

The Assault on Freedom of Expression
By Maria Ressa
March 30, 2022

Thank you for inviting me to speak to you today.

My name is Maria Ressa. I would like to share three points with you: first, what we are living through as journalists and human rights defenders in the Philippines; second, how technology for profit has become an insidious tool for tyranny globally; and finally, what we are doing to help safeguard our elections in 40 days. This is an Avengers, Assemble moment in our nation's battle for facts.

Lawfare

I've been a journalist for more than 36 years. I am a co-founder of Rappler in the Philippines. In 2016, we came under intense online attack because we exposed the brutal drug war and the propaganda machine that was attacking journalists, news organizations, human rights defenders, and opposition politicians. The weaponization of social media was followed by lawfare, twisting the law to target those same groups. In 2018, the Philippine government tried to revoke Rappler's license to operate, and while we continued to fight it legally, within 4 months, we lost 49% of our advertising revenue. In less than 2 years, my government filed 10 arrest warrants against me. In order to travel, I have to ask for permission from the courts. Sometimes I get it. Sometimes I don't. One of the times my travel was denied at the last minute was when my aging parents, both ill, had asked me to come because my mom was getting an operation.

In the past few months, we've had 22 new complaints, potential new legal cases, filed against us. Last Friday, we received 8 in one day. We must be doing something right because not only did a sitting cabinet secretary¹ sue 7 news organizations, but another is a petition at the Supreme Court² by the Solicitor General alleging unfounded conspiracy theories against Rappler. The majority of these complaints³ are connected to President Duterte's pastor, Apollo Quiboloy, wanted⁴ by the FBI, whose company leading the attack against journalists and human rights activists⁵ was recently awarded

¹ [Cusi sues Rappler, 6 other news orgs for libel over Malampaya-Dennis Uy reports](#), [Journalist groups decry Cusi and Uy's libel suits over Malampaya deal reports | Philstar.com](#), and [Cusi libel complaints an 'embarrassment' for PH – Maria Ressa's lawyers](#)

² [Calida to SC: Void Rappler-Comelec fact-check deal for violating free speech](#) and [Marcos and Calida in sync anew, this time vs Rappler's Comelec deal](#)

³ [Quiboloy workers file a dozen cyber libel complaints vs Rappler](#) and [Rappler answers a dozen cyber libel complaints from Quiboloy workers](#)

⁴ [Quiboloy, 2 associates on FBI's most wanted list](#)

⁵ [Quiboloy's SMNI fuels disinformation, online attacks on gov't critics](#)

a television franchise⁶. Last week, I testified in court in a case where the alleged tax we owed - P200,000 was far less than the P1.2 million I had posted in that court in bail and bonds to stay free and keep working.

All told, I could go to jail for the rest of my life. Because I refuse to stop doing my job as a journalist. Because Rappler holds the line and continues to protect the public sphere.

It feels like we're living in an alternative universe, and the Queen is shouting, "off with her head!"

But I'm lucky.

Violence, jail, shutdown

Remember Senator Leila de Lima, a former justice secretary and head of the Commission on Human Rights, last month began her 6th year in prison. Amnesty International calls her a prisoner of conscience.

Or young journalist Frenchie Mae Cumpio, who spent her last two birthdays in prison.

Or former colleague Jess Malabanan, killed by a bullet to his head. He worked on Reuters' drug war series that won a Pulitzer Prize.

Or ABS-CBN, the largest broadcaster in the Philippines - a newsroom I headed for 6 years, which in 2020 lost its franchise to operate. The last time that happened was when Ferdinand Marcos declared martial law in 1972.

For the people who defend us, there are costs. More lawyers have been killed⁷ than journalists under the Duterte administration: at least 66 compared to at least 22. And the toll for human rights activists⁸ as of August last year hit at least 421 dead. Last year on March 7, nine trade union leaders and human rights activists were killed⁹ in simultaneous early morning police raids - now known as Bloody Sunday. And the numbers killed in our brutal drug war - from thousands to tens of thousands - is the first casualty in our battle for facts.

⁶ [Channel 43, used by ABS-CBN, goes to Quiboloy's SMNI](#)

⁷ [On last day of 2021, Cavite prosecutor becomes 66th lawyer killed under Duterte](#)

⁸ [In 2021, activists, human rights defenders fight to survive under Duterte](#) and [A bloody trail: People we lost under Duterte](#)

⁹ [UN slams Philippine police for killing nine activists | News | DW | 09.03.2021](#)

Surveillance capitalism's harms and the destruction of trust

That brings us to my second point: how technology has degraded facts and broken our societies. I became a journalist because I believe that information is power - it's how we get justice. The death of democracy began when journalists lost our gatekeeping powers to the technology platforms that not only abdicated responsibility for protecting us ... but also destroyed democracy by destroying the facts ... for immense profit.

Like the age of industrialization, there's a new economic model that brought new harms, a model Shoshana Zuboff called surveillance capitalism - when our atomized personal experiences are collected by machine learning, organized by artificial intelligence - extracting our private lives for outsized corporate gain. Highly profitable micro-targeting operations are engineered to structurally undermine human will - a behavior modification system in which we are Pavlov's dogs, experimented on in real time with disastrous consequences. This is happening to you - to all of us around the world.

Engagement based metrics of these American tech companies mean that the incentive structure of the algorithms, which is just their opinion in code implemented at a scale that we could never have imagined, is insidiously shaping our future by encouraging the worst of human behavior. Studies have shown that lies laced with anger and hate spread faster and further than facts.

Without facts, you can't have truth. Without truth, you can't have trust. Without these, we have no shared reality, no rule of law, no democracy.

In my upcoming book, the prologue I submitted last year began with the splintering of reality in Crimea in 2014. I had to revise that when Russia invaded Ukraine using the same narratives seeded then. Would that have happened if the platforms had acted 8 years ago? That is the true cost for the world.

Now these networks form a global nervous system of toxic sludge partly fueled by geopolitical power play. In 2018, we connected the information operations in the Philippines with Russian disinformation networks through websites in Canada. In 2020, Facebook took down information operations from China that were creating fake accounts for the US elections, polishing the image of the Marcoses, campaigning for Duterte's daughter, and attacking me and Rappler. In 2021, the US and the EU called out China and Russia for Covid-19 disinformation.

We are all connected.

Legislation

How will we deal with surveillance capitalism today? That's where all our problems connect: safety, privacy, antitrust, and content moderation. They're not separate issues.

The platforms want you to debate content moderation because if you're stuck there, they can make more money. So move further upstream to algorithmic amplification, its operating system, and go further upstream to its root cause: surveillance capitalism.

On Thursday, March 24, 2022, the European Union hammered out the last details of the Market Services Act, to be followed by the Digital Services Act, the most comprehensive legislation to put guardrails around tech. These will take time. Right now, I appeal to US legislators to reform or revoke section 230 of the Communications Decency Act because we at the front lines need immediate help.

Battle for facts

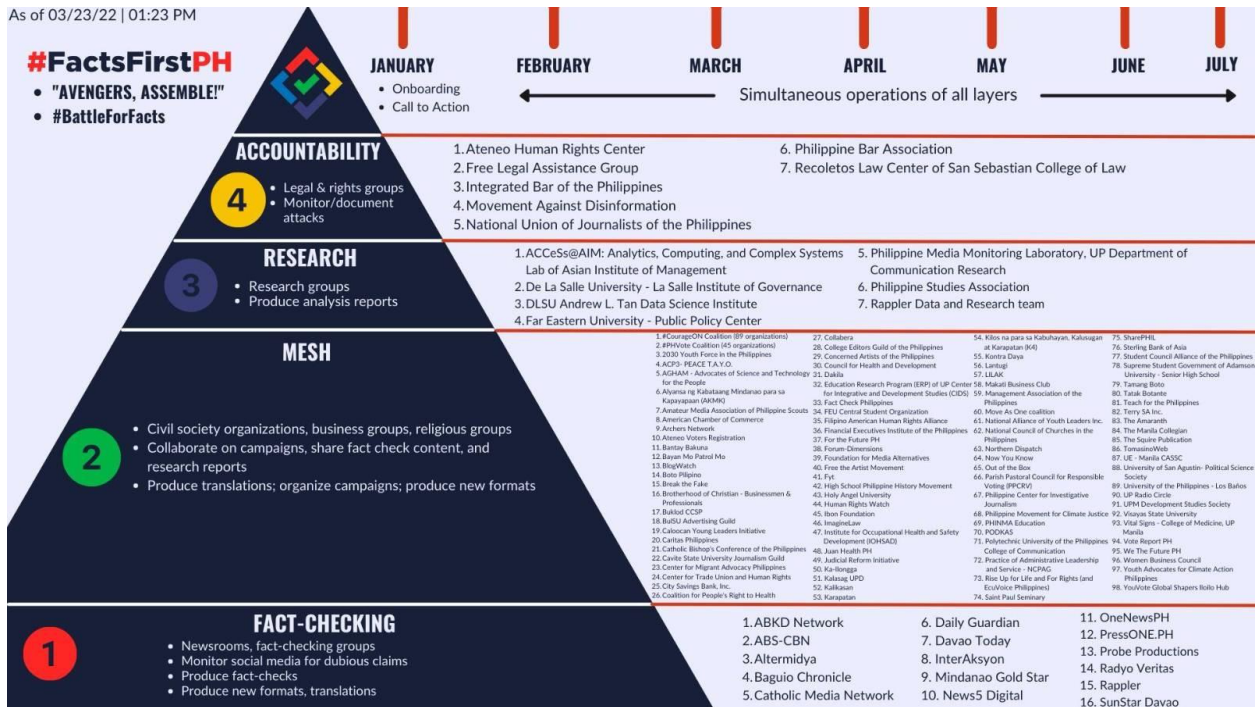
We cannot solve the global existential problems if we don't win the battle for facts. And we cannot have integrity of elections if we don't have integrity of facts.

In 40 days, the Philippines will vote in an existential moment for our democracy. The frontrunner for president is Ferdinand Marcos, Jr., whose family was ousted by a people power revolt 36 years ago. He's back partly because history was revised in plain view, with networks of disinformation, which we at Rappler exposed, releasing the data publicly.

So we decided to collaborate to find a solution. Here's one way media, civil society, the academe, and the law can work together to deal with the viral speed of lies and the preferential distribution of anger and hate.

This is the pyramid we built.

This is #FactsFirstPH:



It begins with our communities - individuals reporting lies to our tiplines, the data layer that unites the pyramid. For the first time, at least 16 news groups are working together in the foundational layer. Once the fact checks are done, it moves to the mesh layer, civil society groups, non-governmental organizations, schools, business groups, and the Church joining together to mount their own campaigns for facts, creating a mesh of distribution. That data then travels to the third layer, the disinformation research groups finally working together, which weekly releases research to tell Filipinos exactly how we're being manipulated and by whom. Finally, the layer that's long been needed: the law - legal groups across the spectrum focused on filing tactical and strategic litigation.

Until legislation - guard rails for tech - are put in place, communities must find a way to collaborate and to use technology and data against this global behavior modification system that has become the preferred tools for autocrats, not because they're so good, but because the platforms are so bad.

It's been only a few weeks, but all news groups have been under new sustained DDOS attacks to take us all down, and we have a petition at the Supreme Court by the Solicitor General saying that fact-checking is prior restraint. So it's working.

Stop the impunity

Eight years after the annexation of Crimea, elections are existential globally - even as the global landscape is being reshaped with "Autocrats Inc" emerging stronger. If lies

win in the Philippines, we again become the first domino to fall in the global descent to tyranny. As news groups in the Philippines now face renewed and expanded DDOS attacks against our sites meant to take us down, these exponential lies are like DDOS attacks on our brains, attacking our biology, leaving us defenseless.

The platforms - and the autocrats that exploit them - must be held accountable, and governments doing this must move at a faster pace. In that sense, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has brought nations together and may bring solutions for the continued impunity of platforms. For countries like the Philippines, consider Magnitsky sanctions.

Democratic nations must stand together for democratic values. The solution is three-pronged, and remain the core pillars of Rappler: technology, journalism, community. First: Put guardrails around the tech; build better tech. Second: strengthen journalism, and help fund independent news - part of the reason I agreed to co-chair the International Fund for Public Interest Media. Third, build communities of action that stand by these democratic values.

I could go to jail for the rest of my life. Just because I'm a journalist. But what I do now will determine whether that will happen. So I pledge to #HoldTheLine. These times demand more, and journalists have met - and will meet those demands.

Now it's up to you.