

Philippines: The Duterte administration's share of COVID misinformation

Saturday 23 January 2021, by [ANCLA Blanch](#), [CAMBA Meeko Angela](#) (Date first published: 19 December 2020).

President Rodrigo Duterte and his government met the deluge of inaccurate claims about the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic with a [clampdown on what it referred to as “fake news.”](#)

Unfortunately, even public officials, to whom Filipinos look for guidance and reliable information, were themselves sources of mis- and disinformation on the health crisis.

Four in five, or 80.39% of the 51 COVID-19-related claims spread by public personalities that VERA Files Fact Check had flagged from January to Dec. 4 this year were by government officials in various departments and levels. These included false, baseless, and out-of-context remarks on supposed cures and treatments, safety precautions, and government response, among other themes.

Here are three trends that emerged from our reports:

Duterte is the top source of COVID misinformation

The president bested every other official when it came to spewing inaccuracies and flip-flops about the pandemic, accounting for almost half of the 41 claims that were fact-checked.

Of Duterte's 19 flagged remarks, 10 were rated false. This included the wrong claim he repeated during a July 31 address about [using gasoline and diesel as alternatives to alcohol](#) to disinfect one's face mask or hands.

Presidential Spokesperson Harry Roque had earlier [told the media that the president was “only joking”](#) after the latter first made the unsafe recommendation on [April 16](#), and again on [July 20](#). But Duterte insisted he was serious.

That was not the only time the president had repeated falsehoods related to COVID-19. In at least [two separate public addresses](#), he erroneously claimed that vaccines were “produced by the [human] body” to fight off infection.

He was also mistaken when he claimed, at least twice — including during his penultimate State of the Nation Address — that pandemics occurred “once every century.”

More than a third, or seven of Duterte's 19 flagged claims, were about his and the government's response to the pandemic. Among these was when he told Filipinos in early April that he had been “warning” of this “deadly” virus “from the start,” when, in fact, he initially downplayed the gravity of the outbreak.

Palace insists PH acted promptly to contain the spread of the virus

Taking off from his supposed “early warning” about the virus, both Duterte and his spokesperson, in the claims looked into by VERA Files Fact Check, had consistently pushed the narrative that the government acted earlier than it actually did to address the pandemic.

At least [twice in April](#), Duterte wrongly claimed that the Philippines was the first in Asia to implement a lockdown to curb the spread of the virus. Roque echoed this in a press briefing the [next month](#) and, again, in [September](#), limiting the scope to Southeast Asia.

China was the first in Asia and the world to implement the measure when it quarantined Wuhan City, where the first cases emerged, back in January to contain the spread of the virus. In Southeast Asia, it was Vietnam which first [imposed a lockdown in one of its districts as early as February](#).

[Duterte first placed Metro Manila under community quarantine](#) only on [March 12](#).

The president also inaccurately claimed that he convened the Inter-Agency Task Force on Emerging Infectious Diseases (IATF-EID) “[immediately...right then and there](#)” after the World Health Organization (WHO) warned of the “virulent, fast-moving” virus.

WHO issued its first warning on what it then referred to as a “cluster of pneumonia cases” in Wuhan in a [tweet on Jan. 4](#), followed by a [disease outbreak news report](#) the next day. On Jan. 9, it said it has [determined the cause of the pneumonia outbreak to be a novel coronavirus](#). Shortly after, on Jan. 10, it issued a “[national capacities review tool](#)” to aid member-states in “better understand[ing] existing capacities in the area of detection and response to a novel coronavirus that is zoonotic and causes respiratory disease.”

The IATF-EID [first convened for the novel coronavirus threat on Jan. 28](#).

Duterte, alter-egos made a lot of contradictions on COVID response

The COVID-19 pandemic was no exception to the Duterte Cabinet’s penchant for flip-flops and conflicting statements. (See VERA FILES FACT CHECK YEARENDER: The Duterte Cabinet’s flip-flops and contradictions in 2019)

Watch this video:

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