# Nipping fake news in the bud | Inquirer Opinion

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In a widely lauded move, Philippine National Police-Criminal Investigation and Detection Group (CIDG) chief Brig. Gen. Nicolas Torre III on Saturday lodged a formal complaint against a vlogger for falsely claiming on social media that the general was hospitalized and in critical condition.

“This caused worry and distress to my family and friends,” Torre said, addressing vlogger Ernesto “Jun” Abines Jr., a known supporter of the Duterte family.

“Actions have consequences,” Torre responded after Abines complained on social media about authorities seizing his electronic devices while serving a search and seizure warrant.

Abines is facing charges for violation of Article 154 of the Revised Penal Code, or the Unlawful Use of Means of Publication and Unlawful Utterances, in relation to Section 6 of Republic Act 10175, also known as the Cybercrime Prevention Act.

He was among the 40 social media personalities invited by the House of Representatives as resource persons for its joint inquiry on the spread of fake news and disinformation. Like the others, he did not attend the probe but instead filed a petition for certiorari and prohibition at the Supreme Court.

## Terrorists and enemies of the state

“In today’s digital age, truth matters more than ever,” several House leaders said in commending Torre for “upholding facts and holding accountable those who deliberately mislead the public.” Fake news, they added, “is a serious threat to our society. It misleads people, distorts public discourse, and even puts lives at risk.”

Recall that so many individuals were arrested, detained, and even killed by unknown assailants, no thanks to false information from the National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict. The task force Red-tagged outspoken Duterte critics which automatically labelled them as terrorists and enemies of the state who could be disposed of with impunity.

The House hearing on fake news also noted how misinformation and disinformation can endanger national security as seen in the contentious discourse on the West Philippine Sea issue. It could weaken trust in democratic institutions as well, and lead the country astray, with the looming midterm elections presenting the perfect opportunity for paid trolls, including vloggers and influencers, to pimp their services to the highest bidder.

## Keyboard warriors

As admitted in 2019 by Christopher Wylie, a Cambridge Analytica whistle-blower, the data collection firm used the Philippines as a “petri dish” to refine the political tactics it subsequently used in the Trump campaign in the United States. It rebranded Duterte as a tough, no-nonsense leader who could solve the country’s problems with unequivocal resolve and force.

A paper on Duterte’s keyboard warriors presented to the National Chengchi University quoted a University of Oxford study, which found that $200,000 was spent to hire trolls who would spread propaganda for Duterte and target his opposition. Fake accounts using “bots” were also used to amplify messages, likes, and shares, thus initiating a bandwagon effect that enticed grassroots voters to openly support their bet.

This could easily be the same scenario in the May elections, but Torre’s court case against Abines might have preempted that.

In a similar bid, the Commission on Elections issued in November a resolution requiring the registration of the social media accounts and other online and internet-based campaign platforms of candidates and parties, ostensibly to stop the spread of falsehoods and level the playing field in online campaigning. It would also empower the poll body to monitor the online campaigns and spending by candidates.

However, election watchdogs and other stakeholders have slammed the resolution for having an overly broad scope that might infringe on the right to free speech and privacy.

## Tall order

Academics and press freedom groups have expressed the same concern, warning that government regulations that penalize fake news could be weaponized against activists and journalists and may impinge on free speech. Press freedom activists have also repeatedly called for libel and cyber libel to be decriminalized, saying it is outdated, undemocratic, and can be used to silence criticism and dissent.

Finding balance and being conscious of the thin line between regulation and suppression of freedom of expression and of the press is the tall order that seems to be an abiding challenge in this issue. Just as important is how media scholars and practitioners can collaborate and find ways to promote media literacy and responsible journalism.

And yes, while there is a need to update some of the country’s laws because of the emergence of new technologies, such as artificial intelligence or deepfakes that could be used to produce harmful content, individuals on their own can help nip fake news in the bud.

As one media expert noted: to combat fake news, we must make sure not to share it.