

# **Press Freedom, facts and democracy (Philippines): The Unholy Alliance between Authoritarianism and Big Tech**

Friday 4 December 2020, by [RESSA Maria](#) (Date first published: 21 November 2020).

**Brief intervention at the webinar “From Repression to Resistance: Combatting the Lawfare against Press Freedom,” Manila, Nov 21, 2020.**

On June 15, 2020, I sat in a decrepit, windowless courtroom and listened to Judge Rainelda Estacio-Montesa deliver her verdict. It started with a fundamental truth about press freedom, then twisted it upside down to justify her guilty verdict, then closed with a quote from Nelson Mandela. It took a lot of legal acrobatics to get me and Rappler there, and it will impact Filipinos: the statute of limitations for libel was changed from 1 year to 12 years; and a new definition of “republishing” was introduced.

I was convicted for a crime that didn’t exist when we published a story 8 years ago, one that I didn’t write, edit, or supervise. Oh, and while my former colleague Rey Santos, Jr. and I were found guilty, Rappler was declared innocent. Kafkaesque.

Of course, I’m challenging this verdict because I have done nothing wrong.

I’m a journalist, not a criminal. Yet, this is what it takes to try to hold power to account today.

I know first-hand why and how democracy is dying, and why journalists at the frontlines are constantly under attack. Part of it is because I have a front-row seat: as a target, I see the evolution of the online attacks as well as the weaponization of the law; as an investigative journalist, I’m faced with near daily decisions challenging our profession; and, as a business and technology head, I’m watching our business model destroyed by technology, and trying to reimagine and build the future of news.

There are 3 developments that are turning our world upside down:

1. The pandemic and its impact on power;
2. The behavior modification system we call social media;
3. The impact of all this on civic engagement - and our attempts to save democracy

So let’s go to the pandemic, which like in most countries only exacerbated the underlying problems. The Philippines has had one of the world’s longest lockdowns: a largely security-led response to this virus. Like Bolsonaro in Brazil, President Duterte appointed mostly retired military generals to lead our response. Our lockdowns had curfews and quarantine passes, rules that weren’t implemented equally. When you break these rules, you get arrested or sometimes shot — more than 100,000 people were arrested for quarantine violations from March to September [[1](#)].

The Duterte administration asked for and received broad emergency powers and a lot of money from Congress. Despite that, many say it didn't do enough in terms of the basics: tests, contact tracing, and aid for our people.

Instead, it used the pandemic to consolidate power, and with a captured legislature, to further constrict our rights guaranteed by the Philippine constitution. On May 5, a small regulatory agency ordered our largest broadcaster, ABS-CBN, to shut down. Within a few hours, the network went dark. The last time that happened was when Ferdinand Marcos declared martial law in 1972; that shutdown lasted 14 years.

Shortly after, a working committee in our House of Representatives took away television network ABS-CBN's franchise for good. While it took months to do that, Congress passed a draconian "anti-terrorism" bill in about 5 days during the lockdown. President Duterte signed it into law.

Under this, anyone labeled a "terrorist" by a small group of cabinet secretaries can be arrested without a warrant and held in prison for up to 24 days. 37 petitions have now been filed at the Supreme Court demanding it be declared unconstitutional [2]. Still, it achieves its purpose: to make Filipinos afraid to speak and challenge power.

What has enabled our democracy's death by a thousand cuts?

Technology, once an enabler, is now the destroyer, building division, "us against them" thinking, into the design of social media platforms. It's not a coincidence that divisive leaders perform best on social media.

Propaganda has always been around, but personalized, atomized, individual news feeds tailored to each person's weakness, this is brand new.

Social media are the new gatekeepers NOT protecting the public sphere. Facebook is now the world's largest distributor of news. Except there's a catch: lies laced with anger and hate spread faster and further than the boring facts of news. They create a bandwagon effect of artificial consensus - for the lie.

You say a lie a million times, it becomes a fact. Without facts, you can't have truth. Without truth, you can't have trust. Without these, democracy as we know it is dead. All around the world, populist digital authoritarians use this scorched earth policy to get elected, then they use the formal powers of their posts - the tools of democracy - to cave institutions in from within. Then they use both social media and their top down power to attack the truth-tellers.

I know this first-hand: in 2016, we challenged the impunity of Duterte's drug war, which human rights groups say has killed tens of thousands (while the government keeps rolling back the numbers [3]), and the impunity of Facebook, which allowed the exponential attacks and hate speech against journalists like me. That was when I was deluged with about 90 hate messages PER HOUR.

It's meant to pound me to silence. Simultaneously, this astroturfing - a fake bandwagon effect - is meant to influence others to believe the lies. Then it went a step further, using microtargeting to seed false narratives. Senator Leila de Lima was among the first target; Vice President Leni Robredo has been a daily target.

My last 4 years show you how this works:

In 2016, pro-government accounts seeded "journalist = criminal" referring to me and Rappler. I laughed then: by 2021, I would have been a journalist for 35 years, and I have a public track record.

Yet, I watched that lie repeated a million times make many Filipinos believe that ridiculous charge.

In 2017, that same narrative came top-down from the most powerful voice: President Duterte attacked Rappler in his State of the Nation address, and a subpoena followed about a week later.

In 2018, the government weaponized the law and filed 11 cases against me and Rappler.

In 2019, it issued 8 arrest warrants against me, 8 criminal cases against Rappler, arrested me twice in a 5-week period (and detained me overnight) to try to intimidate us to silence. It only fuelled our mission because we now had first-hand knowledge of the abuses of power.

Of course, in 2020, there was the conviction for cyberlibel. You could argue that conviction happened because we stuck to our convictions.

This is how alternative realities are formed. If you don't know what to believe, then you can't act. Which gives more power to the person already in power.

Social media is now a behavior modification system [4], and we are Pavlov's dogs.

We input our atomized selves, and for each post, machine learning builds a model of who we are: it knows us better than our family and friends, better than we know ourselves. Then artificial intelligence takes our most vulnerable moment to a message and sells it to the highest bidder. It could be a company or a country. This pattern of insidious manipulation creates its own feedback loop that keeps the machine learning and growing.

Cheap state-sponsored armies on social media are in at least 70 countries around the world in 2019, according to the Oxford University Computational Research Project [5]. It is a scorched-earth policy for power and money, now part of the global dictator's playbook.

We fought back and survived the last 4 years by understanding the data and by realizing how social media abdicated responsibility to protect the public sphere. We built our response on the 3 pillars of Rappler: technology, investigative journalism, community [6].

It's a strange coincidence - or maybe not - that the Philippines' anti-terror law and Hong Kong's draconian security law rolled out at about the same time. Those are top-down measures of control, but far more insidious are the influence operations - state-sponsored social media attacks against human rights activists and journalists, robbing citizens of free will and facts.

There's one crucial question every Filipino, every citizen in a democracy needs to answer.

What are you willing to sacrifice for the truth?

**Maria Ressa**

---

**P.S.**

• Other News:  
<https://www.other-news.info/2020/12/the-unholy-alliance-between-authoritarianism-and-big-tech/>

- Maria Ressa is the Chief Executive Officer of Rappler, an innovative influential online news agency. The recipient of multiple media awards, she has become the international symbol of the free press's resistance to authoritarian efforts to suppress it. She has been served nine arrest warrants, arrested twice, and convicted for cyberlibel. She is threatened with imprisonment should her appeal against her conviction fail.

---

## Footnotes

[1] <https://www.rappler.com/nation/arrested-quarantine-violators-philippines-2020>

[2] <https://www.rappler.com/nation/ibp-34th-petition-anti-terror-law>

[3] <https://www.rappler.com/nation/missing-drug-war-deaths-duterte-government-tally>

[4] <https://www.cigionline.org/articles/maria-ressa-and-social-medias-illiberal-intent>

[5] <https://www.other-news.info/2020/12/the-unholy-alliance-between-authoritarianism-and-big-tech/>

[6] <https://www.rappler.com/about/rappler-story-independent-journalism-impact>