

Headline: Disastrous pseudoscience

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In 2017, a protest sign at a march for action on climate change read: “At the start of every disaster movie, there’s a scientist being ignored.” This is it. We’re living the disaster movie. We probably have been living it for the last several years, as a culture that persists in valuing loud opinions over thoughtful, evidence-based consideration—a culture of doubting experts—has pervaded every sphere of our lives, from health to politics.

It’s not necessarily anything new. As early as the 1960s, philosophers and authors have cautioned against what they perceived to be a culture of anti-intellectualism. This, they commented, might have been helped along by the advent of television, which conveys information quickly to passive recipients, as opposed to the written word which was thought to allow more nuance, more room to explore complicated truths. I wonder what they would have made of our 280-character tweets and clickbait headlines, which qualify as news—and therefore “facts”—for so many. It must be frustrating for experts in any field that our culture thrives so much on the premise that anything can be true if somebody says it loudly enough.

Anyone can be qualified for a position if they act confidently like they are—just look at the American president, a man with the logical faculties of a toddler, and so many of our own local political voices, poorly qualified by education or work experience but whose loud unfounded opinions quickly gain traction among the masses.

It isn’t just about Taal volcanic activity, in the aftermath of which our politicians have erupted with their own variety of ignorant bile. This lack of trust in systematic research and expertise continues to erode many aspects of our lives. Think back to Cynthia Villar’s comments on the corn research budget—“Baliw na baliw kayo sa research. Aanhin niyo ba ‘yang research?”—and other instances where those ignorant of the scope and effect of science were allowed to impact its budget and legislation. Think climate change and the continued failure of international government to take steps against those corporations with the biggest impact on the environment, despite decades of scientific protest. Think anti-vaxxers and the reemergence of eradicated disease; think of the hysteria about Dengvaxia. Think, even, of “Goop,” Gwyneth Paltrow’s wellness company, which sells jade eggs to be inserted in women’s vaginas to “improve” sex lives and menstrual cycles, and which will gain a wider audience with the launch of its “Goop Lab” documentary on Netflix. It’s just one company in a billion-dollar industry of complementary and alternative medicine, which can sometimes be harmless but which also has been shown, devastatingly, to entice patients away from conventional medicine. All of these things have one thing in common—that they thrive when the layperson is encouraged to entertain doubts about modern science and the collective, cumulative knowledge of scientists spanning centuries.

Local scientists have written recently and excellently about how our scientists should be valued as resources in legislation and decision-making, rather than treated with disdain and underfunded as academics stuck in ivory towers, accused of wallowing in obscure research and jargon instead of actively serving society. This conception is itself false, as scientists continue to pursue work that is relevant to public safety, health, agriculture, and other arenas which impact our daily lives, and many academics explore and explain their work through social media platforms and their relationships with people most affected by their research.

The Filipino layperson, perhaps already slightly crippled by poor resources and poorer reading comprehension, isn't to blame for the blight of anti-intellectualism and anti-science. Instead, it's the loud voices which continue to discredit our scientists, who think their opinions matter more than scientific knowledge, and who are suspicious that those in research and technology are just as underqualified and intellectually bankrupt as they are.

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