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Information Dystopia AND Philippine Democracy

Protecting the public sphere
from disinformation

Yvonne T. Chua
Nicole Curato
Jonathan Corpus Ong

STORY

- JOURNALISTS CITIZENS' ASSEMBLY FREEDOM
- NARRATIVE SNAPSHOTS
- SOCIAL PREFERENCE PLATFORMS ENTERTAINMENT
- POSITIVELY EDUCATION OFFLINE ACCESS

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Acknowledgments

First, Internews wishes to thank the three authors of this research paper, Yvonne T. Chua, Associate Professor at the Department of Journalism at the University of the Philippines; Nicole Curato, Associate Professor at the Centre for Deliberative Democracy and Global Governance of the University of Canberra; and Jonathan Corpus Ong, Associate Professor at the Department of Communication of the University of Massachusetts and Research Fellow at the Shorenstein Center of Harvard University.

We are incredibly grateful for the quality of their insights and analyses, their collegial approach, and the passion they have demonstrated in researching the topic.

We trust that each of their chapters, as well as their collective recommendations, will constitute essential contributions to future reflections about the Philippine information disorder and to the search for viable solutions to address it. It also will help inform Filipinos about the issue and the efforts to protect their right to know.

Internews also warmly thanks its partners for their contribution to this research effort, particularly in the development of the mass online survey whose data inform this publication.

Internews further would like to thank the members of its team involved in various capacities in the development of this publication (in alphabetical order): Alison Bartel, Celia de Jesus, Michelle Dyonisius, Regina Florendo, Arlene Garcia, Brian Hanley, Laura Holt, Greg Kehailia, Mikaela Lee, Gian Libot, Laura Stein Lindamood, Kathryn Raymundo, Charlie Saceda, Veronica Santiago.

This publication is the culmination of over nine months of work—from the mass online survey, the first conversations with the three academic researchers, their writing of the chapters, to the final product you are reading here.



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Foreword

Online disinformation and the weaponization of digital platforms during elections constitute unprecedented challenges to both liberal democracies and the media sector.

The Philippines is one of the first countries where the potential for online disinformation threats to undermine democratic processes was noticed.

In 2018, Katie Harbath, Facebook's public policy director for global elections, explained that in light of the 2016 Philippine presidential elections, a few months before Brexit and the US presidential elections, the Philippines was "definitely Patient Zero for the war on disinformation."

Many reasons have been cited to explain the vulnerability of the Philippines to online disinformation.

The internet penetration and social media prevalence certainly is a major factor. As Professor Yvonne Chua reminds us in the first chapter of this collective report, "Filipinos spend nearly 10 hours [per day] on the internet, more than five hours on a mobile device, and nearly four hours on social media as well as watching television. They visit Google, Facebook, and YouTube the most and maintain an average of 9.9 social media accounts."

As a consequence, the Philippines stands out in the global disinformation ecosystem in several ways.

The first characteristic is the impressive diversity of challenges in the Philippine disinformation space: from state actors, foreign influence operations, complicit industry figures, to weaponization of libel and censorship laws and attacks on journalists and human rights figures. Another remarkable element is the extremely rapid evolution and diversification of disinformation operations, noticeable during such a short time span from 2016 general elections to 2019 midterm elections. The rise of micro-level influencers, private groups, and "walled gardens" combined with the diversification of platforms, beyond Facebook and Twitter, is another profound drift¹. Disinformation operations seem also to become increasingly inherent to the Philippine political and electoral landscape. Dr. Jonathan Corpus Ong and Dr. Nicole Curato, who are among the co-authors of this report, noted this trend in 2019, commenting on the midterm elections: "For the first time, digital operations are fully integrated in the overall campaign strategy. In previous elections, social media were peripheral to political campaigns, serving as supplements to the 'air war' of television and radio advertisements and 'ground war' of political machinery. Now, a significant chunk of the

campaign war chest goes to social media. Politicians from the national to the barangay (village) level enlist digital workers for campaign operations, with operators ranging from the professional to the amateur to the ad hoc²."

In this worrisome context, Internews in the Philippines aims to bolster the capacity of media and other organizations to address disinformation.

The toolbox of our program, implemented with a large group of Philippine partner organizations, is designed to deal with both the supply and demand sides of the issue. We have a broad range of disinformation-related activities: fact-check capacity building for media, teachers, students, and civil society members; youth coalition building; work with so-called social media "influencers" and content creators; development of a disinformation reporting platform and a malign actor tracking platform, as well as coordination with Facebook to encourage removing toxic operators. The program also conducts media literacy and disinformation awareness campaigns to reduce the vulnerability of the Philippine citizenry to influence operations. Internews will also engage with the private sector through the establishment of a Trusted Media Index, to be shared with advertising companies and encourage them to focus a larger part of the Philippine digital advertising market—estimated to 700 million dollars a year—on trustworthy information sources. Other activities relate to investigative and data journalism capacity building, with notable focus on elections and political financing. In addition to efforts directly aimed at disinformation, the program also implements a large set of activities dedicated to support the self-regulation of the media sector, which Internews sees as a fundamental alternative to an all-legalistic, strictly-criminalizing approach to disinformation.

Internews' method gives a significant space to research and analysis, as it is essential to better understand the disinformation dynamics—whose actors, networks, sources of funding, and motivations are often obscure—in order to address them. In that context, from April 9 – May 25, 2020 Internews in partnership with RIWI Corp. conducted a mass online survey to better understand the Philippines' current media landscape and information disorder.

Following responses from over 19,000 Filipinos, the mass online survey produced fascinating findings, which at times challenged some of the most common assumptions about the Philippines and its information ecosystem. They showed that the relationships of Filipinos to their media, the sources of information they trust and use, and the issue of disinformation are complex, nuanced, sometimes even contradictory. They vary between regions and generations as well as different socioeconomic and educational backgrounds. The findings also confirmed the rise of digital

platforms as the main sources of information for the Filipinos. Maybe more surprisingly, they showed that the divorce between the Philippine population and the media sector is in fact much less certain than often assumed as Filipinos largely welcome news that is critical or potentially offending. Importantly, the survey also indicated that a vast majority of Filipinos—almost 80%—are worried about the impact of disinformation on elections.

In September 2020, as Internews was celebrating the first anniversary of its office in the Philippines, it was clear to Internews that we should keep testing solutions to figure out what works and ensure that the program design remains adaptive to a rapidly evolving context. As we were looking into the implications of the survey data, we decided that we needed to partner with academic researchers to analyze further what the data were telling us about Filipinos and their relationship to their information sources, and in turn to explore the strategic and programmatic implications of these findings.

Hence, we asked Professor Chua, Associate Professor at the Department of Journalism, College of Mass Communication of the University of the Philippines, Dr. Curato, Associate Professor at the Center for Deliberative Democracy and Global Governance of the University of Canberra, and Dr. Ong, Associate Professor at the Department of Communication of the University of Massachusetts and Research Fellow at the Shorenstein Center of Harvard University, if they would agree to mobilize their expertise and years of observation of the disinformation phenomenon in the Philippines, to help Internews understand the Philippine information ecosystem and explore possible new routes to complement our existing efforts to address disinformation.

We reached out to the three co-authors of this report with this main question: in light of these data, what can we and other stakeholders—non-governmental organizations, civil society organizations, media, digital platforms, legislators, government, academia, and private sector—do better or differently to help address the issue of disinformation in the Philippines when there is still time?

In the first chapter of this report, Professor Chua takes a deep look into Internews’s mass online survey data and proposes her analysis, discussing applicable and pertinent issues such as factchecking, public trust and press freedom, while reflecting upon the profound linkages between disinformation and the relationship of Filipinos to their sources of information.

In the second chapter, Dr. Curato starts from an essential question—have we yet reached peak disinformation?—to

demonstrate the importance of looking into the cultural and emotional dimensions of disinformation and how they form part of the broader political transformations taking place in the Philippines.

In the third chapter, Dr. Ong examines how the Philippine disinformation ecosystem “fits” into the regional landscape of networked disinformation. He then delves into its financial incentives and the questions of legislation and accountability of digital platforms and influence operators, to pave the way to possible recommendations.

In the fourth and final chapter of this report, the three academics join forces to collegially formulate a set of strategic and programmatic recommendations to better tackle the issue of disinformation in the Philippines.

These recommendations should be considered vital for the future of the Philippine democracy. In the hyper-polarized Philippine political environment, where online disinformation has become an integral part of politicking, tackling disinformation is a national emergency. As Filipinos approach the 2022 general elections, now is the time to brace ourselves and to start preparing for the next wave of disinformation in the Philippines.



Greg Kehailia

Country representative,
Internews Philippines

¹Ong, J.C., Tapsell, R., & Curato, N. (2019). Tracking digital disinformation in the 2019 Philippine midterm election. new mandala. <https://www.newmandala.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Digital-Disinformation-2019-Midterms.pdf>

²Idem

Survey methodology

RIWI Corp. conducted the survey using the Random Domain Intercept Technology (RDIT), a patented technology which invites randomized web users to participate safely and anonymously.

The survey asked 18 closed-ended questions exposed to the internet population of the Philippines.

RDIT worked such that anyone online in the Philippines on any device at any time of the day had an equal chance of being exposed to the survey. This enabled RIWI to gather high-quality citizen sentiment data, including those who typically do not self-select or take part in traditional surveys, and those who are not active on social media.

Percentages are calculated based on weighted data using 2020 projections through an application programming interface and census on age and gender.

Survey period

April 9, 2020 to May 25, 2020

Sample

19,621 respondents

Respondents here refers to unique users who have completed the 18 closed-ended questions.

CHAPTER I

Media and disinformation in the Philippines

Trends, perceptions, and challenges

Yvonne T. Chua

Associate Professor, Department of Journalism
University of the Philippines

Introduction

"[T]he next ten years will be pivotal for press freedom because of converging crises affecting the future of journalism: a geopolitical crisis (due to the aggressiveness of authoritarian regimes); a technological crisis (due to a lack of democratic guarantees); a democratic crisis (due to polarization and repressive policies); a crisis of trust (due to suspicion and even hatred of the media); and an economic crisis (impoverishing quality journalism). These five areas of crisis... are now compounded by a global public health crisis."

The Paris-based Reporters Without Borders (RSF) was referring to the global state of journalism when it made the forecast during the release of its 2020 World Press Freedom Index on World Press Freedom Day. But the assessment could not have been more apt for the Philippine media, which have been severely battered since Rodrigo Duterte assumed the presidency in 2016.

Regarded widely as an authoritarian populist, Duterte has habitually demonized journalists, making no bones from the start of his six-year term about his wish to "kill journalism." He also has not concealed the deployment of "keyboard warriors" in his social media-assisted presidential run, turning the Philippines into "patient zero" of the modern disinformation era.

By RSF's reckoning, press freedom in four years of the Duterte presidency so far has undeniably declined—two notches down to the 136th in the latest annual index—asccribed in part to the "state troll armies [that] use the weapon of disinformation on social media" against journalists. The Philippines found itself in the company of Russia and Vietnam, both authoritarian states, with this notorious practice.

A fuller picture from the Freedom for Media, Freedom for All Network (FMFA), a coalition of six Filipino media organizations, shows a disquieting tally of 171 cases of attacks and threats against journalists during that period. It is a dangerous mix of physical and cyberattacks, curtailed access to information, a slew of criminal cases, surveillance and red-tagging (act of labelling, branding, naming and accusing individuals and/or organizations of being left-leaning, subversives, communists, or terrorists), arrests and killings, among others.

The Philippine media situation would further take a turn for the worse—topped by the shutdown of the broadcast giant ABS-CBN Corp., whom Duterte had repeatedly threatened to bring to its knees, and the conviction of Rappler founder and editor Maria Ressa and a former colleague for cyber libel in what was just one of seven court cases she and her online news site are battling.

Government's attempts to decouple the assault on the media from the issue of press freedom aren't all that successful, however. The majority of Filipinos told a Social Weather Stations (SWS) survey, for example, that they regard the rejection of ABS-CBN's application for franchise renewal in particular as a "blow to press freedom."



The Philippine media situation would further take a turn for the worse—topped by the shutdown of the broadcast giant ABS-CBN Corp. and the conviction of Rappler founder and editor Maria Ressa and a former colleague for cyber libel.



How else do Filipinos perceive the media, especially in a polarized environment awash in disinformation?

This paper explores the results of a nationwide survey that asked 19,621 Filipino internet users from April 9 to May 25, 2020 a total of 18 questions about access and

reliability of the news media, values related to accuracy, trust, and fairness, the impact of disinformation, and coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19).

The online survey, one of the largest about the Philippine media, was conducted by the international nonprofit Internews through its partner RIWI Corp. to help it map the media landscape and information disorder in the Philippines. Internews seeks to improve the environment for a free press, bolster the capacity of media and other organizations to address disinformation, and strengthen media self-regulation.

Drawn from all 17 regions, the respondents are 57% male and 43% female. More than half are aged 18 to 34. Two in five have a university degree or more, while more than a fourth have reached secondary school. Those who reported personal monthly incomes of P15,000 and below comprise 70% of the sample.

Nearly three-fourths answered the survey in English and 26% in Filipino. Two in three did so through a smartphone and slightly less than a third through a desktop.

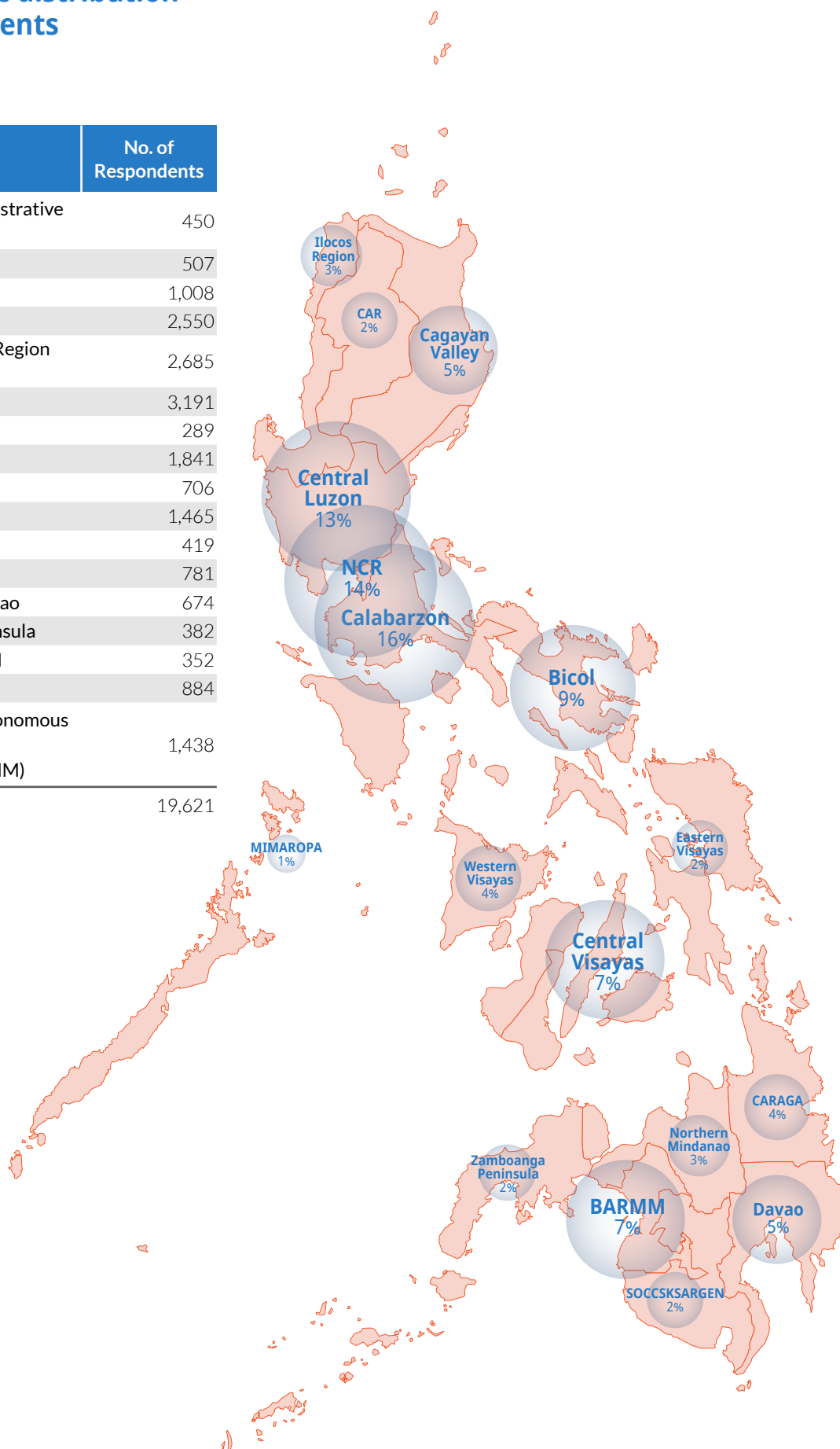
This paper laces the discussion with related studies, including the Digital News Report 2020 (DNR 2020) of the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism (RISJ), which covered the Philippines for the first time.

RISJ polled 2,019 adult Filipinos broadly representative of those online (72% of the population) from January 17 to February 8, 2020, weeks before the outbreak of the novel coronavirus escalated into a pandemic and the media situation in the Philippines deteriorated even more.

Collectively, the Internews survey and other studies provide more varied snapshots of Philippine journalism and its publics.

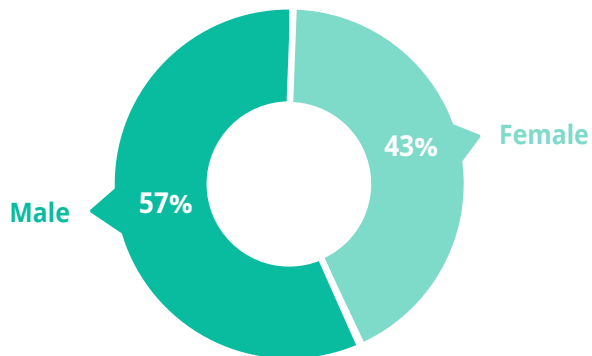
Geographic distribution of respondents

Region	No. of Respondents
Cordillera Administrative Region (CAR)	450
Ilocos Region	507
Cagayan Valley	1,008
Central Luzon	2,550
National Capital Region (NCR)	2,685
CALABARZON	3,191
MIMAROPA	289
Bicol Region	1,841
Western Visayas	706
Central Visayas	1,465
Eastern Visayas	419
CARAGA	781
Northern Mindanao	674
Zamboanga Peninsula	382
SOCCKSARGEN	352
Davao	884
Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM)	1,438
Total	19,621

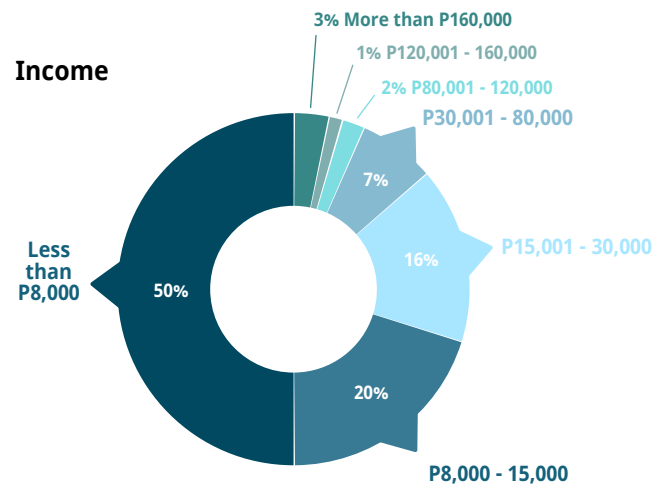


Profile of Respondents

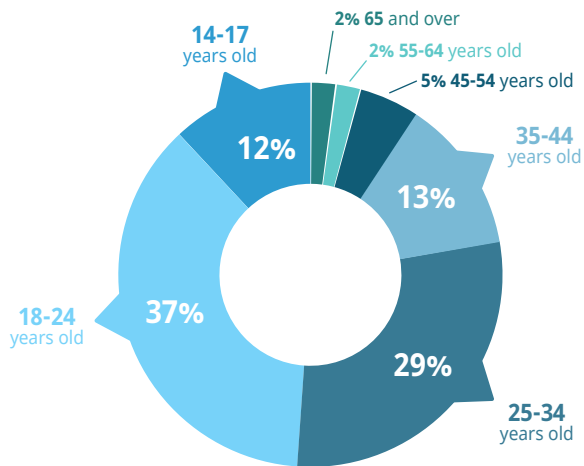
Gender



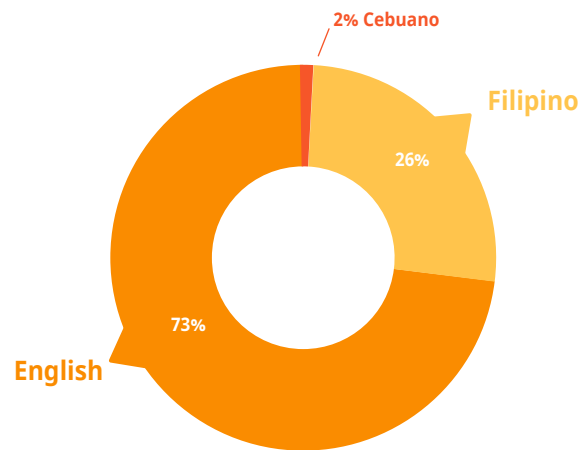
Income



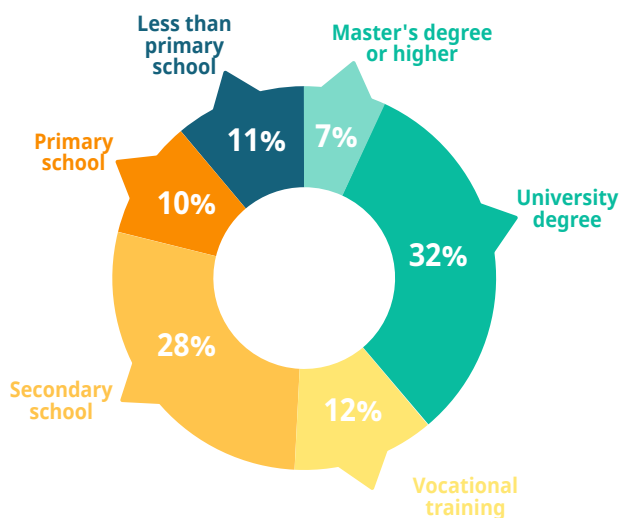
Age Group



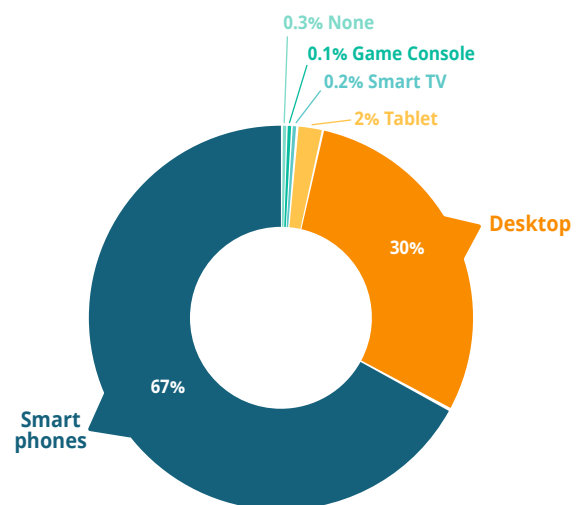
Language



Education



Devices



1. Media consumption

Filipinos turn largely to the media when they look for information, but nonmedia sources, especially friends and family, are just as important gateways. Television continues to command a big following, but radio and newspapers have all but been dwarfed by digital platforms that traditional news outlets have also moved into. The proportion who use the media as a source of news may be barely half the respondents of the Internews survey, but for those who follow the news, they tend to do so closely.

1.1. Preference for the media

The media remain widely used in the Philippines. Only a tenth told the Internews survey that they do not use the media.

Media usage is slightly greater among women (91%) than men (88%). It is greatest among those who are 18 to 44 years old (all 91%), university graduates (95%), in the P15,001 to P30,000 income group (94%), and live in Metro Manila, Western Visayas, and Northern Mindanao (95%).

The proportion of non-users, on the other hand, is bigger among those who are 65 and older (19%), have only primary schooling (22%) or less (19%), earn a monthly personal income exceeding P160,000 (28%), and hail from three regions: Caraga (24%), Cagayan Valley (23%), and Zamboanga Peninsula (18%).

Although used by an overwhelmingly large segment of the population, the media are the **main** source of information for a smaller fraction of Filipinos.

They are the go-to for only 55% of Filipinos these days, with the remaining 45% comprising nonmedia sources: friends and families, public officials and political leaders, religious leaders, and public personalities.

Who prefers the media—and who does not?

Females tend to lean toward the media as a primary source of information more than males. The same goes for respondents who are slightly older, between 55 and 64 (62%); university completers (67%); report a monthly income between P30,001 and P80,000 (64%), with those earning from P15,000 to P30,000 a close second (63%); and live in Metro Manila (69%), followed by Western Visayas (66%) and Soccsksargen (65%).

At the other end are those whose combined patronage across nonmedia sources exceeds media usage. They are the youngest respondents, who favor nonmedia sources by 11 percentage points, and the oldest (2 points). They also include those who only finished primary education (37 points) or less (42 points), as well as five regions: the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao or BARMM (38 points), Caraga (28 points), Cagayan Valley (18 points), Bicol (15 points), and Zamboanga Peninsula (2 points).

The media apparently gain popularity with more years of schooling (from 29% of the least schooled to 67% of

university graduates). The finding roughly mirrors the conclusion of the government's 2013 Functional Literacy, Education and Mass Media Survey (FLEMMS) that media exposure rises with educational level. The Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) equates exposure to accessing a specific form of mass media every day, at least

once a week, or seldom. (The 2019 results were unavailable at the time of the publication.)

However, the positive correlation FLEMMS also detected between media usage and socioeconomic status does not resonate with the Internews survey. For example, 51% of the poorest respondents identified the media as their top source of information, as did the same proportion of the wealthiest.

1.2. Popular media platforms

The Philippine media landscape has indeed changed, with digital platforms overtaking traditional radio and newspapers. Although television still leads traditional platforms, the extent to which it does declines among internet users.

FLEMMS in 2013 found that majority of Filipinos aged 10 to 64 were exposed to television (80%), radio (66%), newspapers (61%), and magazines (61%). Internet use at the time was a low 16% for social media and 14% for research.

An SWS survey six years later reported 69% of adult Filipinos getting news from television, immensely higher than those who use radio (19%) or newspapers (1%).



Although used by an overwhelmingly large segment of the population, the media are the main source of information for a smaller fraction of Filipinos.



The Internews survey, however, places these figures at 40% for television, 4% for radio, and 4% for newspapers among internet users. The balance is distributed among websites of news outlets (28%), their social media accounts (21%), and news articles posted by others (3%).

Altogether, traditional platforms (television, radio, and newspapers) lag behind digital platforms (websites, social media, articles posted by others), 48% to 52%, except in Soccsksargen, Mimaropa, Bicol, and Calabarzon, and among those who obtained only primary schooling or vocational training, are 14 to 17 or 55 to 64, and in the P120,001 to P160,000 income group.

Internews' figures correspond more closely with those from the DNR 2020 conducted months earlier. According to the RISJ study, 41% of Filipinos rely on television as their main source, 2% on radio, 4% on newspapers, 29% on social media, and 22% on online sources excluding social media. Similarly, digital platforms (51%) are more popular than traditional platforms (47%).

The age groups differ markedly in their choice of platform, the Internews survey shows. The youngest cohort relies on television the most and the oldest the least, the latter preferring websites slightly more than TV. The highest proportion of those who read a newspaper also comes from the oldest age group.

Mimaropa ranks first in accessing television customarily for information while the Cordillera Administrative Region (CAR) and BARMM are last. CAR, however, tops news website consumption and Davao, social media. The dominance of radio, newspapers, and news articles posted by others in BARMM is noteworthy.

Interestingly, several age groups in 14 regions cited neither radio nor newspapers as a source of information. They include four age groups from 35 up in Mimaropa.

At the same time, a number of age groups in four regions, including the oldest respondents in Mimaropa, did not identify TV as a source.

1.3. News versus entertainment

Filipinos who use the media typically as a source of news (48%) slightly outnumber those who use it for entertainment for the most part (42%), according to the Internews survey.

Of the various platforms, radio has the biggest proportion of respondents who tune in to it for news (59%) than entertainment (34%). Social media is the opposite: It is a platform for entertainment (52%) more than news (43%).

Respondents aged 14-24 and who reached only high school also tap the media more for entertainment, as do those who live in Mimaropa. Those with the smallest income, however, divide their attention equally between news and entertainment.

Filipinos who listed friends and family as their principal source of information tend to turn to the media for entertainment (44%) slightly more than for news (41%). But half of those who count on public officials for information and a smaller percentage of those on religious leaders (44%) treat the media more as a source of news.

One encouraging trend is that among the Filipinos who follow news and current events, a large majority—three in four—do so closely, a third “very closely.”

Apart from the respondents in Metro Manila (86%), those with the greatest interest in news are from Soccsksargen (85%), with personal incomes of from P15,001 to P80,000 (82% to 83%), and who look to public officials for information (73%).



One encouraging trend is that among the Filipinos who follow news and current events, a large majority—three in four—do so closely, a third ‘very closely.’

Those who receive information mostly from television and websites also follow the news more closely than those who read newspapers and consume news posted by others.



The DNR 2020 has similar findings, estimating 69% of Filipinos as very and extremely interested in news in general. Only 1% are not.

A consumer survey carried out in the Philippines in late 2019 by the global market researcher Ovum, reported that four in five Filipinos had deemed news and current affairs related TV and video content, in particular, as important.

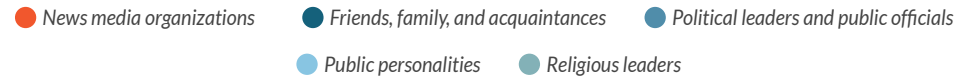
As for news habits, the DNR 2020 said 86% of Filipinos had accessed news at least once a day, nearly three-fourths through Facebook and a half through YouTube.

Filipinos have also been found to be more disposed to watching the news (55%) than reading (36%) or listening (7%) to it. Of those who consume news videos online, 54% do it on Facebook, 46% on YouTube, 39% on a website or app, and 12% on another platform.

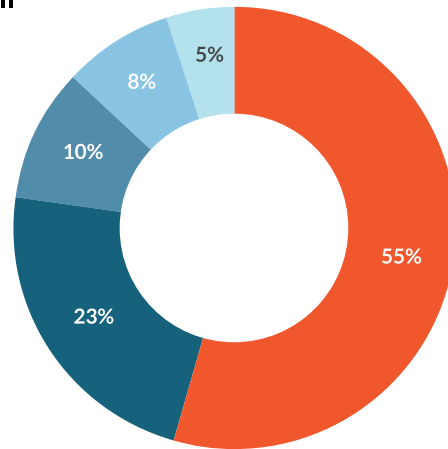
Podcasts are less popular, with 43% not having listened to any in a month. For those who do listen, these would be on news, politics, and international events (26%), ahead of specialist subjects (25%), lifestyle (24%), contemporary life (20%), and sport (12%).

An SWS survey done in the third quarter of 2019 found that one in four Filipinos had read news daily on Facebook, which is positively related to education.

Who do you mainly get information from?

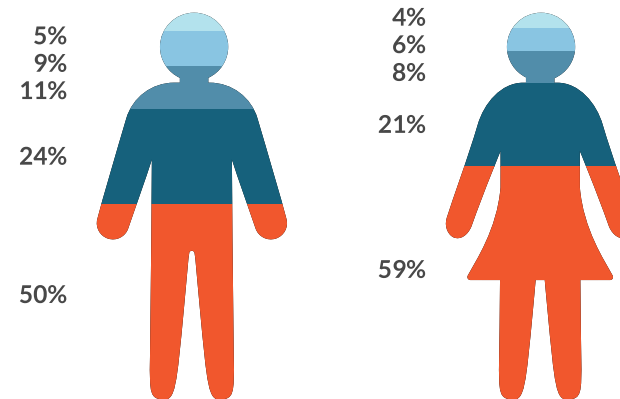


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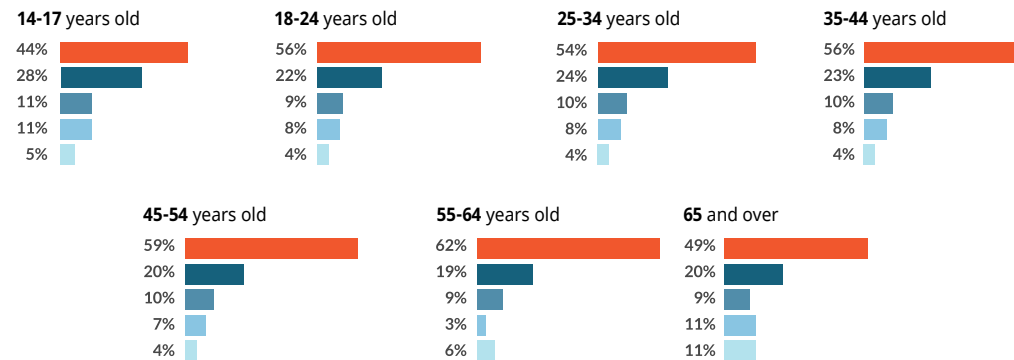


Gender

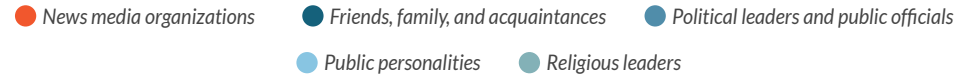
Male vs Female



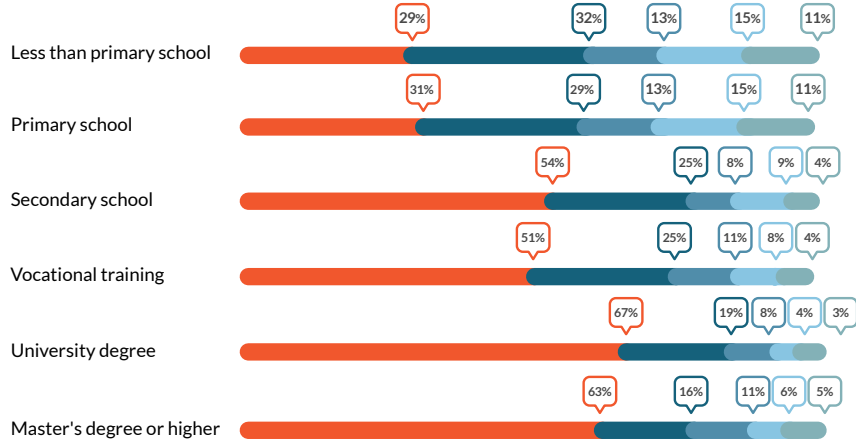
Age Group



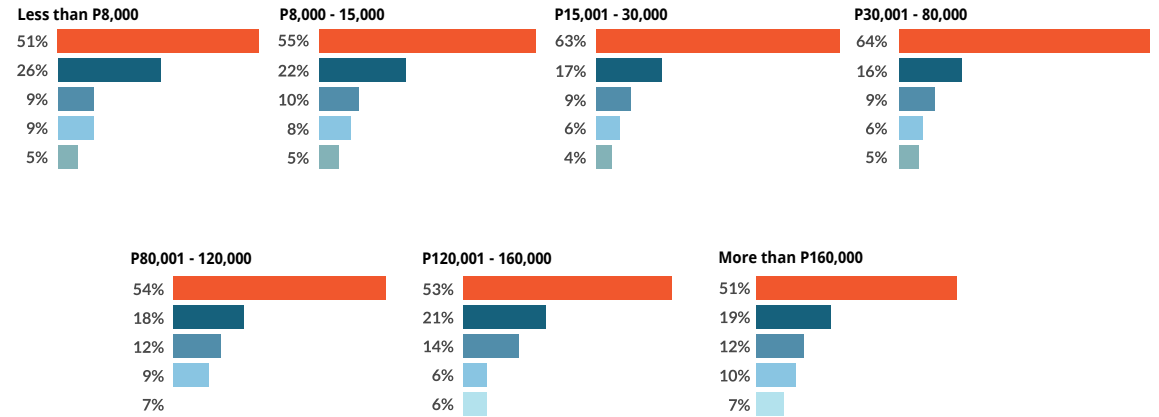
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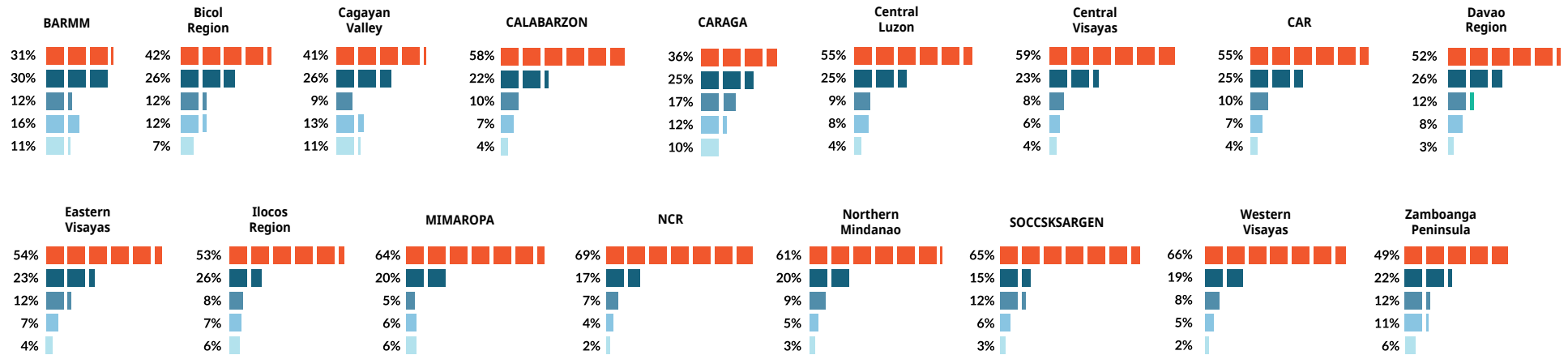
Education



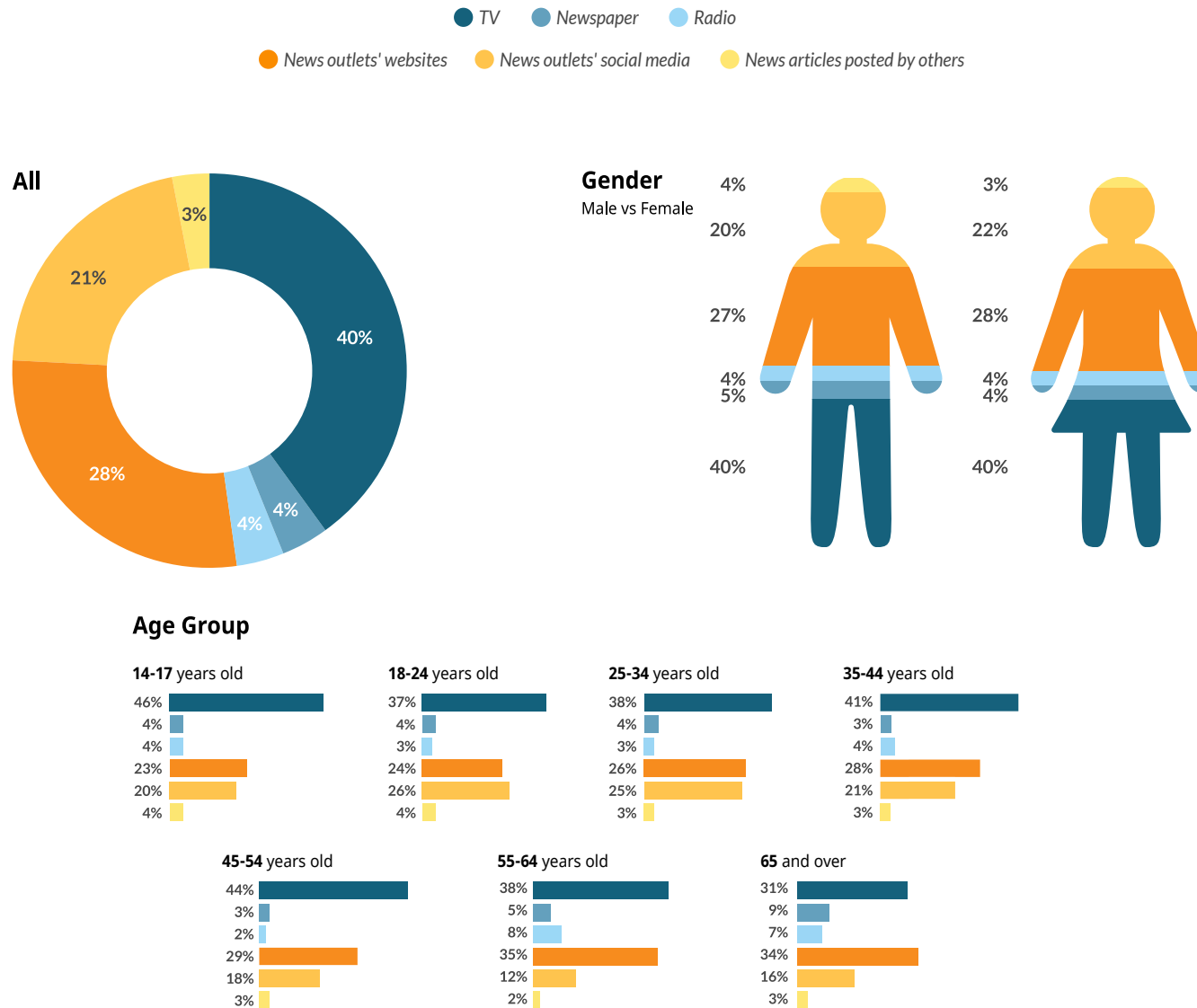
Income



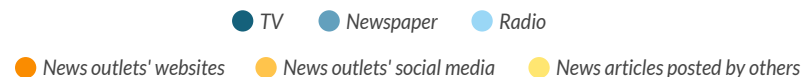
Region



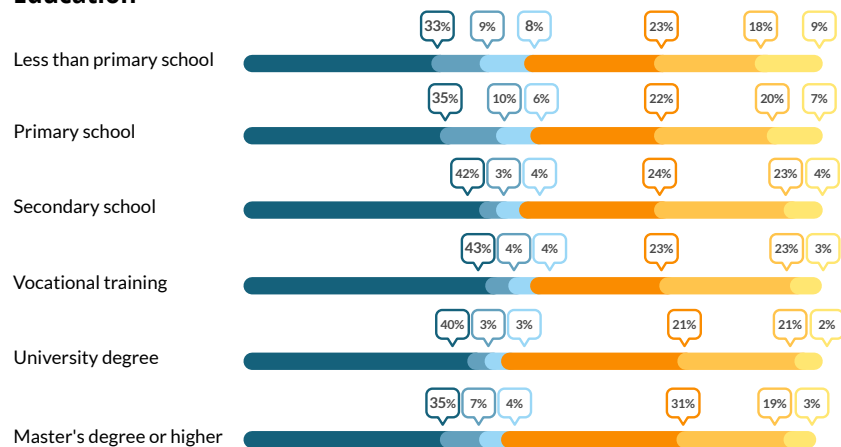
Specifically, which platform do you mainly get information from?



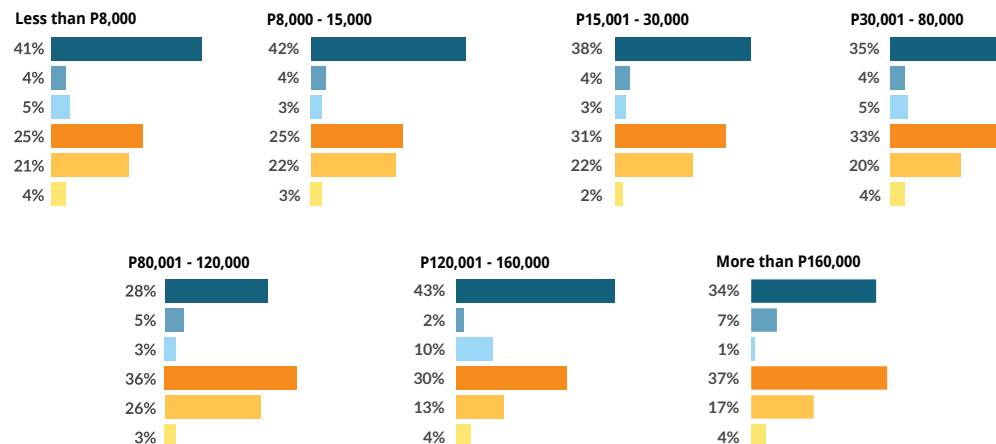
Percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding



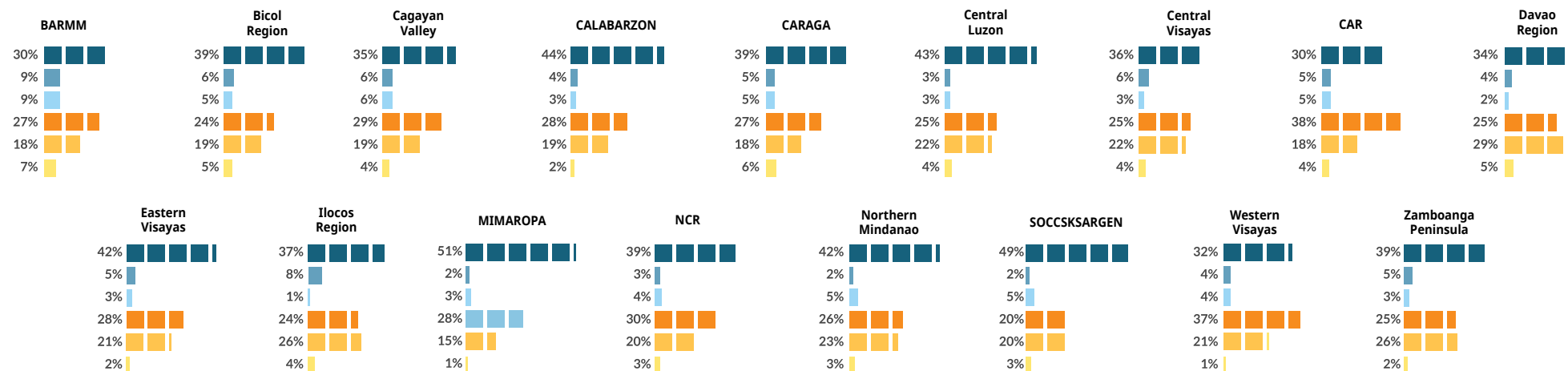
Education



Income



Region

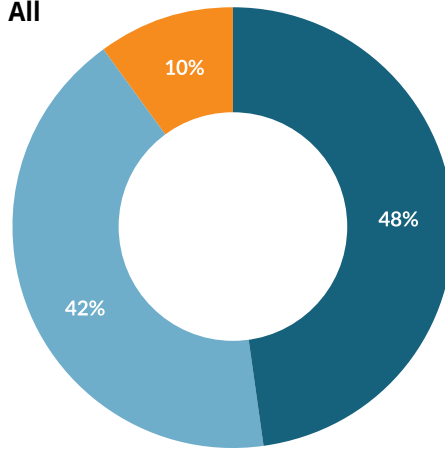


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What do you mainly use the media for?

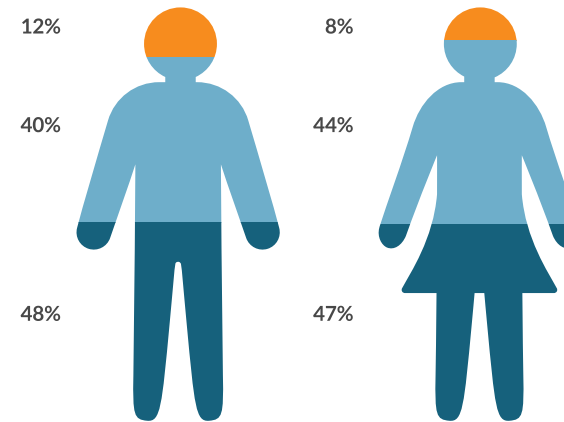
● As sources of news
 ● For entertainment
 ● I don't use media

All

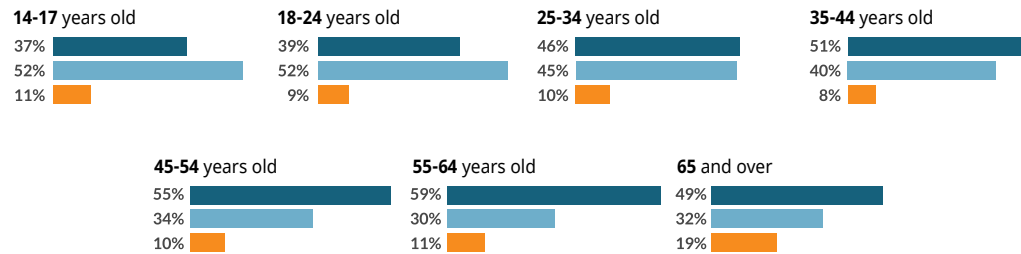


Gender

Male vs Female



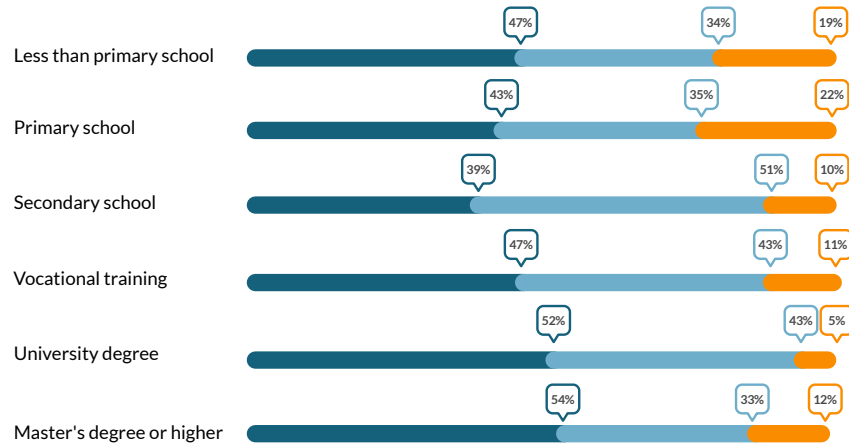
Age Group



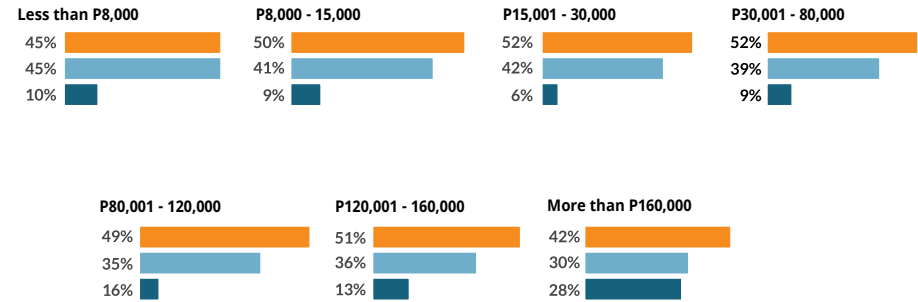
Percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding

● As sources of news ● For entertainment ● I don't use media

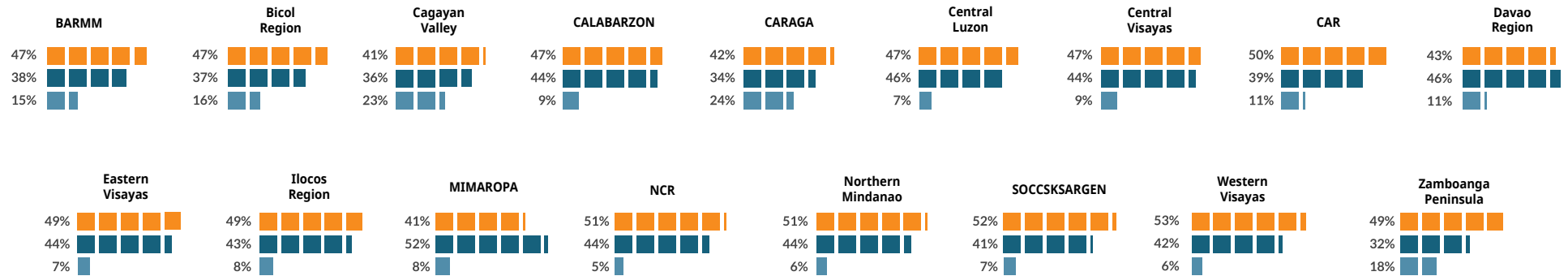
Education



Income



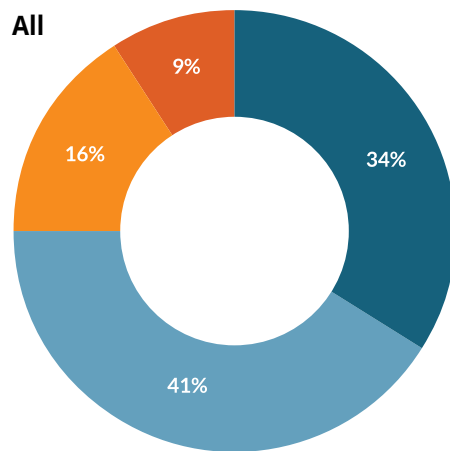
Region



Percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding

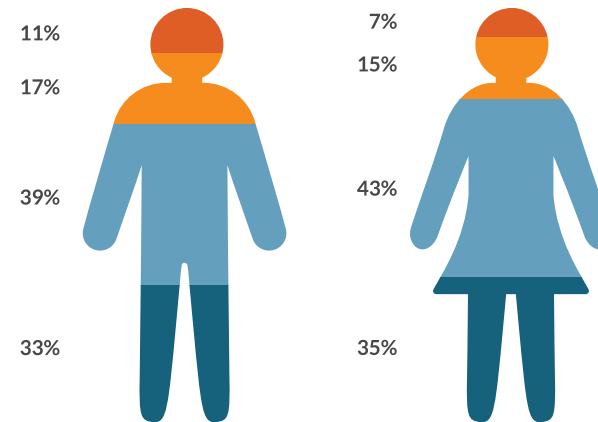
How closely do you follow news and current events?

Very closely
Somewhat closely
Not very closely
Not at all



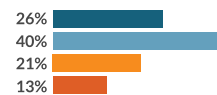
Gender

Male vs Female

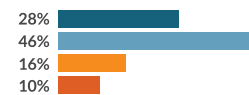


Age Group

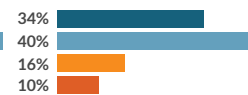
14-17 years old



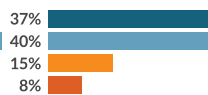
18-24 years old



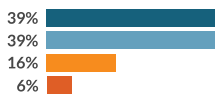
25-34 years old



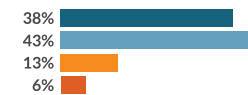
35-44 years old



45-54 years old



55-64 years old



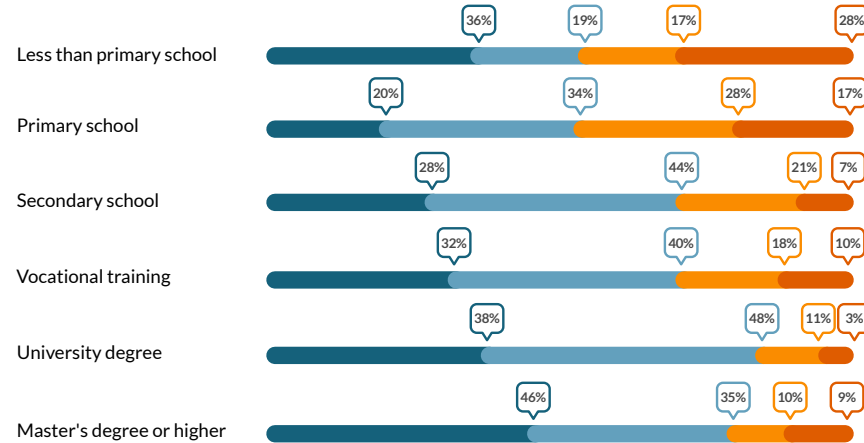
65 and over



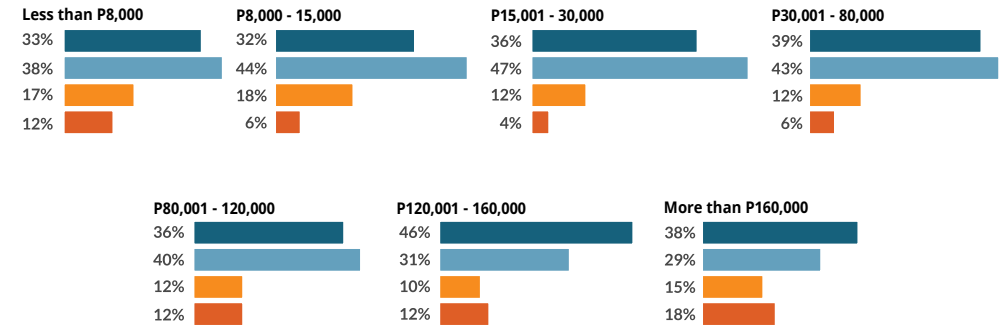
Percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding

● Very closely ● Somewhat closely ● Not very closely ● Not at all

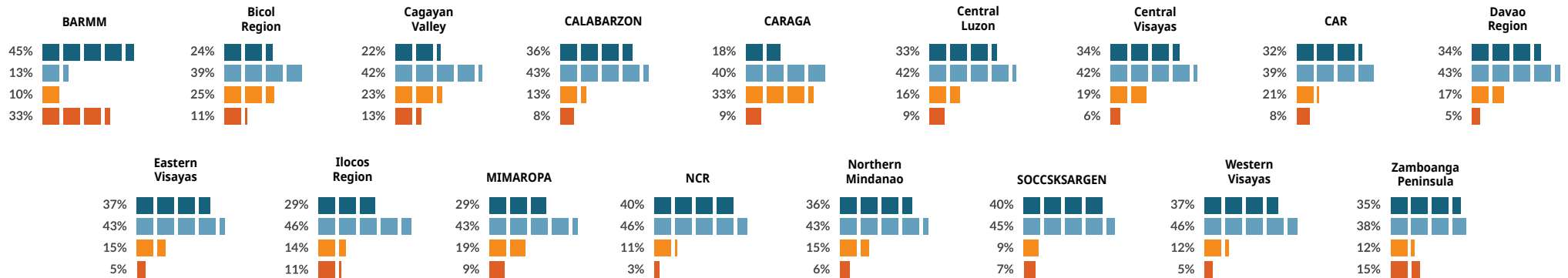
Education



Income



Region



Percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding

2. Not the media

While the majority of Filipinos access news media organizations extensively for information, nonmedia sources are also a force to reckon with. Not only do close to half of the respondents in the Internews survey seek them out, a sizable number of them also consider these sources reliable—even more than the media for some. A large majority use online channels to get to these sources.

2.1. Who matters

In the Internews survey, nonmedia sources comprise family, friends, and acquaintances, political leaders and public officials, public personalities, and religious leaders. In all, they top the list of information sources of 45% of the respondents. Family, friends, and acquaintances account for 23%, political leaders and public officials 10%, public personalities 8%, and religious leaders 5%.

In terms of age, the youngest cohort gives considerable weight to kith and kin (28%), especially among the males, as well as to public officials and public personalities (both 11%). Like the youngest respondents, the oldest group pays great attention to public personalities (11%) but, unlike them, also to religious leaders (11%), especially among the women.

Dependence on nonmedia sources is associated with education, public officials and political leaders being the exception. Family, friends, and acquaintances start to matter less as a source of information as the respondents become more educated (from 32% for the least educated to 19% for university graduates), similar to public personalities (from 15% to 4%) and religious leaders (from 11% to 3%).

Among the regions, BARMM stands out for the importance it attaches to family and friends (30%) as the main channels of information, which is only 1 percentage point below its reliance on the media. It also has the biggest share of respondents who secure information from public personalities (16%) and religious leaders (11%).

Family and friends as a source of information also matter less in Soccsksargen (15%), followed by Metro Manila

(17%). Caraga (17%) leads the regions in sourcing information from public officials with Metro Manila (7%) and Mimaropa (5%) at the tail end.

Metro Manila and Western Visayas, which have the strongest preference for the news media, are the least likely regions to seek out religious leaders (both 2%) for information. Along with Northern Mindanao, they also rely the least on public personalities.

2.2. Online versus offline

A vast majority (70%) go online to get to nonmedia sources, a great deal more than those who do likewise for media sources (52%).

However, those who identified religious leaders as their chief information source are less likely to go online (57% or 14 points below average). The same applies to males 65 years old and older (55%), respondents with primary schooling (64%) or less (63%), as well as those who are from Caraga (59%) and among the P80,001 to P120,000 earners (59%).

The extent of online access among the survey respondents reflects the internet penetration in the Philippines.

The Internet World Stats places this at 72%, or 79 million internet users, as of June 2019. We Are Social and Hootsuite's Digital 2020 report in January gives a somewhat lower estimate: 67%, or 73 million users, which is also the number of active social media users in the Philippines.

Filipinos spend nearly 10 hours on the internet, more than five hours on a mobile device, and nearly four hours on social media as well as watching television. They visit Google, Facebook, and YouTube the most and maintain an average 9.9 social media accounts.

SWS, in its 2019 fourth-quarter pre-pandemic survey, said 98% of adult Filipino internet users have a Facebook account. The other platforms trail far behind: YouTube at 18%; Instagram, 6%; Snapchat, 4%; Twitter, 3%, and Viber, 2%.

Estimates on the degree to which Filipinos access digital platforms, especially social media, vary.

According to We Are Social, the most used social media platforms are Facebook (96%) and YouTube (95%),

“Among the regions, BARMM stands out for the importance it attaches to family and friends as the main channels of information. It also has the biggest share of respondents who secure information from public personalities and religious leaders.”



followed by FB Messenger (89%), Instagram (64%), and Twitter (37%).

The DNR 2020 figures for Filipinos who access the platforms for any purpose are lower: 86% for Facebook, 78% for YouTube, 70% for FB Messenger, 36% for Instagram, and 30% for Twitter.

Nearly all Filipino internet users (98%) watch videos, according to We Are Social. They are also fond of watching vlogs, 80%, and listening to music, 84%. A little more than half (55%) listen to online radio stations and 43% to podcasts (see “Media Consumption”).

In its October 2020 update, We Are Social ranks the Philippines first in the world among internet users aged 16 to 64 who play video games on any device (95%). Video games, it said, are marketing’s biggest “missed opportunity.”

When it comes to devices, the SWS survey for December 2019 indicates that 91% of households own a cellular phone, 83% a television set, 25% a radio set, and 19% a personal computer.

We Are Social also found an overwhelming number of Filipinos (93%) owning a smartphone, but reported a higher proportion owning a laptop: two in three. It also said 40% own a tablet.

Of the devices Filipino use for any purpose, 75% use a smartphone, 39% a computer, and 14% a tablet, according to DNR 2020.

In the Internews survey, 67% of the respondents answered using a smartphone, 30% a desktop, and 2.5% a tablet.



Distrust in other sources is greater among nonmedia users, especially those who acquire information offline, than among media users.



2.3. Reasons for favoring an information source

In contrast to news media consumers who rated ease of access as the foremost reason for selecting an information source, nonmedia users, except those who rely on public personalities, place the greatest premium on reliability.

Distrust in other sources is also greater among nonmedia users, especially those who acquire information offline, than among media users (see “Perceptions of the News Media”)

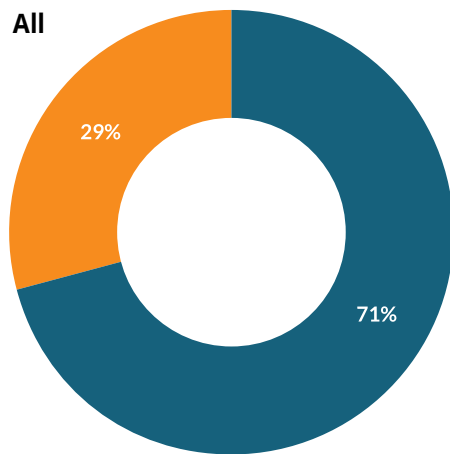
For the offline group, a greater than average proportion in Western Visayas cited reliability (44%) as the No. 1 reason, whereas Central Visayas has the biggest share of respondents who selected ease of access (23%). Distrust in other sources is considerable in Davao (26%) and agreement with their sources in BARMM (18%). (Soccsksargen’s proportion is bigger than BARMM’s, but the margin of error is high.)

Among online users, Eastern Visayas accounts for a bigger percentage who identified reliability (32%) as key motivator; Western Visayas, ease of access (36%); Soccsksargen, distrust in other sources (31%); Ilocos, agreement with their view (20%); and Bicol, cost (14%).

Reliability is also the leading reason for those who get information from public officials (35%), religious leaders (26%), and family and friends (24%). Those who lean toward public personalities consider ease of access (22%) and ease of understanding (21%) a great deal. Distrust in other sources is highest among those who obtain information from public officials (17%).

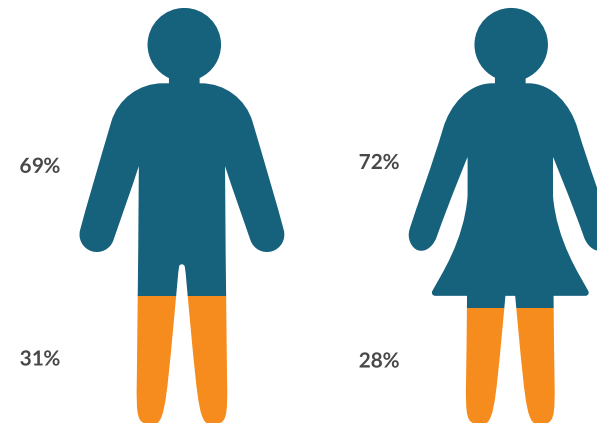
Do you mainly get information online or offline?

● Online ● Offline

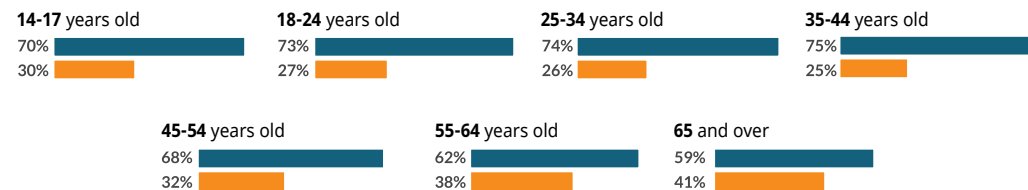


Gender

Male vs Female



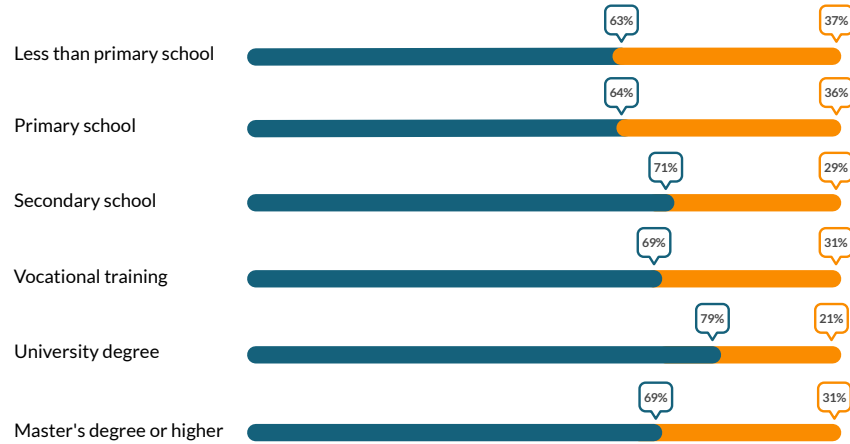
Age Group



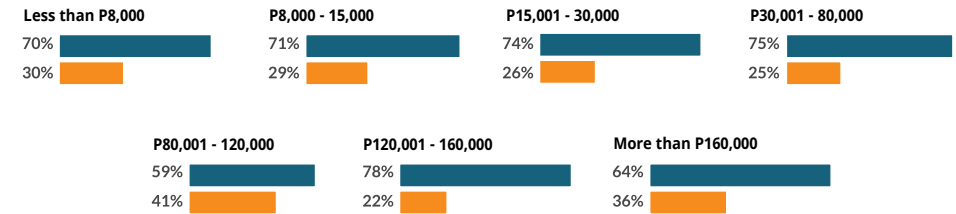
Percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding

● Online ● Offline

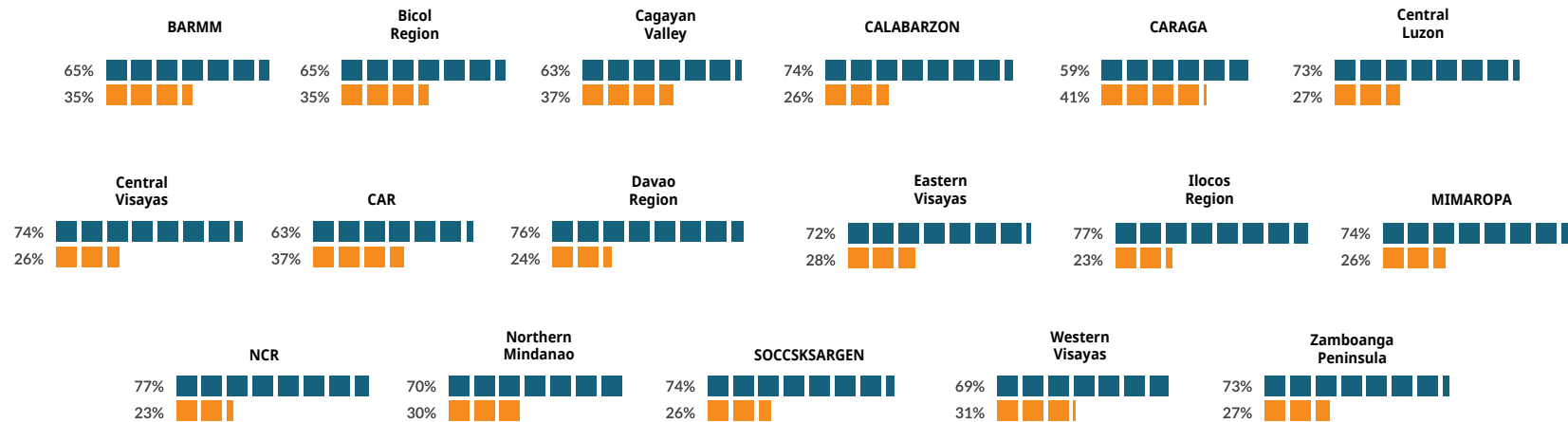
Education



Income



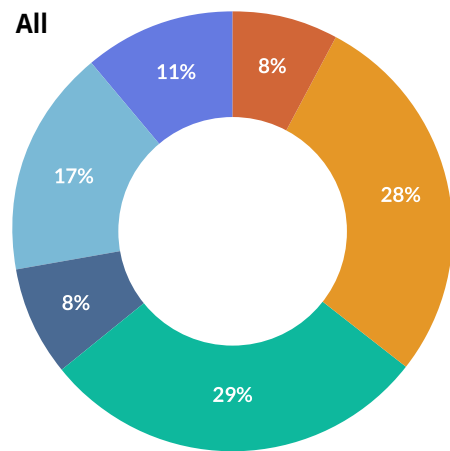
Region



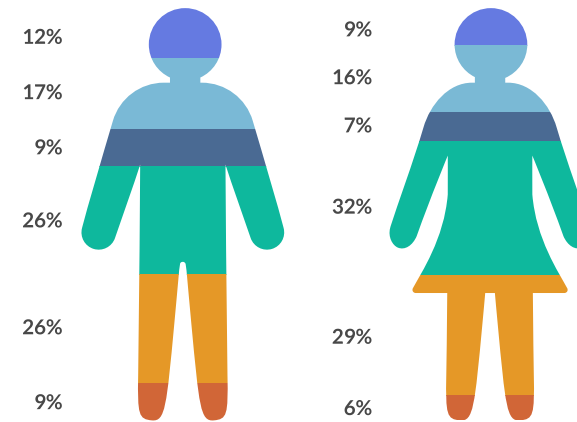
Percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding

Why do you choose [X] as your main source of information?

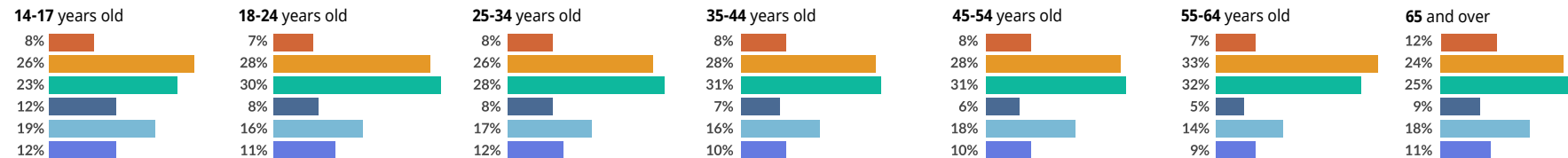
- It's cheap / free
- It's reliable
- It's easy to access
- I always agree with them
- It's easy to understand
- I don't trust other sources



Gender Male vs Female



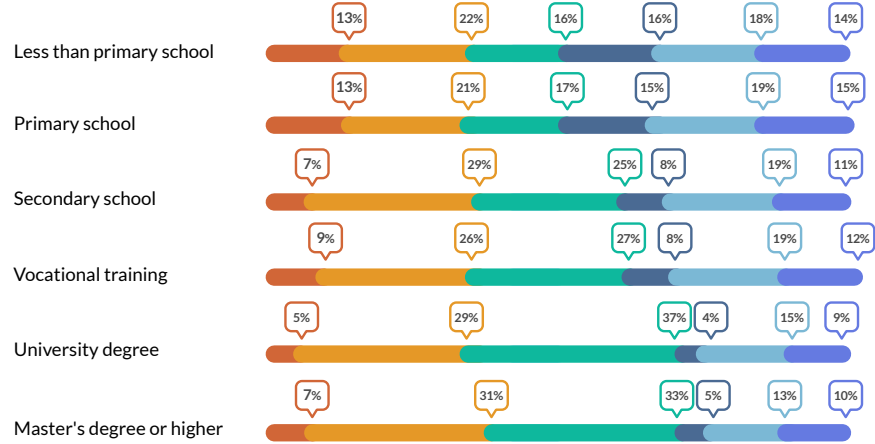
Age Group



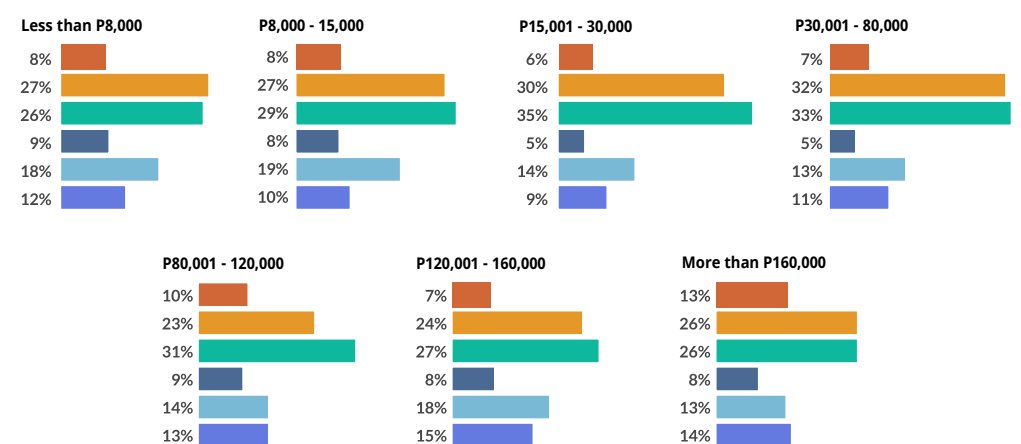
Percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding

● It's cheap / free
 ● It's reliable
 ● It's easy to access
● I always agree with them
● It's easy to understand
● I don't trust other sources

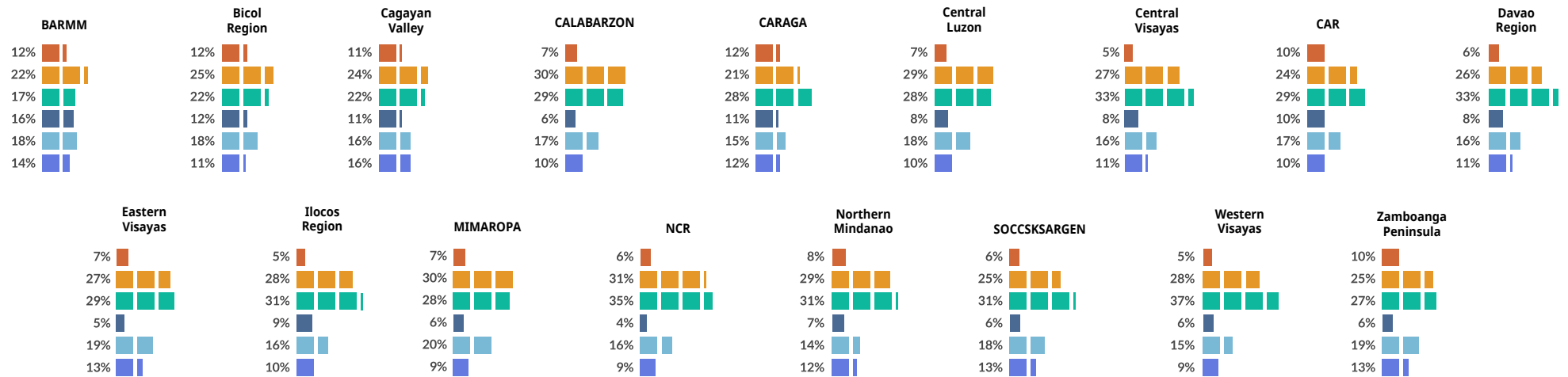
Education



Income



Region



Percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding

3. Perceptions of the news media

Accuracy, fairness, and balance are among the fundamental journalism norms, strict adherence to which is demanded to preserve public trust and confidence in the media.

In this regard, Filipinos have a generally positive perception of the media, but their views are at the same time mixed, even contradictory.

Case in point: Although nearly half of the respondents in the Internews survey identified the media as the most accurate source of information, many do not rate reliability as the chief reason they patronize news organizations.

Assessment of the media's fairness is also inconsistent. On the one hand, only a small fraction said they perceive media reports as biased. On the other, a significant number lamented media reporting on government as being unfair – either “too negative” or “too positive.”

Notwithstanding these, the survey clearly shows that many Filipinos associate media trustworthiness with their obligation to verify information and expect journalists to put out news that offends as long as it is verified.

3.1. Reliability and accuracy

On the whole, respondents in the Internews survey gravitate toward their sources of information largely because they are easy to access (29%) and reliable (28%). While some are attracted by ease of understanding (17%) and cost (8%), others have highly personal reasons: They either do not trust other sources (11%) or always agree with their sources (8%).

The youngest respondents (12%) top the age groups that scout for sources whose views are aligned with theirs, while those 65 years old and older (12%) consider cost more than the other cohorts.

Affordability also means much to respondents from BARMM and Caraga, the country's poorest regions, and Bicol (all 12%), and, surprisingly, those from the wealthiest group (13%).

Education appears to be an important determinant. The proportion of respondents with higher education who cited ease of access as the chief reason is at least double that of the respondents with primary schooling or less. The biggest percentage of those who said they get information from sources that are cheap and that agree with them, and who said they do not trust other sources comes from the groups with primary education or less.

Unlike nonmedia sources, who are sought because they are perceived firstly as reliable (see “Not the Media”), news media organizations have a strong following because Filipinos find them, firstly, easy to access (37%) and, only secondly, reliable (29%).

In fact, a bigger proportion of respondents (35%) regard public officials and political leaders rather than the media as reliable.

Only newspaper readers cited reliability (33%) ahead of ease of access (25%) as the top reason for going to the media for information.

The gap between ease of access and reliability is wide among respondents who follow social media accounts of news outlets (52% for ease of access versus 18% for reliability) and news articles posted by others (33% to 23%). It is smaller for radio (31% to 26%) and smallest for television (34% to 32%).

Nonetheless, nearly half of the respondents (49%) picked news media organizations as the most accurate among all information sources, with public officials and social media posts not from the news media a distant second (13% each).

This finding cuts across demographic groups with a few exceptions: those who rely mainly on friends and family and offline for information; those who prefer public personalities in Mimaropa, Davao, Ilocos, Central Luzon, and Northern Mindanao, all of whom find social media more accurate than the media; and those who rely on religious leaders in Caraga, CAR, and Mimaropa, all of whom say sources other than the media more accurate. In



Filipinos have a generally positive perception of the media, but their views are at the same time mixed, even contradictory



Unlike nonmedia sources, who are sought because they are perceived firstly as reliable, news media organizations have a strong following because Filipinos find them firstly, easy to access and, only secondly, reliable.



particular, only one-tenth of the respondents in Caraga and CAR described the media as the most accurate source. They strongly favor social media.

3.2. Bias and fairness

By and large (84% of respondents), media reports are regarded as unbiased. Only one in six believes that all media—international, national, and local—distribute biased information.

For 28% of the respondents, media reports are all equally unbiased, while 21% find those from the national media the most unbiased, followed by the local media (20%) and the international media (15%).

Excluding those who feel that media reports are all equally unbiased, respondents in the 35 to 44 and 55 to 64 age groups have the biggest proportion who view the national media and international media reports as the most fair, while those aged 18 to 24 lean toward the local media. The oldest cohort, in general, tends to find the media to be biased compared with the rest of the cohorts.

Those who received less than primary education (32%) are more inclined to see the local media as the most unbiased. It is completely different for those with a master's degree, which had the smallest proportion of respondents who find local news reports fair. By regions, the largest share of respondents that view the local media as the most unbiased are from BARMM (41%), which also happens to have the lowest proportion that see national media (9%) and international media (7%) as producing the most unbiased reports. Respondents from Cagayan Valley (29%) and Bicol (28%) think very highly of the national media and the international media. In contrast, Caraga (31%) and CAR (27%), as well as those in the two highest income groups, have the lowest regard for the media insofar as fairness and balance are concerned.

Those who depend primarily on friends and family, social media, and public personalities for information also look more favorably on the local media. Those who turn to public officials and religious leaders, meanwhile, perceive the national media in a better light.



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Paradoxically, while declaring the media mostly as unbiased, only a little more than half (55%) of the respondents describe their reporting on government as fair. Of the remaining respondents, 24% called it “too positive” and 21% “too negative.”

Curiously as well, a portion of Filipino internet users not only consider negative news about the government as unfair, but also define such types of reports as “fake news” (see “Disinformation”).

More males consider media coverage of the government too positive and slightly more females consider it too negative.

Respondents who find media reporting more positive than negative belong to these groups: the 14-17 and 18-24 age groups; have a pre-university education; live in Bicol, CAR, and Caraga; and have lower incomes. They also consider family and friends, social media, religious leaders, and public personalities as the most accurate sources and obtain information offline.

Those who evaluated media's reporting of government as more negative than positive possess a university or master's degree, reside in Davao, Soccsksargen, and Zamboanga, and belong to the two highest income groups. They rely more on websites and social media accounts of news organizations, as well as public officials for information, and never verify the news.

Strangely, despite their expectations of the media to be fair and unbiased, only a fourth of Filipinos prefer news from sources that are objective or without a particular point of view, according to the DNR 2020.

A big number of them (42%) would rather have news from sources that share their point of view, echoing a similar finding of the Internews survey that some respondents seek sources they agree with, although to a lesser degree (8%). The DNR 2020 found that another fourth favor news from sources that challenge their point of view.

3.3. Trust in media and news

The apparent ambivalence toward the media comes at a time when trust in the media—and the news—has been on the wane in the Philippines.

Trust in media as an institution has dropped from 80% in 2012 to 69% in 2019, three years after Duterte became president, as shown in the 2019 Philippine Trust Index from the communication firm EON Group. Particularly, extreme trust has slid sharply—from 32% in 2015, a year before his election, to 22% in 2019.

The index tracked the general public's trust in television declining from 89% in 2017 to 80% in 2019, radio from 85% to 74%, newspapers from 75% to 63%, magazines from 57% to 48%, online news sites from 54% to 44%, social media from 55% to 51%, and blogs from 48% to 33%.

In addition, the proportion who believe the media are unbiased or nonpartisan has fallen from 83% to 79%, that they cannot be bribed from 74% to 59%, that they report only the truth from 84% to 72%, that they are competent from 95% to 88%, and that they provide quality content/reporting from 92% to 86%.

In its monitoring of online conversations about the media, the EON Group said distrust, especially toward mainstream media, accounts for 62% of mentions, compared with those expressing trust, 11%. "Biased media" and "fake news," it said, have become buzzwords.

3.4. Has the pandemic improved—or worsened—trust in the media?

Elsewhere in the world, the search for reliable information related to COVID-19 has driven trust in news sources to an all-time high, as the 2020 Edelman Trust Barometer, a global survey, concluded in its spring update. Traditional media (+7 points) and owned media (+8) saw the biggest gains. Despite these high levels of trust in news sources, Edelman stressed an urgent need for credible and unbiased journalism, saying that concerns about fake news still loom large, with 67 percent of respondents worried about false and inaccurate information being spread about the virus.

RISJ's separate survey on COVID-19, meanwhile, shows that 60% of respondents in six countries credit the news media with helping make sense of the pandemic, with trust in new media rated significantly higher than information received on social media.

Another global survey, conducted by the International Center for Journalists (ICFJ) and the Tow Center for Digital Journalism at Columbia University, this time with journalists as respondents, said most of them believe that audience trust in the media has risen during the pandemic.

But this does not seem to be the case in Metro Manila.

The majority of respondents (51%) in an early May survey, administered by Publicus Asia in partnership with Kantar,

described their trust in media as more or less the same during the lockdown compared to before.

As for news, trust in it appears dismal.

The DNR 2020 found overall trust in news among Filipinos to be at a low 27%—and a lower 22% for news in social media.

Bucking the overall trend are certain media brands such as GMA Network (73%), TV5 (68%), and the Manila Bulletin and Philippine Star (68% for both). The brands most vilified by Duterte,

however, did not fare as well, an obvious consequence of the presidential attacks. ABS-CBN is tied with the state-run PTV at 61%, while Rappler at 49% tails state media, including its radio network, and a tabloid.

There appears to be potential consequences for individuals who distrust the media, especially in their capacity to detect disinformation. People with negative opinions of the news media are not only less likely to differentiate between news and opinion, they are also more likely to be fooled by a fake headline, concluded a study by News Co/Lab at the Arizona State University.

3.5. Gaining trust

As far as the Filipino public is concerned, the path to media trustworthiness is paved with various possibilities.

For most respondents of the Internews survey, this entails validating information (45%). The rest believe news organizations should report complete details (29%), get all perspectives (14%), and be open to audience feedback (12%).

There are more females (49%) than males (40%) who opined that the media should verify information. Validating information also received the biggest nod from those in the 45 to 54 age group (51%), who have a university or master's degree (each 55%), earn P30,000 to P80,000 (56%), and reside in Metro Manila (54%). So too are those who mainly draw information online (38%), from news websites (57%), and from public officials and political leaders (39%).

Without a doubt, all four suggested courses of action are congruent with the journalism principles of truth-telling (verification), justice (fairness and balance), and accountability and community engagement (stewardship).



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The Media Insight Project, a collaboration between the American Press Institute and the AP-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research, listed accuracy, having the latest details, and conciseness and clarity among the factors that drive people to trust news reporting sources. It also found a strong correlation between trust and how much people interact with the news.

Trusting News, another American project, said people who were asked to describe trustworthy journalism said they value balance (78%), honesty (52%), depth (47%), reader agency (24%), professionalism and reputation (22%), simplicity (12%), and relevance (6%).



The belief that the media should publish verified reports even if they offend people coincides with the growing concern among Filipinos over how far and freely they can speak up nowadays.

A journalism expert observed, “People who think that the news media does a bad job of keeping them updated with current events, fails to help them properly understand the news, or is unable to monitor and scrutinize the powerful, are much less likely to say they trust the news...[P]eople with low trust in the news media don’t want it to be fundamentally different—they just want it to be better.”

3.6. News that offends

In the face of growing media repression, including in the Philippines, the call for courage and independence in journalism has also been swelling. They are requisites for Philippine journalists to do what a majority of respondents (56%) in the Internews survey demand of them: to report news that may offend people—as long as it is verified. A fourth, however, disagree.

Expectations run high especially among those in the 55 to 64 age group (62%), with higher education (up to 62%), with the highest incomes (63%), and who live in Soccsksargen (67%), followed by those in Metro Manila (62%).

Disagreement is felt most among the youngest cohort (27%), with fewer years of schooling (33%), the lowest income (29%), who reside in BARMM (36%), and who

source information primarily from public personalities or consider them the most accurate (32%).

The belief that the media should publish verified reports even if they offend people coincides with the growing concern among Filipinos over how far and freely they can speak up nowadays.

The SWS said in its July 2020 survey that 51% of Filipinos feel it “dangerous to print or broadcast anything critical of the administration even if it is the truth.” The survey was taken after Congress had rejected ABS-CBN’s franchise application and weeks before the controversial Anti-Terrorism Act, which critics argue would restrict free expression, had taken effect.



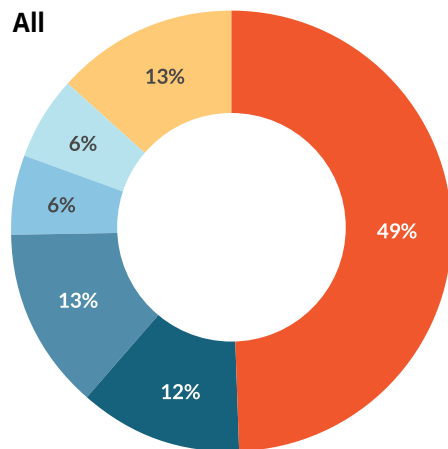
The sentiments of survey respondents also reinforce those expressed by Filipinos who participated in the DNR 2020. Nearly two-thirds (65%) emphasized that independent journalism is very and extremely important for the proper functioning of society. Close to that proportion (63%) wanted the news media to prominently report a false or misleading statement made by a politician because, they said, it is important for the public to know what the politician has said.

Around the world, media executives and publishers resoundingly agree with the need to call out falsehoods, according to a related study, the Digital News Project 2020. But some worry that this might not be enough as more politicians pick up U.S. President Donald Trump’s media playbook of undermining mainstream media and pushing messages directly to supporters through social media. A number also worry that fact-checking would divert resources and attention from other journalistic undertakings.

In the Philippines, a 2019 study that looked into how Filipino journalists perceive their role in response to mis- and disinformation found them according greater importance to their roles as disseminator, watchdog, truth crusaders, and advocates of societal reform. However, the journalists also pointed out the impediments to fulfilling these roles, which among them were political pressures, public criticisms, and their owners’ interest that at times have led to self-censorship.

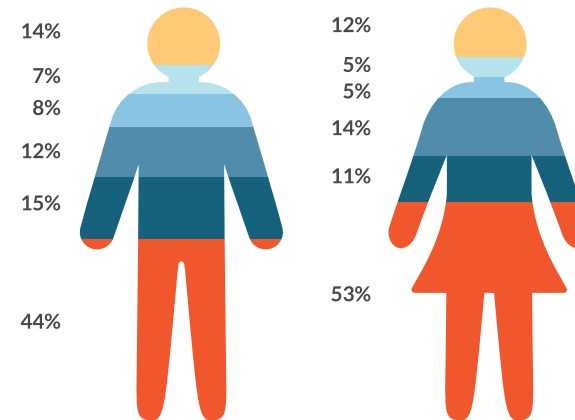
In your opinion, which is the most accurate source of information?

- News media organizations
- Friends, family, and acquaintances
- Political leaders and public officials
- Public personalities
- Religious sector
- Social media posts not from news organizations

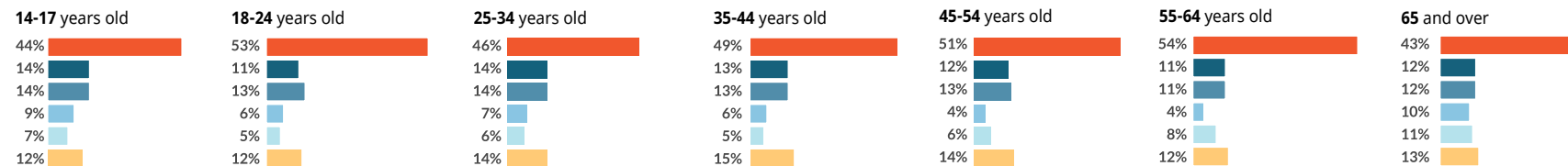


Gender

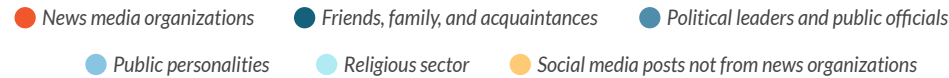
Male vs Female



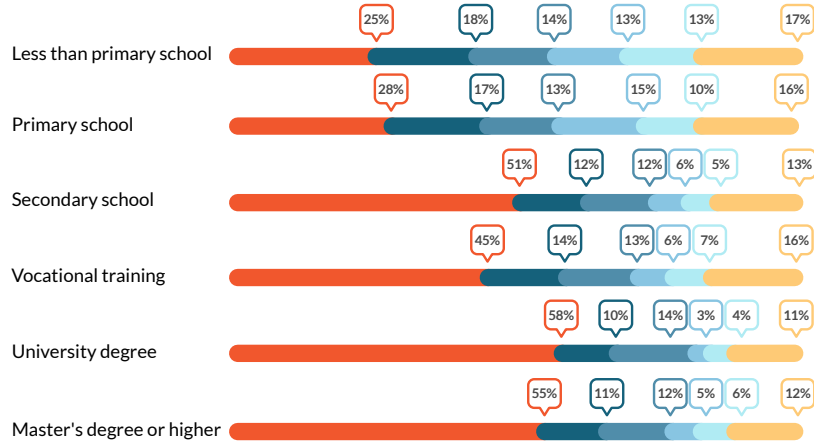
Age Group



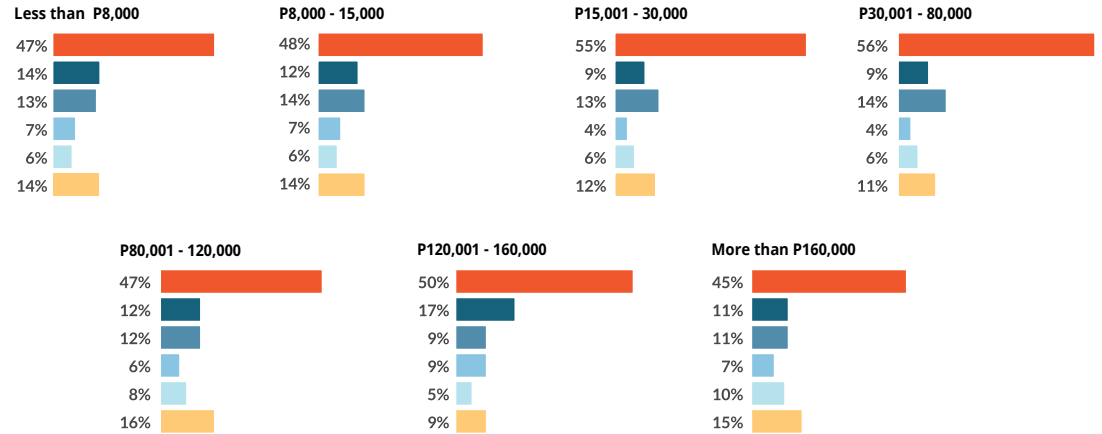
Percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding



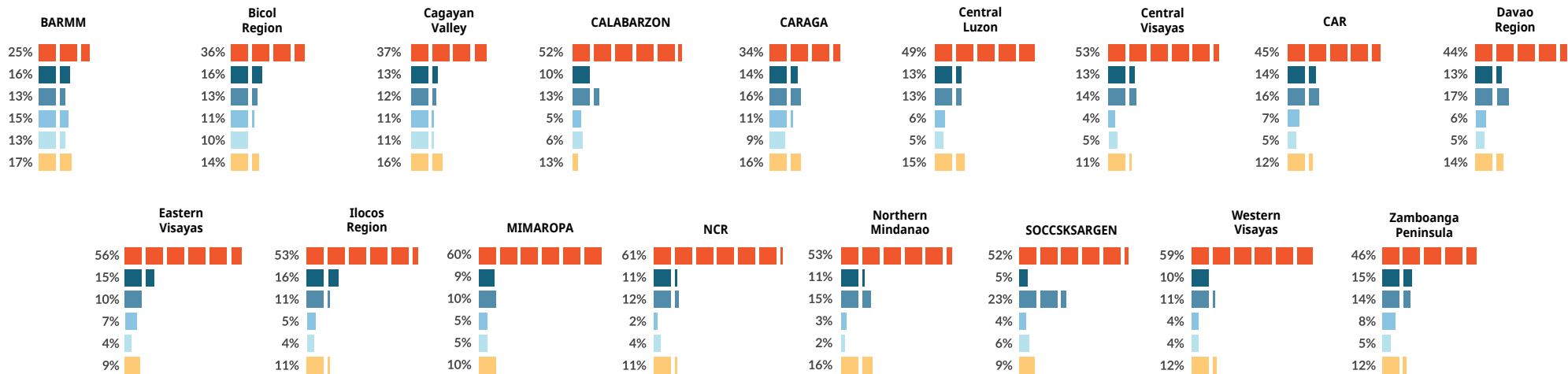
Education



Income



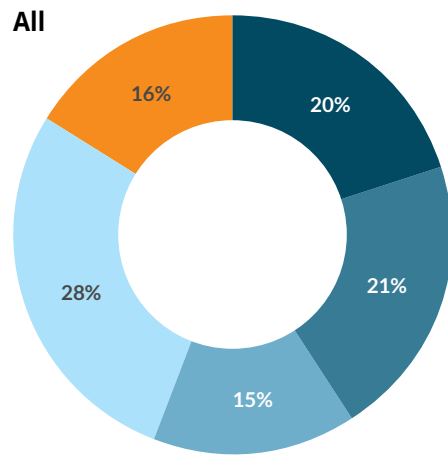
Region



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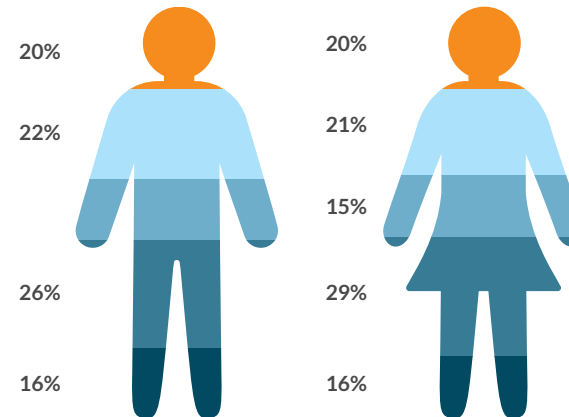
Which type of media reports the most un-biased information?

- Local media
- National media
- International media
- All equally
- None, they all report only biased information

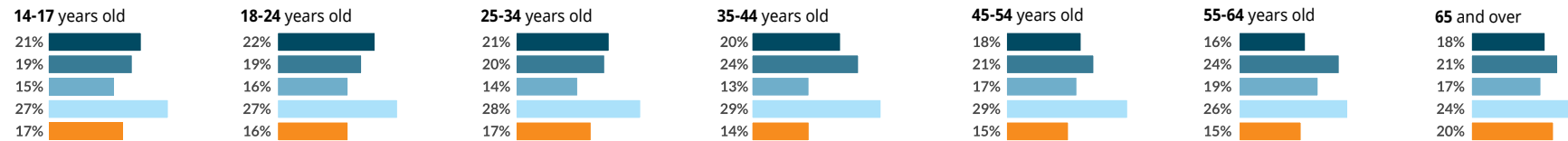


Gender

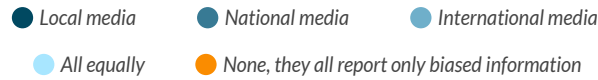
Male vs Female



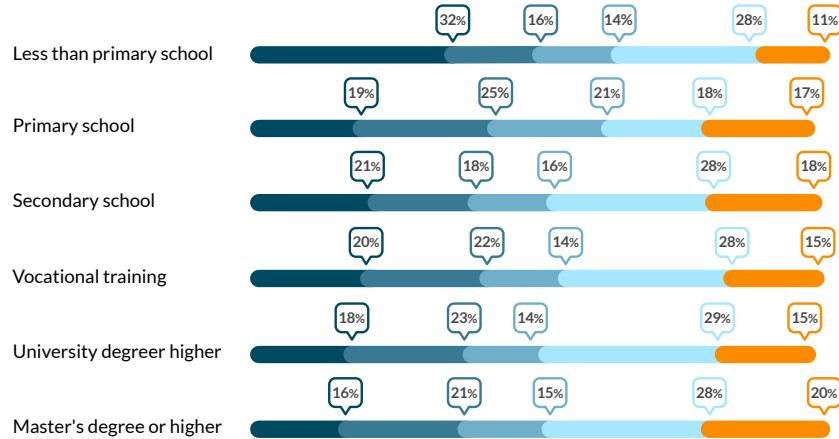
Age Group



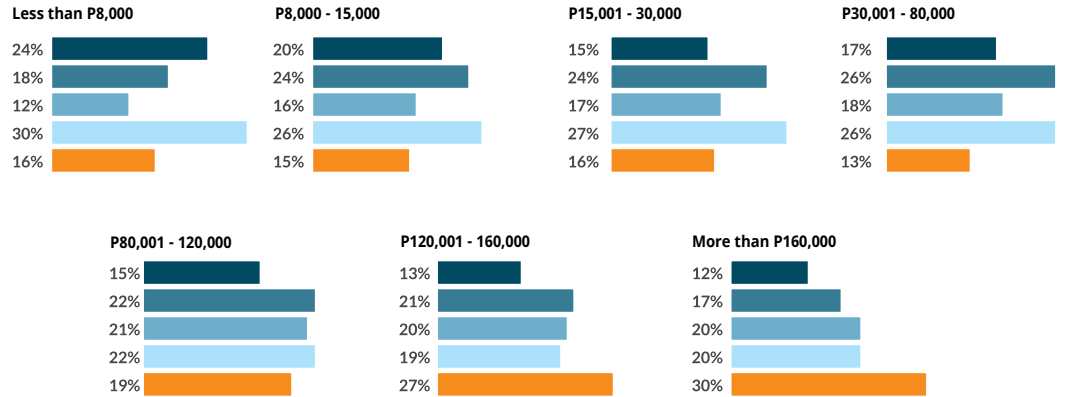
Percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding



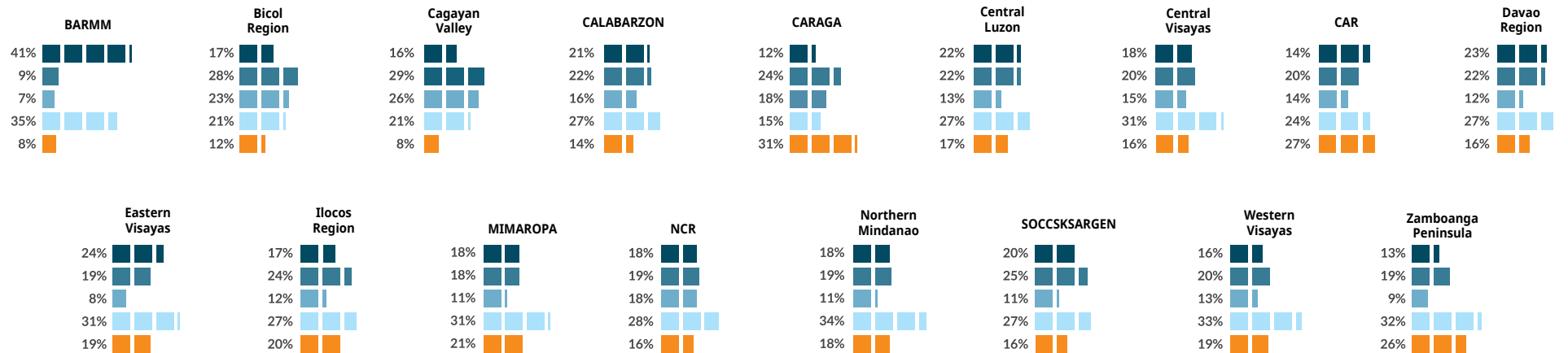
Education



Income



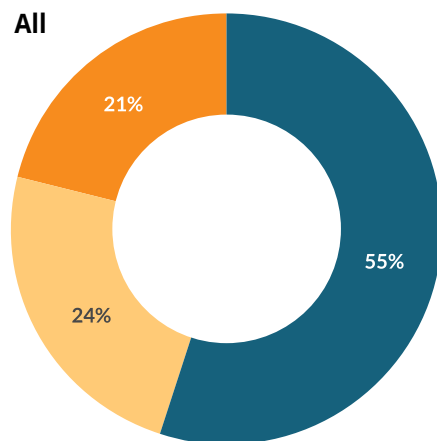
Region



Percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding

In general, do you think the way Philippine media report the work of the government is fair?

● Yes
 ● No, they are too positive
 ● No, they are too negative



Gender

Male vs Female

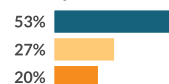


Age Group

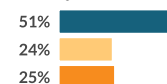
14-17 years old



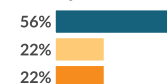
18-24 years old



25-34 years old



35-44 years old



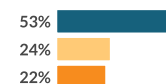
45-54 years old



55-64 years old



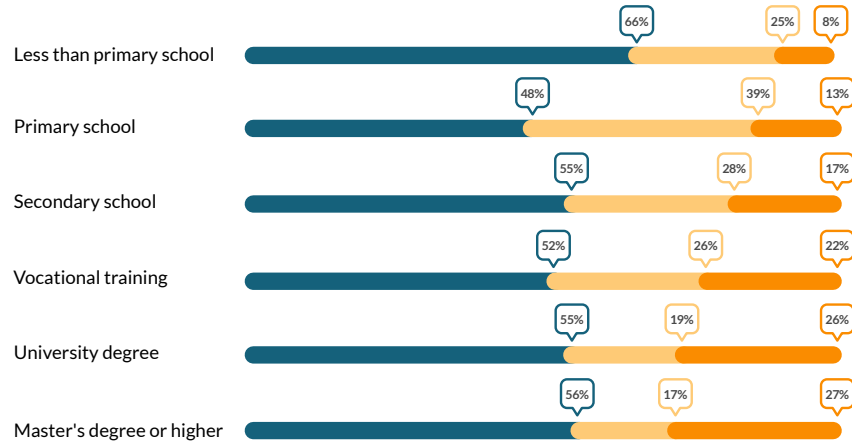
65 and over



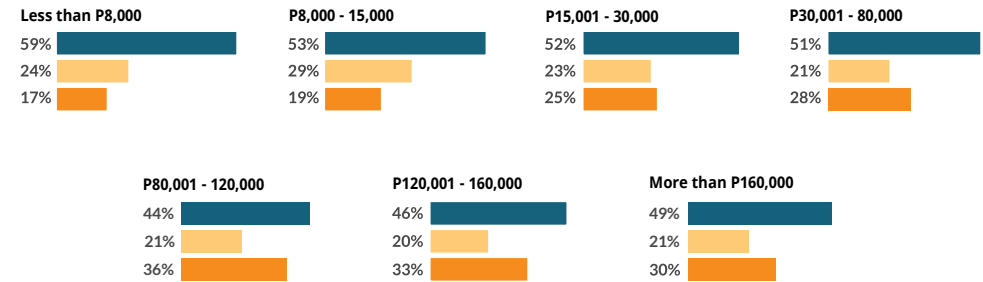
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● Yes
 ● No, they are too positive
 ● No, they are too negative

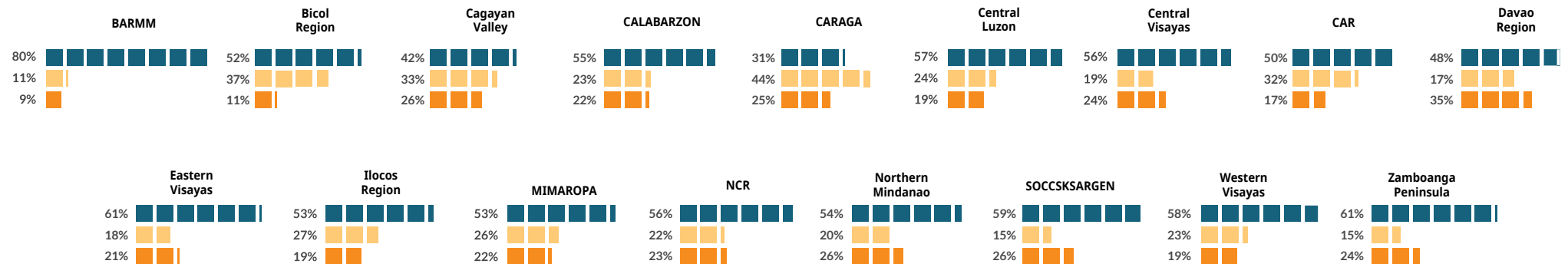
Education



Income



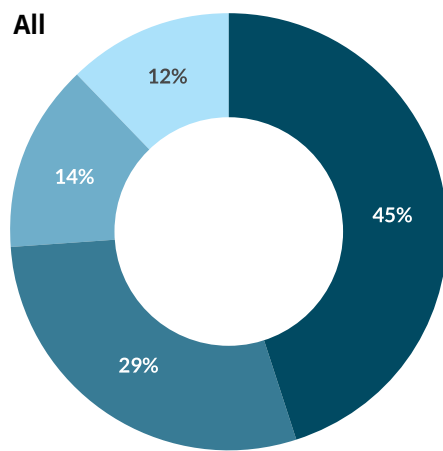
Region



Percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding

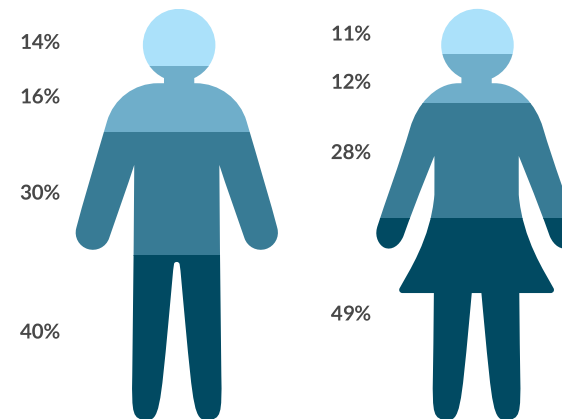
What is the most important thing for a media outlet to do in order to be trustworthy?

● Validate information from several sources
● Report complete details
● Get as many perspectives as possible
● Open to audience feedback

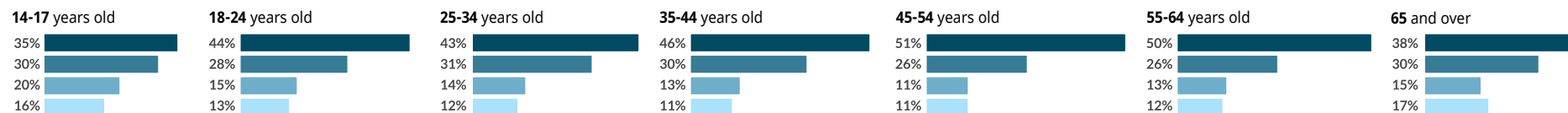


Gender

Male vs Female



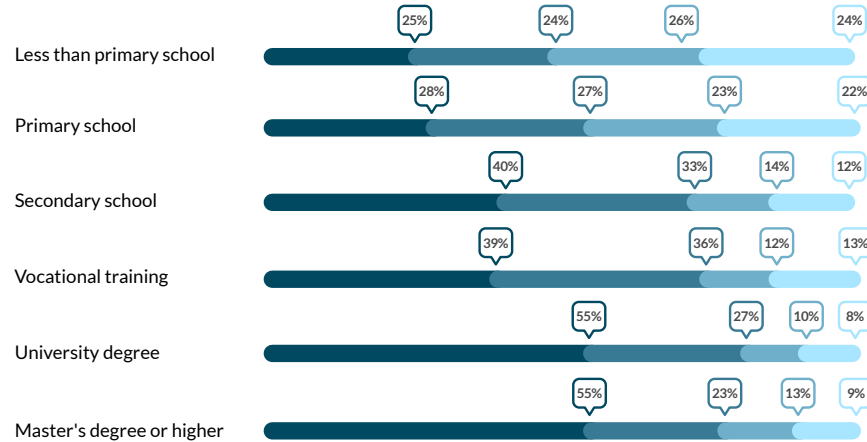
Age Group



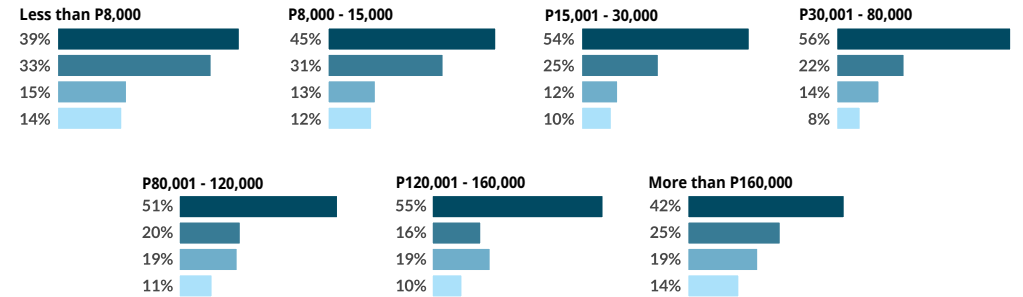
Percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding

● Validate information from several sources
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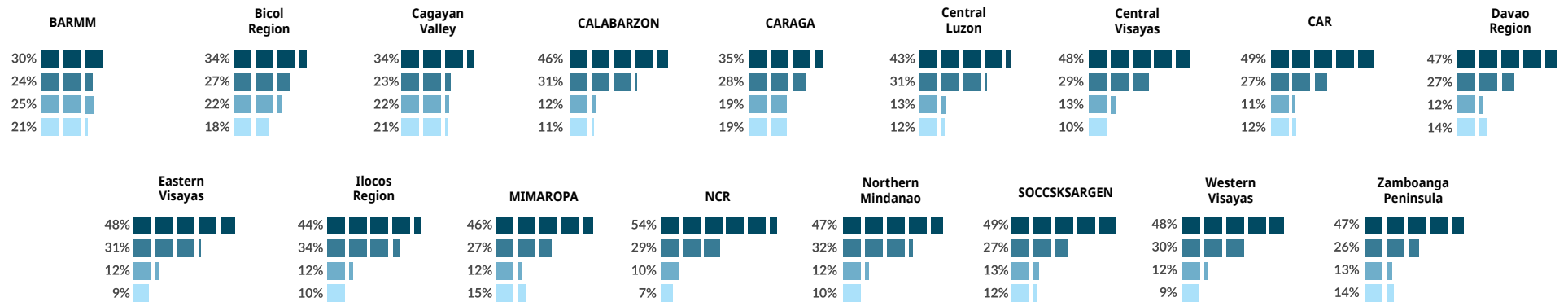
Education



Income



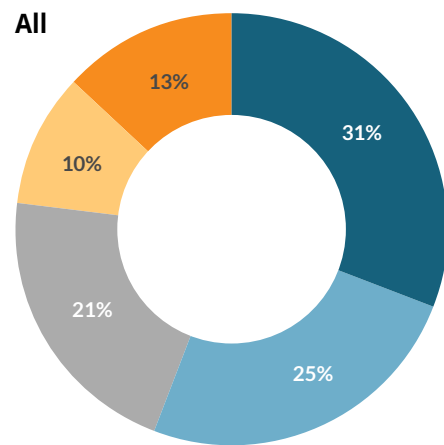
Region



Percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding

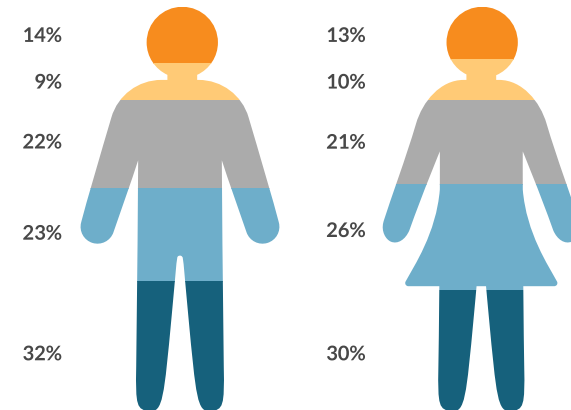
As long as information is verified, journalists should be able to report news that may offend people

Strongly agree
Somewhat agree
Neither agree nor disagree
Somewhat disagree
Strongly disagree



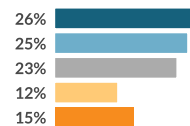
Gender

Male vs Female

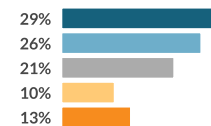


Age Group

14-17 years old



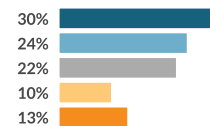
18-24 years old



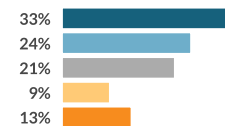
25-34 years old



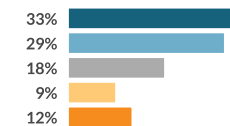
35-44 years old



45-54 years old



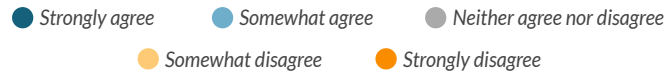
55-64 years old



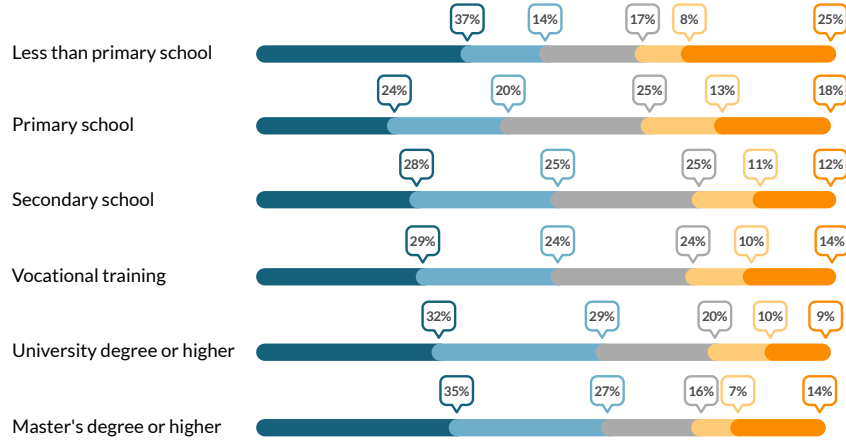
65 and over



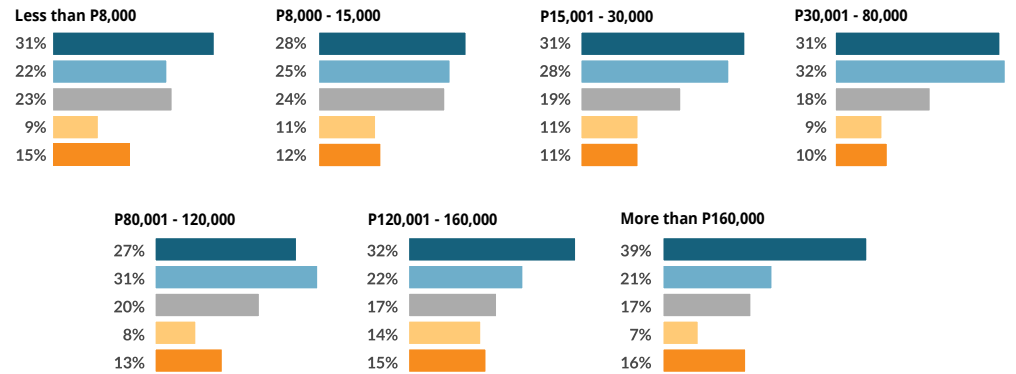
Percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding



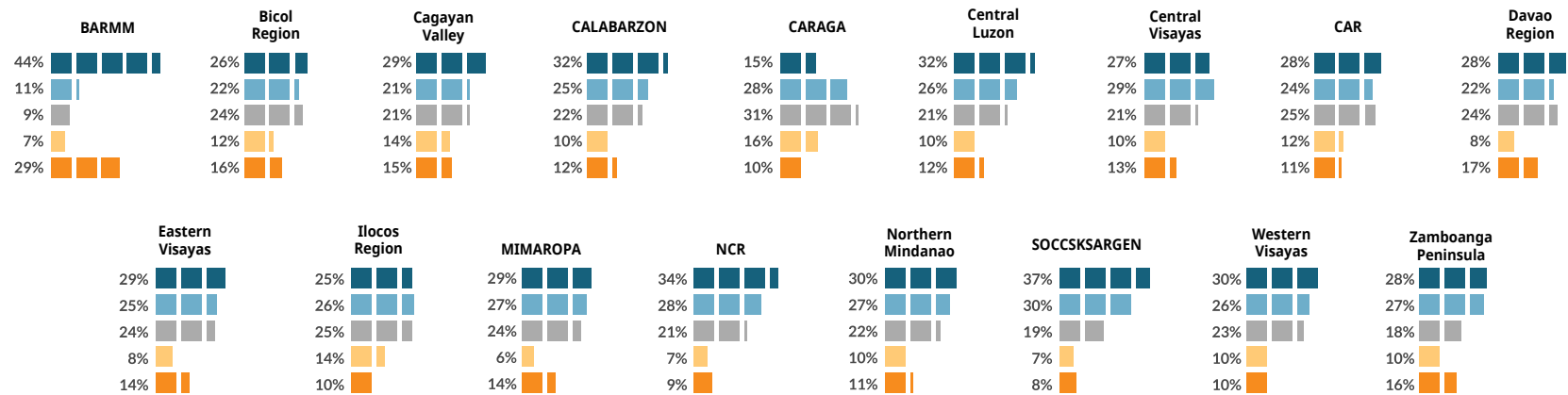
Education



Income



Region



Percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding

4. Disinformation

The seriousness of disinformation is not lost on Filipinos. Its effects on national elections, still a good two years away at the time they participated in the Internews survey, already had them worried.

Notwithstanding, many of them **do not always** verify the news they consume, mostly citing the lack of time. Disturbingly, an overwhelming majority see legislation outlawing disinformation as a solution.

4.1. 'Fake news' defined

At its simplest, "fake news" means false information masquerading as news. But the term has turned problematic because populist leaders like Duterte and Trump have misappropriated it to describe and assail news coverage which is unsympathetic or critical of them. It has also gotten lumped with other forms of disinformation, including decontextualization and reconfiguration of facts.

The Internews survey captures the inchoate understanding of what fake news is and encompasses: A number of respondents classify news that is bad for the country and for the president or the government as fake news.

Filipinos mostly define fake news as untrue information (51%). It is unverified information to 46% of the respondents and manipulated photos and videos to 37%. A third described it as incomplete information and another third as biased information.

But 18% said it is news bad for the country, while 17% said it is news bad for the president or the government, echoing the tune of leaders like Trump and Duterte along with their loyal followers. This dovetails with another finding of the Internews survey that one in five respondents views media reporting of government as "too negative" (see "Perceptions of the News Media").

Respondents who found none of the suggested seven phrases in the survey as a suitable definition make up 15%.

Slightly more men than women consider news bad for the country, the president and government as fake news. Those with high school education and vocational training are also more likely to define fake news as such.

Men more than women also tend to see no connection between the seven descriptions and fake news. Replying in

such manner are more than 30% of respondents with primary schooling or less, nearly a third of those in BARMM, and 40% of those who do not follow the news.

University graduates, on the other hand, make up the largest proportion of respondents among the age groups that define fake news as untrue, unverified, incomplete, and biased information, and as manipulated photos and videos.

4.2. The problem of disinformation

Regardless of how they define fake news, a resounding 85% of the respondents acknowledged the spread of incorrect information on important issues such as health, laws, and elections as a problem, 57% of whom deemed it serious ("yes, very much so"). One in seven, however, dismissed it as a nonproblem.

Comprising the biggest share of respondents who find disinformation a serious problem are those aged 18 to 34 (58%), who live in Metro Manila (62%) which is closely followed by BARMM (61%), have a university education or less than primary schooling (both 60%), and belong to P15,001 to P30,000 and P30,001 to P80,000 groups (61% and 62%).

Respondents who rely on news organizations (61%) and public officials (56%) as their main sources of information, depend more on online platforms of news outlets, whether

websites or social media (both 63%), and closely follow the news (64%) also worry the most about disinformation.

But the oldest cohorts (19%) are most likely to rule out disinformation

as a problem, as well as respondents with primary schooling (20%) and from Zamboanga Peninsula (26%). The highest proportion of those who also think it is not a problem bank more on public personalities (24%) or newspapers (17%) for information or do not follow the news (30%).

In the DNR 2020, 57% of Filipinos expressed concern over what is real and what is fake on the internet, corroborating the findings of the Internews survey. They said the



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platforms that worry them the most are Facebook (49%), news websites or apps (16%), messaging apps (15%), search engines (7%), YouTube (6%), and Twitter (2%).

Two years earlier, an SWS survey estimated that two-thirds of adult Filipino internet users had perceived the fake news problem on the internet as serious (40% very serious and 26% somewhat serious). The proportion saying there is a serious problem of fake news on the internet was directly related to the frequency of using it.

That same year, Pulse Asia reported that a large majority of Filipinos who had accessed social media accounts (88%) were aware of fake news on that platform, with most of them (79%) saying it was widespread on social media.

4.3. Electoral disinformation

Coming off the midterm elections in 2019 and facing national elections scheduled in May 2022, respondents are worried this early about the effects of disinformation on elections. Slightly more than three-fourths (78%) of them expressed apprehension with 44% saying they are “very worried.” A tenth are not at all.

A little more than half (52%) of those who considered the spread of incorrect information a problem worry the most about its consequences on elections. But even those who did not consider disinformation a problem (35%) share the concern.

As perturbed are the respondents who have higher education, live in Soccsksargen, and access information mainly through the media or online.

Least bothered are those in the 14 to 17 and 65-over groups, those with primary education or less, and those who live in BARMM. Those who turn mainly to public personalities and religious leaders, as well as to newspapers or news articles posted by others for information, likewise make up the highest proportion of the respondents who believe incorrect information will not affect elections.

Borrowing a page from Duterte’s novel campaign playbook in 2016, national and local candidates in the 2019 elections had fully integrated digital operations in their campaign strategy, investing considerably on social media and resorting to “more insidious and camouflaged” disinformation practices, according to the study “Tracking digital disinformation in the 2019 Philippine midterm election” (see Jonathan Ong’s chapter).



Borrowing a page from Duterte’s novel campaign playbook in 2016, national and local candidates in the 2019 elections had fully integrated digital operations in their campaign strategy, investing considerably on social media and resorting to ‘more insidious and camouflaged’ disinformation practices.



Another study, which analyzed fact checks produced during the midterm elections by the collaborative fact-checking initiative Tsek.ph, documented the pervasiveness of disinformation, purveyed mostly on Facebook, largely

through images and, on numerous occasions, in the guise of news. Opposition candidates and progressive groups were the most targeted, the former being the frequent victim of recycled and misleading to downright false information while the latter, chiefly of red-tagging. No opposition candidate made it to the Senate, the first time since 1938.

Filipinos are as interested in politics (77%) as they are in the news, according to the DNR 2020. More of them (44%) are concerned about the false and misleading information from the government, politicians, or political parties than other sources, it said. Other sources here are ordinary people (15%), journalists or news organizations (15%), activists or activist groups (11%) and foreign governments (9%).

In addition, they do not wholly relish political advertising on television and social media. Only two-thirds agree that politicians should be allowed to advertise on television and 59% on Facebook, Google, and Twitter.

By the same token, more than half (54%) would like tech companies to block an ad that could be inaccurate. They also expect journalists to report prominently false and misleading statements from politicians (see “Perceptions of the News Media”).

4.4. Verifying the news

In spite of their awareness and worry over the extent of disinformation in the Philippines, only a third have picked up the habit of always verifying the news they get. Another third do it often, and 7% never verify it at all.

Males are less inclined than females to verify the news. The most unlikely to fact-check also belong to the oldest and youngest groups (both 10%), those with less than primary schooling (22%), live in BARMM (25%), and are the wealthiest respondents (17%). Similarly situated are those who acquire information mainly from public personalities (16%), religious leaders (14%), and offline (18%).

However, half of those who are extremely worried about the effects of incorrect information during elections said they always verify the news.

Lack of time (33%) and lack of know-how (20%) are the biggest barriers to fact-checking. Around 17% feel no need to verify because they said they trust their source, whereas

16% do not see it as their responsibility and 14% said they cannot be bothered to do so.

More women than men cited both the lack of time and of know-how as hindrance. Those who access information from public personalities also point to both as the primary reasons.

Lack of time is more pronounced among respondents in the 35-44 and 55-64 cohorts (38% and 37%), with university degrees, live in Mimaropa and Western Visayas, and rely more on news organizations for information.

In contrast, lack of know-how is more prominent among respondents in the 14-17 age group, with only primary education or less, and live in Zamboanga Peninsula, Northern Mindanao, and Soccsksargen. Zamboanga Peninsula and CAR have the biggest share of respondents who see verifying the news not as their responsibility. Newspaper readers tend to think the same way.

A big proportion of those aged 65 and older believe that they can trust their source or said they cannot be bothered to fact-check.

4.5. Legislating against disinformation

Apart from earning trust, the inability to verify the news all the time could very well be a reason for respondents expecting journalists to validate information, as well as report complete details and get all perspectives (see "Perceptions of the News Media"). But this, together with the concern over the spread of disinformation especially during elections, could very well be another reason an overwhelming majority believe that there ought to be a law against disinformation.

Four in five of the respondents support legislation against disinformation. Only 8% do not and 12% said they do not know.

Outlawing disinformation is favored more by females (83%) than males (78%), those in their mid-30s to mid-60s (83% to 84%), those with university degrees (90%), those in Metro Manila (91%) and Western Visayas (88%), and those with monthly incomes of P15,001 to P80,000 (84%).

It also has support from respondents that rely on news organizations as a main source of information (88%), especially news websites (90%) and television (89%); those that follow closely the news (89%); those that worry the most about disinformation (86%), including its effects on

elections (90%); and even those who say they always verify the news (89%).

Those that disagree the most on the need for such a law are those 65 and older (12%), with primary education (23%), in Caraga (27%), with monthly incomes of P120,001 to P160,000 (12%), and who obtain information mainly from religious leaders (18%).

The Philippines has long have had a law against false news. The 90-year-old Revised Penal Code, through Article 154 Section 18, penalizes the publication "as news any false news which may endanger the public order, or cause damage to the interest or credit of the State." It was amended in 2017 to provide stiffer penalties: a fine of up to P200,000 and imprisonment of up to six months (see Jonathan Ong's chapter).

The Bayanihan to Heal as One Act (Republic Act 11469), passed in late March 2020 granting Duterte emergency powers to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, also contains a provision, Section 6f, punishing individuals who spread false information about the crisis on social media and other platforms. The Philippines is one of 17 states that passed regulation targeting disinformation during the pandemic, a move the International Press Institute said has "hand(ed) autocrats new censorship tools."

The ad hoc law has expired, but not before its vaguely worded Section 6f was used to arrest and charge 60 individuals (as of April 20, 2020). In a number of instances, law enforcers combined it with other laws in coming up with charges—not only Article 154 Section 18 on false news, but also the its provision on libel (Article 353) and the 2012 Cybercrime Prevention Act's provision on online libel. Some were also warned that they could be punished for rumor-mongering and spreading false information under Presidential Decree No. 90, a draconian Marcosian

law repealed by Corazon Aquino months after she was swept to the presidency through the world's first people power revolution.

Restriction of free-expression rights online and further criminalization of certain forms of online speech through the Bayanihan Act and the Anti-

Terrorism Law inevitably led the U.S.-based Freedom House to downgrade the Philippines' internet freedom score.

Responding to temporary restrictions on the exercise of human rights, including freedom of expression, on the grounds of public health across the world, David Kaye,

“Apart from earning trust, the inability to verify the news all the time could very well be a reason for respondents expecting journalists to validate information, as well as report complete details and get all perspectives.”

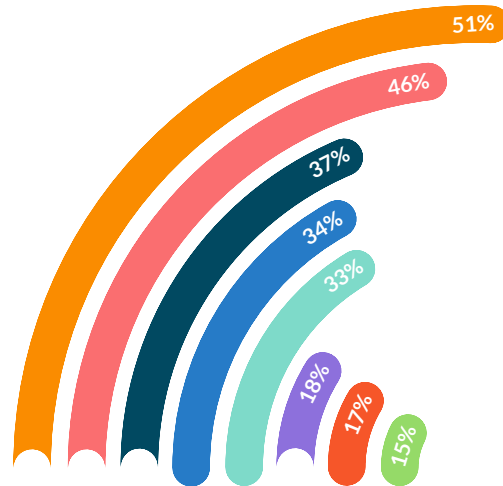
United Nations special rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, reminded governments of a 2017 declaration that clearly states that general prohibitions on the dissemination of information based on “vague and ambiguous ideas, including ‘false news’ or ‘nonobjective information’ are incompatible with human rights law and should be abolished.”

“Vague prohibitions of disinformation effectively empower government officials with the ability to determine the truthfulness or falsity of content in the public and political domain, in conflict with the requirements of necessity and proportionality under Article 19,” Kaye said, referring to the right to freedom of opinion and expression espoused in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR).

How do you define the term 'fake news'?

- Incomplete information
- Untrue information
- Biased information
- Unverified information
- News that's bad for the president/ government
- News that's bad for the country
- Manipulated photos and videos
- None of the above

All

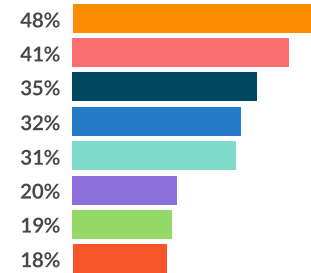


Gender

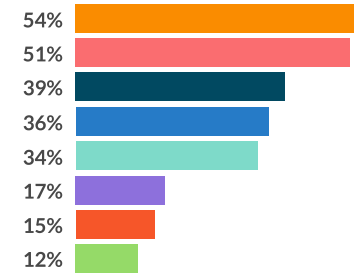
Male vs Female



Male

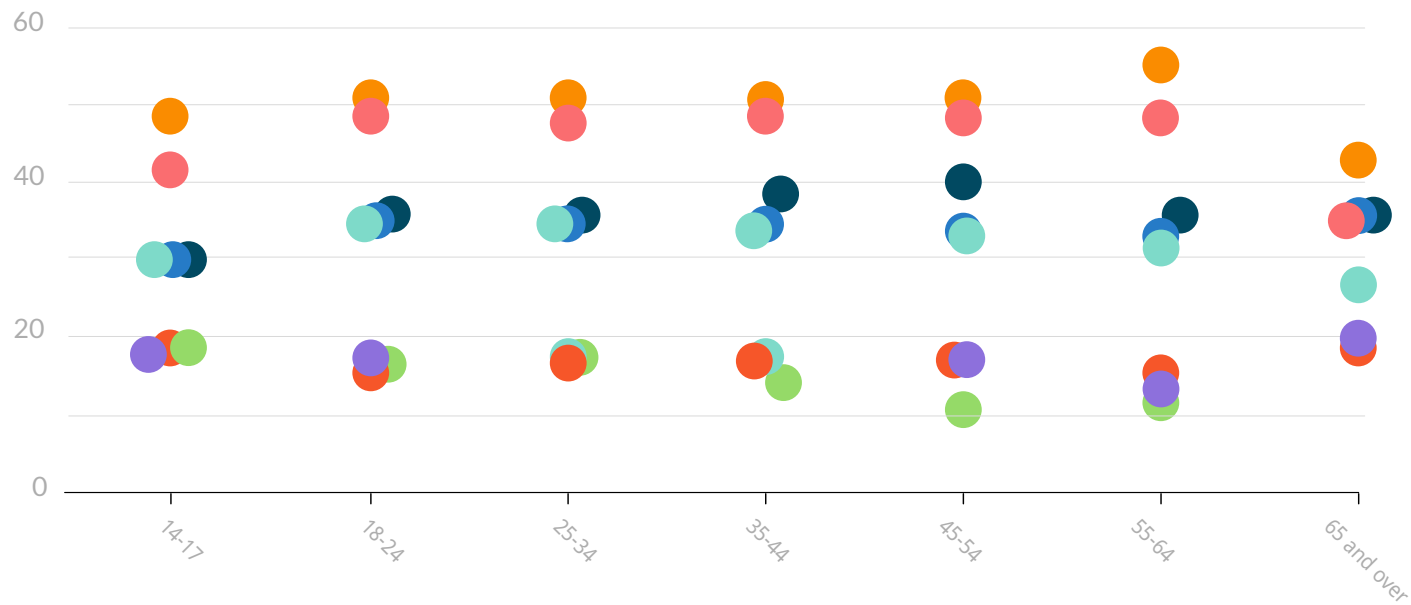


Female



Percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding
Totals may exceed 100 percent due to multiple answers

Age Group

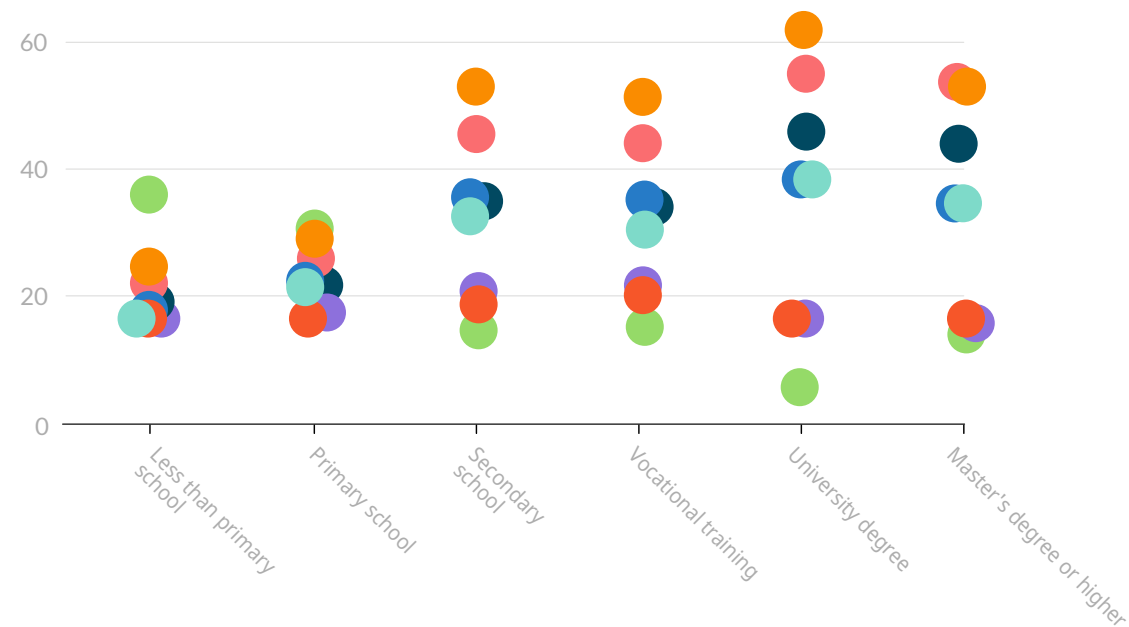


- Incomplete information
- Untrue information
- Biased information
- Unverified information
- News that's bad for the president/ government
- News that's bad for the country
- Manipulated photos and videos
- None of the above

	14-17	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65 and over
Incomplete information	33%	36%	36%	35%	33%	32%	27%
Untrue information	48%	53%	50%	52%	53%	55%	42%
Biased information	29%	35%	35%	32%	33%	31%	27%
Unverified information	42%	48%	46%	48%	47%	47%	35%
News that's bad for the president/ government	19%	15%	17%	17%	16%	15%	19%
News that's bad for the country	19%	18%	18%	19%	19%	16%	20%
Manipulated photos and videos	30%	37%	37%	39%	40%	36%	37%
None of the above	19%	16%	17%	14%	11%	12%	21%

Percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding
Totals may exceed 100 percent due to multiple answers

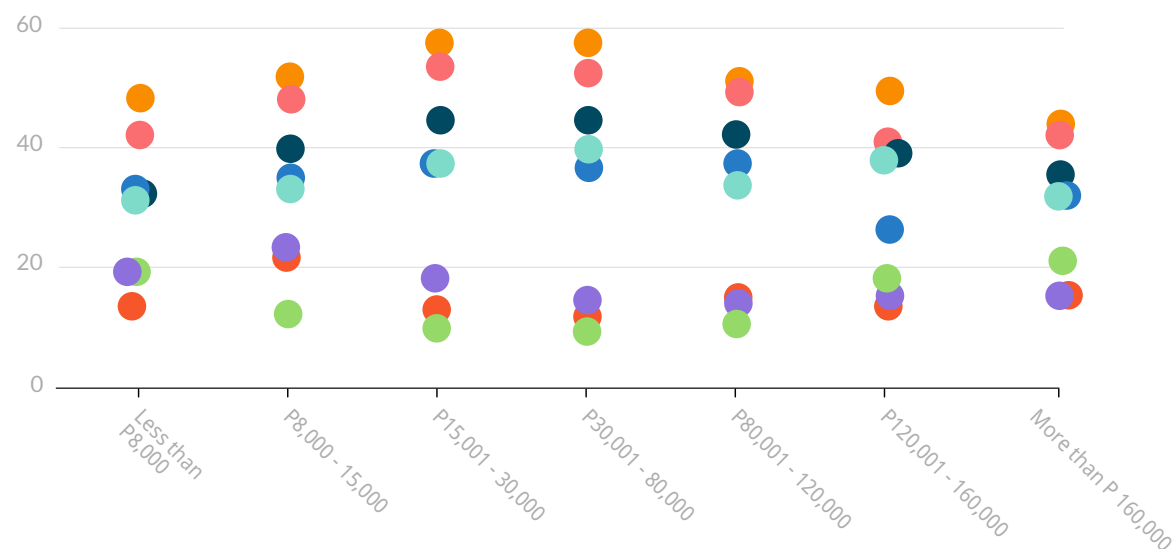
Education



	Less than primary school	Primary school	Secondary school	Vocational training	University degree	Master's degree or higher
Untrue information	18%	22%	36%	35%	39%	34%
Biased information	24%	29%	53%	51%	62%	53%
Unverified information	18%	21%	33%	30%	39%	35%
Incomplete information	22%	26%	46%	44%	55%	53%
News that's bad for the president/ government	15%	17%	19%	20%	15%	15%
News that's bad for the country	16%	18%	21%	22%	17%	16%
Manipulated photos and videos	19%	22%	36%	35%	45%	43%
None of the above	36%	31%	14%	15%	8%	14%

Percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding
Totals may exceed 100 percent due to multiple answers

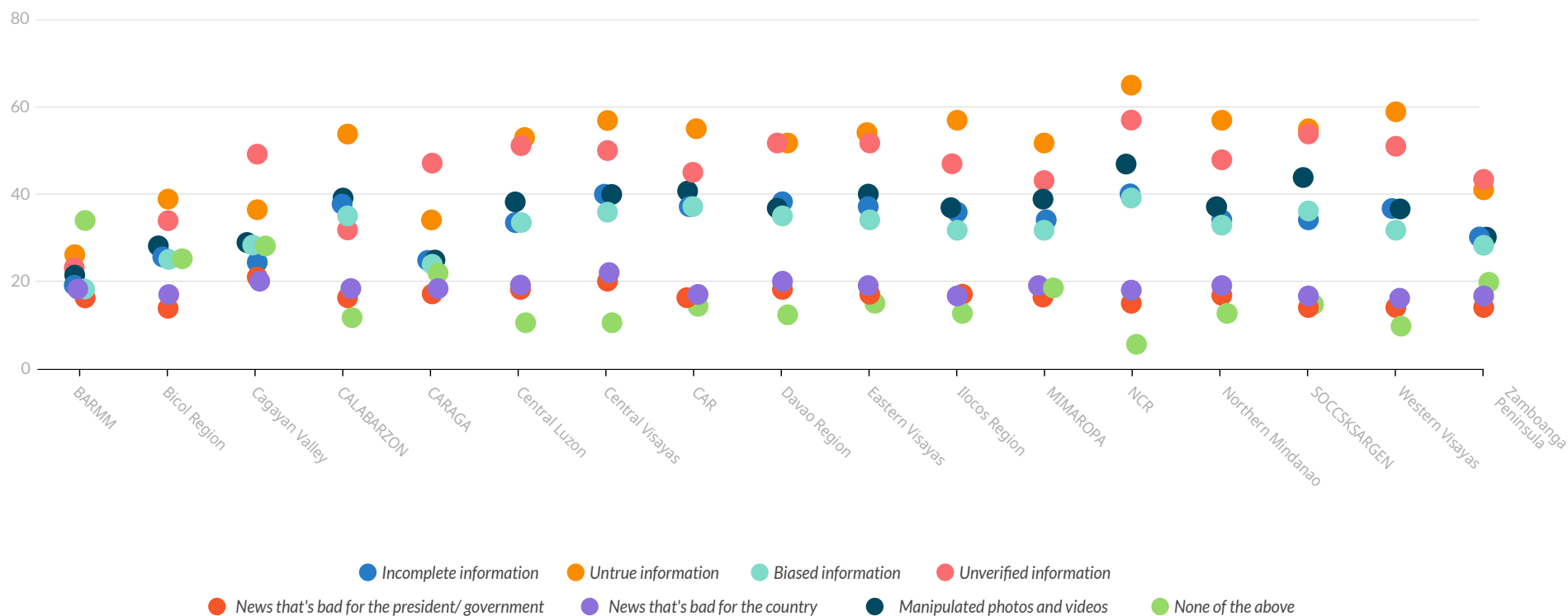
Income











	Less than P8,000	P8,000 - 15,000	P15,001 - 30,000	P30,001 - 80,000	P80,001 - 120,000	P120,001 - 160,000	More than P160,000
Untrue information	33%	35%	38%	37%	38%	26%	32%
Biased information	48%	53%	58%	58%	52%	50%	45%
Unverified information	31%	33%	38%	40%	34%	39%	32%
Incomplete information	42%	49%	54%	52%	49%	41%	42%
News that's bad for the president/ government	17%	21%	16%	12%	15%	13%	16%
News that's bad for the country	19%	23%	18%	15%	14%	16%	16%
Manipulated photos and videos	33%	40%	45%	45%	42%	39%	36%
None of the above	19%	12%	10%	9%	11%	18%	21%

Percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding
Totals may exceed 100 percent due to multiple answers

Region



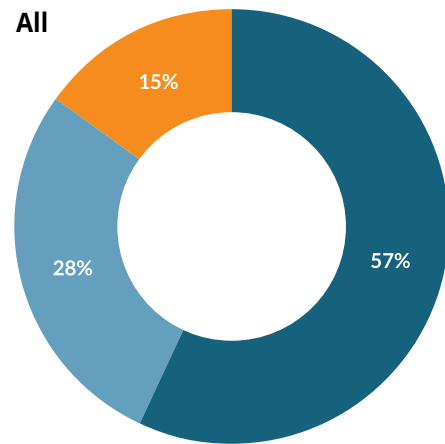
Percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding
Totals may exceed 100 percent due to multiple answers

	 Incomplete information	 Untrue information	 Biased information	 Unverified information	 News that's bad for the president/government	 News that's bad for the country	 Manipulated photos and videos	 None of the above
BARMM	19%	26%	18%	23%	16%	18%	21%	20%
Bicol Region	27%	39%	25%	34%	14%	17%	28%	26%
Cagayan Valley	25%	36%	28%	34%	21%	20%	29%	24%
CALABARZON	37%	54%	35%	49%	16%	18%	39%	12%
CARAGA	26%	34%	24%	32%	17%	18%	25%	22%
Central Luzon	34%	53%	34%	47%	18%	19%	38%	12%
Central Visayas	40%	57%	36%	51%	20%	22%	40%	12%
CAR	37%	55%	37%	50%	16%	17%	41%	15%
Davao Region	38%	52%	35%	45%	18%	20%	37%	13%
Eastern Visayas	37%	54%	34%	52%	17%	19%	40%	16%
Ilocos Region	36%	57%	32%	47%	17%	17%	37%	13%
MIMAROPA	34%	52%	32%	43%	16%	19%	39%	19%
NCR	40%	65%	39%	57%	15%	18%	47%	7%
Northern Mindanao	35%	57%	33%	48%	17%	19%	37%	13%
SOCCSKSARGEN	35%	55%	36%	54%	14%	17%	44%	14%
Western Visayas	37%	59%	32%	51%	14%	16%	37%	10%
Zamboanga Peninsula	30%	41%	28%	43%	14%	17%	30%	20%

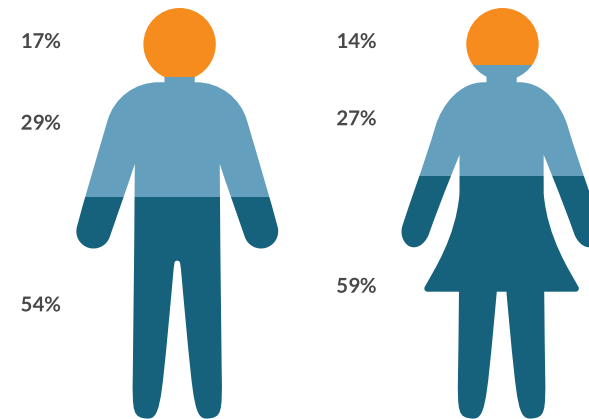
Percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding
Totals may exceed 100 percent due to multiple answers

Is the spread of incorrect information on important issues (e.g., health, laws, elections, etc.) a problem in the Philippines?

● Yes, very much so ● Somewhat ● No, not at all



Gender Male vs Female



Age Group

14-17 years old



18-24 years old



25-34 years old



35-44 years old



45-54 years old



55-64 years old



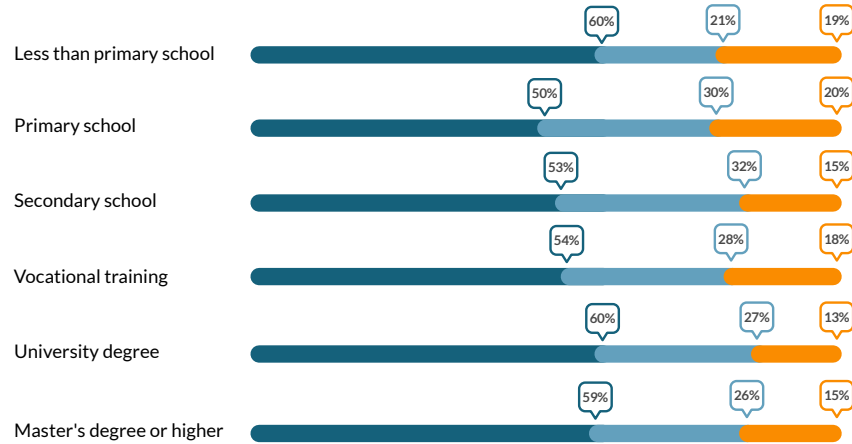
65 and over



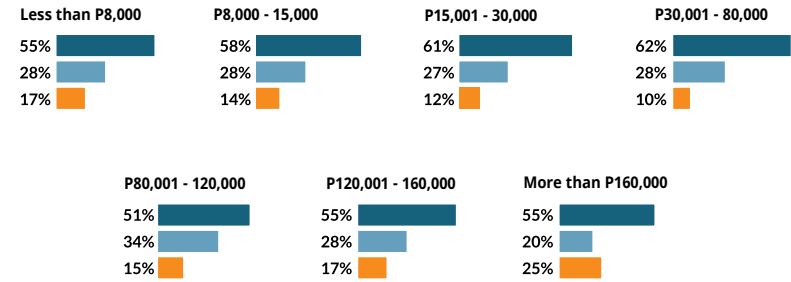
Percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding

● Yes, very much so ● Somewhat ● No, not at all

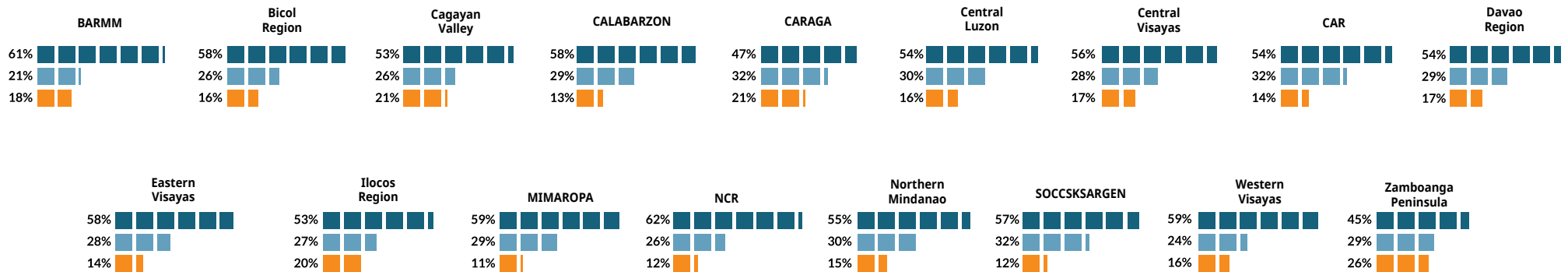
Education



Income



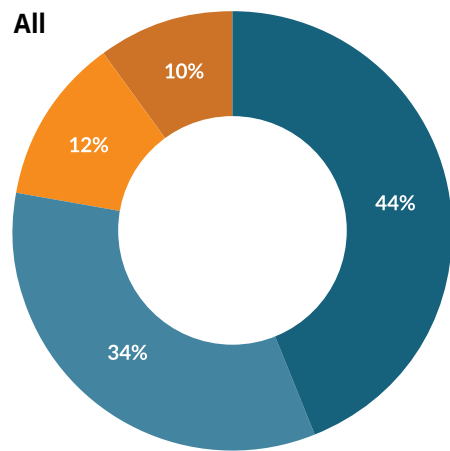
Region



Percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding

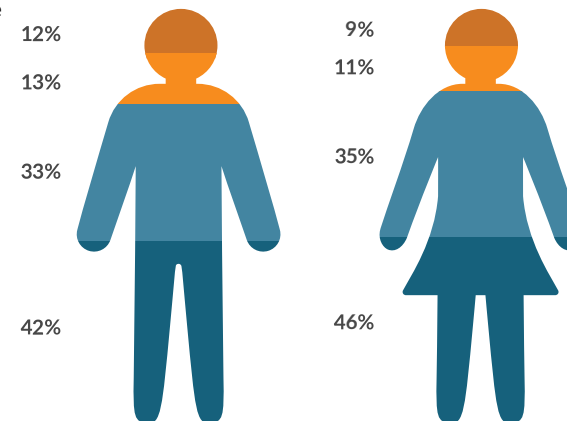
How worried are you about the effects incorrect information can have on national elections?

Very worried Somewhat worried Not very worried Not at all worried

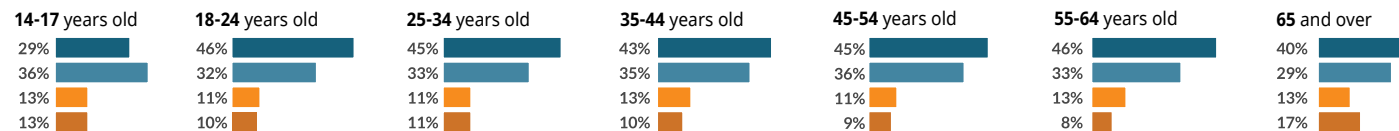


Gender

Male vs Female



Age Group



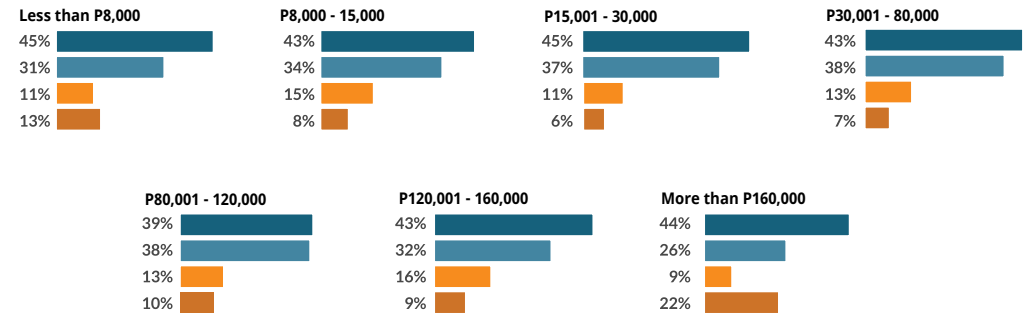
Percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding

Very worried
Somewhat worried
Not very worried
Not at all worried

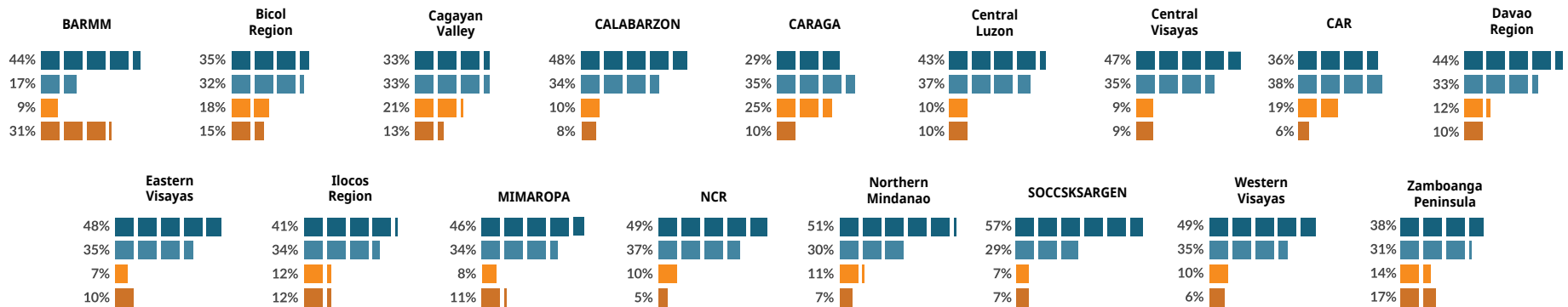
Education



Income



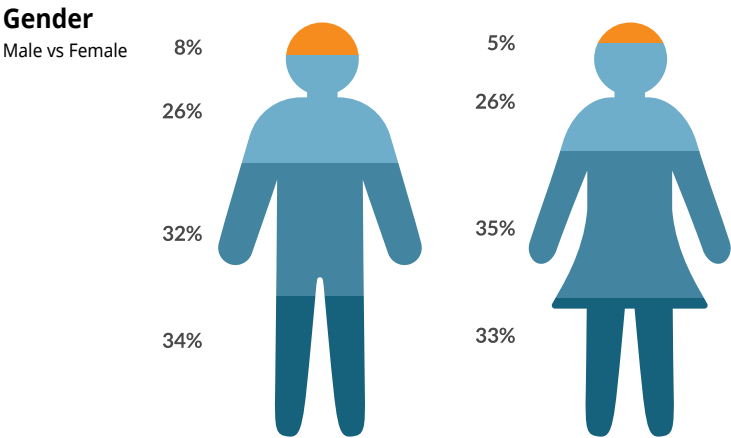
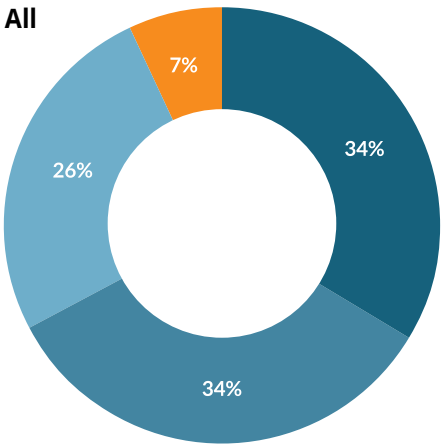
Region



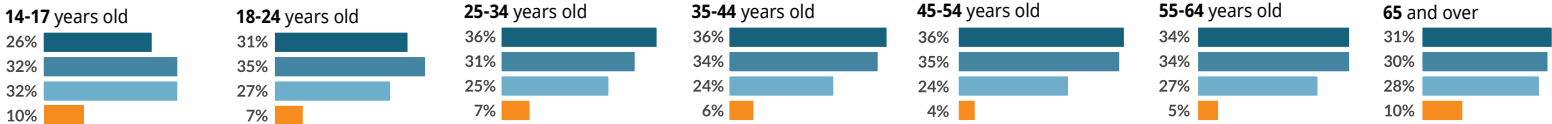
Percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding

How often do you verify a news story?

Always
Often
Sometimes
Never



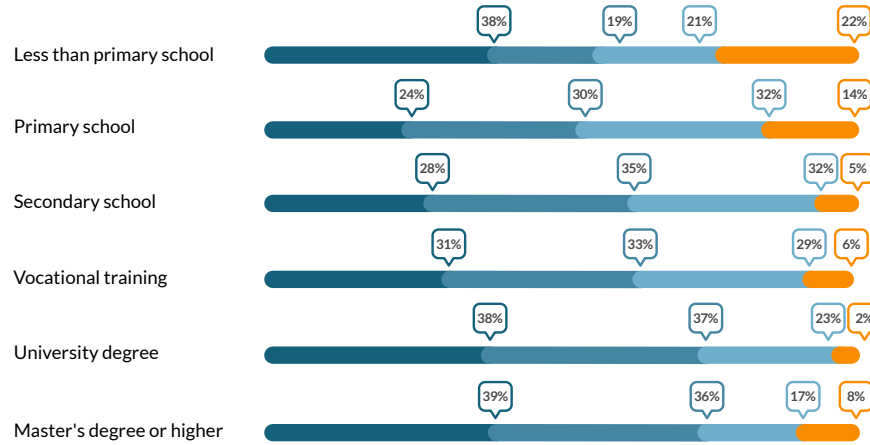
Age Group



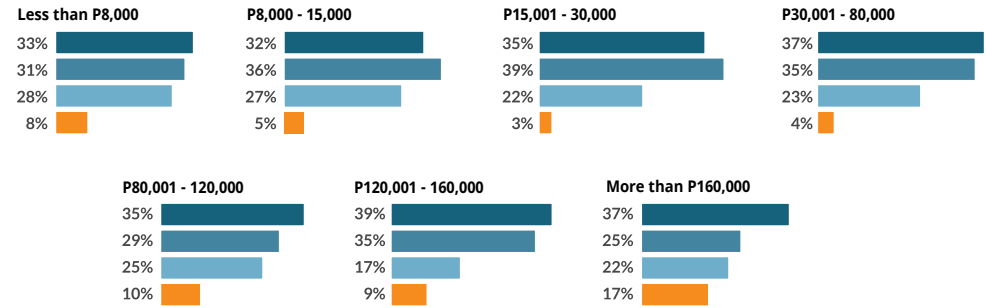
Percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding

● Always ● Often ● Sometimes ● Never

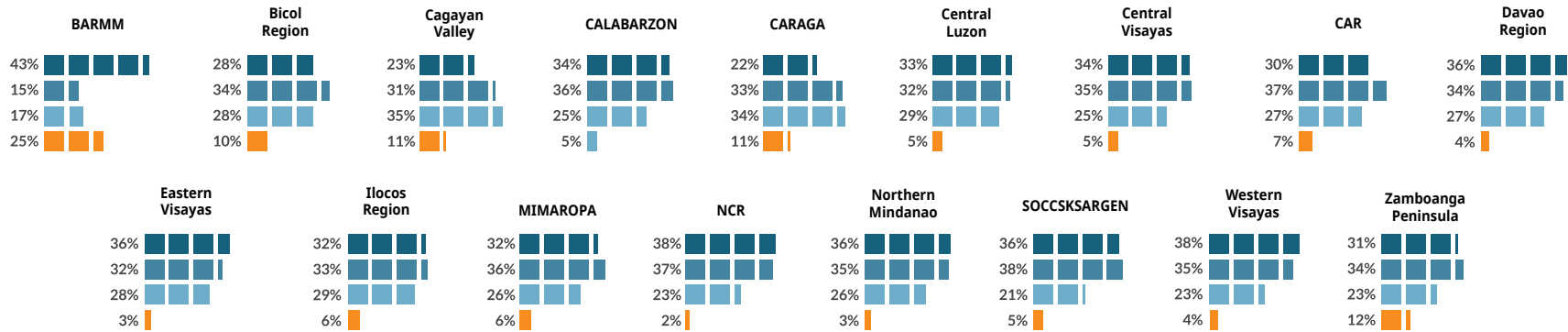
Education



Income



Region

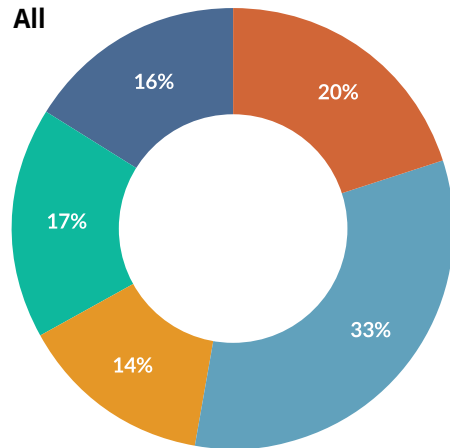


Percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding

What is the main reason you are unlikely to verify the information you consume?

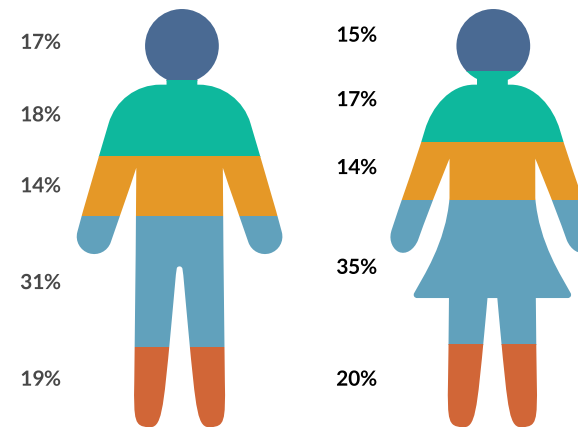
- I don't know how to responsibly
- Not enough time
- Can't be bothered because all media lie
- No need to because I trust the source
- It is not my responsibility

All



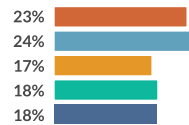
Gender

Male vs Female



Age Group

14-17 years old



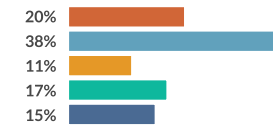
18-24 years old



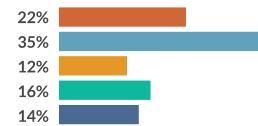
25-34 years old



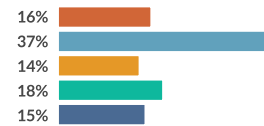
35-44 years old



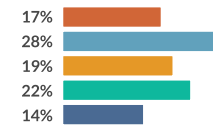
45-54 years old



55-64 years old



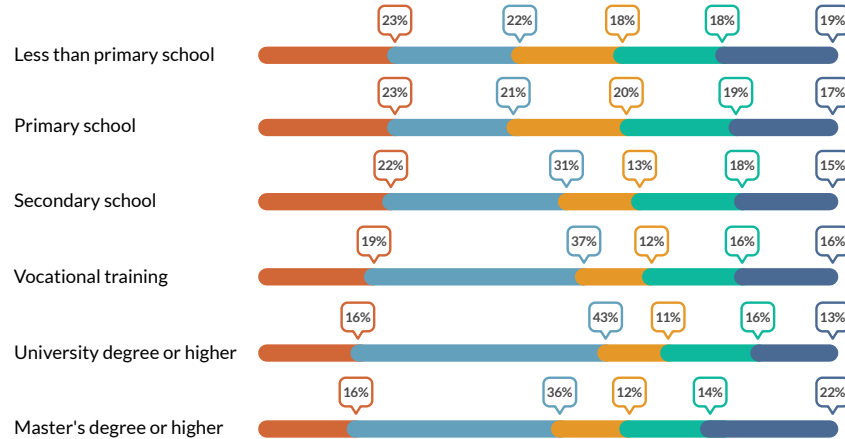
65 and over



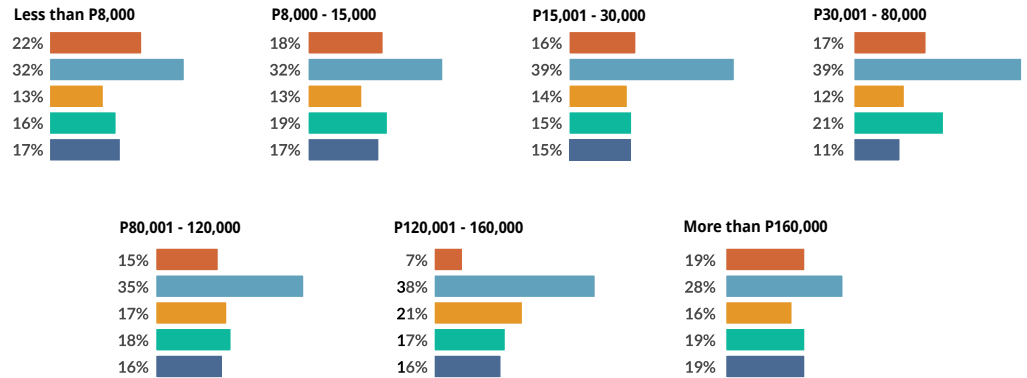
Percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding

● I don't know how to responsibly ● Not enough time ● Can't be bothered because all media lie
● No need to because I trust the source ● It is not my responsibility

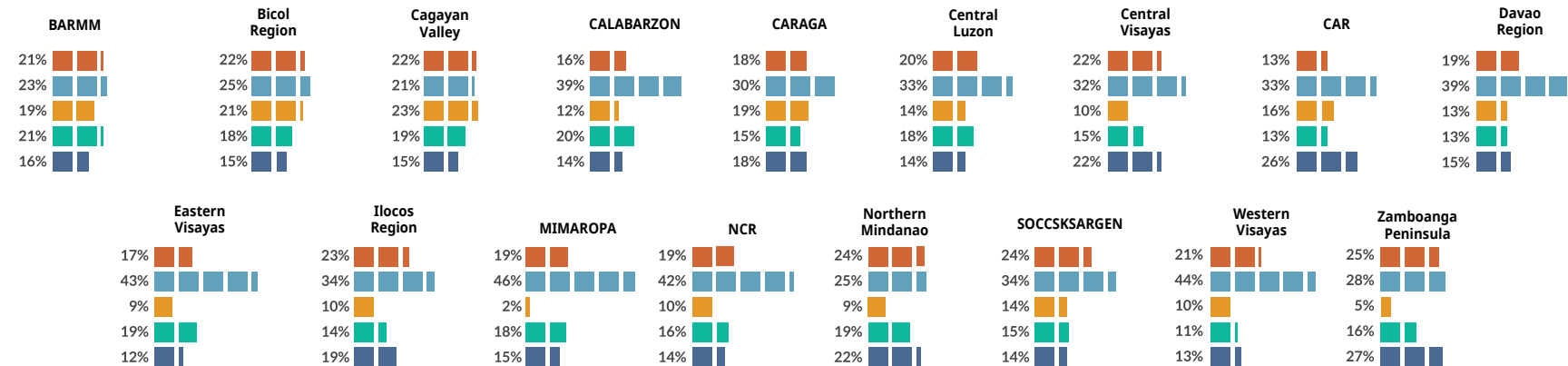
Education



Income



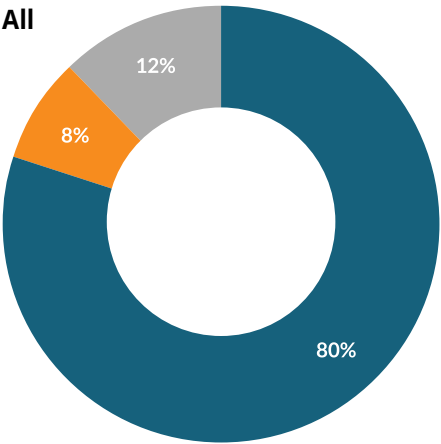
Region



Percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding

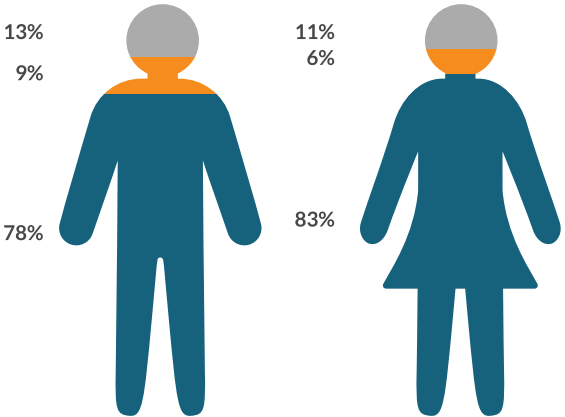
Should there be a law against the intentional spreading of incorrect information?

Yes No Don't know



Gender

Male vs Female



Age Group

14-17 years old



18-24 years old



25-34 years old



35-44 years old



45-54 years old



55-64 years old



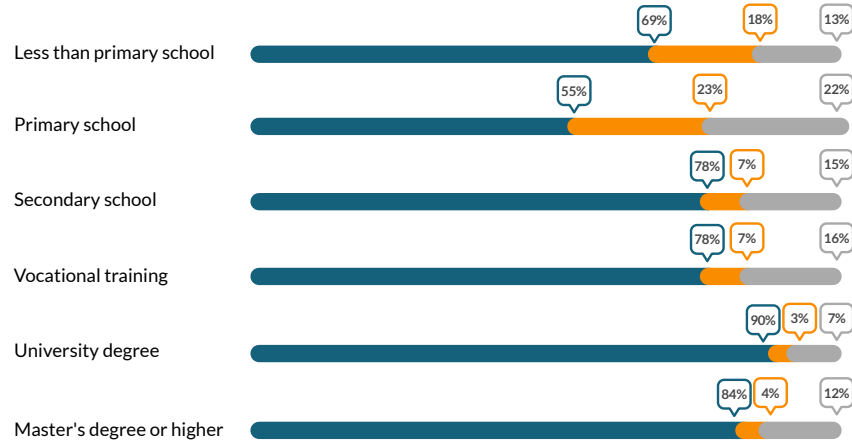
65 and over



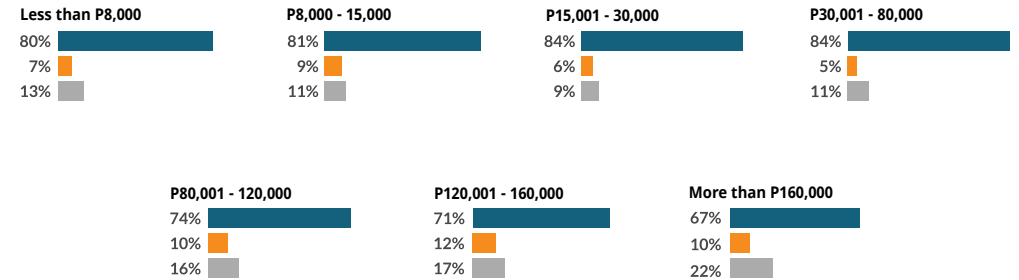
Percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding

● Yes ● No ● Don't know

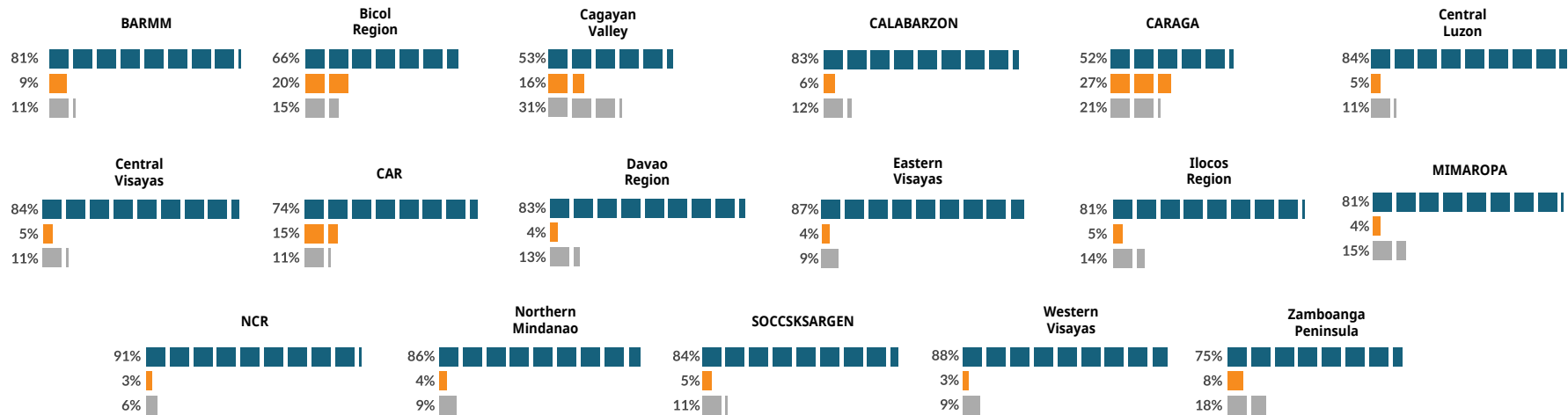
Education



Income



Region



Percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding

5. COVID-19

The coronavirus pandemic has modified information consumption behavior globally, including in the Philippines where the lockdown has by far been the world's longest and among the strictest. Health institutions—not the media—are the top information source about COVID-19 for Filipinos. Consumption of online news related to the outbreak is also lower than on normal occasions, especially away from social media accounts of news organizations.

5.1. Information sources

On a regular day, Filipinos tap news organizations first and family and friends second for information (see “Media Consumption”). This is not so with COVID-19.

Health institutions are the No. 1 source of information on SARS-CoV-2 (39%), far greater than news media organizations (25%), family and friends (5%), public personalities (4%), and religious leaders (5%).

Access to public officials and political leaders has increased, though only if the percentages for local government units (9%) and national political leaders (4%) are combined. Health practitioners account for 10%.

Preference for the news media as the leading source of information on COVID-19 is 30 percentage points lower compared with when health institutions and health practitioners are not listed among the providers of information. Preference for most nonmedia sources is similarly lesser, down from as little as 1 point for religious leaders and 4 points for public personalities to as much as 18 points for family and friends. Public officials are the lone exception, enjoying a 3-point increase.

Reduced media usage can be attributed to big decreases among respondents who are female (33 points), aged 55 to 64 (34 points), hold a master's degree (40 points), earn between P15,001 and P30,000 (38 points), and live in Western Visayas (46 points).

The decline in reliance on friends and relatives as an information source is most felt in the 14 to 17 age group (20 points) and among those with less than primary

education (21 points), earn less than P15,000 (19 points), and live in Davao and Ilocos (both 21 points).

Respondents who are largely responsible for public personalities losing ground as providers of information are the youngest (6 points), the wealthiest (7 points), made it only to high school (6 points), and live in BARMM (7 points).

Although the decrease in their following is minimal, religious leaders do have to contend with substantial losses among respondents who are 65 and over and live in Ilocos (both 5 points). The sector only has tiny gains among those aged 18 to 24, with less than primary education, and live in BARMM and Bicol.

Public officials and political leaders (broken down into local government units and national government leaders for this COVID-19 question) draw their biggest gains from respondents with the least schooling (13 points) and from Mimaropa and BARMM (both 11 points). The only groups where their importance as an information source has contracted are among the P80,001 to P120,000 earners and in Eastern Visayas (both 2 points).

The emergence of health institutions and practitioners as important sources among Filipinos, which can arguably be equated to trust, reflects the trend in other countries. In a separate survey of six countries on COVID-19, the DNR 2020 found trust in scientists and doctors at a high 83%, national health organizations at 76%, and global health organizations at 73%. Both news organizations and national governments rank next, 59%, with individual politicians lagging behind at 35%.

In the Philippines, the percentage of females who obtain information first from health institutions is bigger than the proportion of males. Reliance on health institutions rises with the level the education. Those with a university or master's degree or higher are thrice as likely to rely on health institutions than those without primary education. The latter rely nearly equally on the following sources: health institutions and local government (15% each), health practitioners, religious leaders and news organizations (12% each), and family and friends, national political leaders, and public personalities (11% each).

Among the regions, BARMM depends the least on health institutions (19%) and the news media (13%) for information about COVID-19.



Health institutions are the No. 1 source of information on SARS-CoV-2, far greater than news media organizations, family and friends, public personalities, and religious leaders.



5.2. Gains for radio, newspapers

For the respondents who primarily count on news organizations, television comes first (40%), unchanged from regular media consumption habits. Websites of news outlets (29%) and their social media accounts (15%) follow, ahead of newspapers (7%), radio (6%), and news articles posted by others (4%).

Only social media accounts of news organizations show a decline by 6 percentage points compared with their usage for non-COVID information. The rest reflect gains, from 1 point for both websites and news articles posted by others, to 2 points for radio and 3 points for newspapers.

Overall, television consumption is unchanged, but distinct differences across groups can be seen. Among the groups with greater usage of television to obtain COVID-19 information are the 65-over, the P80,001 to P120,000 cohort, and those in Davao and Zamboanga Peninsula, rising from 7 to 11 points. Larger declines can be traced to the 45 to 54 age group (4 points), those with the least schooling (12 points) as well as residents of Caraga (10 points) and CAR (9 points).

Albeit having the biggest gains among the platforms, newspapers have small losses among two income groups, P15,001 to P30,000 and P80,001 to P120,000, as well as in Ilocos and Eastern Visayas. Its boost is due mostly to the oldest cohort (5 points), those with less than primary education (9 points), with P120,001 to P160,000 income (8 points), and Mimaropa (11 points).

Like newspapers, radio's losses are only from four groups, this time the oldest, the P30,001 to P80,000 earners, and Soccsksargen and Mimaropa. Its biggest gains are credited to the P80,001 to P120,000 income group (13 points) and CAR (11 points).

Reduced reliance on social media accounts applies to all groups, except those without primary education and the P30,001 to P80,000 group. Double-digit decreases, from 10 to 17 points, are posted by the three wealthiest cohorts and seven regions: Davao, Soccsksargen, Northern Mindanao, Ilocos, Central Visayas, Zamboanga Peninsula, and CAR.

In spite of its overall small gain, websites as a source about COVID-19 are less popular among the two oldest groups, the two groups with the fewest years of schooling, the poorest and wealthiest, and those living in nine regions led by Caraga and Western Visayas.

Nearly all of Filipinos (98.7%) follow COVID-19 related news and updates, according to a mobile survey administered by the EON Group and research firm Tangere to mostly Luzon residents in the private sector in late March to early April, or two weeks after the Luzon-wide lockdown. Seven in 10 said they receive enough COVID-19 related news. Traditional media are the main

source of news at 95%, social media at 90%, and websites at 74%.

Specifically, Philippine television recorded three million new viewers and an increase of more than 60 minutes of viewing in the early weeks of the enhanced community quarantine (ECQ), as detected by Kantar Media Philippines' TV audience measurement service.

Kantar's global survey in April 2020, the COVID-19 Barometer, monitored a 70% growth in web browsing, 63% in traditional TV viewing, and 61% in social media engagement over normal usage rates in different parts of the world in later stages of the pandemic. It said that increased usage across all messaging platforms has been the biggest in the 18 to 34 age group.

The survey also shows traditional nationwide news channels (broadcast and newspaper) as the most trusted sources of information: 52% identified them as "trustworthy," followed by government agency websites at 48%. Social media platforms were regarded by only 11% as a trustworthy source.

Kantar's September 2020 COVID-19 Barometer, however, found media consumption, including social media, falling considerably since the end of April.

5.3. Going offline

Slightly more nonmedia users (31%) access information about COVID-19 offline compared with when they get information in general (29%).

Among the nonmedia sources, friends and families, public personalities, and religious leaders experienced the shift away from online toward offline access. The proportion of respondents who elect to go offline is highest among those who prefer religious leaders (47%) and lowest among those who lean more on health institutions (26%) for information about the pandemic.

By regions, the biggest proportion of those who go online to find out about COVID-19 comes from Davao (78%)—not Metro Manila, the epicenter at the time of the survey—closely followed by Western Visayas (76%). Those from Cagayan Valley and Caraga rely a great deal on offline sources (44% and 43%).

The EON-Tangere study said 92% of Filipinos usually get their information on COVID-19 from Facebook, 73% from YouTube, 67% from group chats, 39% from Twitter, and 36% from Instagram.

Nearly 60% spend three to four hours a day on social media apps during this period, the primary drivers in using the apps being the following: obtaining news and info (98%), sharing them (97%), communicating with family and friends (97%), and entertainment (83%).

5.4. Disinfodemic

COVID-19 not only escalated into a pandemic, it also unleashed what the World Health Organization (WHO) calls an “infodemic” (an overabundance of information online and offline) and, worse, what the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) labels as a “disinfodemic” (a surfeit of disinformation).

Launched in January 2020 by the International Fact-Checking Network at Poynter (IFCN), the CoronaVirusFacts Alliance has discovered more than 9,000 false or misleading pieces about COVID-19 in more than 70 countries and in more than 40 languages. The pioneering global fact-checking collaboration brings together over 100 fact checkers around the world, including Rappler and Vera Files from the Philippines, both verified IFCN signatories and third-party fact checkers of Facebook.

Citing various studies, a UNESCO report in November 2020 said that around 40% of COVID-19 related social media posts had come from unreliable sources, 42% of over 178 million tweets analyzed in a research had been produced by bots, 38% of nearly 50 million tweets had been deemed to be “manipulated content,” and 40 million problematic posts had been identified in March 2020 alone by Facebook.

In a global survey on the pandemic, 81% of journalists said they have encountered disinformation—28% said many times a day, 35% many times a week, and 18% weekly. They identified regular citizens (49%) as the top sources of disinformation, followed by political leaders and elected officials (46%), attention-seeking trolls (43%), profiteers (38%), propagandistic or heavily partisan news media or state media (34%), identifiable government agencies or their spokespeople (25%), government-sponsored troll networks (23%), celebrities (19%), foreign influence agents (8%). The most prolific platform is Facebook, according of 66% of the journalists, followed by Twitter (42%), WhatsApp (35%), and YouTube (22%).

In Metro Manila, however, the poll administered by Publicus Asia found respondents divided on whether the volume of fake news had increased or decreased during the ECQ: 34% said that it had decreased compared to before the lockdown, 33% said that it had increased, and another third said that it was more or less the same.

EON-Tangere’s survey reported 96% of its respondents saying they had fact-checked information received on COVID-19, a figure much higher than Internews’ finding on the frequency that Filipinos verify news they get (see “Disinformation”).

As partners of the CoronaVirusFacts Alliance, Rappler contributed a total of 164 COVID-19 fact checks and VERA Files 109 to the international database. The two

news organizations were also active in Tsek.ph, the country’s first collaborative fact-checking initiative launched for the 2019 midterm elections.

Rappler, along with civil society, also brought to Facebook’s attention a network of 57 Facebook accounts, 31 pages, and 20 Instagram accounts originating in the Philippines that was found to have violated the platform’s policy against foreign or government interference. The network, which Facebook said had links to the Philippine military and police, was taken down in September 2020 for coordinated inauthentic behavior on behalf of a foreign or government entity.

Despite its conceded inability to outperform disinformation in reach and speed, the value of the fact-checking, especially during elections and crises, is widely acknowledged as an effective means of countering disinformation, with calls to support diverse, independent fact-checking organizations and mechanisms mounting.

For example, fact checks marked up by publishers to make them searchable on Google have been seen on the platform’s “Search” and “News” more than 4 billion times between January and September this year, exceeding all of 2019 combined. As previously mentioned, Facebook in March 2020 alone placed warning labels on 40 million posts rated as misinformation by its third-party fact checkers.

But a few areas need working on.

One study suggests that the reach of Facebook’s network of third-party fact checking organizations is insufficient. Facebook partners in many parts of the world appear to have centered on viral disinformation surfaced by the tech platform, for which their fact checks are monetized. This may have contributed to their overlooking false or misleading information spreading on other channels such as YouTube.

The Oxford Internet Institute said in a study released in September 2020 that COVID-related misinformation videos on YouTube are largely shared on Facebook rather than through the video sharing platform itself. But Facebook only placed warning labels about false information on 55 COVID-related videos on YouTube, less than 1% of the misinformation videos shared on the platform, it said.

An unpublished paper of two University of the Philippines professors, who studied COVID-19 digital disinformation debunked by Rappler and VERA Files from March to May 2020, found Rappler acknowledging Facebook’s Claim Check dashboard as the source of 92% of the claims it fact-checked for that period. VERA Files made no similar disclosure, but the research pinpointed at least 40% of its fact checks also coming from Facebook’s queue by crosschecking them against those done by Rappler and the platform’s non-Philippine partners.

The findings gain further significance in light of a discovery of an ongoing study of two De la Salle University professors that YouTube is a big purveyor of historical revisionism favoring the late dictator Ferdinand Marcos and his family.

The pandemic, however, has dealt a heavy blow not only to the integrity of the truth, but also to journalists.

Some journalists have become vectors of misinformation, amplifying falsehoods that undermine the public's trust in the media. At the other extreme are journalists who have become victims of disinformation.

A UNESCO study said journalists who expose COVID-19 disinformation find themselves as the targets of disinformation-fueled attacks. Discrediting journalists and credible news outlets, it said, is often associated with political disinformation, with unsupported accusations that certain news outlets are themselves peddling in disinformation.

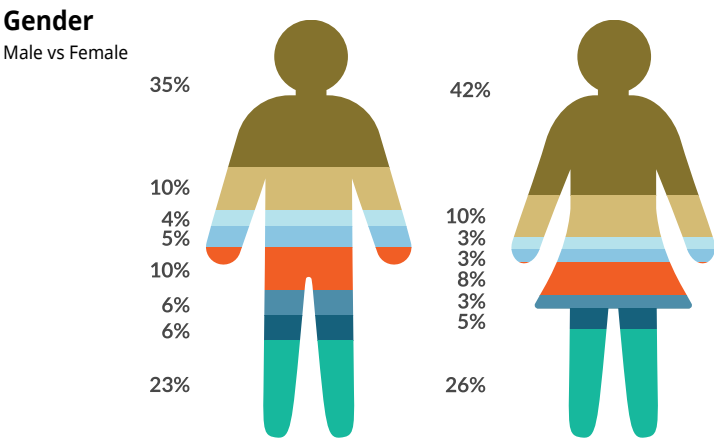
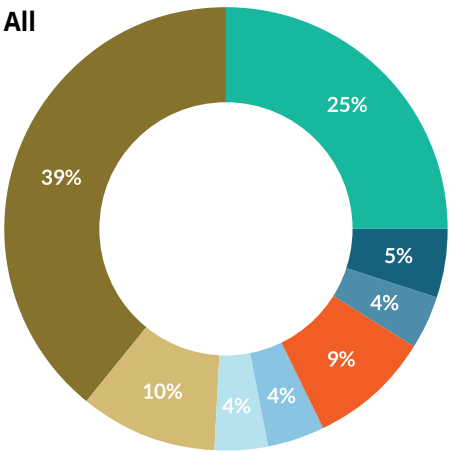
Even worse, COVID-19 has turned into a “media extinction event”: It has forced several news outlets around the world to fold in what could lead to “news deserts for the public.”

In the Philippines, community journalism has been affected the most by the pandemic and the prolonged lockdown. Many local newspapers across the country ceased printing during the lockdown, including one of the oldest daily newspapers in Mindanao. A number have since transitioned to the digital sphere, while others have resumed printing in more recent months but with reduced frequency, pages, personnel, and circulation. Local radio and television stations are hurting as well. Communities previously reached only by ABS-CBN are now highly underserved because of the closure of all the network's regional stations. All these have for sure restricted the volume of verified news at the public's disposal.

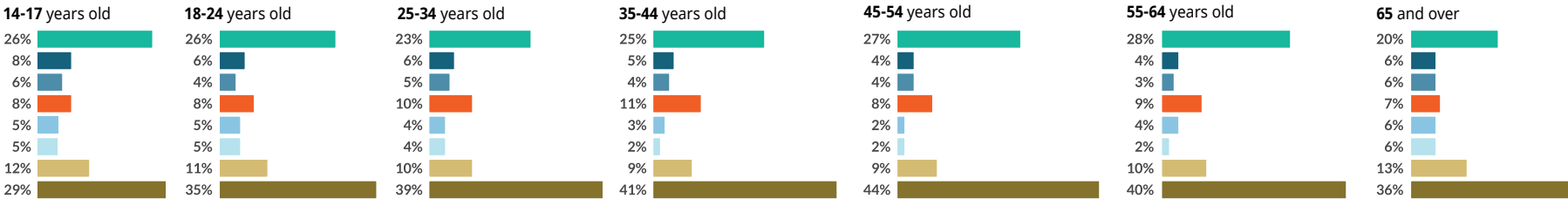
“In the absence of verified information, disinformation fills the gap,” UNESCO warned.

Where do you go first when you're looking for information about COVID-19?

- Friends, family, and acquaintances
- National political leaders
- Local government units
- News Media organizations
- Public personalities
- Religious sector
- Health practitioners
- Health institutions



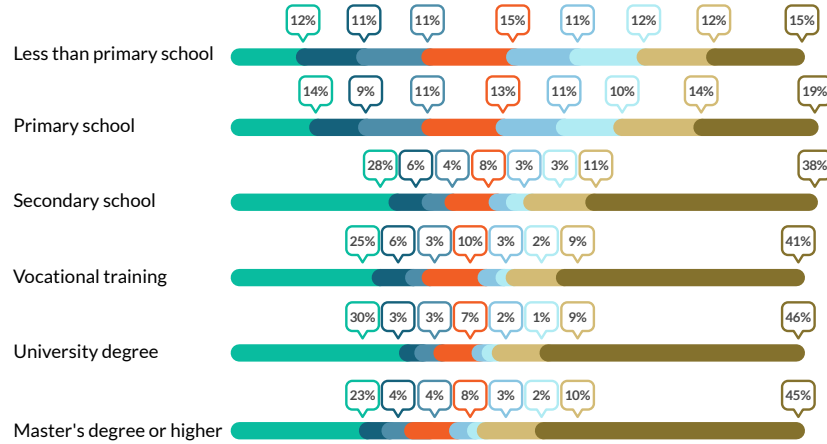
Age Group



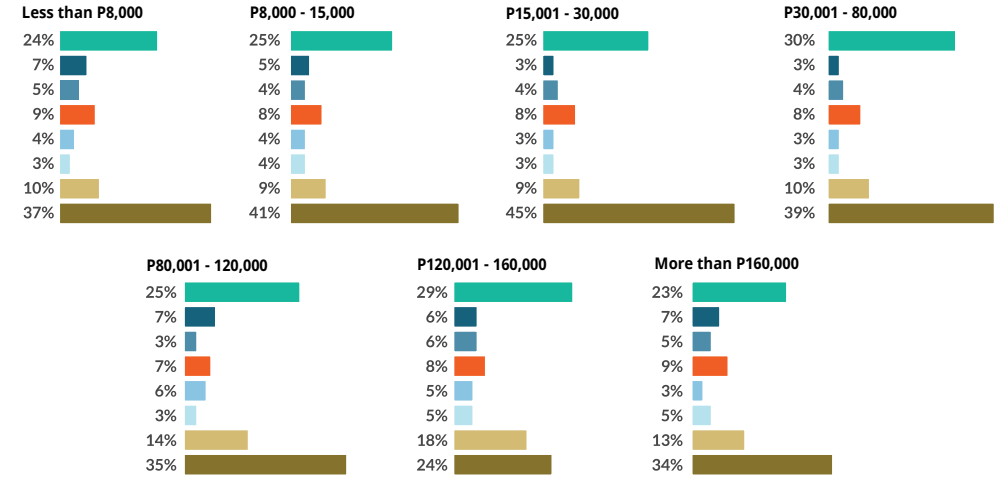
Percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding



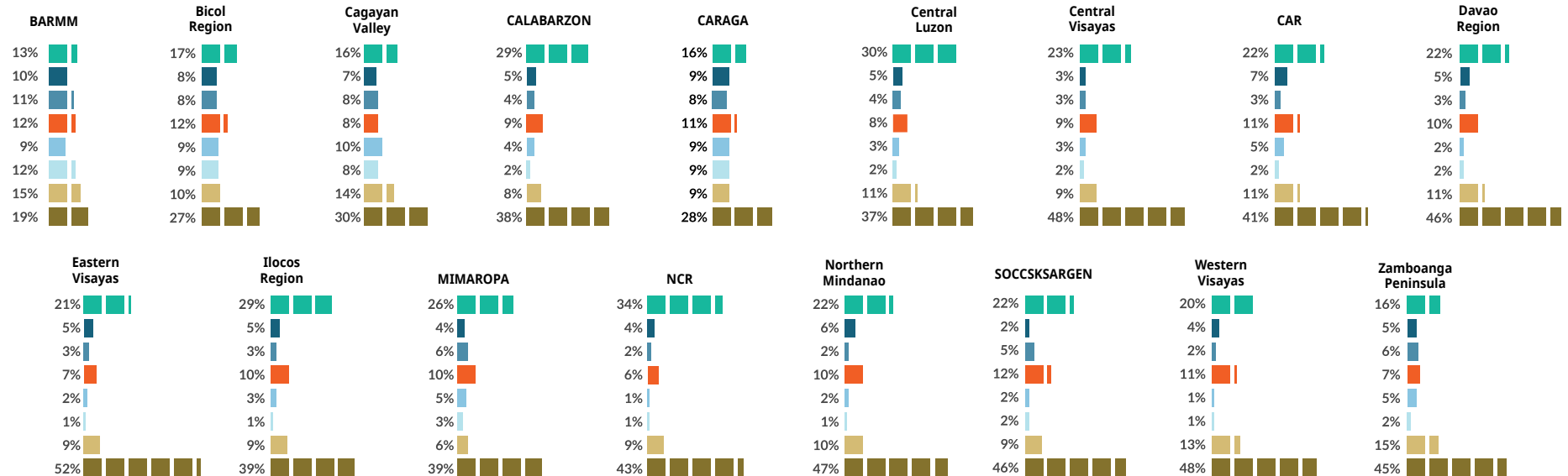
Education



Income

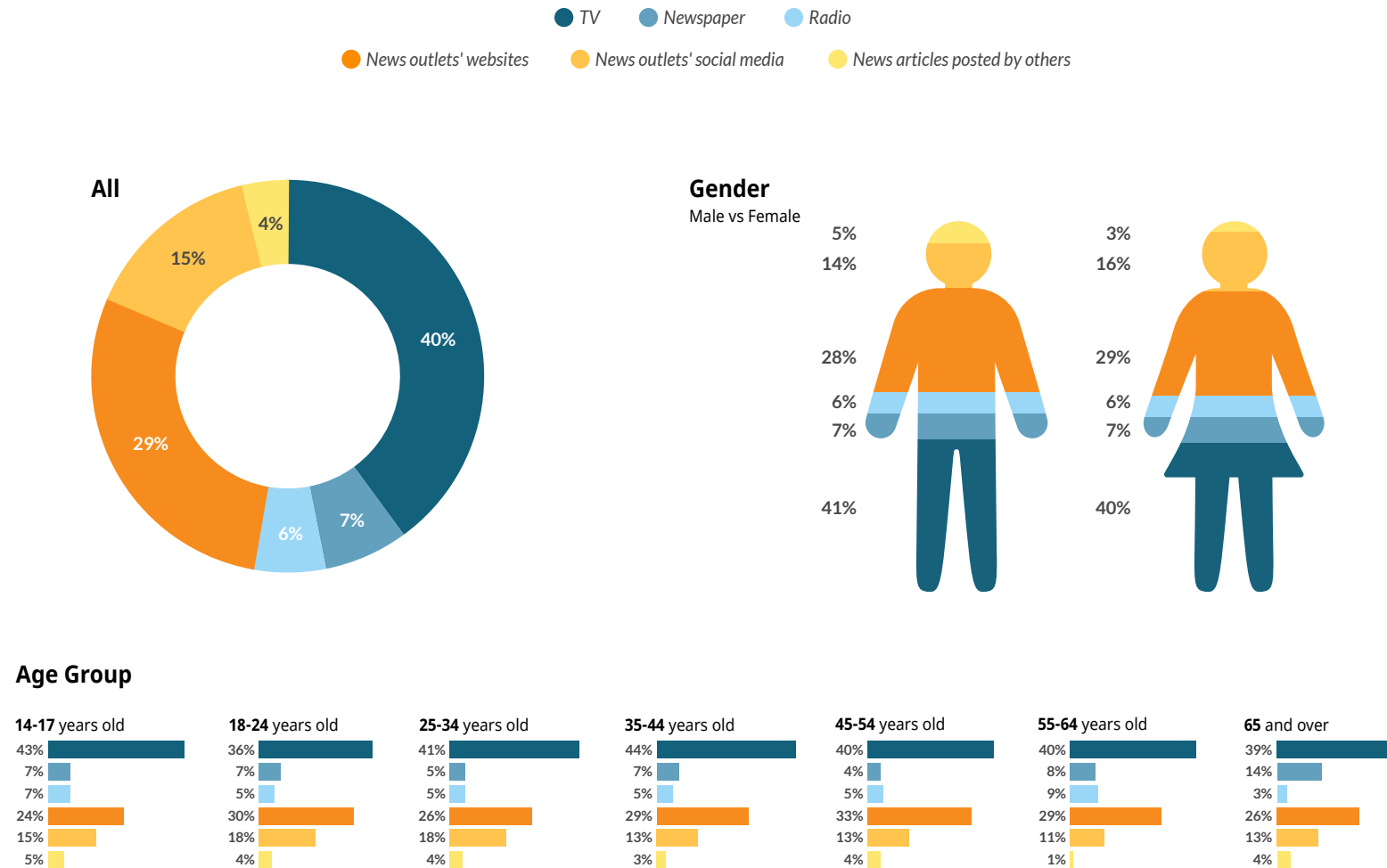


Region

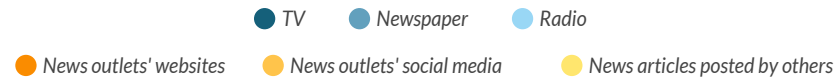


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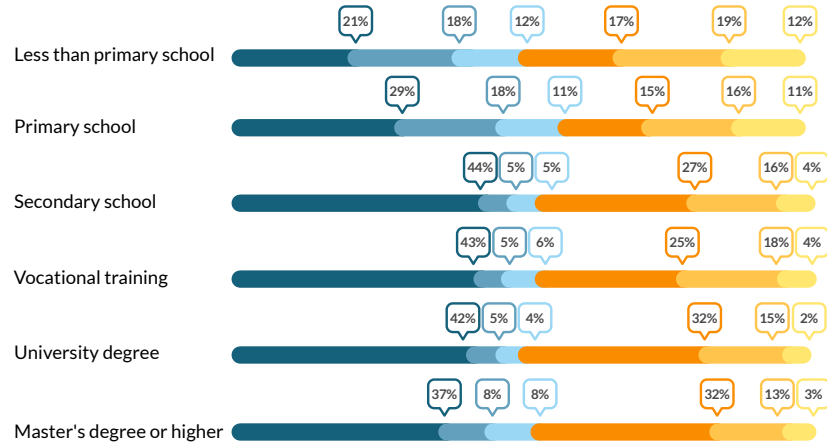
Specifically, which platform do you mainly get information about COVID-19 from?



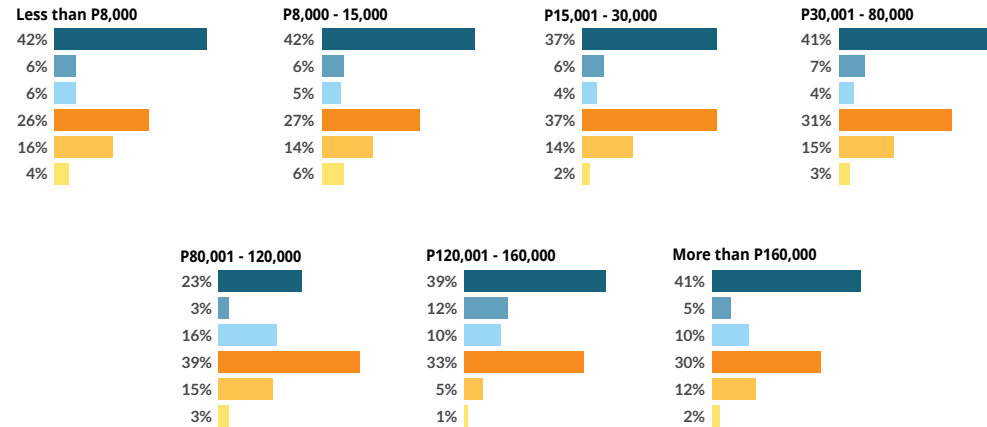
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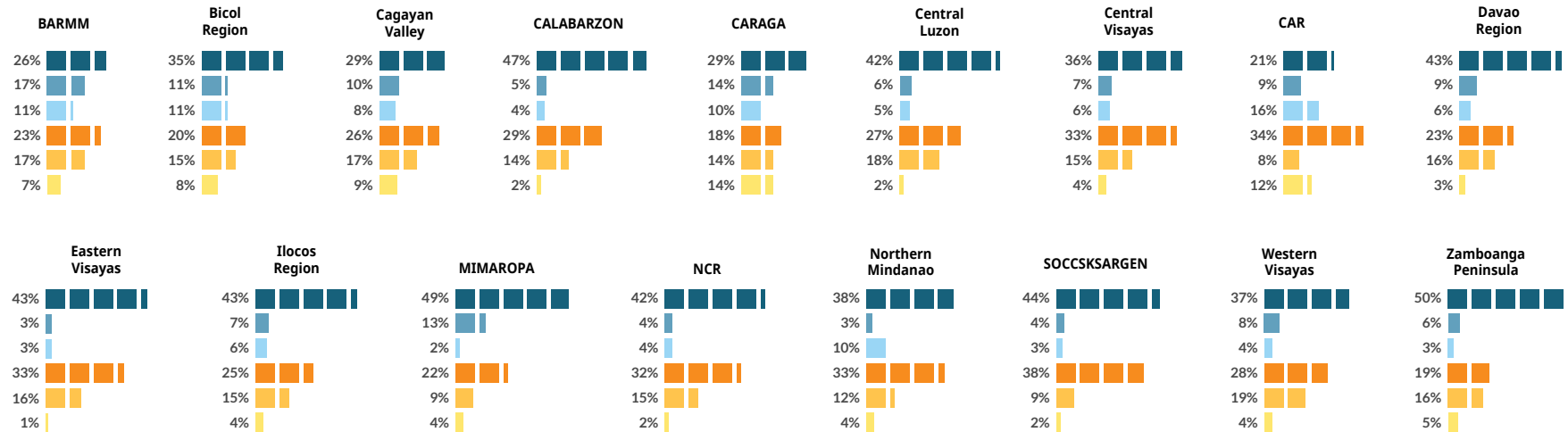
Education



Income



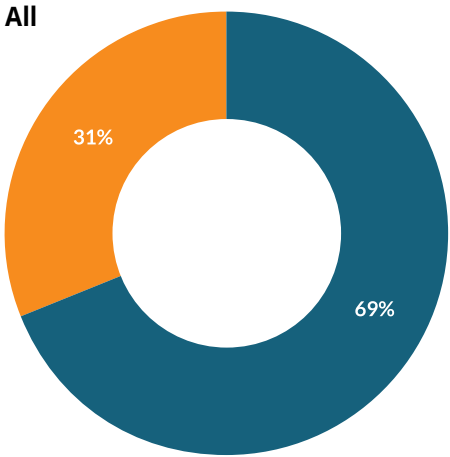
Region



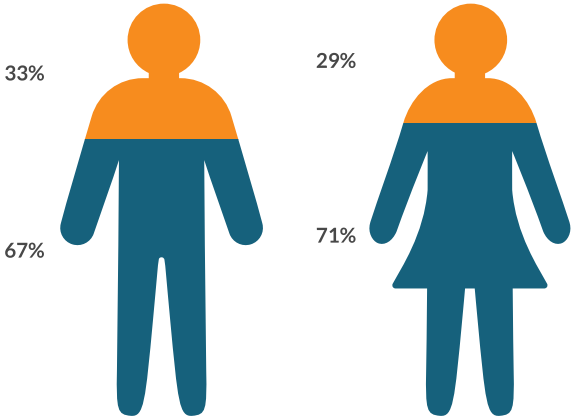
Percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding

Do you mainly get information from them about COVID-19 online or offline?

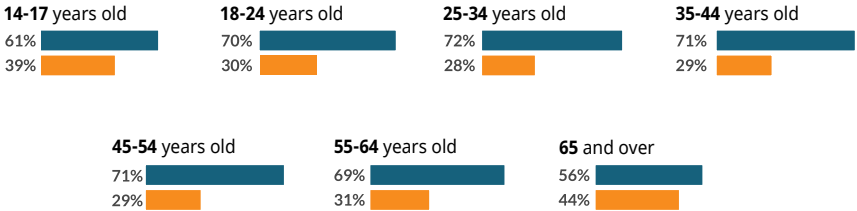
● Online ● Offline



Gender Male vs Female



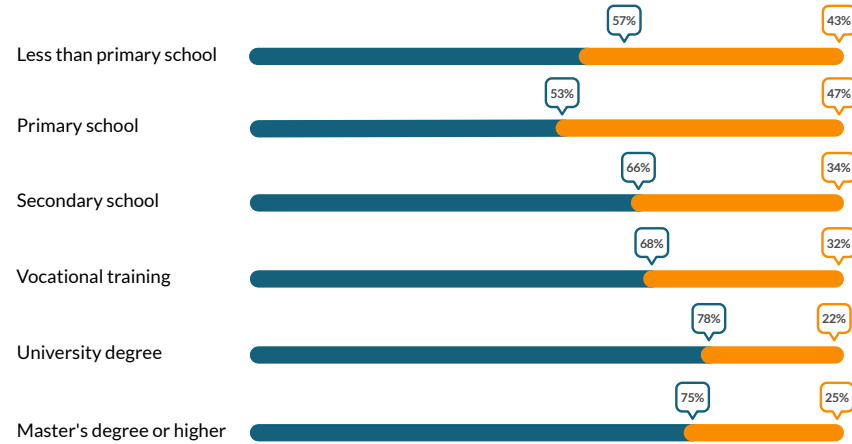
Age Group



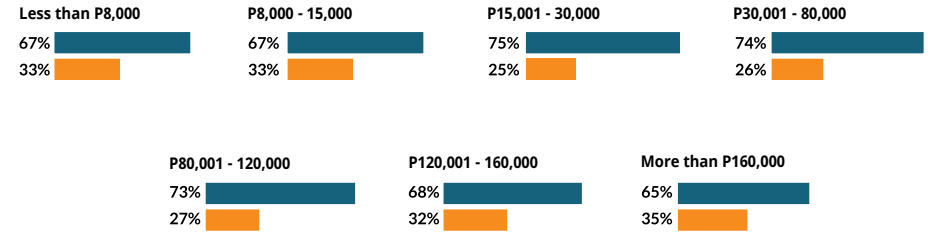
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● Online ● Offline

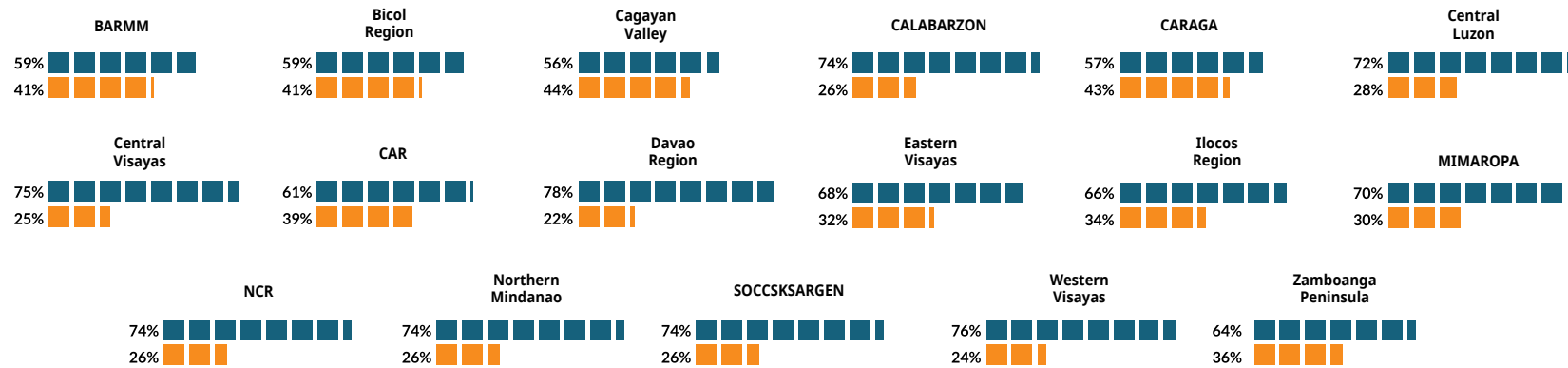
Education



Income



Region



Percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding

Conclusion

Buffeted by crises, the Philippine media can take heart from the fact that they still wield considerable importance among Filipinos as a source of information. They continue to command a large following, particularly traditional television. Despite efforts to discredit them, journalists are regarded as the most accurate of all sources of information.

But there are new realities they have to come to grips with. Their position as information sources is being chipped away by nonmedia sources, especially family and friends and public officials. This is further highlighted by the COVID-19 pandemic: Filipinos shift away from news organizations the most when scouring for information about the public health crisis.

Overall preference for digital platforms as a source of information—the websites and social media of news outlets as well as news posted by articles—also makes the pivot to digital inevitable.

Yet, the media also need to bear in mind that a big segment of the Philippines' population remains offline, with more going offline during a crisis, as the Internews' findings on COVID-19 show.

The paradox in the public's perceptions of the media requires further probing. Although most Filipinos consider

news organizations as the most accurate information source and their reports unbiased on the whole, a sizable proportion think that they are less reliable than nonmedia

sources and their reporting of government is unfair—even going to the extent of labeling news bad for the government and president as “fake news.” Trust in the media is also low.



Overall preference for digital platforms as a source of information—the websites and social media of news outlets as well as news posted by articles—also makes the pivot to digital inevitable.



At the same time, however, the public has clear and high expectations of journalists. Most Filipinos assert that journalism's chief function is to verify information and report all the details.

They also unequivocally stress media's role of reporting verified news even if it offends people.

The weight Filipinos attach to journalistic verification evidently stems from their own inadequacies to fact-check the news they consume amid a growing concern over the spread of disinformation, including during elections. That also partly explains their overwhelming preference for a law that would penalize disinformation, which, if gone wrong, may only end up trampling upon human rights and free expression.



Amid a confluence of crises, journalists have no choice but do a better job. They need to retrace their steps and wholly embrace the profession's fundamental norms and principles—lest an internal crisis exacerbate the unenviable situation they are already in.



The public has clear and high expectations of journalists. Most Filipinos assert that journalism's chief function is to verify information and report all the details.

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CHAPTER II

After disinformation

Three experiments in democratic renewal in the Philippines and around the world

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Introduction

Have we reached peak disinformation?

In 2017, the problem of disinformation was named as one of humanity's greatest challenges. The dangers of disinformation have been widely documented, from shaping electoral outcomes to inciting ethnic conflicts. But as we learn more about disinformation tactics, we are better able to respond to distortions in public communication as well as imagine possibilities for future-proofing our democracies.

My discussion piece focuses on trends in counter-disinformation strategies and attempts to reclaim the public sphere. My strategy in developing this theme is to situate practices of disinformation within the broader political transformations taking place around the world and their particular manifestations in the Philippines. I begin with the premise that disinformation's power cannot be reduced to command-and-control tactics of manipulation, where "bad actors" exercise overwhelming influence in distorting public discourse. Instead, I begin with the premise that disinformation practices are embedded in local cultures and entangled with the evolving landscape of political communication.

Understanding disinformation and counter-disinformation practices, therefore, demands an analysis on how both

practices shape and are shaped by these political transformations.

I focus on three transformations in this piece: (1) the increased value of emotional currencies in politics; (2) the growing demands for sites for listening; and (3) creative attempts to filter disinformation with democratic deliberation. These focus areas are by no means exhaustive, but they exemplify both the vulnerabilities and opportunities for defending the integrity of the public sphere. I present illustrative examples in each of these sections that enliven these ideas. This discussion piece concludes by reflecting on what Philippines' democracy "after disinformation" could look like and considering creative pathways to reach this aim.

1. Increased value of emotional currencies in politics

Citizens becoming more emotional rather than rational political actors is a cause of concern for many. In the so-called age of anger, populist leaders embolden "furious majorities" by putting their prejudices into practice. A key demographic voting for Donald Trump has been described as "angry white men" while in the Philippines, supporters of

Rodrigo Duterte have been described as "hateful," "anxious," and "frustrated." People's desire to support a domineering leader, one study from the United States (US) finds, lies in their

"vicarious participation" in the punishment of out-groups, such as immigrants in the case of the US, and criminals and drug addicts, in the case of the Philippines.

Understanding disinformation and counter-disinformation practices, therefore, demands an analysis on how both practices shape and are shaped by these political transformations.

'Fake news,' so the argument goes, are "deliberately affective and inflammatory" which deter citizens from reaching considered judgment.

The increasing value placed on emotions as political currency is often attributed to the architectures of social media that elicit quick and unfiltered emotional responses.

“Fake news,” so the argument goes, are “deliberately affective and inflammatory” which deter citizens from reaching considered judgment.

This prompts reflection on the value of fact checks. In the academic journal *Science*, sixteen authors report that the science supporting the efficacy of fact checking at best, mixed. After all, can we fact check feelings?

1.1. Historical revisionism and deep stories

Take the case of elections. In 2019, my colleagues and I led a study that examined the character of disinformation in the Philippines’ midterm elections. One of the study’s key findings is the importance of “disinformation narratives” with different emotional registers that resonate in public discourse. Historical revisionism is an example, where YouTube channels mimicking the aesthetic of broadcast media subvert the “liberal memory paradigm” by shifting the portrayal of the Marcos regime as one of the darkest periods in the country’s political history to a time of economic prosperity. These tactics have been in place long before the 2016 and 2019 race, where both Bongbong and Imee Marcos ran for the Vice Presidency and Senate, respectively. While there have been various attempts from journalists, educators, celebrities, and influencers to “set the record straight,” memes claiming Marcos to be the country’s greatest President not only continue to circulate but are also amplified by the President himself, who openly celebrates the Marcos legacy by burying the late dictator in the Heroes’ Cemetery and supporting Bongbong and Imee Marcos’s political ambitions. The combination of the tone from the top—i.e. Duterte’s endorsement of the Marcos legacy—and disinformation from below—i.e. producers of revisionist contents online—create a mutually reinforcing affective narrative that simultaneously combines feelings of nostalgia, hope, and irritation against the liberal version of history.

Dierdre McKay further grounded this observation among Filipinos in the diaspora. Overseas Filipino Workers, she

observed, enjoy increased social status through the number of likes, shares, and comments of revisionist memes they share on social media. Overturning the liberal historical consensus has a particular emotional appeal for the diasporic Filipinos. As McKay puts it, “the idea of constantly working back towards a place that you have left and the days ‘before’ your departure when things were better, more commodious, more secure appeals to migrants struggling with life abroad.”

This narration is a reminder that historical revisionism through social media is not a crude attempt at manipulating public conversation by unscrupulous actors, but are rooted in “deep stories” of ordinary Filipinos about how they view themselves, their personal circumstances, and their relationship with the nation.

“Deep stories,” argues sociologist Arlie Hochschild, “do not need to be completely accurate, but they have to feel true.” This, one could argue, partially explains the challenges of educating against historical revisionism, because emphasizing historical facts does not always connect to felt experiences.

1.2. Celebrity fandoms and the sentimental citizen

These emotions gaining increasing currency, however, is not unique to this political moment, nor is this necessarily bad news. Stephen Coleman, for example, has long explained that voting is driven by the importance of feeling being counted. This is true for India, where Mukulika

Banerjee and team’s ethnographic project finds that it has high participation rates because people find “blissful satisfaction” in elections being a “loud, rambunctious equalizer in public life.” And the same is true for the Philippines, where, despite all the dysfunctions of its electoral system, according to Filomeno Aguilar, voting is still experienced as a “ritualized gamble” where citizens

experience excitement as they place their bets on their candidates.

The exuberance surrounding elections is felt in both mass campaigns as well as in online spaces.

These studies, among others, underscore the ambivalent role of the “sentimental citizen” in democratic life. They can

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“By emphasizing the personal, emotional, and indeed playful character of social media, we can situate ‘the problem of disinformation’ to a broader discussion of what kind of politics can be performed in a digital social space.”

perpetuate disinformation that seed suspicion or provoke feelings of anger, but they can also stimulate feelings of excitement that can be translated to defending spaces for democratic contestation. To appreciate the democratic potential of the sentimental citizen, it is important for us to recognize that social media is not designed to serve an extension of the news and information ecosystem. As the name suggests, the logic of social media is to facilitate social conversations that build emotional attachments to groups. In the Philippines, social media has become a lifeline to Filipinos to reach the diasporic population, seeking to maintain connection to friends and families overseas. It is not an accident, therefore, that the platform designed for interpersonal connection makes the political personal. Our political identities are constructed by stylized expressions of what we feel using simplified cultural content like emojis and selfies, and personalized identifications of politicians like Bernie and Joe, and indeed, Tatay Digong and Inday Sara.

By emphasizing the personal, emotional, and indeed playful character of social media, we can situate “the problem of disinformation” to a broader discussion of what kind of politics can be performed in a digital social space.

The fascinating case of #WeBlockAsOne comes to mind. In May 2020, fans of mega-celebrities Kathryn Bernardo and Daniel Padilla organized a counter-trolling operation to “protect” these actors from attacks by influencers associated to the Duterte administration’s “propaganda machine.” Within minutes after a vocal Duterte supporter livestreamed his criticism against the actors for speaking up against the shutdown of media giant ABS-CBN, Bernardo and Padilla’s fans organized an “RBM (Report. Block. Mute.) Party” on Twitter. They coordinated this campaign through the hashtag #WeBlockAsOne—a wordplay on the government’s coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) response slogan #WeHealAsOne. This campaign may seem mundane and ephemeral, but it elucidates the possibilities of defending spaces for democratic contestation in a digital public sphere by embracing the social and affective logics of social media.

First, the #WeBlockAsOne campaign was not organized around an overtly political position (e.g. anti-Duterte) but was crafted around intense emotional attachment to two of the country’s most celebrated movie stars. “Protect KathNiel at all cost” was a loaded appeal of loyalty within the celebrity fandom. Fans recognized the vulnerability of actors, not only to troll-driven “cancel culture”, but also because these actors’ careers are on the line due to their

network’s closure. The campaign built a “big tent” that brought together fans regardless of their political dispositions and instead emphasized the importance of loyalty to celebrities when times are tough. This social media campaign that defended the digital public sphere, therefore, was built on social, not political foundations. Second, the campaign demonstrated clarity in tactics.

“Prioritize talking heads” was one of the organizers’ instructions to fellow fans, by which they meant mass reporting Duterte-allied influencers who had provided talking points for trolls to amplify. This instruction was coupled with warnings not to mention the names of

these influencers (they uploaded screen grabs of accounts instead) so their names do not trend. Third, the campaign was global. Organizers tagged Bernardo and Padilla’s fans in Malaysia and Indonesia to take part in the campaign and linked up with other celebrity fandoms to join their RBM Twitter party. These tactics are consistent with K-pop stans lending support to anti-Trump and Black Lives Matter protests in the US. Finally, the campaign built on fan cultures of joy and positivity, with moderators reminding fans not to bash other celebrities and instead stay focused on the task of blocking, muting, and reporting trolls attacking their idols. That the campaign was called a “party” serves as a counterpoint to the aggressive and hateful approach of Duterte-allied influencers, by focusing on norms of cooperation and celebrating collective achievements when a troll’s account got suspended.

What can we learn from this case of celebrity fandom? The intention of this case study is not to romanticize a good-versus-evil narrative (this indeed has been a harmful arc for democracy) but to draw critical insights about the relationship between emotion, disinformation, and political practice. Much like the playful and highly emotive character of historical revisionist content,

#WeBlockAsOne was built on intense emotional identifications with fans that can be translated to a democratic practice of defending the integrity of the digital public sphere by reporting troll accounts, deep fakes, and

threatening messages. They are also built on a deep story that fans constructed about their relationship with celebrities, which makes defending them from attacks a plausible plan of action.

While fandoms are topical examples of how emotional connections and personal loyalties result to an inadvertent defense of the integrity of the digital public sphere, they also point to the limits of emotions as currencies in political life. Surely, Bernardo and Padilla are not the first and only personalities vilified on social media, but they are certainly



The exuberance surrounding elections is felt in both mass campaigns as well as in online spaces.



Attention is the scarcest resource in today’s hypermediated societies.



the among best defended personalities from these attacks. One might wonder what it takes for such impassioned defence to extend to other ordinary citizens who wish to speak up but have no luxury of having a loyal fanbase as insurance against state-sponsored disinformation.

2. Growing demands for sites of listening

Attention is the scarcest resource in today's hypermediated societies.

There are many opportunities for ordinary citizens to express their views but there are no guarantees that these views will be heard. A consequence of this is the increasing interest in cultivating practices of listening that connect citizens' voices to powerful decision-makers. At the moment, listening in social media has become a practice mastered by tech companies, commercial operations, and indeed, the disinformation industry. These groups have actionable data about the public mood and sentiments, which inform strategies of microtargeting. Sociologist Shoshana Zuboff uses the concept "surveillance capitalism" to characterize this contemporary reality.

The practices of social listening mentioned above have one critical limitation.

They are extractive rather than communicative. Listening is used for surveillance—to harvest data that can be used for commercial or political purposes. It does not seek to establish relationships of accountability between citizens and people in power. This is what I mean by the growing demands for sites of listening in today's democracy. Citizens are looking for spaces where their voices are heard, amplified, and connected to actors who can act on their claims. Unlike surveillance, listening is an interactive relationship.

2.1. Sumbungan culture

There has long been a demand for sites of listening in the Philippines—a country where voices of disadvantaged communities have often been dismissed as uneducated, stubborn, and corruptible. Often, this demand is met by the institutions of the mass media that feature the *sumbung* or grievances of audiences in radio and television programs. In these programs, anchors portray themselves as allies, if not heroes who empathetically listen to their callers' stories of suffering, and act on these grievances by calling, and sometimes shaming, responsible government agencies. Ted Failon—one of the most respected personalities in broadcast media today—built his career both as a broadcaster and politician on the *sumbungan* genre popular in the 1990s through the program Hoy

Gising. Duterte himself was well-versed in this genre. As Davao mayor, he headlined the weekly television show *Gikan sa Masa, Para sa Masa* where he directly responded to his constituents' queries and complaints, and, in some instances, directed City Hall officials to act on citizens' reports. This culture remains alive today in radio and television personified by "media strongmen" such as the Tulfo brothers.

The *sumbungan* culture takes a different shape in the digital public sphere. Filipinos have learned to directly report their complaints to politicians through their Facebook pages, bypassing the need for mediators in broadcast media.

In recent typhoons, for example, residents trapped in their homes called for help through tweets and direct messages to government officials as well as influencers who can amplify their appeal.



The *sumbungan* culture takes a different shape in the digital public sphere. Filipinos have learned to directly report their complaints to politicians through their Facebook pages, bypassing the need for mediators in broadcast media.



Meanwhile, place-based Facebook groups have also been gaining traction as a platform for interactive listening. Facebook groups like Iligan Pulse (150k members), Masbate News (30.3k members) and Marawi Pulse (2k members) serve the function of a newsletter where posts vary from

queries about water interruption, to advertisements of skin whitening soaps, to hosting watch parties of Miss Universe Philippines' coronation night. Other groups take a more precise purpose. Bacolod Exposed (30.5k members), for example, was designed for members to "expose their concerns on the inefficiency of government and officials." One could argue that these digital innovations are necessary in so-called "news deserts" where information accessible through local news media are scarce or places where radio broadcasters are perceived to be biased or corrupt. It is worth monitoring whether the closure of ABS-CBN's regional offices have implications to the spread and use of these groups.

Unlike the traditional *sumbungan* genre of the mass media, the grievance culture in these pages take a different shape. First, there is no heroic news anchor listening to the voices of powerless callers. In their place are fellow citizens who listen, amplify, support, and sometimes criticize each other. In Iligan Pulse, for example, a member called out the Mayor and his Councilors to reconsider an ordinance about curfew and enumerated its logical flaws. This post generated nearly 600 likes and 600 comments from fellow members who affirmed the argument through clap emojis and encouraging comments like "very well said." The tone of the thread was unlike the traditional *sumbungan* genre of powerless citizen pleading for help, and instead, the tone

was that of an active citizen demanding accountability. The post critical of the local government was also met with counterarguments, with some suggesting that the curfew lessened incidences of crime in their area. Interspersed within the comments section are casual rumors and hearsay (i.e. my friend told me...), just like everyday conversations at home and among neighbors. Worth tracking, therefore, are systematic attempts to sow doubt and seed disinformation in these private groups, through posts pretending to be casual comments but with malicious intentions and tactics. That these groups merge the social with the political makes these sites particularly vulnerable to disinformation. While admins are clear in enforcing norms of respect, and especially careful of members not to smear each other's reputations, the less overt forms of disinformation can easily slip under the radar.

2.2. Disinformation via pile-on culture

In the previous section, I described how the *sumbungan* culture has evolved from powerless citizens turning to a heroic news anchor for help, to attentive citizens turning to a Facebook group to listen, amplify as well as criticize each other's claims. In this section, I characterize another dynamic of online listening—one where participants collectively express their grievance in an aggressive manner. This practice is akin to the digital public sphere's "pile-on" culture, where hostile groups gang up or harshly criticize a less dominant group, at least in their circles.

On some occasions, disinformation provides the material to intensify aggression.

Banat By's YouTube channel is an illustration of this practice. Banat By is a YouTube celebrity (430k followers on YouTube) who gained his following among the vocal supporters of President Duterte. His hour-long YouTube livestreams follow the format of a

radio commentary, which begins with novelty tunes to warm up the listeners, followed by greetings to commenters on the page, and then a series of commentaries on the news of the day. On the right-hand side of the screen are live comments from viewers who follow social norms of digital gatherings. They say good evening, they introduce themselves, and declare where they are watching the stream. This is followed by



On some occasions, disinformation provides the material to intensify aggression.



affirmations of Banat By's comments, with occasional pile-on unto opposition personalities in the hot seat.

The livestream on ABS-CBN's shutdown is one example.

On Jul. 16, 2020, Banat By livestreamed an episode entitled "ABSCBN at KOMUNISTA nag alyansa???" It garnered more

than 38k views. In that show, Banat By and his co-host Mark Lopez interviewed Congressman Boying Remulla, who unequivocally declared that ABS-CBN and the Liberal Party ("the yellows") were colluding with the New People's Army. Most commenters affirmed Remulla's claim. Some said thank you. Others applauded his "principles." Many piled on ABS-CBN, and published claims that the network's reporters had access to rural areas and insinuated how these reporters had engaged in illegal activities. Others repeated the common accusation of the network's bias, while others did not stop short of tagging ABS-CBN as a terrorist organization that should be covered by the Anti-Terror Law. There were some who called their fellow DDS (Diehard Duterte Supporters, but originally stands for the vigilante group Davao Death Squad) to amplify the video by sharing it on Facebook, Instagram and TikTok.

This illustrative example reveals a different form of listening in social media. Listening happens in two directions. Banat By listens to his audiences via the comments section. Audiences listen to Banat By and their co-participants in the comments section and boost comments that they agree with by clicking like. Unlike the

sumbungan platforms described earlier, the tone in this platform is openly hostile and hyper-partisan. The hostility is based on perceived injuries caused by the person or organization being discussed, whether it is ABS-CBN and the Communist Party, Risa Hontiveros and PhilHealth, or Vice President Leni Robredo. Needless to say, this YouTube channel, among others, is an unmitigated site of disinformation, commanding a large enough committed following to co-create and amplify falsehoods produced in the

channel.

This offers several lessons for reclaiming the public sphere. First, the demands for spaces of listening, regardless of the character of these platforms, have similar origins—an attempt to seek attention in a public sphere organized around hierarchies of voice. It is not an accident that the digital forms of *sumbungan* take the form of an enclave.



In response to political polarization, mistrust of experts, and the spread of disinformation, policymakers at both local and national level have conceded to the need for carefully designed and independently run inclusive deliberative forums to better connect ordinary citizens to democratic decision-making.



Place-based Facebook groups and hyper-partisan YouTube channels, regardless of their content and outcome, provide a hospitable space for participants to secure attention among similarly situated peers. Second, demands for listening signal the need to better design processes and spaces that promote empathetic listening and meaningful engagement. The popularity of Banat By's YouTube page is not accidental, for the page captures the grievances and mood of the President's supporters. What was once the turf of mass media has now shifted to hyper-partisan celebrity influencers, and the democratic future of *sumbungan* culture, it seems, hangs on the balance.

3. Creating attempts to filter disinformation with democratic deliberation

Early this year, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) launched a report that observed a "deliberative wave" unfolding in Europe and the rest of the world.

In response to political polarization, mistrust of experts, and the spread of disinformation, policymakers at both local and national level have conceded to the need for carefully designed and independently run inclusive deliberative forums to better connect ordinary citizens to democratic decision-making.

From the French Citizens' Assembly on Climate Change, convened by no less than President Emmanuel Macron, to the institutionalization of "sortition body" in Belgium, where randomly selected ordinary citizens can set the agenda for the legislature, there is increasing evidence that citizens can engage with complex information and deliberate with unlike-minded people as long as these conversations take place in carefully designed forums. In the French Citizens' Assembly for example, ordinary citizens including a bus driver, a student, and a plumber had access to experts on standby, to fact check technical information about climate science. Outside Europe, the deliberative wave has also unfolded in Japan, South Korea and Mongolia, where divisive political matters are subject to citizens' deliberation.

3.1. Traditions of deliberation

The deliberative wave in the Philippines is yet to unfold, but there are concrete examples to build on. Naga City is often described as the center of participatory governance in the Philippines, where civil society groups are empowered to influence the conduct of local governance. Through the Naga People's Council, people's organizations representing urban poor communities, persons with disabilities, and senior citizens are able table issues for deliberation in the local development council and therefore shape the course of policymaking and implementation. There are many other examples of participatory innovations outside of Naga City, all of which point to the fact that ordinary citizens are willing and able to process complex information and deliberate on

technical issues when they are given the opportunity to scrutinize evidence and discuss their ideas with their fellow citizens and decision-makers. These practices, of course, are not without their flaws and they too are vulnerable to elite co-optation, but I underscore these practices to emphasize the possibility of slow thinking and careful interactions among fellow citizens amidst the backdrop of widespread disinformation.

3.2. Filtering disinformation with democratic deliberation

There are many more possibilities to filter disinformation with democratic deliberation. Here, I draw on my own study about holding a deliberative forum among residents in an urban poor community in Quezon City that has witnessed a spate of killings related to the drug war. This forum was experimental in nature. My research team and I convened it for academic purposes. Our goal was to examine whether deliberation could unfold in a tense and hyper-partisan political environment, among citizens who had witnessed the consequences of the drug war first-hand.

We recruited around twenty respondents based on purposive random selection. We mixed self-confessed supporters of the drug war with so-called "tokhang families," mothers or widows of those who were killed in drug-related police operations or unidentified motorcycle-riding gunmen. The day-long deliberative forum was conducted in a modest conference room at the Ateneo de Manila University—a space we considered neutral, welcoming, and safe for all participants. We started the forum with a social session where participants had the chance to get to know each other. This was followed by a norm-building session where the "rules of engagement" were defined by participants themselves. Everyone agreed to be honest, respectful, and open-minded. We then gave them the charge of the forum: to think of proposals to enhance the security of their neighborhood. We clarified to the participants that our activity is for an academic study, and not linked to policymaking. The rest of the day was spent in breakout groups and plenary sessions. Participants were tasked to diagnose safety issues in their community and propose ideas to address these issues.

It did not take long for tensions to emerge in deliberation. Some participants expressed a popular view on social media about drug addicts deserving their fate. Some prefaced their statement with qualifiers like "with all due respect," and then pinned blame on mothers and widows for failing to look after their family members who joined gangs to sell drugs. Disinformation also made its way in the sessions. Some participants reiterated the President's false claim about the rate of drug addiction in the country. Others cited the effectiveness of death penalty in reducing crime. There was also nostalgia for Martial Law, described as a time when people had respect for the law.

Participants did not reach consensus at the end of the forum as far as their policy preferences remained different

and quite fragmented (there was a long list of proposals, which is to be expected in a short deliberative forum). What changed, however, was the empathy developed among neighbors.

“Tokhang families” apologized to their neighbors on behalf of their husbands and sons for causing trouble. They said sorry for the anxiety caused by their loved ones selling drugs, especially to their neighbors’ younger children. As “tokhang families” began to cry, supporters of the drug war consoled them by saying that they understood that their family members needed to make a living, that they had to deal drugs because they did not want to see their families go hungry. “He did that because he loved you,” as one self-confessed drug war supporter put it, to comfort a woman who lost her husband in a police operation.

In our post-deliberation survey, most participants expressed satisfaction with the process. They found value in a careful, facilitated, and structured discussion, to hear each other’s stories, to overcome the temptation to make quick judgments, and to go out of their bubbles and engage with others. “Tokhang families” found it valuable that they were able to overcome their shame, face their harshest critics, and defend the life choices of their husbands and sons. This site of listening was a rare opportunity for them.

This deliberative forum is a pilot test case to examine the possibility of respectful and thoughtful deliberation amidst disinformation. While more work needs to be done in finetuning the design and scaling up this initiative, this example illustrates the importance of curating spaces specifically designed for norms of deliberation to take root. Needless to say, social media are not designed to be spaces for deliberation. They are designed for speedy communication that thrives on instincts. While I have cited examples in the previous section on how spontaneous social media campaigns can inadvertently defend the digital public sphere, it is worth recognizing that these will remain exceptions to platforms that are not designed to be

deliberative in the first place. It is worth pursuing design questions about creating spaces for communication, whether online, offline, or hybrid, that can facilitate public-spirited deliberation.

Conclusion

This discussion piece started with the question: have we reached the peak of disinformation? As we learn more about the tactics and underlying logics of disinformation, we are also increasingly observing counter-disinformation strategies that defend the integrity of the public sphere.

I conclude this piece with two key messages to provoke further conversations on this matter. First, as the illustrative examples presented in this piece demonstrate, counter-disinformation strategies do not unfold in perfect communicative environments with pure intentions. Whether it is fans whose only goal was to protect their idols or place-based Facebook groups that make up for news deserts, these developments are not to be romanticized, nevertheless worth recognizing to demonstrate possible spaces for collective action.

Second, disinformation is embedded in broader social transformations, and so its shape, content, and logic are shape-shifting depending on current conditions. Addressing disinformation, therefore, cannot be reduced to discrete attempts in the form of regulation, techno-solutionism, and top-down education campaigns. Like dark money, spin doctors, and other distortions in public discourse, disinformation may be a problem that never goes away, but it can be managed with a combination of large-scale political reform and micropolitical cultural shifts. The Philippines after disinformation does not promise a utopia, but a nation that learns to navigate a series of gray areas.



Participants did not reach consensus at the end of the forum as far as their policy preferences remained different and quite fragmented (there was a long list of proposals, which is to be expected in a short deliberative forum). What changed, however, was the empathy developed among neighbors.



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CHAPTER III

Disinformation at a turning point

Spotlight on the Philippines

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Introduction

The Philippines stands out in the global disinformation ecosystem because of the diverse range of digital influence operations coming from the State, the private sector, and individual entrepreneurs, just as there have been active resistance from journalists, activists, and researchers, drawing global attention to local challenges.

Disinformation innovations continue to emerge and evade platforms and their fact-checkers from micro-level influencers operating in smaller groups (Ong et al, 2019) and private channels to the internationally networked operations by Philippines' military agents working with mainland Chinese digital armies (Nimmo et al, 2020).

The evolution and diversification of “trolling” only suggest that the underlying infrastructures, that make disinformation production not only possible but also immensely profitable, have yet to be sufficiently understood and dismantled.

Complicating the fight against “fake news” in the country is that it would involve challenging or circumventing censorship from the State. In 2020, the Philippines introduced controversial and overreaching anti-fake-news regulations fraught with potential harms as it extends the State’s surveillance of social media with vaguely defined terms and limits. In the broader context of

a violent drug war, media shutdowns, harassment of journalists, and weak institutions, such measures deepen chilling effects and entrench cultures of silencing, given unpredictable and unaccountable implementation measures.

We need systematic research and journalist reportage that goes beyond calling out “fake news” as false speech to understand the work arrangements and business contracts behind disinformation production, as I have previously argued (Ong & Cabanes, 2019). We also need to invest in more surveys of users of social

media—summarized by Yvonne Chua in Chapter 1—and listening projects of populist supporters—such as those undertaken by Nicole Curato (2016). These insights are important resources for us to identify how we could harness diverse tools of legislation (Can we build better connections with imperfect allies in the legislature to develop accountability mechanisms in election campaigns and transparency measures in political consultancies?),

industry (Can we put pressure on industry to build self-regulation mechanisms that can hold political consultants accountable?), elections commissions (Can we support election monitors to track politicians' campaign expenditures and provide them with better data management

in fairer work arrangements?), and the media (Can we help journalists attend to the porous boundaries between



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disinformation and hate speech that have escalated in the wake of COVID-19?).

This chapter outlines key challenges in the country's fight against disinformation in the current political moment. It

then reviews regional trends that would situate the Philippines' experience in comparative context. It ends with insights on regulation based on recent United States (US) elections and anticipating the Philippines' upcoming presidential elections in 2022.

What's in store for the Philippines in 2021 and beyond?

1

Tech companies have adopted more stringent measures to moderate “fake news” and other harmful content in mitigating the COVID-19 “infodemic” and those attempting to undermine the US electoral process. We will need to monitor the local adoption and translation of platforms' procedures in flagging falsehoods of elected officials, robust monitoring of disinformation that undermines electoral process, disabling hashtags during elections, and extensive content moderation of COVID-19 medical claims. **To what extent should we lobby tech companies to apply similar standards for monitoring and de-platforming local disinformation, including those expressed in local languages and visual cultures?**

2

A Joe Biden presidency is expected to take a harder line with tech companies than his predecessors, possibly setting a new direction in the “fight against fake news” in the global context. It remains to be seen how his administration's approach might offer an alternative framework to social media regulation in contrast to the widely overreaching regulatory measures adopted by world governments in recent months—many used by autocrats to silence dissenters. **How might the Philippine government adjust its Anti-Terror Bill and COVID-19 anti-fake news provisions in light of diverse and competing global standards that will emerge over the next years?**

3

Over the past four years, we have observed how the Philippines' disinformation production economy moved from the shadows to the corporate boardroom. Some top-level strategists have happily taken credit for campaigns in their desire to

seek new clients while others work in open-secret without fear of regulation or oversight. **How can journalists, activists, and academics apply corporate pressure and seek new standards for fairness and accountability in local industries of advertising, public relations, influencer marketing, and political consultancy?**

4

The COVID-19 pandemic brought with it its own “infodemic” of vaccine conspiracy and miracle cures. It also unleashed a secondary contagion racism where people of Chinese descent and their culture were blamed for the virus. Anti-China racist speech and conspiracy theory similarly proliferated in Philippines' social media. Journalists and fact-checkers failed to call out their own colleagues for amplifying hate speech and were guilty of publishing already-debunked conspiracy theory in the local press. **How can Filipino journalists rise up to the challenge of addressing disinformation and its porous boundaries with hate speech? How can anti-racism training help sensitize local journalists and academics to acknowledge local racial hierarchies and de-escalate violence and hate?**

5

Activists, journalists, and academics have worked tirelessly in the “fight against fake news,” launching diverse initiatives from media literacy caravans to listening projects to ethnographies of paid trolls to lobbying tech firms at the global level. **How can we support each other better as vocal dissidents are punished by government, women (most especially) get trolled and harassed, frontline workers reach burnout, and conditions of our labor and research become ever precarious and riskier?**

Philippines' disinformation space in regional context

Earlier this year, my colleague Ross Tapsell and I released a report (see Ong & Tapsell, 2020) outlining lessons from recent electoral experiences in three Southeast Asian countries. We discussed how Southeast Asia serves as a cautionary tale for other countries when fears of fake news are hijacked by state leaders to expand their surveillance of digital environments and to chill free speech.

In the pandemic moment, fears of fake news and fears of the virus have converged, and at least 16 world governments from Romania to Botswana have emulated examples of “overreaching” social media laws and scare tactics first seen in Singapore and Malaysia (Lim, 2020). In the Philippines, a controversial Anti-Terror Bill was passed by the Duterte government to appease the military and its vaguely defined social media content monitoring

provisions further deepen cultures of self-censorship and surveillance against the backdrop of a violent drug war.

In the region, Thailand's political culture of "deep polarization" offers a dangerous example of what could happen when the polarized politics between Duterte's populist supporters versus more liberal "dilawan" (yellows) becomes further entrenched. In Thailand, electoral campaign laws and social media laws have been

weaponized to such an extreme that opposition politicians are routinely disqualified and harassed, and the application of campaign laws is arbitrary (Ong & Tapsell, 2020). Social media have also been polarized to an extent that ordinary people's choice of platforms is expressive of their political alignment, making attempts at "reaching across the aisle" impossible. The Philippines must learn from the Thai experience the urgent need to address the issue of political polarization and find ways to develop check-and-balance mechanisms including for electoral campaign and social media regulation.

Neighboring Indonesia also has lessons for the Philippines, particularly with racial tensions and violence erupting from the mix of disinformation and hate speech. Similar to the Philippines, anti-China sentiment has surged in Indonesia in the wake of fears of COVID-19 and fears of Chinese people as "virus carriers."

Unlike in the Philippines, Indonesia has a more recent history of racial violence against Chinese immigrants in their country. Over the past years, a mix of conspiracy theory, insinuating President Widodo being a Chinese spy, Chinese workers being foreign agents, election-related black campaigning, and COVID-19 related conspiracies about Chinese biological weaponry, has led to eruptions of physical violence, doxing, and shaming in social media (Chew and Barahamin, 2019). The Philippines saw many incidents of physical altercations, parody and memes, racial slurs of "chingchong," and service refusals to mainland Chinese people unleashed by COVID-19 (Ong & Lasco, 2020). We should prepare for scenarios where digital disinformation and hate speech converge and harm multicultural relations in the country. As two of us had previously documented in the 2019 elections, anti-China disinformation and hate

speech were political strategies of various political influencers and meme accounts, and we should be quick to call these out in the months ahead.

In the next sections, I summarize key insights from previous research on disinformation that should guide any regulation and intervention we should develop.



Southeast Asia serves as a cautionary tale for other countries when fears of fake news are hijacked by state leaders to expand their surveillance of digital environments and to chill free speech.



1. Many disinformation producers are financially motivated with little ideological investment.

In the US, diverse segments among the far-right have real ideological investment behind the xenophobic and/or misogynistic online speech that aligns with

their political agenda. The Philippines, however, has long been described as one with "strong personalities/weak parties", where politicians and their parties are rarely differentiated for their ideological positions. Politicians along with their funders and strategists have been previously described as "butterflies," flitting from one alliance to another. This feature of the local political system should impel us to focus on fixing structures and address what might be purely entrepreneurial motivations of the disinformation producers to develop strategy for politicians.

In the last Philippine elections, "black campaigning" emerged from the shadows into the boardrooms of advertising and public relations firms (Silverman et al., 2020) selling their services to the highest bidder. From our ethnographic research with campaigners, influencers, and



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fake account operators in the Philippines, we discovered that nobody really works as a full-time troll (Ong & Cabanes, 2018), most of whom maintained "respectable" day jobs in corporate marketing for shampoo and soft drink brands. A strategic communications

scholar, Lee Edwards (2020), is correct to say that "disinformation is in the DNA of public relations."

These insights are often missed by narratives that spotlight disinformation as technological feature of social media or the innovation of Duterte and his digital advisers. Researchers have the responsibility here to shade in the layers of accountability and complicity within local political regimes and help journalists find more effective tools than "unmasking" the person behind one Twitter account.

We need to harness the array of tools of taxation and auditing, industry self-regulatory councils, and media monitoring to understand disinformation as an industry.

We need to also do more investigation of how related fields of practice such as search engine optimization, hackers, data analytics companies, meme page operators, and digital influencer agencies are responsible and/or complicit.

It is important that academics help put pressure on industry leaders and regulators, as journalists may themselves be reluctant to antagonize those who control the corporate advertising money that their news agencies depend on.



The first step to take is to continue a public conversation about the scale of the issue, and how deep these incentives go within local industries.



2. We need to develop norms and regulatory frameworks on political marketing.

We need to shine a light on the ways in which contemporary campaigns are funded, managed, and executed. This requires shifting regulatory impulses from banning or censoring to openness through transparency and accountability mechanisms.

The first step to take is to continue a public conversation about the scale of the issue, and how deep these incentives go within local industries.

This discussion should be less about shaming personalities and more about understanding the vulnerabilities of the broader system of political campaigning.

Advertising and public relations (PR) industry leaders need to engage with the limitations of their self-regulatory boards, where practitioners take on political consultancies as “open industry secrets” and digital influencers are not penalized for failing to disclose paid collaborations. At the same time, the advertising and PR industry has existing frameworks for reviewing advertising materials for corporate brands that set some precedents for what a self-regulatory review board might look like for political ads.

The second step is to review possibilities for a broader legal framework that might encourage transparency and accountability. Unlike certain countries in North America and Western Europe, political consultants in the Philippines (and countries like India) are not governed by

legal provisions. In this light, a legal framework for a Political Campaign Transparency Act might provide opportunities to create better checks-and-balances in political consultancy work arrangements, campaign finance disclosures, and campaign donations of “outsourced” digital strategy. Perhaps there is an opportunity to identify more concretely the donors, political consultants, and paid influencers supporting politicians.

The third step is to review the Commission on Elections’ (COMELEC) existing frameworks for campaign finance and social media regulation. COMELEC’s attempt to create transparency

and accountability in social media campaigning in 2019, which one of us helped advise on, is a step in the right direction. For the 2019 midterm election, COMELEC introduced new guidelines that increased the reportorial responsibilities of politicians to include social media spending in their Statement of Contributions and Expenditures (SOCE). However, the current framework also has several vulnerabilities, particularly in its extensive focus on the reporting and monitoring of politicians’ official social media accounts, and requirement of attaching receipts of transactions. As our previous research has shown, digital campaigns involve both official and underground operations (Ong et al 2019). Facebook ads, influencer collaborations, and many political consultancies do not have formal documentation and fail the requirement. This loophole enables politicians to skirt responsibility to report on informal work arrangements. We encourage COMELEC to provide more detailed guidelines to politicians and revise SOCE forms to include

the variety of digital campaign executions, including the mobilization of paid influencers, the maintenance of supplemental accounts, and their principles in micro-targeted advertising. The current framework also needs to be amended to oblige politicians to sign off on social media content just as they are obliged to approve television, radio,

and print advertising contents.

Finally, we encourage COMELEC to form intersectoral alliances with the academe, civil society, and creative and media industries in the monitoring of traditional and digital campaigns. COMELEC’s monitors of SOCE are short-term contract-based workers with little job security or political clout. Civil society should find ways to help COMELEC



It is undoubtedly important that we should keep applying pressure to platforms to improve their content moderation of hate speech and enhance the support for the many precariously employed content moderators in the region.



build greater capacity, especially as their 2022 election preparations also have to contend with challenges of voter engagement in this pandemic moment.

3. We need more transparency mechanisms in our engagements with tech companies.

Blaming Facebook is easier for everyone than seeking local reform. Platform determinist narratives assign primary blame to Facebook for the crass tenor of partisan debate and “surprise” electoral outcomes (Ressa, 2016). This is not at all helpful in precisely identifying vulnerabilities in a diverse ecosystem with many players and assigning precise levels of responsibility to the main culprits. Even in Thailand, which is greatly affected by disinformation in social media and censorship from the government, political opposition actors and activists have a longer view of “fake news” as rooted in propaganda from partisan media pundits within a deeply polarized political system. We should also be very cautious about blaming Facebook Free Basics for various processes of dumbing down political conversation or swinging the electoral outcomes as this denies ordinary people of any sense of agency and rationality, which Curato has discussed in detail in Chapter 2.

It is undoubtedly important that we should keep applying pressure to platforms to improve their content moderation of hate speech and enhance the support for the many precariously employed content moderators in the region.

It is also urgent that we demand better representation of the region in the Facebook Oversight Board, which is responsible for reviewing content takedown decisions. As legal scholars argue, it is disproportional that only one Southeast Asian representative is on the 20-person board (Domino, 2020) when global surveys have identified that four of the top 10 countries with the most active users in social media are in Southeast Asia.

However, researchers, activists and policy experts should resist adopting the language of securitization or platform determinism in their own lobbying strategies.

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It also takes focus away from the hard work of developing specific and granular language around regulation. Should platforms apply similar standards for content takedowns or platform bans, or should these be contextual depending on country, context, or speaker? To what extent should parody be allowed on platforms, and who determines this? What mechanisms for content takedown and fact-checking should we develop for live video streaming on YouTube and Instagram? These are the challenging questions that slip

discussions when simplistic binaries of good-versus-evil or post-by-post takedown frameworks (Douek, 2020) to social media content moderation are all-too-easily thrown.

4. We need to hold our allies accountable.

We should be careful to ensure that this urgent fight against fake news does not turn us or our allies into the very enemies we vow to fight against. One of the findings in our Southeast Asian elections study (Ong & Tapsell, 2020) is that disinformation became “democratized,” and that politicians and their supporters who previously decried disinformation campaigning adopted some of these same tactics to try to fight fire with fire (Tapsell, 2019). While some coordinative tactics are productively disruptive of racist speech—for example, K-pop fans’ recent torpedoing of racist hashtags against the Black Lives Matter movement (Evelyn, 2020)—we should be cautious that some other tactics might reproduce vicious cycles of hateful confrontation. We should refrain from adopting

and celebrating coordinated behaviors when they are done by “good guys” because these same tactics would eventually be used and copied by the other side. As Cherian George has argued in the Singaporean context, it is important to call out one’s own allies for behaving like bullies (George, 2020).

Researchers and policy experts thus have an important, yet challenging, responsibility to take a step back and challenge the good-versus-evil framing that only deepens the many ethnic, racial, religious and class divides in Southeast Asian contexts.



Local journalists, activists, and academics need to develop a more sustained research agenda around hate speech and racism in the Philippines, attuned to the specific racial hierarchies and power dynamics in deep and recent historical context.



5. We need to examine intersections of disinformation and hate speech. We need to watch out for fake news that could lead to escalations to racial violence, as we have seen in our neighboring countries.

In the wake of COVID-19, anti-China racist speech and conspiracy theory surged in global context, and the Philippines was unfortunately no exception.

Rather than fact-checking their statements or calling these people out, some journalists reproduced this hateful rhetoric in their own personal pages or republished conspiracy theory in national newspapers, such as the Philippine Daily Inquirer (see Ong & Lasco, 2020).

This tactic has been an extension of an anti-China disinformation narrative that we observed in the 2019 elections. As Curato, Tapsell, and I discussed (see Ong et al. 2019), opposition politicians in 2019 amplified an anti-China narrative to attract and mobilize supporters against Duterte with his increasingly cozy ties with the Chinese government. At times, online discourse slipped into racist expressions against Chinese people posing threats to multicultural social relations. While there are good reasons to raise alarm over the administration's policy on China, the worrisome aspect of this narrative is that it could lead to real-life violence, just as we have seen anti-China hate crimes rising in diverse national contexts in the wake of COVID-19.

Unfortunately, some journalists have only doubled-down on their decision not to fact-check this disinformation narrative, with some claiming that this is a "false equivalence" or that "hate speech is not disinformation" (Nery, 2020).

As we had discussed earlier with the Indonesian example, hate speech and disinformation have porous boundaries and can lead to armed vigilantism.

Local journalists, activists, and academics need to develop a more sustained research agenda around hate speech and racism in the Philippines, attuned to the specific racial hierarchies and power dynamics in deep and recent historical context.



We need to combine journalists' storytelling, fact-checkers' rigorous research, deep ethnographic insight, and big data researchers' broad pattern analysis to combat disinformation innovations to come.



Anti-racism trainings that shed light on historical and structural roots of racial hierarchies in the Philippines and emerging standards around reporting on complex multicultural issues would be important programs for journalists and academics to collaborate on. This helps in diffusing racial tensions as we would not want the Philippines to follow the examples of neighboring countries such as Indonesia, or even Hong Kong and Singapore where anti-mainland Chinese racism has become deeply entrenched (Ong & Lin 2017).

6. We need to create sustainable intersectoral and interdisciplinary alliances where individuals

contribute diverse specialized knowledge to tackle different dimensions of information pollution.

We need collaborative alliances that can create effective divisions of labor in monitoring our information ecosystem.

We need to combine journalists' storytelling, fact-checkers' rigorous research, deep ethnographic insight, and big data researchers' broad pattern analysis to combat disinformation innovations to come.

I have been a Research Fellow at the Harvard Kennedy School's Technology and Social Change Project this year to help with their disinformation monitoring for the US

elections, and I found it inspiring that their research team was diverse in expertise and independent with their funding structures. The team was led by ethnographers whose primary

responsibility was to map out origin points of disinformation narratives, identifying not only key influencers behind popular memes but also the historical lineages behind certain kinds of conspiratorial thinking. This meant that the approach was less about reporting on a falsehood, but deep investigations of specific subcultures or "scenes," such as right-wing Asian supporters of Trump, gun owners, anti-vaccine and anti-mask COVID-19 conspiracists, etc. Former tech journalists are members of the team and help communicate their research with policymakers and the mainstream press.



After all, there are far too many people responsible and much more complicit in the expansion of disinformation economies to reduce the fight against fake news to simplistic good-versus-evil narratives.



Another difference in their approach was the focus on de-escalation. While fact-checkers worked with highlighted harmful effects of certain kinds of disinformation, i.e. fake COVID-19 cures, the Harvard team cautioned journalists about inadvertently amplifying hateful speech or popularizing certain influencers. These helpful practices could actually help counterbalance certain tendencies of Filipino journalists to spotlight disinformation from influencers or strategists as press attention would actually bring more political clients to these disinformation producers (Ong & Cabanes 2019).

Conclusion

Moving forward, we need better cooperation among academic researchers, journalists, and civil society activists to tackle a multi-dimensional issue that cannot be solved by technological solutionism (e.g. “We need better algorithms”) or platform determinism (“Facebook ruined democracy”).

After all, there are far too many people responsible and much more complicit in the expansion of disinformation economies to reduce the fight against fake news to simplistic good-versus-evil narratives.

The challenge ahead is to have a more precise language of responsibility, such that we can sufficiently assign culpability to the diversity of disinformation producers who profit from political campaigns as well as ordinary people who believe in various disinformation narratives. The word “troll” is not at all useful here as it muddles any discussion of responsibility and accountability.

We will need sustainable infrastructures for deep research and quick interventions that could shed light on new “fake news innovations,” de-escalate narratives that could lead to violence and harm, disincentivize non-transparent and non-accountable ways of electoral campaigning, penalize the entrepreneurial influencers and strategists profiting from “black campaigning”, and understand the social and economic anxieties that are being stoked by insidious media manipulators, such that we could address them at their roots.

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And now what?

STRATEGIC AND PROGRAMMATIC
RECOMMENDATIONS BY

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Global discourse around social media platforms has significantly changed in 2020. The “techlash” has reached a point where most politicians, lawyers, journalists, academics, and ordinary people have all come into understanding that social media must be regulated in some form or another. This heightened media and technological reflexivity is evident in the opinion poll summarized in Chapter 1, where respondents generally expressed agreement that disinformation on social media should be regulated.



Global discourse around social media platforms has significantly changed in 2020. The “techlash” has reached a point where most politicians, lawyers, journalists, academics, and ordinary people have all come into understanding that social media must be regulated in some form or another. This heightened media and technological reflexivity is evident in the opinion poll summarized in Chapter 1, where respondents generally expressed agreement that disinformation on social media should be regulated.

As Chapters 2 and 3 have illustrated, however, political scientists, legal experts, and media and communications scholars have all raised caution that regulation must tow a fine line such that it does not encroach on free speech and a free press. There is also the danger that the discourse of “fake news” would only marshal moral panics and scapegoat tech platforms for being responsible for today’s social ills. This disingenuous move would distract from more complex projects of facilitating social inclusion, mitigating inequalities, and reimagining information infrastructures for public good rather than their for-profit

motives. As Chapter 3 discussed, the pandemic moment has further underscored the dangers, where so-called cures for the “infodemic” are worse than the disease, as whistleblowers, frontline health workers, and even ordinary people have become targets of “anti-fake-news” measures around the world, while the real amplifiers of conspiracy theory and hate speech have evaded punishment.

Moving forward, we need bold, thoughtful, creative, and sustainable proposals from civil society that could engage elected officials, platforms, and the wider public to address fast-moving disinformation innovations as well as infrastructural failures of our information environment. We need to fund sustainable multi-stakeholder interfaces where scholars and civil society can lend their own expertise and address specific aspects of a complex and multi-layered issue, while engaging and learning from the experiences of the wider public.

Based on these premises, we put forward the following recommendations.

Invest in sustainable and multi-stakeholder interfaces.

1

Disinformation is not a glitch that could be corrected by technological solutions, nor by more robust policing of the “bad actors” inhabiting platforms. Disinformation is produced out of diverse commercial, technological, and social incentives and thus would require multi-pronged approaches.

We need to leverage on the skillsets of scholars and civil society actors of diverse backgrounds to contribute specialized knowledge that could sufficiently attend to both most pressing immediate harms of disinformation and hate speech as well as the deeper underlying factors behind specific features of technologized behaviors.

Scholars and civil society actors need to work together, consistently engage platforms and elected officials, and build lobbying power. This requires skills of cultural and

technical translation, so the Philippines' historical and social issues could better inform not only specific content moderation decisions but also, more crucially, inform higher-level global debates about frameworks for political advertising, influencer marketing, hate speech definitions and norms, platform policies about regulating speech of elected officials, and data privacy regulation.

There is a need here for sustainable funding infrastructures that guarantee the independence of research from specific political agenda. There is difficulty in securing research funds on non-United States (US)/United Kingdom (UK) research on disinformation that are not tied to foreign policy or security initiatives (e.g., the focus on disinformation as purely a Russian or Chinese enterprise). Civil society and academia should lobby funders to fund interdisciplinary and multi-perspectival research with public engagement components that facilitate two-way conversations and mutual learning.

2

Improve researcher-journalist-fact-checker interfaces.

The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has highlighted the value of fact-checking as one of the quickest responses against disinformation. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) urges support for diverse and independent fact-checking organizations within national societies, while the Broadband Commission for Sustainable Development of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the International Communication Union recommend the development of collaborative fact-checking operations worldwide to monitor, among others, political content, and political advertising. We add that fact-checking operations should find more sustainable and creative ways of reporting on disinformation, not as singular discrete falsehoods, but as narratives that emerge from particular subcultures or “scenes.” They also should attend to disinformation’s porous boundaries with hate speech, political advertising, and organic rumor.

For this, we will need to establish dynamic interfaces that bridge journalists and fact-checkers with academics specialized in ethnography as well as big data analysis. In the US, the model developed by research institutions such as at Harvard's Shorenstein Center is to develop collaborative disinformation monitoring initiatives that guide journalists' reporting of “fake news” and trace the niche subcultures that originate certain kinds of conspiracy theory or racist propaganda. Within Harvard, journalists and technology writers are embedded in the research team as full-time staff or research fellows to support public engagement and translation of academic writing. In the lead-up to the elections, the team hosted open Zoom calls communicating their latest research with journalists, who in turn shared their stories for the week and workshopped ideas for future investigations. These dynamic interfaces were particularly crucial to the

strategic reporting on armed militias organizing on social media against racial justice protesters, aimed for de-escalation rather than sensationalism. In the Philippines, journalists and academics can work better toward finding ways to mitigate the spread of extremist speech and de-escalate potential harm and violence.

Previously, two of us had proposed recommendations of reporting disinformation as narratives, where, instead of fact-checking a falsehood as a news event, reporters can shed light on the process of insidious media manipulations that have occurred over time as well as the political and commercial incentives that impelled strategists or influencers to spread such falsehoods. The case of place-based closed groups and private chat groups was raised in the previous chapter as one vulnerability for disinformation, especially in “news deserts” where they are the only sources of information. This is where deep ethnographic insight of academics can supplement the fact-checkers' and big data analysts' focus on trending items and popular hashtag communities. They could identify emerging communities that originate and provide fertile ground for certain kinds of conspiracy theory and explore their accidental collisions with politically interested media manipulators.

Additionally, reporting on disinformation as narratives helps with complex issues around the proliferation of racist speech along with their intersections with conspiracy theory and “fake news,” as discussed in Chapter 3. Certainly, it would be ethical and responsible to make available anti-racist training for reporters and academics in the disinformation space. Racism and racist speech within Asian countries are highly particular and contextual, important issues to acknowledge.

Improve election-oriented civil society initiatives.

3

While one of us has cultivated relationships with election-oriented legal group and helped inform social media campaign regulations for the previous elections, we found no evidence that such regulations were enforced and led to any political outcome.

As the Philippines prepares for an important presidential election in 2022, we need to form intersectoral alliances between academics, election lawyers, journalists, and civil society to promote transparency and accountability frameworks for campaign financing. It is clear that the Commission on Elections (COMELEC) does not have the infrastructure nor the expertise to monitor politicians' campaign spending.

Civil society can play a major role in monitoring and curtailing electoral disinformation through voter education and lobbying COMELEC to include anti-disinformation provisions in its resolutions, holding not just the media but, more important, candidates and their supporters alike accountable. Lobbying legislators to

update the Fair Elections Act or propose a Political Campaign Transparency Act, as one of us has previously proposed, is another initiative to develop new frameworks that respond to features of targeted political advertising and influencer marketing that are unregulated.

Two of us had also reported previously that we had observed foreign interference in elections in the business transactions that occur between political consultants and foreign entrepreneurs invested in electoral outcomes that would gain them favor. We need to establish more frameworks that would introduce disincentives to shady behaviors and campaign practices. Civil society can explore how we could make better use of taxation frameworks, such as in proposals to tax targeted advertising and use that collected tax to promote public literacy portals.

4

Improve private sector engagement.

It has been far too long an open secret that creative industries of advertising and public relations have engaged in both above-ground and dirty campaigning for politicians. Previous engagements of scholars with industry experts have met much resistance and outright disavowal of responsibility for disinformation campaigns, yet the industry shows that reflexivity and self-criticism come from younger creative professionals. We need to build better inroads with the private sector and cultivate champions who can advocate for industry reform and better self-regulation systems and practices.

5

Experiment with citizens' jury.

One could consider building on the “deliberative wave” taking place around the world, and experiment on democratic innovations: inviting a randomly selected group of ordinary citizens—a citizens' jury in policy parlance—to assess cases of disinformation or hate speech online and provide recommendations based on their deliberations.

The value of a deliberative body has now been affirmed by platforms like Facebook, which recently convened an oversight board that had been tasked to adjudicate cases regarding raised issues of free speech. This board is composed of experts—a Nobel Prize winner, a former prime minister, journalists, legal scholars, and human rights advocates. The idea of citizens' juries is similar to this oversight board (the oversight board is indeed described as the Supreme Court of Facebook), except that its composition is not limited to experts but members of the wider public.

One could imagine running a citizens' jury composed of twenty-four citizens from diverse backgrounds, representing different ages, gender, religion, ethno-linguistic background, political views, and educational attainment. The ideas and values they bring in deliberations are based not on their fields of expertise, but

from their experience as lay citizens who encounter disinformation on a daily basis. Just like juries in court, citizens' juries will have access to expert witnesses and advocates whose evidence and testimonies should be considered in their deliberations. That way, citizens also have the opportunity to improve their knowledge on the case at hand and correct their biases. The outcomes of this process will be recommendations on what to do with cases of disinformation.

Why is this experiment worth pursuing? There are several reasons. First, as an academic exercise, a citizens' jury could lend insight into the moral calculations of ordinary people when faced with disinformation dilemmas. Data from citizens' juries are different from polling or focus group data. Polling and focus groups convey what people think in an imperfect public sphere, defined by click-bait headlines, sensationalist reporting, and, indeed, disinformation. Meanwhile, data from citizens' juries represent what people think about the issue when they are given the opportunity to learn more about the topic and deliberate on its complexities. In other words, citizens' juries provide a counterfactual scenario of how people appraise disinformation when they are placed in learning environments conducive for reflection. It prompts questions on how we can design our public sphere to be like this more often.

Second, as a practical exercise, citizens' juries have a track record of providing recommendations that can inform decisionmakers, whether these are policymakers, regulators, or even Facebook itself. It is not an accident that these deliberative processes are popular in the field of health and medicine. Debates about the ethics of biobanking, mitochondrial donation, and genome editing are controversial and emotional topics, which cannot be left to the hands of experts. The issues related to disinformation bear similarities to biomedical issues (indeed, biomedical issues can also be subject to disinformation). They too are emotional, complex, and hyper-partisan. A citizens' jury can serve as a circuit breaker for citizens to pause and deliberate about these issues with their peers in a respectful and other-regarding manner. The recommendations of citizens' juries are often utilized by policymakers as inputs to their decision. They carry weight because the recommendations represent, not citizens' views as in polling data, but citizens' considered judgment.

Finally, citizens' juries are opportunities for citizens to learn. These processes can be implemented in schools and universities as part of a media literacy program, where the pedagogical focus is on active participation and democratic thinking. It can be implemented by platforms themselves, for example, to supplement the oversight board. Alternatively, it can be implemented by civil society organizations in collaboration with regulators as part of their campaign against disinformation. This way, citizens can learn how to judge disinformation through conversation and collective learning.

6

Cultivate ethnographic and listening projects.

Effective disinformation practices are attuned to the anxieties and often unspeakable worries of everyday citizens. The interactive character of disinformation through YouTube and Facebook livestreams makes these practices even more effective, as mutual listening and amplification of views unfold among like-minded communities. Addressing disinformation requires careful listening in these channels, spotting the disinformation narratives that they co-construct, and identifying the emotions that emerge from these channels. Insight from these projects can help shift our diagnosis from demonizing the perpetrators of disinformation to understanding the visceral and unspeakable gains people get from these collective experiences.

In practical terms, ethnographic and listening projects can take off with research and investigative reporting grants or training programs for journalists and researchers to uncover the deep stories of disinformation. Reporting deep stories requires a distinct skillset: both a science via big data and an art via affective attunement or emotional sensing of what others feel in different platforms. Indeed, developing this skill is critical for a contextualized and meaningful reporting of disinformation.

7

Engage social media companies and include them in multi-sectoral collaborations.

As previously discussed in Chapter 3, platform determinism ignores the agency of ordinary people. It also ignores the diversity and agency of workers within social media companies and their capacities for lobbying, collaboration, and even resistance. As the “techlash” of the past years has proven, social media platforms face pressure within the organization from their own workers who challenge exploitative or business-as-usual practices, including when they relate to political processes.

Academics and civil society should engage the diversity of platform workers from their public policy officers to their engineers and cybersecurity experts at global, regional, and national levels. Our past experience of engaging with some platform workers is that a combination of public pressure through mainstream media and backchannel communication (providing them with tips and asking questions) shape decision-making around content moderation, platform banning, or even flagging of racist slurs.

We also need to expand our focus from engaging Facebook to also putting pressure on Google/YouTube. As our 2019 elections study has shown (Ong et al. 2019), YouTube was a cesspool of profitable conspiracy theory channels, yet they had barely attended any multi-stakeholder meetings with election commissioners. Twitter representatives attended multi-stakeholder meetings, but only to observe

and did not give their opinion. Across regional context, platforms' public policy representatives are variably engaged with local civil society. It is imperative therefore that we find ways to cultivate spaces that allow for feedback loops. We should also pressure platforms to themselves support academic research and public interventions, as academics and journalists produce work that ultimately improves their platform but are rarely given just compensation for their time, labor, and years of training in their fields of practice.

Invest in independent, critical media.

8

Public expectations of the media have risen amid growing concern over the spread of disinformation and an increasingly intolerant environment for free expression. Newsrooms have to take proactive steps to respond to the demand for verified information and firmly establish themselves as champions of truth to regain the public's trust in the media.

Capacity building to ground media practitioners in the fundamentals of good journalism remains a given. There is urgency, however, in investing in advanced verification techniques and, equally as important, disinformation investigations to unmask networks of malicious actors.

Integrating fact-checking skills to everyday reporting, including those conducted live or in real-time, is essential. But there is a need to move past the fixation with the “gotcha” mentality. Attention should be trained on contextualizing misinformation and filling data voids with high-quality content to stop information manipulators in their tracks, especially during elections and crises. Newsrooms also find themselves in a good position to equip audiences with verification skills through their content and platform.

Attacks from various fronts in recent years have encouraged a growing number of Filipino journalists to band together and hold the line. But what is noticeably lacking is a mechanism that would consistently enforce professional and ethical standards across all media platforms to assure the public that the industry could very well police its own ranks. For far too long, self-regulatory bodies in the media have operated as silos—this must end. Other countries have benefited from the establishment of independent industry-wide press councils and intersectoral Codes of Ethics boards. In the context of disinformation, the presence of such a mechanism will facilitate the formulation of industry-wide policies, such as how to deal with public officials and politicians who disseminate disinformation in live/real-time coverage.

An internal audit of the media will go well with self and peer regulation, especially for newsrooms to gain the public's trust. Templates are available such as the Trust Project, which employs eight trust indicators to assess if news organizations are worthy of a trust mark which, in turn,

allows the public to easily identify trustworthy news and newsrooms.

Civil society, academia, and the public also ought to keep newsrooms on their toes. Regular external audits can be a mechanism to watch the watchdog. Again, there is no dearth of replicable initiatives.

However, it may be too much to expect newsrooms at this time to self-finance an all-encompassing self-improvement package. For one, economic losses resulting from the pandemic have further crippled operations and led to massive job cuts. External support is plainly needed to help sustain a robust, independent media in the Philippines.



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DEVELOPING
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