# When lawyers become liars | Inquirer Opinion

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It’s been said that the first casualty of war is truth, and nowhere is this more evident than in the ongoing avalanche of fake news and disinformation that greeted former president Rodrigo Duterte’s recent arrest and surrender to the International Criminal Court (ICC) in The Hague, Netherlands.

The spurious claims are meant to portray Duterte’s arrest as “unjust and illegal,” “a breach of Philippine laws and sovereignty,” and “devoid of due process.” Ironically, that last is the same injustice Duterte has been accused of in the extrajudicial killings of over 6,000 drug suspects, for which he now faces ICC trial for crimes against humanity.

What makes this orchestrated assault on truth even more ignominious is how two prominent lawyers — guardians of the law — led the fake news frenzy, with Raul Lambino claiming that the Supreme Court had issued a temporary restraining order (TRO) on March 11 to stop the former chief executive’s flight to The Hague. Former Duterte executive secretary Salvador Medialdea followed this up with the barefaced lie that his client was not at the ICC detention center.

Not surprisingly, die-hard supporters who are less invested in upholding the law as the two Duterte hirelings, soon spewed out a toxic mix of fake headlines and edited photographs meant to portray huge rallies demanding Duterte’s release. This included the religious procession for Inang Maria in Cebu City in January, which was cribbed from GMA News but recycled as a prayer rally for The Punisher.

## Fictional characters

Social media soon bloomed with memes that approximate the hypnotic lure of the Nigerian scam, irresistible for their unintended humor. There’s United States President Donald Trump, “It’s Showtime” host Vice Ganda, and several “Yale- and Harvard-educated lawyers and legal experts” calling out the arrest — except that these quoted personalities are fictional characters from popular series and movies: Annalise Keating (Viola Davis) from “How to Get Away with Murder,” Elle Woods (Reese Witherspoon) from “Legally Blonde,” and Saul Goodman (Bob Odenkirk) from “Better Call Saul.”

That such specious memes and made-up quotes are widely believed shows the Filipinos’ susceptibility to fake news. It also betrays the lack of discernment and critical thinking, and stubborn refusal to accept facts that have polarized the country and stalled its political maturity. That it took so long to exact accountability from Duterte and his minions shows how judicial processes have been hobbled as well, with judges during Duterte’s term being Red-tagged for dismissing fabricated charges against activists or choosing early retirement rather than handle the case of his nemesis, former senator Leila de Lima.

## Political hoax

Fake news peddlers did not spare the Supreme Court either. Aside from Lambino’s TRO claim, the high court “categorically” denied the authenticity of a statement saying it had received, “acknowledged and docketed” a petition allegedly with “16 million signatories” demanding President Marcos’ resignation. The announcement was written on Supreme Court stationery, purportedly from the office of its spokesperson.

With the Supreme Court itself being targeted by political hoaxes and Duterte supporters camping out in court premises, is it any wonder that hauling him off before an international court beyond the reach of political pressure is seen as the wiser option?

The cacophony of false claims and narratives has prompted Malacañang to initiate live discussions and press briefings to address the issue. The National Bureau of Investigation is meanwhile mulling charges of inciting to sedition and cyber libel against guilty parties, even as some House members have called for sanctions against Lambino and Medialdea.

Indeed, the two lawyers flagrantly violated several provisions of the Code of Professional Responsibility and Accountability that was officially launched by the Supreme Court in April 2023.

## False representations

The provisions violated include Proper Conduct under Section 1, Canon II on Propriety: “A lawyer shall not engage in unlawful, dishonest, immoral, or deceitful conduct.” Section 11 meanwhile states that “A lawyer shall not make false representations or statements.” Under the Canon on Responsible Use of Social Media, Section 38 cautions lawyers to “not knowingly or maliciously post, share, upload or otherwise disseminate false or unverified statements, claims, or commit any other act of disinformation.”

Shouldn’t the Integrated Bar of the Philippines take its cue from the above, and discipline its errant members? Complaints from this professional body can then be endorsed to the high court for appropriate sanctions that range from suspension from law practice to disbarment.

And rightly so, since such disregard for the truth can foment chaos and unrest, igniting dangerous passions already simmering in the aggressive race for public office in the upcoming midterm elections.

“How to get away with fake news” is certainly one reality show we don’t deserve.