

Holding the line:

Rappler, Facebook, Duterte and the battle for truth and public trust

Commentary: *Rappler* is the only journalist-owned and journalist-led media company in the Philippines. In the aftermath of chief executive Maria Ressa’s 2021 Nobel Peace Prize, this keynote address at the Asian Congress for Media and Communication (ACMC) outlines how the independent media group has harnessed social media and pressured Facebook and the tech giants that control the global information highway to do better and to give facts premium over profits. The address argues that the only way media can regain public trust in journalism is to regain their rightful space in the public sphere. This will not be able to be achieved in an environment where algorithms make value judgments for the public and where readers are served only information that they want or enjoy. Without journalists who will tell it like it is no matter the consequences, the future will continue to be one of alternate facts and manipulated opinions.

Keywords: ACMC2021, activism, algorithms, alternate facts, Arab Spring, authoritarianism, Facebook, Maria Ressa, media lawsuits, Nobel Peace Prize, Philippines, prostitute, Rappler, Rodrigo Duterte, social media, technology, truth to power

GLEND A GLORIA

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A WARM hello from the ‘Nobel Newsroom’. Ever since our CEO Maria Ressa was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize—the first Filipino Nobel laureate—some of us have started calling our office the Nobel newsroom. This immense pride that we feel isn’t just because Maria is our CEO, it is that the prize went to two journalists who have faced the toughest challenges imposed by authoritarian states (The Nobel Peace Prize, 2021). More than that, the Nobel prize puts a global spotlight on the extraordinary dangers that we journalists face today.

You and I are no stranger to threats to media freedom—from repressive laws to libel suits to imprisonment to death threats. To many of us in the Global South, journalism has always been considered a dangerous profession long before media watchdogs started ranking countries around the world according to the freedoms enjoyed by their press. And yet, despite all that we have seen



Figure 1: The founders of the Philippine news website *Rappler*, Glenda Gloria (from left), Lilibeth Frondoso, Chay Hofileña and co-winner of the 2021 Nobel Peace Prize Maria Ressa in the company’s newsroom in Manila, Philippines.

and experienced, it’s no exaggeration to say that this is the most challenging period for journalism. At stake today is our very existence, our relevance, and our ability to speak truth to power.

Not only are journalists under attack. Truth is under attack. Not only is the business model we grew up in under attack. It is either dying or dead, and the road to sustainability is more elusive than ever. Not only are we harassed and silenced for speaking truth to power. Power has consolidated itself using the same technology that once upon a time we thought would democratise access to information.

And this did not happen overnight. Instead, this came day by day, in painful increments of disruption, change, and emojis in between.

The best of times

The world used to be a better place. We established *Rappler* ten years ago with a core of a dozen journalists, artists, and technology specialists that came from two generations and various fields of work and discipline (*Rappler’s Founding Board, 2012; The Rappler Story, 2017*). The year 2012 was an opportune time to imagine, to risk, to recreate. The world was being disrupted by technology but it seemed to be disrupting for the greater good.

Democracy activists were still raving about the Arab Spring when social media broke the dam that sustained dictators. And Filipinos had just fallen in love with Facebook as their best connector with each other. In fact, our vision for *Rappler* then was to use social media for social change.

Fast forward to today, and we woke up one morning in a new world where our body of work is served on the public arena alongside the fakes and memes—and given equal importance. To be sure, the ground has been shaking in the last few years—triggered by technology, a mobile lifestyle, and the persistent yawning gap between the powerful and those in the margins.

What changed?

At *Rappler*, we felt the tremors months before the start of the campaign period for the 2016 presidential elections that Rodrigo Duterte would win. Aware that it was going to be the first social media-driven election, campaign teams resorted to building groups that relied on algorithms to spread campaign propaganda and an army of laptop warriors who are provided hate agendas every day (Etter, 2017).

We saw how the speed and spread of targeted distribution has changed the way people think and behave, how information is absorbed and who absorbs it, and how facts are manipulated to suit political ends. We saw how the disruption impacted on journalism, advertising and politics—shaking the foundation of these three.

In the Philippines under President Rodrigo Duterte, state power further constricted media freedom and diminished journalism in three tactics:

1. First was to create a climate of fear among citizens, not just journalists, by spreading half-truths and lies that create an alternate reality of imagined enemies.
2. Second was to kill online independent voices by consistently discrediting them and destroying their reputation through repetitive messages that falsely lump them with vested interests.
3. Third was to exploit resentment toward media around simple, unified messages: it is biased, it is corrupt, it is owned and run by oligarchs. Derogatory terms like the word ‘presstitute’, a play on the words ‘press’ and ‘prostitute’, have been purposely circulated within the platform for years by pro-Duterte administration social media influencers to vilify journalists and destroy public trust in news groups. In a report we published in June 2018, *Rappler* found at least 194 Facebook groups which used the word ‘presstitute’ in posts (Rappler Research Team, 2018). These groups had a total of 6.57 million members.

Today Facebook is the public sphere in the Philippines—a country where users spend twice as many hours on social media than the global average. No media network could claim as much reach or depth of influence in the daily lives of Filipinos. With 83 million Filipinos on Facebook every month (roughly 74 percent of the total population), Facebook remains the key attack vector vs journalists.

Real world impact

This has real world impact in the Philippines. Starting in 2018, the Duterte government and its satellites have filed at least 11 investigations and cases against *Rappler*, Maria Ressa, myself and other staffers (Johnson, 2018, Philippine court dismisses, 2021). We were threatened with closure. The presidential palace banned us from getting close to the President, and our reporters' access to key Cabinet secretaries and agencies was cut. To be a *Rappler* journalist is to earn the ire not only of the then President Duterte but the entire bureaucracy that he has controlled. It's been tough.

And then in 2020, at the height of the pandemic, Duterte's allies in Congress did not renew the franchise of ABS-CBN, the country's biggest radio and TV network and the only source of news in remote villages in the Philippines (Cepeda, 2020).

It didn't help that the lockdown already caused further decline in the use of traditional media. On the whole, according to the Reuters Institute report, use of television has slipped 5 points to 61 percent (Newman et al., 2020). The same report showed that online news consumption rose while social media as a source of news grew.

Why is this a concern? Because while most news groups are also active on social media, these digital spaces have also been used as platforms for launching the most virulent and relentless attacks against journalists and media organisations.

Moving forward

Is there hope? Three reasons to be hopeful despite everything:

1. Every crisis is an opportunity. In the last two years, we at *Rappler* managed to bounce back and continue holding power to account and exposing wrongdoing. Part of the reason is how our ownership structure was set up. *Rappler* is the only journalist-owned and journalist-led media company in the Philippines. We make decisions for the public interest even if it's bad for business. There is no businessman who would call us to kill this story or to offer a dialogue with the powers that be. The buck stopped with us. And we considered this ownership structure both as a privilege and a massive responsibility. For every attack hurled against us, we held on to the belief that backing down will not only weaken journalism but will also give the dictator victory on a silver platter. You yield an inch of your space to an authoritarian, and he will want more. At *Rappler*, we chose not to yield an inch; we did not compromise; we did not duck, we did not hide. That we have survived and continue to survive Duterte has been proof that guarding one's space—no matter how narrow—has its rewards.
2. Second reason to be hopeful is—for journalism to matter, the com-

munity must be a part of it. In our crisis years, our community stayed with us. We realised that we had a core base of audience that, while not massive, shared the same value that we believe in, which is the public's need for transparency and accountability on the part of those who lead and govern them. We tapped democracy partners in schools and universities, in the NGO community, in media and business. We held forums with them, joined protest rallies for press freedom and democracy, conducted briefings on the disinformation ecosystem and shared our studies on networked propaganda with them. We took time to explain to students and young professionals the interconnection between press freedom and democracy; that without truth tellers who will scrutinise government, those in government will be let loose to do whatever they want. At *Rappler*, we learned that when the going gets tough, hold the line, stick to your core, and have faith in your community of readers. *Rappler* after all has never been just about *journalism*. Our two other pillars are *community* and *technology*. In our worldview, the stories we write should be actionable by the communities we serve. And each innovation should not be just for the sake of innovation but to provide meaning and allow journalists to tell stories that move communities to act.

3. The third reason to be hopeful is that crisis challenges our mindsets. The attacks on *Rappler* scared away advertisers but also compelled us to diversify our revenue stream so that today, our revenues come not just from advertising but business research, grants, membership, programmatic ads, and special projects. We have not paywalled our site but we have content and activities exclusive to paying subscribers. Thankfully, we are now entering our third year of positive net income.

Beyond Duterte

But crisis management is just one part of the equation. We understood that the problem was more than Duterte, who has now been replaced by the ousted 1970s dictator's son 'Bongbong' Marcos Jr in the Philippines elections in May 2022, it was the environment where news is being pitted against fake news and where platforms would not distinguish the work of journalists from hired propagandists.

And so we led the pushback against Facebook by partnering with them as a fact-checking partner on one hand, and exposing the gaps in their algo and policies on the other. It is a strange relationship that both helps—and shames—Facebook. *Rappler's* pushback against Facebook, which we began in 2016 when nobody would dare listen, is now bearing fruit in terms of some key steps done by the tech giant, but we're a long way off from what we need.

We continue to pressure the tech giants that control our information highway to do better and to give facts premium over profits. Because the only way we could regain public trust in journalism is to regain our rightful space in the public sphere. We won't be able to achieve that in an environment where algorithms make value judgments for the public and where our readers are served only information that they want or enjoy.

Without journalists who will tell it like it is no matter the consequences, the future will continue to be one of alternate facts and manipulated opinions.

As we've experienced at *Rappler*, the battle to save journalism cannot be fought by journalists alone, and cannot be fought from our laptops alone. The battle for truth is a battle we must share—and fight—with other groups and citizens. Each time our freedoms are threatened, we should have no qualms engaging other democracy frontliners and participating in collective efforts to resist authoritarianism.

I believe we have the motivation and enough understanding of our world now to stop the tide of disinformation that fuels the spread of authoritarianism. In this environment, make no doubt: Journalism is activism.

Note

1. On 27 June 2022, three days before President Rodrigo Duterte stepped down as Head of State, the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) again ordered the closure of Rappler. The Rappler editors vowed to fight on.

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Glenda Gloria co-founded Rappler in 2011 and served as its managing editor until 2020 when she was named executive editor. She completed her journalism degree in 1985, a year before the end of the Marcos dictatorship. She has worked for the Philippine Daily Inquirer, The Manila Times, the Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism (PCIJ) and international news agencies. Between 2008 and 2011, she managed ANC, the ABS-CBN news channel. Among her authored books are Under the Crescent Moon: Rebellion in Mindanao, with Marites Dañguilan-Vitug, a groundbreaking book about the conflict in Mindanao that won the National Book Award. She was a keynote speaker for the Asian Congress for Media and Communication (ACMC) conference hosted virtually by Auckland University of Technology (AUT), 25-27 November 2021.
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