of mainstreaming MIL.

On the one hand, the challenges in teaching MIL in the formal education system must be addressed. The study of Bautista (2021) revealed that there is a lack of proper teachers' training, a dearth of reference materials, and little to no profound understanding of the meaning, scope, and essence of MIL. It is high time then that coaching sessions for teachers through partnerships

with the above-mentioned organizations are harnessed by the school administrators. It will also help to revisit the qualifications of an MIL teacher to effectively teach the subject, to prevent him or her from getting caught off guard for the whole academic year.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) stressed that prioritizing teachers in MIL education cultivates a “multiplier effect,” one that can influence their students and then society as a whole (Gretter & Yadav, 2018; Wilson et al., 2011). This way, both educators, learners, and the public can work together toward sifting truth and advocating meaningful face-to-face or virtual conversations with their respective networks of influence. They become adept in navigating media development and steering social change, more so.

Furthermore, there are credible resources on MIL at one’s disposal, most of which are open-access. It is a resounding call for schools to redesign their curriculum map by using these available sources. Apart from formative assessments, students must be taught to apply MIL concepts to practical situations, thereby assuring that they meet the most essential learning competencies (MELCs) and fostering authentic learning. Activities that will make students act as if they were journalists who make editorial decisions may similarly allow them to understand the nitty-gritty of news packaging. Besides, today’s journalism has evolved from the media being the sole gatekeeper to people deciding on which content they need and want for themselves.

With TikTok coming out as a popular social media of choice among Gen Zs (K. Chua, 2021), it may even be advantageous to tap its potential as a platform for producing short-form contents that demonstrate the use of the Explore-Engage-Empower Model conceptualized by Alagaran (2017).

On the other hand, in non-formal contexts, there is value in fostering a safe environment where acknowledging and learning from honest mistakes is admired. More often than not, people have been quick to humiliate others for being misinformed. However, an open and trusting conversation may allow one to realize their part in the solution. It is also beneficial that every person practices reading beyond the headlines, scouting for other sources that report about a topic, and reviewing their digital footprints. Presenting reliable information sources to peers and family members in cases of confrontations is a chance to help both parties appreciate the facts, rather than pointlessly argue with each other. Calling someone out for their peddling of dubious and malicious content can be done privately and with love so that good relationships with them can be maintained rather than broken.

Like the concept of “global village,” MIL is a vision that can be meaningfully realized when people, despite spatial-temporal distances, converge as one toward speaking truth to power all the time and in all kinds of spaces.

In the end, the message will always be the same: It is through MIL that a person can learn the golden nugget of separating the wheat from the chaff.

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