

Fight Fascism Before It's Too Late

Maria Ressa

In retrospect, I should have seen that democracy was collapsing around me sooner. I wish now that I'd understood then how quickly it happens. At the time, over the summer of 2016, in the months after the presidential election of Rodrigo Duterte, several things seemed to happen all at once.

First, Duterte's minions were changing our information ecosystem in the Philippines in plain sight. They did this through multipronged and relentless attacks that were intended to discredit journalists and disorient the public. These attacks worked, and they continued nonstop for years before Facebook—one of the primary places where they occurred—took any action.

What happened in the Philippines in 2016 is a microcosm of every information operation launched in democratic countries around the world. A combination of bots, fake accounts, and content creators—real people doing the bidding of a government determined to mislead its people—infected our citizenry like a virus. Many of those who were infected didn't even know. This is how disinformation operations work everywhere. Lies that are repeated over and over change the public's perception of an issue and spread exponentially. This is a tactic that powerful and corrupt forces have long used, but one that has gained terrifying new meaning and pitch in the age of Big Data and social media.

There's a word in Filipino, *talangkaan*. It describes the behavior of crabs crawling over one another to get to the top. When I reflect on the surreal events of the past six years—the powerful autocrat determined to silence me and other journalists; the 10 arrest warrants the government issued against me in less than two years; the possibility that I will still go to prison for life; the warping of information across the social web; and the refusal of the powerful men who control social platforms to do anything—this is the word that's come to me again and again: *talangkaan*.

Looking back today, I can see what I missed at the time. In my case, dangerous individuals seeded the narrative that would unravel democracy. Propagandists across the web chanted “Journalist equals criminal” and “Arrest Maria Ressa” years before my first arrest; in doing so, they softened public acceptance for legal cases that later became a reality. Let me say this to you as clearly as I possibly can: This happened to me. It can happen to you.

In October 2016, Mocha Uson, an entertainer whose enormous Facebook audience made her an Alex Jones-like figure in the Philippines, attacked me and my news organization, Rappler, continuing her rant against journalists and mainstream media, whom she called “presstitutes.” As a co-founder and leader of Rappler, I had found myself at the center of a storm. We had published a series of stories about how the Duterte administration was weaponizing the internet against the people, silencing those attempting to hold Duterte accountable, and paving the way for the support of the drug war and extrajudicial killings of citizens in the Philippines. It was a blockbuster story, one that other outlets didn't touch. And it set off a chain reaction that

would alter the course of my life. In the moment, we were caught in a cycle that went like this: My team would publish information about the corruption of the Duterte administration; the administration would launch unabated attacks and targeted harassment against us; those attacks would be amplified across the social web to tear down our reputation and confuse the public; and platforms like Facebook would cash in on the confusion.

Uson's live video attacking me and Rappler contained a perfect mix of interactivity, vitriol, "us against them," and easy engagement—exactly what Facebook algorithms reward. Nearly five years later, that attack video remains on Facebook, with more than 3,100 shares, 12,000 comments, and 497,000 views.

The personal attacks against me came, too, in her comments section; the worst were posted by men, or by accounts pretending to be men. This is a common dynamic all over the world—Facebook actually rewards behavior that women and other vulnerable groups globally have spent decades fighting. All of it was something we flagged early on for Facebook because it was in the comments that we saw a lot of astroturfing create an artificial groundswell of support.

The attacks on my own Facebook page also increased. I tried to respond, but my feed was inundated with comments. Midway through Uson's live broadcast against me, I started counting the attacks. By midnight, I had reached an average of 90 hate messages an hour. I was angry, and my heart was pounding. I stood up and walked around my apartment, trying to understand what was happening, debating how exactly I should try to fight back. I saw real people being persuaded to change their minds about my long journalistic track record, which no longer seemed to matter. It was like drunk frat boys coming together. Just like that, the credibility I had built up during my entire career crumbled. I watched it happen in real time.

So I did what I had learned to do while in war zones: I took five deep breaths in a row, pushed my emotion to the pit of my stomach, and decided on a course of action. I decided to take the abuse that was sent to me directly, which only I could see on my Facebook page, and post it publicly for everyone to see. I would document the attacks.

In one night, the impact of the government's campaign on Rappler's Facebook page was immediate: 20,000 accounts unfollowed Rappler, the highest ever in a single day, and the attrition continued in the coming days. In a month, we lost 44 percent of our weekly reach and 1 percent of our total followers, a little more than 50,000 accounts. It was, in essence, a new and insidious form of state censorship—one that enlisted both citizens and officials to participate in propaganda and attacks to take advantage of Facebook's algorithms. Twenty-five percent of our page views from Facebook disappeared.

No self-respecting journalist would do what Uson and others like her did to take over our country's information ecosystem, which meant that in the beginning, most journalists like me chose not to respond to what seemed like kindergarten antics and bullying. We were fighting a war in a new world using old-world paradigms, thinking that doing the work of journalism was enough.

[Facebook Papers: 'History will not judge us kindly'](#)

We didn't grasp that Facebook, the website that millions of people still believed fostered community and

connection, had supplanted traditional media. We didn't realize that those "content creators," with their crude, sometimes lewd, manipulative posts, now passed as political pundits, even as journalists reporting "facts." Those accounts were at the core of a propaganda machine that bullied and harassed its targets and incited its followers to violence. The same thing happened with "Stop the Steal" in the United States, anti-Muslim riots in India, the invasion of Ukraine by Russia, and many other events around the world. Facebook didn't only provide a platform for those propagandists' speech or even only enable them; in fact, it gave them preferential treatment because [anger is the contagious currency](#) of Facebook's profit machine. Only anger, outrage, and fear led to greater numbers of people using Facebook more times a day. Violence has made Facebook rich.

I often tell people that what happened to me, and what happened to Rappler, is an early-warning system for the rest of the world. The year 2016 had been the target year for Rappler to break even—and we were on track to do that until we published our weaponization-of-the-internet series, and Duterte's propaganda machine tore us apart.

We began reaching out to Facebook's representatives to tell them what was happening to us, sharing concrete evidence of the harassment we endured and the extent to which their platform was being used to inflict harm on civic life in the Philippines. For two years, Facebook largely ignored the data we gave it, maybe because we were in the Philippines and not the United States. Those years, during which information operations functioned with impunity around the world, were characterized by systematic, large-scale manipulation that distorted facts, changed the public narrative, and destroyed public trust.

Within six months of Duterte's taking power in the Philippines, the checks and balances of the three branches of government—executive, legislative, and judicial—collapsed through a system of patronage, blind loyalty, and what I started calling the "three C's": corrupt, coerce, co-opt.

If anyone refused what the government desired or offered (often privately and often linked to business opportunities), they were publicly attacked. That happened in two ways. In the first, indiscriminate, repeated online attacks created a chilling effect, curbing online conversations and speech. A climate of fear settled in the virtual world, mirroring the violence and fear that a drug war in the Philippines was creating in the real world. Then the administration targeted high-profile individuals in specific sectors: business, politics, and media. Duterte needed to make highly visible examples of what happened when anyone challenged his power. This is how one of the most successful business figures in the Philippines saw his company's stock tank. It's how Senator Leila de Lima wound up publicly humiliated and thrown into prison for daring to investigate the president.

Looking back, it should have been obvious that the checks and balances of our democracy were collapsing. Here was our president, successfully jailing an opposition politician who had fought to expose his crimes, with the support of the people and institutions that should have kept him in check. Duterte, like Facebook, benefited from the system of trust that they both destroyed. The weaponization of the internet had evolved into the weaponization of the law. It was only a matter of time before the government came for us, too.

Before Senator Leila de Lima's arrest, Rappler received a tip that Solicitor General Jose Calida was pushing

the Securities and Exchange Commission, which is under the executive branch, to open an investigation into our company. Despite all that had gone on in the previous months, it was still hard for me to take such an outlandish idea seriously. For all the corruption that I'd witnessed over the years in my country, the use of government levers for this kind of retribution against the press seemed strange and unlikely.

Still, I felt helpless in dealing with the online attacks, which continued uninterrupted. My anger was building. I funneled that anger into more investigations, more data. I told anyone who would listen exactly how we all were being manipulated. We were not going to be intimidated into backing off our hard-hitting coverage of the new administration.

We did not relent, nor did Duterte and his online army. In May 2017, we published a transcript of a call between Duterte and then-President Donald Trump during which Duterte called North Korea's leader a "madman." In response, the blogger and Duterte-defender RJ Nieto posted a video in which he called me a "traitor" who had made the Philippines a target of North Korea. By November 2017, the video had 83,000 views and encouraged comments such as "#ArrestMariaRessa" and "Declare Rappler & Maria Ressa as enemies of the Filipinos."

Despite the churning in my stomach, I learned to embrace my fear and change what I could. We gathered data, monitoring the evolution of tactics as well as the growth and messaging of disinformation networks. Then we published stories that forecast what might happen in other democratic countries. We knew we were wading into dangerous waters. By then it was clear that online violence led to real-world violence: Reports had detailed the way social-media groups had fueled the fury of white supremacists in the United States. We prepared for the worst-case scenarios and increased our security. After that, we had to increase our security six more times.

In April 2017, I flew to San Jose, California, for the F8, Facebook's annual developer conference. Facebook had asked me to attend, meet with its officers and partners, and talk about our work at Rappler. At the F8, I was invited to a small meeting with Mark Zuckerberg to give him perspectives about how companies use Facebook around the globe. I was the only journalist in the room. A Facebook employee next to me held down the top of my computer when I was about to open it and take notes.

[Adrienne LaFrance: Facebook is a Doomsday Machine](#)

When it was my turn to speak, I first invited Mark to come visit the Philippines. He thanked me, but said he planned to stay in America instead—he'd recently developed a plan to spend 2017 traveling to every U.S. state because he wanted to understand his country. "You have no idea how powerful Facebook is in the Philippines," I told him.

For six years in a row leading to 2021, Filipinos spent more time than any other country on the internet and on social media. And despite slow internet speeds, Filipinos consistently uploaded and downloaded the largest number of videos on YouTube in 2013. As a Filipino and the only journalist in the room, I wanted to warn the group how social media was fundamentally changing journalism and our information ecosystem.

"Ninety-seven percent of Filipinos on the internet are on Facebook, Mark!" I exclaimed, hoping, in part, that

that tidbit might entice him to visit. Perhaps then he would better understand the problems we were beginning to see: how journalists were coming under attack and how the government had hired social-media influencers to wage its propaganda war.

Mark was quiet for a beat. Maybe I had been too pushy. “Wait, Maria,” he said, looking directly at me. “Where are the other 3 percent?”

At the time, I laughed at his glib quip. I’m not laughing anymore.

It wasn’t until 2018 that Facebook began high-profile post takedowns in the Philippines and around the world, which included limiting the reach of Uson’s page and taking down the network built by Duterte’s social-media-campaign manager. By then, of course, it was too late.

Without any real solution from the tech platforms, it would be easy to give up. But we can’t do that. Not when the integrity of our elections is at stake. So we do our best with what we have: We act, and each day we iterate. This, so far, is our only collective defense. The only way to find a solution is to act.

First, we must demand accountability from technology. This has to start with government action, because the social-media companies regard public pressure and outcry as something that can be safely ignored.

We also must protect and grow investigative journalism. One global initiative I’ve helped lead is the International Fund for Public Interest Media, an immediate short- and medium-term solution to the drop in advertising revenues—which have filtered away from news organizations and to tech platforms instead.

After funding, journalists need protection, starting with the law. Impunity must stop. I learned firsthand just how frail the legal protections are for journalists worldwide. In many ways, lawyers are also playing whack-a-mole, and just as with the official-development-assistance funds from democratic nations, there needs to be a concerted systemic effort for international law. It makes sense that if we don’t have facts, we can’t have law, and we have no democracy.

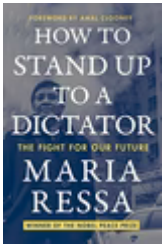
“The struggle of man against power,” the novelist Milan Kundera wrote, “is the struggle of memory against forgetting.” I have lived through several cycles of history, chronicling wild swings of the pendulum that would eventually stabilize. When journalists were the gatekeepers to our public-information ecosystem, those swings took decades. Today, they take months.

As for me, there are times I struggle. Because I refuse to stop doing my job, I’ve lost my freedom to travel. I can’t plan my life, because I still have seven criminal cases that could send me to prison. But I refuse to live in a world like this. We deserve better. I *demand* better. In [the lecture I delivered](#) to accept the Nobel Peace Prize in 2021, I asked for a defense of our democracies—of our freedom, of equality—that begins at the individual level. In the long term, the most important thing is education; in the medium term, it’s legislation and policy to restore the rule of law in the virtual world—to create a vision of the internet that binds us together instead of tearing us apart. In the short term, right now, it’s just us: collaborate, collaborate, collaborate.

World War III won’t just be a conventional war. The fight for democracy requires a person-to-person defense of our democracies. Microtargeting means that this is hand-to-hand combat for all of us on social media.

This is us—you and me and everyone you know—resisting dictatorship through our values not only in the public sphere but in our daily lives. That begins with trust.

This article is an adapted excerpt from Ressa's new book, [How to Stand Up to a Dictator](#).



By Maria Ressa

When you buy a book using a link on this page, we receive a commission. Thank you for supporting The Atlantic.