

THURSDAY | JANUARY 25, 2018

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What's 'fake news' in the real media?

FAKE NEWS Queen" was among the pejorative tags pinned on Malacañang communications official Mocha Uson by her detractors after she was recognized by the UST alumni association for being a prominent graduate serving in government.

That deprecatory description raised again a question that has been bugging me since the 2016 US presidential election campaign: What exactly is "fake news"?

The term was given currency by then candidate and now President Donald Trump railing against several media organizations that, he thought, have been unfairly critical of him. His repetitive use of the term, I presumed, was for calculated effects.

Familiar with how memes are used to condition the public mind, I generally ignore the term "fake news" when I come across it – until I found it has leaped to these parts as most American cultural oddities do. So now I am forced to contend with it.

But defining it as used locally is tricky since "fake news" now refers loosely to a wide variety of media stories and situations, many of them defying classification.

To preserve my own mental health, I now simply define "fake news" as any report or statement that I think is injurious to one's name and equanimity. Put another way, "fake news" is any report that a politician or public figure or a private person does not like.

The free-for-all over the meaning of the Word of the Year (2017) will leave the attack term without its bite, except for those who are onion-skinned or those who refuse to heed the Supreme Court's advice of the "balm of a clear conscience" enough to let pass a hurtful "fake news."

Defining "fake news" is very subjective. If one does not like a news item, he can denounce it as fake. If he likes it, it's tolerable. If it's favorable or even flattering, it's OK, thank you.

Applying this confused definition, the title of "Fake News Queen" conferred on Mocha by her critics is stripped of its negative innuendo. And with her returning the UST alumni recognition, the brouhaha should die down. (But it won't – not yet, anyway.)

• All errors make for 'fake news'?

SERIOUSLY now, we should distinguish between fake news and honestly mistaken reports. Not all erroneous stories can or should be assailed as "fake news."

Without meaning to free the writer and/or his editor of liability, we suggest that aside from the damage it may have caused, the circumstances under which the error was made be considered. Another point is the presence or absence of malice (which, btw, is one of the

* FAKE NEWS
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The Philippine Star
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elements of libel).

We commit errors under pressure of deadline. When we do, one rule we follow is to make a prompt and proper correction – and apologize if warranted.

Unfortunately for print media, our work cycle is one day, or some hours between editions, so the update or correction can appear only in the next edition. In the broadcast media (radio/TV), programming will determine the next opportunity for a correction for serious mistakes.

In the digital media, however, corrections usually can be made on the run, 24/7. This is true especially with personal blogs and institutional websites, where corrections can more easily be inserted right after they are spotted and the updated material prepared.

Imagine a reporter driving on the North Luzon Expressway coming upon a vehicular accident. He gets off, gathers details and phones in or messages a bulletin saying among other basic facts that four persons died – he counted the “lifeless” bodies – then drives off to his original assignment.

If his brief story saw print after it turned out that one of the four “fatalities” survived after treatment at the hospital, will the first erroneous report about four dead persons be considered “fake news”?

Of if the President says that he would fire a ranking official that day and his statement was published – but for some reason he fired nobody – will the story be “fake news”? It depends on how the report was worded and edited.

There is no doubt that we have “fake news” on our hands when we purvey reports that had been concocted or knowingly based on false, forged or non-existent

documents.

Such fake stories can originate from anywhere – including a writer colluding with a polluted source or a party out to destroy another person. They could also come from official or government sources, sometimes also PR agents, who foist wrong information on the public through mass media.

Modern technology has made it easier than during the typewriter age to generate and publish or plant false and malicious stories. The possibility of fake stories being fed to an unsuspecting public has been facilitated in digital media.

Anybody with the right devices and internet connection – plus a devious mind – can create and publish almost any material looking professional with crisp images and fancy typography. There is no bar between the malefactor and the worldwide public in the internet.

Not that we want to say that mainstream media are more trustworthy, but I think the random browser is safer accessing reports or stories uploaded by media entities that have a solid reputation and a history of truthfulness and reliability.

These are the media organizations whose writers and editors – the gatekeepers – follow time-tested rules and whose product passes through editorial filters that spot errors, malice and other elements that detract from the delivery of honest news and views. Truth is not sacrificed for speed.

While these recognized media outfits are not perfect, I would bet on them rather than on random bloggers or users of Facebook and Twitter hiding behind cryptic names and unrecognizable avatars.