

When overload becomes anxiety

By: AMBETH R. OCAMPO

Fake news is a blight on our times, resulting from the explosion of information that people cannot possibly digest and absorb in one or even multiple lifetimes.

Remembering my undergraduate course on Western civilization recently made me wonder how much simpler the world must have been before Gutenberg, a time when books were patiently copied out by hand, and sometimes lovingly illustrated or "illuminated" by monks, making these so valuable that everything had to be attached to library shelves by heavy iron chains. The so-called Middle Ages that fell roughly between the fall of the Roman Empire and the Renaissance is also known as the Dark Ages, a time characterized by illiteracy, pestilence, barbarian invasions, and wars that inflicted rape, pillage, famine, and destruction on the defenseless. Monasteries became beacons of light in the Dark Ages, with monks copying out and preserving the history and literature of the Greco-Roman world for the future. In those days, few could make text emerge from a page by oral reading, and those who were fortunate to hear the so-called "voice of the pages" had to be fluent in Latin or Greek to understand it.

Today we have "information overload," a term made popular by Alvin Toffler in his 1970 book "Future Shock," in which he predicted that information will be generated faster than we can digest and absorb it. Toffler described himself as a "futurist." He was not a clairvoyant or a fortune teller: He did not predict the future; he imagined how and what we would be like at a future time. His "information overload" has become a reality and it has led to another condition described by Richard Saul Wurman in 2000 as "information anxiety," which describes the gray

area between what we *think* we know and understand and that which we *really* know and understand.

As I approach my senior years and reminisce, I often tell my students that I modeled myself on my many mentors: E. Aguilar Cruz, Doreen G. Fernandez, Teodoro A. Agoncillo, Armando and Carolina Malay, Gilda Cordero-Fernando, Carmen Guerrero Nakpil, E. Arsenio Manuel, Benedict Anderson, and O.D. Corpuz, who all worked from their home libraries. Each had patiently built Filipiniana collections, very much like digging a well from which they drew material for their research and writing.

Fernandez was the most technologically savvy; she had her own clunky word processor when people were still on typewriters. She even had a microfilm-microfiche reader to access the material she brought home from libraries and archives abroad. Cordero-Fernando and Aguilar Cruz had eclectic assortments of books, photographs, artworks and ephemera. Both did not care for rare and out-of-print books if photo-

copies were available, explaining that it was content rather than the physical books that was important to them. Manuel followed the example of his teacher H. Otley Beyer, and arranged and bound the term papers of his students into a multivolume resource he named the "Pasig Papers."

Corpuz had all his reference materials literally within reach—an encyclopedia and an assortment of dictionaries. Of course he had his own set of the 55-volume compilation of Philippine historical documents by Emma Helen Blair and James Alexander Robertson that other scholars had to consult in a university library during office hours. In his lifetime, Corpuz was probably

the only person who had read all 55 volumes cover to cover—not once but twice! Gifted with a near-photographic memory, he could cite text by volume and page or recall and recite whole pages from previous readings. I used to kid him that in the future when brains were auctioned, his brain would be cheap compared to that of the village idiot because his was overused while the latter's was brand-new.

Many of my reference books have been set aside to make more shelf space for recent acquisitions. These were not hard to part with because Google had made many of them nearly obsolete. My standard references are now in digital form and a shadow of my physical library that I can carry around in a thumb drive, but the real challenge is reading and digesting information. Almost everything is now available with a tap on a trackpad. Information overload should make us happy, but it causes information anxiety.

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