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FORUM Q&A: MARIA RESSA ON DIGITAL DISINFORMATION AND PHILIPPINE DEMOCRACY IN THE BALANCE



*Maria Ressa is a leading Filipina journalist and CEO of **Rappler**, an online news site based in the Philippines. In 2017, she accepted the **National Democratic Institute's Democracy Award** on behalf of Rappler for its coverage of disinformation in the Philippines. She has more than thirty years of experience working as a journalist in Southeast Asia, most of them as CNN's bureau chief in Manila, then Jakarta. She later spent six years managing more than a thousand journalists for the largest multi-platform news operation in the Philippines. Follow her on Twitter **@mariaressa**.*

The election of Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte in 2016 came amidst a wave of divisive rhetoric and digital disinformation. Since the election, independent journalists and opposition politicians have been targeted by systematic campaigns of online harassment, and investigators have identified networks of pro-government bloggers and automated social media accounts engaged in a concerted effort to tarnish the credibility of the independent Philippine press and bolster support for President Duterte.

On January 15, 2018, shortly after this interview was conducted, the Philippines' Securities and Exchange Commission **revoked Rappler's registration**, claiming that international funding the site received from philanthropic sources violated Philippine law regulating foreign ownership of mass media. *Rappler* objected to the ruling, noting

that the receipt of these funds afforded their donor neither ownership of *Rappler* nor control of its operations or reporting. Observers called the decision a **blow to press freedom in the Philippines**.

Dean Jackson of the International Forum for Democratic Studies spoke with Maria Ressa about her experience working as a journalist in a rapidly deteriorating media environment and the impact of social media on the trajectory of democracy in Southeast Asia. (This interview has been condensed and edited for clarity. The views and opinions expressed within do not necessarily reflect those of the National Endowment for Democracy.)

Dean Jackson: You've had a distinguished career covering Southeast Asia. What is your view on the health of the region's media ecosystem today—how has it waxed and waned over time?

Maria Ressa: For a big chunk of this time I was “foreign media”—I was able to come in and out of the region and had the privilege to move from local media, where we started our own kind of “60 Minutes” in 1986, to CNN, where I worked from 1987 to about 2005. After that, I came home to the Philippines and worked for the largest network there. What I saw from the late ‘80s until 2016 was really the movement of Southeast Asia away from autocratic, one man rule. I covered every country in our region as it transitioned to democracy. The trigger was the Philippines in 1986. Going through that – Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew stepping down; the retirement of Malaysia’s longest-serving Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohamad, after twenty-two years in power; going through the end of thirty-two years of Suharto’s rule in Indonesia... it was amazing. I felt like I was covering a region where people were finding their voices and finding ways to speak truth to power.

The other trend that happened during that time was a shift toward independent media. In some countries, the shift was incomplete: In Indonesia during the 2014 elections, you still saw politicians and businessmen with political ambitions owning media. But, in general, journalism flourished, and certainly in the Philippines from 1986 until recently, we had a rambunctious—that’s the word that’s always used—a rambunctious, free press after we came out of twenty-one years of rule by the Marcos dictatorship.

I got to cover the pendulum swinging this way, but now I fear that that it may be moving back the other way towards authoritarian rule. That also began in the Philippines, with the election of Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte. Like the rest of the world, what you’re seeing is that liberal democracy has not been inclusive enough, the benefits haven’t trickled down to everyone, and social media technology has empowered

populations to demand more; it's had a great impact on both perception and the vote in these democracies.

Do you think of the Philippines as a bellwether for the region?

Well, some people say the Philippines is much more like Latin America than it is like the rest of Southeast Asia, but again, when it comes to freedom of the press, issues of human rights, and even its role in the geopolitical balance of power, we're seeing a reversal in the Philippines with Duterte's election in 2016. You're seeing a rollback and people wanting more of a 'macho man' who knows what he wants, who goes where he wants and does what he wants, who seems authentic. At the same time, he's shifted the Philippines away from its traditional alliance with the United States towards China and Russia, and those are new things; in the thirty-some odd years I've been a journalist, I've not seen this kind of radical shift in such a short period of time.

You have a harrowing personal story about what it's like to navigate this shifting media environment as a journalist. Could you summarize your experience as a target of systemic harassment over social media?

You know, *Rappler* was born in 2012 and we rode the crest of social media. We were great advocates for empowering ordinary people through social media and we pushed Filipinos to adopt it. But what we saw during the campaigns of 2016 was the fomenting of anger, hitting these fracture lines within societies... in the Philippines, it was the gap between the rich and the poor and the gap between "Imperial Manila" and the countryside. The campaign leading up to the 2016 elections fomented anger over these gaps, but after President Duterte won, that was when it really became weaponized. Any kind of independent institution or voice was targeted. So beginning in July 2016, for about a month after the elections, President Duterte boycotted traditional journalists, and at the same time his campaign machinery began targeting news organizations with messages about corruption in media, attacking the credibility of traditional journalism. Shortly after that, it began targeting individual journalists.

Rappler and I became a target after we did a series on the "**propaganda wars.**" We released stories that showed how this hate was being used to create doubt in institutions and in journalists... That triggered a wave of attacks against me and against *Rappler* that reached as many as ninety hate messages per hour... ninety messages a week, you can handle, but an hour? That becomes a whole different ball game, and our response to it was to do what we do as journalists: to shine a light and tell people that these attacks were happening, that journalists were being targeted.

After journalists were targeted, opposition politicians were next, and the one who I think really bore the brunt of the propaganda machine's attacks was **Senator Leila de Lima**, the former Commission on Human Rights chief and justice secretary who had been investigating Duterte and then became a Senator; President Duterte began targeting her and within a few months, she was jailed.

The harbinger of the attacks against her in the real world was a social media campaign. What we saw with these attacks is not just an attempt to tear down the credibility of anyone questioning or perceived to be a critic of government, but also to seed doubt in truth, and this is where you can see the disinformation campaign that continues today.

You've said elsewhere that Duterte may have adopted these techniques from authoritarian governments overseas. Could you tell us more about that?

Well, this approach certainly isn't homegrown. *Rappler* is a startup that grew on social media and we watched exponential growth in the use of anger and hate online, which had not really happened in the Philippines like this before. We looked to two countries when trying to figure out what was going on. The first was China, and the other was actually Ukraine and what Russia had done there. Looking at the data, in China during 2016 state-sponsored accounts produced roughly 450 million fake messages on social media. But the difference between the approach in China and the Russian approach in Ukraine was the pointed anger, the sowing of doubt in truth, the disinformation aspects of it. In China, you're flooded with state messages but they are kind of boring, extolling the virtues of the state, versus what we saw Russia using in Ukraine and against its own citizens, the breaking down of facts until you don't know what is real and what is trustworthy... in that environment, the most powerful voice gains more power. In Russia that voice belongs to Putin, and in the Philippines it belongs to Duterte.

Has that been the largest effect on Philippine politics from these shifts in the media environment? How do politics work in an environment where the media operates in that way?

Up until 2016, because our institutions are weak in the Philippines, traditional media and journalists were seen as the most credible institutions. We've seen this shift quickly: traditional media was bombarded beginning in July of 2016, and now many Filipinos' trust in traditional media has been eroded as disinformation and fake news have polarized our society.

The ecosystem has changed dramatically: at the base of it is the weaponization of the social media campaign machinery that was used during the 2016 elections. Several of the key creators of propaganda from the campaign machine are now **paid by the government**.

The second layer of this is, how does it shift from social media to traditional media? There are newspapers and websites that are owned and operated by businessmen close to President Duterte or who are appointed to their positions by him. From there, it jumps into state media, which operates through radio, on television, and online. State media is run by the **Presidential Communications Operations Office**, which has no qualms about saying that they are sending their folks for training to China and Russia. These are former journalists, and I remember asking them, “Really? You’re sending your guys to China and Russia for training?” And they said “Yes, because it’s free!” And then, finally, you close the loop through the way appointments have been made. This information ecosystem is the harbinger of some of the policy shifts and priorities of the Duterte administration.

It’s striking that state employees are doing this openly. Often, governments outsource this activity so that there’s some degree of plausible deniability, but it doesn’t sound like that’s the case in the Philippines.

It starts with that first step of crippling traditional media. Part of how you do that is you replace traditional journalists with bloggers who do propaganda for the administration. That, I suppose, is great for the people in the administration, who feel that they’re among friends, but what’s shocking to me is the idea of attacking the media as a check on the government.

This transition is very apparent, and I think that part of the reason it’s been possible is because of the big social media platforms, which have gotten rid of a public space where you see different sides of the story; instead, it’s algorithms where if you follow the propaganda machine’s content creators and bloggers, you will only see their content and you won’t see any of the challenges to that worldview. These echo chambers are extremely dangerous in a threatened democracy like the Philippines, because information is key to keeping democracy strong.

Let’s be blunt about this now: traditional journalists are no longer the gatekeepers. Human journalists have been replaced by the assumptions built into the platforms’ algorithms, which looks more and more like mob rule. It creates echo chambers, and in the process, has weakened Philippine democracy.

Could you go into more detail on how social media has contributed to the shift you’ve described?

I was one of social media's greatest advocates, and again: *Rappler* could not have grown and could not have become the media organization that we are today without the power of social media. In the Philippines, social media is our public space; more than 97 percent of Filipinos who are online are on Facebook. One of the reasons I was such an advocate of social media in the beginning was because I felt like it empowered everyone, and it did; but by driving news consumption through the platforms, social media companies have, without realizing it, taken over the gatekeeping power of journalists.

The algorithms that power the platforms don't distinguish between fact and fiction, or between the *New York Times* and dubious blogs, or between what you ate for dinner and the top news of the day. The platforms give all of this to you in a mix, and the more you click on something the more of it you are given. That assumption, when it comes to news and information in a working democracy... well, we saw the impact of that globally in 2016. We first saw it in Brexit, and we saw it in Duterte's election in the Philippines.