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FILIPINOS FIGHT BACK VS FAKE NEWS

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The Philippines has become a case study for the damage that disinformation can do to democratic societies, but after a year of living in fear of speaking up under the Duterte administration, Filipinos are fighting back openly and online, according to media experts and veteran journalists.

"I often say to people globally, 'Take a look at the Philippines to understand what we might be facing, to understand how the mechanisms of the free press could be under threat so quickly,'" said Claire Wardle, executive director of First Draft, a Harvard University think-tank, at the start of the two-day Democracy and Disinformation Forum on Monday.

Wardle, whose group finds solutions to challenges faced by trust and truth in the digital age, was one of the speakers at the conference on how fake news and disinformation undermine people's freedoms.

"And what you have in the Philippines, you yourselves are an incredible case study in recognizing how damaging disinformation can be but also recognizing that the steps that your country potentially takes in terms of regulation could have huge repercussions globally in terms of what that means," Wardle said in a video message shown at the conference attended by nearly 400 participants.

Wardle looked into how disinformation has quickly spread online and influenced Filipinos, using "technology that could connect people that we were so excited about to technology that has the potential to cause such harm and such damage."

What has happened to the Philippines is now taking place in other parts of the world, triggering inquiries, research and discussions on "potential regulation," which worried her, she said.

"One of my biggest concerns globally is that 2018 is the year of governments and fake news inquiries. What that means is we have politicians around the world suddenly waking up to the fact that this is an issue and believing that regulation is the answer," Wardle said.

No agreed definition

Ironically, she added, government authorities might want to regulate fake news even when there had yet to be an agreed definition of the term.

Sen. Grace Poe, who opened an inquiry on fake news, has proposed a law that would penalize government employees who spread false information, saying they should at all times be accountable and perform their duties responsibly while upholding public interest above their own.

Veteran journalist Howie Severino of GMA Network suggested that false information were being spread, especially on social media, apparently because people were becoming less critical of the information that besieged them daily.

He cited the case of one of his own relatives who shared an old 2016 GMA report announcing classes had been suspended.

Maria Ressa, chief executive officer of the online news site, Rappler, said fake news also was being spread to tarnish or slam the reputation of public figures, citing the case of attacks against Vice President Leni Robredo, which her group had traced to bloggers who supported President Duterte.

Overcoming fears

Severino said he believed that people who were initially intimidated online were now learning to overcome their fears.

"Just a year ago, there was so much intimidation," he said. "Now you see much more honesty, outspokenness, people are becoming more vocal. So I think this period of intimidation is ending and I think there's much more courage."

"I think even organizing something like this, even livestreaming this, a lot of people who don't agree with us are probably listening in and this is an act of courage by the organizers. And everyone here I think just by showing up made an act of courage," he added.

Ressa said based on the online news site's analysis, there was a period of "silence" among the critical voices online from August 2016 to August 2017.

Drama and lies

Ressa said the brutal mur-

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ders of Kian delos Santos, Carl Arnaiz and Reynaldo de Guzman allegedly by police officers triggered the online protests and the voices of protest against Mr. Duterte's war on drugs that has killed thousands of drug suspects.

Another veteran journalist, Ellen Tordesillas of Vera Files, said Mr. Duterte himself was a source of disinformation.

Ron Jabal, president of the Public Relations Society of the Philippines, said that "Mr. Duterte is not giving information but drama."

"People are reacting to the drama and lies. We need to be able to understand him that way," Jabal said.

The forum also emphasized the role of media and journalists to keep democracies alive and the challenge for the industry to be more responsible and committed to its role as a watchdog.

Inquirer editor and opinion writer John Nery said that fake news and other forms of disinformation "undermines the credibility of traditional news sources."

"Even more important it makes it difficult for the public to make distinctions between what is right, what is wrong and what is false, and I think that is where the peril, the risk to our democratic project, lies," Nery said.

Foreign correspondent Peter Greste, who was jailed in Egypt for 400 days for his reportage, said a society "cannot have a strong democracy unless you have strong journalism."

"We have to remind people that we have a responsibility to do and to do that job well," Greste said. INQ