

Judith Kelley:

Well, it's a pleasure to welcome Maria Ressa, the Nobel Peace Laureate and international journalist to Duke University and to this podcast. Maria Ressa won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2021 for her challenge of corruption in her native country, the Philippines. She's faced government arrest and online assaults for her work to hold the line and tell the truth. Maria is CEO of Rappler, an international news organization that she co-founded. She's the author of *How to Stand Up to a Dictator: The Fight for Our Future*. The book is a memoir of her life's work to hold power to account. Maria Ressa fights for justice often in the courts. She has fought numerous court cases brought against her by the Philippine government, and two of those cases are currently pending. In the book she unravels clues in history that connect the Philippines to some of the biggest issues in the world. She also provides important lessons from her work that can be guideposts for a better world in our future. I'm Judith Kelley, I'm Dean of the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University. Welcome to Policy 360, Maria.

Maria Ressa:

Thanks for having me.

Judith Kelley:

We're so thrilled that you could be here and travel from the Philippines to spend time with us and with our students here in our community. You received the Nobel Peace Prize for your courageous fight for freedom and for freedom of expression in the Philippines. You were the first Filipino to ever win the prize, congratulations.

Maria Ressa:

Thank you.

Judith Kelley:

I'm sure you've told the story before, but would you just tell us just quickly about hearing that you had won the prize?

Maria Ressa:

Oh my gosh. I was actually live on a webinar on how and whether independent media could survive in Southeast Asia. It was a two-hour webinar, and in the middle of it after the first hour my phone started ringing and I just saw it was a Norwegian number. And I was like, "Okay." I knew I had been nominated, but I didn't expect it, because I thought if they were going to give it to journalists, the Committee to Protect Journalists was nominated, so I would give it to ... But I thought, "Oh my gosh." In fact, I messaged the host to say, "I'm getting a call. I'll just turn off my audio and pick it up." Because we were in Q&A. And I thought that they were going to tell me, I thought they were so organized that they would tell everyone who was nominated who won.

And little did I know, of course, when Olav, Olav Njølstad was the man who ... When he told me that it was, I think you could see the shock. I was in shock. And in a strange way it was such a difficult time for Rappler. It was a difficult time for me. And in a way you shut parts of yourself off. You almost become a stoic. Because you need to keep moving forward, but it's just there's mounting pressure. And I think that moment, it's funny, I don't think of this as something for me or for Rappler. I think it was a recognition of how difficult it is to be a journalist today. It was for Dmitry Muratov-

Judith Kelley:

As well for [inaudible 00:03:25].

Maria Ressa:

Yes. And within four months both of our news organizations faced impending shutdown. It was the very first time that Rapplers came together virtually. It was still the tail end of our lockdown in the Philippines, and I think we all cried together. But in the middle of that, I remembered telling people, "Gosh, you can't be complacent now, because things had gotten so bad."

Judith Kelley:

Yeah, yeah. You said they wanted to recognize journalists. I think that's right. But they also had to pick somebody they thought worthy, so congratulations for that. But you mentioned in your book that the last time the prize had been given to a journalist was in 1935.

Maria Ressa:

Yes.

Judith Kelley:

And it was given to Carl von Ossietzky, if I'm saying that right, a German.

Maria Ressa:

That's correct, yes.

Judith Kelley:

A German who couldn't receive the prize, because he was, as you say, languishing in a concentration camp. Why do you think they wanted to give it to a journalist now? And what is the connection you make to the moment today with 1935?

Maria Ressa:

Oh my God, in so many ways. I mean, the major two is in the Nobel lecture in 2021 I said, "What is happening in our information ecosystem is like the atom bomb being dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, except this is silent, but yet it is death by a thousand cuts. Not only of the degradation of our information ecosystem, of our own insidious manipulation by information operations, information warfare, but also ultimately what we are seeing is really the death of democracy." And this is data-driven. You cannot have integrity of elections if you do not have integrity of facts. The comparison to World War II is what aided the rise of Hitler communications. Again, this is a new moment where the big tech, the social media platforms that connected us is it's like throwing a spark into really dry wood, and we are blowing up. That's the first, I think.

I actually asked the Norwegian Nobel Committee, and they're not supposed to tell us for 50 years, but in the very last day after a lot of wine, I can outlast this, they did tell us that the attacks on journalists had been more than a decade where it has become harder and harder to do our jobs. And if you remember at that point there was a journalist who was, a plane was diverted by, this is in Belarus, right? So, look at this. The increasing number of journalists who were harassed, jailed, killed. With big tech, with the social media landscape you now can kill a journalist through information warfare, because if no one believes what the journalist is doing, then it's very similar, the harassment, the doxing, all of these. The attacks

against journalists went hand in hand with a declining democracy, the indexes for democracy over the last 17 years.

Judith Kelley:

Yes, that's exactly right. That's exactly right, 17 years. And that's what I was going to point out too is that the rise in authoritarianism, right?

Maria Ressa:

Yes.

Judith Kelley:

1935.

Maria Ressa:

Exactly.

Judith Kelley:

2021.

Maria Ressa:

And part of it is I covered the shift of Southeast Asia from authoritarian one-man rule to democracy. Starting with the people power revolt against Marcos, the father in 1986. I also covered the end of Suharto of almost, I'm going to say 27 years. I mean much more almost, I think, sorry, I'll double check. But decades, 32 years, almost 32 years in power, that Suharto had been in power. And what I saw in these countries in Malaysia is a nostalgia for the past. It moved at human comprehension and human longing. Because democracy is really hard. And I think when there is too much change, people want to put their heads down and just build a better life for their families. Well, we saw this nostalgia for strong man rules. And it was starting around soon after. When is the fall of Suharto? 1998. By 2000, 2004 we were already saying that, because there was too much change.

But it was before the age of social media, so that civic engagement, human rights organizations could get in front, political parties could still debate and move the needle. In the age of big tech, of social media, that became impossible, because a lie told a million times becomes a fact. Because the algorithms that pushed growth, a growth algorithm recommending friends of friends to you, to me, literally pushes you to grow your own networks, but also grows the platform. Every social media platform uses that. And yet, that has led to polarization, political polarization all around the Earth, all around the globe. For me, it was really this time around, I think the last part, even comparing it to World War II, the sheer speed, the way information becomes missiles that blow up.

Judith Kelley:

Yeah. It seems to me that the Nobel Committee was sending a warning signal. They were calling out the moment.

Maria Ressa:

And they had been trying to, what they had actually told us that last closing dinner is that they had wanted to, that they had seen the trends, but that they were waiting for the journalists. And the

journalists were handcuffed, because you're not supposed to be writing about yourself. We tend to take ourselves out of the occasion. And yet these moments when democracy comes under attack, journalists were the first line. Actually, we're not alone, journalists, women, human rights activists.

Judith Kelley:

Absolutely.

Maria Ressa:

These tend to lead to the disintegration of democracy.

Judith Kelley:

But they did pit you and Rappler, so let's talk a little bit about Rappler. Rappler is a groundbreaking online news platform, and it's been challenging the government. And you were first arrested in 2017, right? In the newsroom?

Maria Ressa:

Yes.

Judith Kelley:

That must've been a shock. Can you talk a little bit about that?

Maria Ressa:

Actually, that was a game changer for me. Because even until today people don't quite realize how much the world has changed, until it slaps you in the face. That was my slap in the face moment. Because I'll joke and say the Nobel Prize in a weird way was Duterte, right? Duterte, if he had not tried to consolidate power, if he had not tried to control information, if he had not tried to intimidate journalists and human rights activists, I think we would've kept doing our jobs.

Judith Kelley:

But did they just come barging into the newsroom? Was there like a warning, or did they take you away? Did they put you in handcuffs? What was the, I mean, maybe you don't want to relive the moment, but-

Maria Ressa:

No, no, no. It's funny, because I think what prepared me for all of it, one is, I was already in my 50s. At that point I think it was clear in my head there's kind of this slow descending gloom coming at you. And our lawyers were pretty much doom and gloom at that point. They were like, "Maria, be quiet." And we couldn't stop ourselves. In fact, the first time the government tried to shut us down, my co-founders and I gave a press conference the same day, and we forgot to tell our lawyers. But having said that, so what did they do? This was, I believe the first time I was arrested was in 2019.

Judith Kelley:

2019, okay.

Maria Ressa:

2019, because in 2016 information operations, all of the online attacks, I was getting 98 messages per hour. Then that-

Judith Kelley:

90 per hour?

Maria Ressa:

90 per hour. That set the stage, pulled the public apart, gave plausible deniability for the weaponization of the law, which came top down then. 2017 there were something like 21 investigations. By 2018, January 2018 they tried to shut Rappler down in January, we came fighting back. This entire time I was like, "I understand the constitution. I led the largest nukes organization in the Philippines, and I know when we should be standing up against draconian measures." But then when I got arrested in 2019, and it was again, it was a day before Valentine's Day, February 13th 2019 was the first time I got arrested, and then I kept getting arrested or sued after. But they came, it was near five o'clock, so I still remember how the sun was coming through the windows. I was actually, I had just walked into a meeting with Facebook's young information operations team, two of them super young, and I was thinking, "Oh my gosh, you have no idea what you've just walked into."

And then more than a dozen agents from the National Bureau of Investigation, this is our FBI, they walked into the newsroom. I was doing the present, we were having the meeting, and then my co-founders, I just saw tremendous activity outside. We have glass walls, glass conference rooms, and one of my co-founders came in and said, "Maria, they're here to arrest you." I looked at my watch, I do worst case scenarios all the time, and I knew that there was a municipal court where I could post bail. I wasn't concerned. I just thought, "Okay, I'm going to post bail. There's more than enough time."

Judith Kelley:

You weren't concerned. That's pretty good.

Maria Ressa:

I guess it's like the hard part is when you know the frog in boiling water, you don't know, right? Bad things become normalized. I mean, the police themselves said 33 people were being killed every night during that time period. Those are their numbers.

Judith Kelley:

As part of the war on drugs?

Maria Ressa:

As part of the war on drugs. For me it was like, "Okay, you just take it as it comes." But then they took us to the National Bureau of Investigation, which was an hour away. They ran out the clock to make sure that I stayed in jail that night. But here's the good part, the goodness of strangers, the goodness of human nature. I was walking into our FBI, our NBI headquarters and a woman who I barely knew, she's a doctor, she worked with the UN, and she said, "I'm coming with you because you're going to have to go through medical testing." And I think I wrote this in the book. She knew that that was going to be my most vulnerable moment and did not want me to be alone.

Judith Kelley:

A human touch.

Maria Ressa:

So many things, right? And that's where I felt like even the officer who was trying to handcuff me, the second time they arrest me I was coming off a plane and they tried to say, "It's not our fault. We're just carrying out what we're supposed to do. Can you put your jacket over your hands to make it seem like you're handcuffed, but we won't handcuff you?" And I was like, "No, I'm not going to play. It's not Kabuki theater. I'm not going to, handcuff me or don't handcuff me." But I think those are the beginning, right? It's the bureaucracy like in Nazi Germany. It's the bureaucracy carrying out what they know is wrong. And I've gone back to some of these people over the years. It's been a long time. In 2019, oh my gosh 10, 11 arrest warrants, I posted bail 11 times, and of that, now it's 2024, I've been acquitted from all but two of those criminal charges.

Judith Kelley:

Well, that's wonderful. But as she said, two are still pending. All they need is one. So, they kept trying to arrest you, they kept harassing you. How did you and your team manage to keep Rappler open?

Maria Ressa:

I laugh, because in a weird way, it's kind of the way country sometimes will start a war to keep their people together. This was beyond us. And what was crazy is that I just kept moving forward. We started Rappler in 2012, because we're an independent news organization. And in 2018, so January 2018 was when they first, the SRSEC tried to shut us down. I held a general assembly, because I knew this was beginning something different that we had never been. Rappler is small. We're about at that point 100, 120 people. The median age is 23 years old, so I knew that there would be many questions. I knew parents would be concerned.

Judith Kelley:

Of course.

Maria Ressa:

And I told our people, "It's like we're walking into something new. Tell us if you want to stay, if you don't, let us know and we'll try to place you in a different news organization." Not one journalist wanted to leave.

Judith Kelley:

Wow.

Maria Ressa:

And during the times when we were most oppressed, like when the government really targeted us, the team, which we now all have PTSD to a degree, but the team really understood we had a mission. The mission of journalism was overwhelming, and we worked very hard at it.

Judith Kelley:

Now that you've had the Nobel light shine on you, has the game changed at all for Rappler?

Maria Ressa:

In how to stand up to a dictator? I mean-

Judith Kelley:

That's where the dictator [inaudible 00:18:40].

Maria Ressa:

How to stand up to a dictator. I laid down the two men who I felt were the dictators, right? This was Duterte who in his first six months of power, essentially our institutions, which is patterned after the United States, we have the same a constitution that's patterned after the U.S., the three branches of government. Duterte became the most powerful leader president our country has ever seen. He didn't have to declare marshal law. COVID helped, the COVID lockdown did that for him. But more powerful than Duterte was Mark Zuckerberg, which is really, this is I think the battle that the news now is facing. And very specifically, will news organizations survive the next two years? Because a year ago ... Look, a digital news site will only get traffic in three ways. Search, direct or social.

Social, Meta is the world's largest distributor of news until last year when they literally began constricting access to news sites. When that happened you had Western News Organization dropping 80% of the traffic, the recommendation, the referrals, what we call it.

Judith Kelley:

Right.

Maria Ressa:

Traffic is revenue for a news organization.

Judith Kelley:

Off course right, yeah.

Maria Ressa:

So you saw, and here's the other part, you don't have access to that information. That is the distribution of news. Social started choking access to news, and last year generative AI search started rolling out, rolled out first in the United States. How much, do you actually have a link going back to those news websites? This is going to be the greatest challenge for news organizations today. Will we be able to, will our business models survive? Right now it's not good.

Judith Kelley:

You say in the book in some ways the Philippines has been on the forefront, like a test room. You say, "Everybody should really care about what's played out in the Philippines." Can you comment a little bit more about that? Why should we all be paying attention to the Philippines?

Maria Ressa:

I think the first is that up until 2021 Filipinos spent the most time online and on social media globally. This is like a Petri dish. That's the first. The second is that even in the days of Yahoo, because we're 110 million people who speak English, we were a country where digital products were tested. Yahoo tested

digital products in the Philippines. Remember, Yahoo lost dominance to Google right? Because it used Google search.

Judith Kelley:

Our younger listeners may be, "What? Yahoo what?"

Maria Ressa:

Right, exactly. I think that's the second one. And third, the Filipinos have always been first adapters of SMS, texting. We were once called the SMS capital of the world. We organized in 2003 protests against governments on SMS texting. We were multiply was big in the Philippines until Facebook took over. Again, this is a place where digital products can be tested. There is a lack of law enforcement. What are the three things in the Philippines? Weak institutions, endemic corruption, weak enforcement. That's the one. In 2016 when I began to see the information operations attacking us, the kind of insidious manipulation I lay out in the book in data. I was actually in Mountain View, I think I was at a Google News initiative event where I said that, "I am getting these attacks. We are being attacked for being journalists. Those words didn't even exist at that point. Doxing, the harassment that we were getting. And you need to pay attention because what is happening to us is coming for you."

I wish I had been wrong, but on January 6th, 2021, Silicon Valley since came home to roost when you had violence on Capitol Hill, again enabled by social media. Documents now that came out in the recent book of the Wall Street Journal reporter, showed that soon after the 2020 elections Meta took away all of its break glass measures, starting with something very small. Like, how many invitations can a group send out? They took away, they had limited this before leading up to elections. Now they took those restrictions away and they found out that they were growing groups like Stop the Steal by 200,000 a day.

Judith Kelley:

That's amazing.

Maria Ressa:

They fueled the growth of this, which then were ... That's where inciting to violence and planning happened.

Judith Kelley:

This goes back to something you say in your book, because at the Sanford School we're very interested in technology policy, but particularly how it's affecting our democracy. And you say in the book that Facebook is one of the greatest threats to democracy around the world. Can you talk a little bit about what you mean and what policies do you think could really make a difference?

Maria Ressa:

Yeah, I'll start with the policy quickly, and then I'll describe it backwards, right? I said this in a Nobel lecture. Our lawyers actually tried to stop me at some point to say, "Maria, don't walk into that." And I was like, "But it's true." I think that one of the biggest mistakes made by the United States, not only seeding the development of the internet, our virtual world to private companies, because DARPA was a government project, right? Then this will lay the groundwork for the big, big tech. But in 1996 the Communications Decency Act, section 230. That gave cover and allowed impunity for the tech

companies on social media, the social media companies, to essentially allow information warfare, to allow insidious manipulation of the cellular level of a democracy, every one of us on these platforms. And you know that in 2016 this was released, 126 million Americans were affected by Russian disinformation.

Judith Kelley:

Section 230 is the piece that, if I remember correctly, but you can correct me if I'm wrong, that basically says that these social media companies can't be held liable as traditional news media organizations can be for the content that they-

Maria Ressa:

Correct. The idea behind it, and this was way before social media really took off, so 1996, right? The idea behind it is that you need to treat the big tech, the social media companies like plumbing or like the telephone companies. Except the telephone companies, the telephone company doesn't choose which calls you're going to get.

Judith Kelley:

And it also doesn't produce the content, the conversation, right?

Maria Ressa:

Correct, correct.

Judith Kelley:

Or curate the conversation.

Maria Ressa:

Exactly. And that's where you go back and realize that these companies meticulously designed the platforms to keep us scrolling for profit.

Judith Kelley:

Right, they are more than a conduit.

Maria Ressa:

They are more, in fact, they are more powerful than publishers. Because they essentially took all of our data. It's funny because they say that they built a model of each of us. The easy way that I say this to kids is they cloned us, right? They cloned our data, and then AI comes in. Machine learning creates the clone, and then AI comes in and takes all of that and puts it into a master database that's used for micro targeting. That's how they make money. This is insidious manipulation at every level. It also uses our biology against us, our emotions against us. As early as 2018 MIT did a study that showed lies, lies spread six times faster. And what we saw in our data in the Philippines is that if it's laced with fear, anger, and hate, it spreads even faster.

Judith Kelley:

Tapping into our survival instincts, right?

Maria Ressa:

Exactly. Yeah, there's a great book by, I think it's Michael Easter called The Scarcity Brain. It's patterned after the design of casinos once it went digital. It is like Pavlov's dogs, if they get a reward every time-

Judith Kelley:

They get conditioned.

Maria Ressa:

Yes. But if the reward is intermittent of an easily repeatable act, and it's addictive, and I think that's part of what's happened, and you can see the impact on our children on Gen Z today. Finally, the U.S. Attorney General came out with a report May last year that said, "Not only is it addictive, there are increased incidents of sleeplessness, of suicide." I mean, there was just a hearing last week where Mark Zuckerberg apologized to the parents of kids who had been bullied, who had been harassed, who had committed suicide.

Judith Kelley:

He was asked to apologize.

Maria Ressa:

He was asked to apologize, and he did apologize without admitting culpability.

Judith Kelley:

He was very shrewd in that moment. I've often, when you think about technology, and we think about how it potentially contributes to civil society, I was fortunate in my former life to spend some time in China the year before and after the Tiananmen Massacre. And I was there just in the days leading up to the massacre. And the way the Chinese people were communicating with each other at the time were incredibly rudimentary, like hand-painted posters. They would put up everywhere. They would get on a train and go to the next city and put up the posters. There was no way of disseminating information in any kind of instantaneous or coordinated fashion. And clearly that hampered their efforts to coordinate. When martial law was declared, Beijing independently had to make a decision from Chengdu, independently had to make a decision from Shanghai, "What are we going to do?" They couldn't all get in a room and coordinate. And then we fast-forward a little bit and we start to get more technology. And you look at Tunisia and some of those places, and there the technology is facilitating the breakthroughs of democracy. And then you fast-forward to say China again during the time when young people came out with the just holding up white pieces of paper to protest the COVID policy. And now facial recognition policy tools is suppressing the ability to protest, because you can get identified just by showing up and new tools of repression become available. And then you throw in misinformation. It seems like technology had its moment.

Maria Ressa:

Yeah.

Judith Kelley:

When it could contribute.

Maria Ressa:

Could help.

Judith Kelley:

And then now we are somewhere else. Do you think, is there any hope for that curve to change again, for technology to become, once again, a tool in the hands of building democracy?

Maria Ressa:

I think it will depend on citizens in democracies to demand better and governments in democracies to act not for political power, but to actually put guardrails. It's funny, again, I go back to World War II right after the atom bomb was used, after that exploded and you have hundreds of thousands killed. Now we're at this moment, and yet we don't see the urgency of the moment. In fact, in November 2022 generative AI was rolled out and began a new arms race. And the crazy thing is, again, it violates existing laws. For example, you had the Screen Actors Guild go on a strike. What about news heads, news organizations whose content, which expensive content built by a news group sucked up in a large language model without any kind of-

Judith Kelley:

That's the New York Times lawsuit, right?

Maria Ressa:

Exactly.

Judith Kelley:

You're waiting to-

Maria Ressa:

Exactly right. It's a creative destruction moment yet again. And I was telling ... We were talking with friends of how I had just watched Oppenheimer, and it's funny, you remember that moment when he was saying they weren't sure whether, if they exploded, if they started the chain reaction?

Judith Kelley:

Spoiler alert everyone.

Maria Ressa:

No. But they were saying, if we started this chain reaction, they were worried that it would continue to the destruction of the world. I think a little bit of that humility should be there in big tech. Because again, we're talking generative AI where the big tech platforms have had no guardrails. They actually use, they keep saying, "Well, we could have a Terminator moment, and this is why we need a pause." And yet they also in business are using this time period. This is the largest companies on the stock exchange or tech companies.

Judith Kelley:

That's an interesting parallel. The difference is that Oppenheimer and his crew out in the desert needed a massive government operation to stand that up. And the decision to push that button was in the hand of a government-

Maria Ressa:
Government.

Judith Kelley:

... and a massive operation. Now the decision is in the hand of somebody who's sitting in their home office or has just even working on their phone.

Maria Ressa:

Yes. But this is where you go back to, when is the moment in American history where DARPA switched hands? Where the technology that the government, well, it was used for warfare. I mean, where the technology was developing, when they allowed the gatekeepers to become the technology, the private tech companies? And this is the last part, we haven't spoken about the business model of big tech. We didn't even have a name for it until 2019 when Shoshana Zuboff wrote a 750-page book called Surveillance Capitalism. She had spent her life, 40 years looking at machines and how this plays out in a business model. Surveillance Capitalism connects to everything you just said, right? It takes all of the data and uses that data against the individual. Finding that balance where we own our own data, and there are some countries that have done this. Estonia, for example, if the government was getting access to your driver's license, you would get a notification. You own your data. This is not the case in the United States or in many other parts of the world.

Judith Kelley:

Yes, yes, indeed. We're constantly asked to sign away our rights to the data because if we don't, we can't even use our phone.

Maria Ressa:
Correct.

Judith Kelley:

There's a passage in your book where you write that, "We were fighting a war in a new world using old world paradigms, thinking that journalism was enough." Do you mean that we need to rethink how to harness the power of social media? What did you mean by that?

Maria Ressa:

No, it's funny, because I'm reading Marty Baron's book, Marty Baron headed the Washington Post. He headed three major American news organizations during his career and worked with six different publishers. And in his book he responded to President Trump by saying, "We are not at war. We are at work." I think now everyone is trying to figure out and realizing that that isn't enough. And it isn't because of former President Trump, it is because of what big tech has enabled.

In 2018 when both the UN and Meta sent people to Myanmar to investigate the causes of genocide, they both came back and said that it enabled ... The man who did this from Indonesia for the UN is Marzuki Darusman. He was the former commissioner on human rights. And they both came back and

said that Meta, that Facebook had enabled that genocide. And then over the years to watch that word watered down, despite what has happened in Myanmar. There's been a lack of accountability. And frankly, very few changes in design that still continues this insidious manipulation. This is the world we're living in today, and I think part of what needs to happen now is we need to call a spade a spade. Journalists can't just work. Because if we do that, we will not have distribution. Creating the journalism is now very, very different from distributing the journalism. And if you are using social media for distribution or search, you're relying on big tech to do it. And big tech has been driven by surveillance capitalism.

Judith Kelley:

Okay, so let's try to turn the conversation to slightly more constructive.

Maria Ressa:

Sure, I keep laying out the problem, right?

Judith Kelley:

Before we wrap up. You write that journalism enable facts to survive, but communities have to respond. And you call for a new model of civic engagement. What might that look like?

Maria Ressa:

Because we were at the front lines of attacks and we had an election in May 2022 when Marcos Junior won as president. He is now our president. What we saw is that you don't stand still, you keep experimenting. And what we did in the May 2022 elections was to create a whole of society approach to protect the facts. Or if you put it in marketing language for social media, an influencer marketing campaign for facts. Facts are super boring. Everyone, and this is something Facebook had created a fact checking network, the International Fact-Checking Network based out Florida, has a list of all of the things we all go by. It's standardized. It was created and funded partly by big tech so that they would have deniability, right?

I mean, because if they did it themselves, then they could be held liable, right? This is super smart on their end. Anyway, having said that, what we did is a whole of society approach. We did a pyramid, and to the credit of the Google News Initiative, the Google News Initiative was our partner in this, more than ... Almost, actually 149 groups came together for that May 2022 elections, a four-layer pyramid, 16 news organizations at the first layer.

Judith Kelley:

I remember this from the book, you talk about the mesh, you talk about academia and then the-

Maria Ressa:

Lawyers.

Judith Kelley:

The lawyers at the top holding us accountable.

Maria Ressa:

Yes, yes. Because in the end, so all the news groups, we also connected that with a data pipeline, an American company called [inaudible 00:38:58], right? Each of the news groups got the data from each of our audiences. We funneled it right up into all of our partners here. The second layers, the mesh is about 116 different organizations from the church, to human rights organizations, to climate change groups, to business. When business came in that was a different segment of society. Their task every day leading up to our elections was to share those boring fact checks, which don't spread on social media, but to share it with emotion. And from that we realized once we started, we were looking at this on a daily basis mapping our information ecosystem, and we saw that, oh, they share it with emotion and they can't use anger. And we found that inspiration spreads as fast as anger. It's just harder. The third layer were the academic institutions who every week-

Judith Kelley:

Research.

Maria Ressa:

... they held a public conference where they would tell Filipinos, what are the Meta narratives that are pushing? Who was winning, who was losing, who was being attacked? And then finally, the fourth layer were six legal groups who in those three months filed more than 20 cases to protect this four-layer pyramid, right? I mean, it's strange, America's walking into the 2024 elections, and you have far less safeguards in place today than you did in the 2020 elections. X has replaced Twitter, Elon Musk has bought it, fired all of the trust and safety teams. Meta, which actually was preparing to already stop political ads. Well, they followed X, they let go of their trust and safety people. And because of the way-

Judith Kelley:

And then we have new platforms like Truth Social.

Maria Ressa:

And TikTok, and YouTube is still there. Americans are walking into elections now. And the question that I have is, if we don't have facts, how are you going to vote? If you're being insidiously manipulated, how are you going to vote? Integrity of elections is going to be impossible if we don't have integrity of facts.

Judith Kelley:

We don't have facts, then we don't have a shared reality.

Maria Ressa:

So Al Gore, and I think we were together several times, and he just pointed out, "You cannot solve the climate crisis if we do not solve our democracy crisis." And I think that's a fundamental problem of technology. This idea that personalization is the right way to make money. Personalization, here's an easy one. In the old days the house that would have 20 people each with their own separate realities, that would be called an insane asylum.

Judith Kelley:

All right. On that note, let me ask you the last question before we sign off. Again, I'm staying on the constructive line of thinking here. Just first of all, I just so admire everything that you've fought through.

And I wonder, in the face of so much persecution from the government and technology, how do you remain hopeful?

Maria Ressa:

In the middle of all the bad the kindness of strangers popped, right? I mean, I don't think we could have survived the Duterte years. That was six years. I don't think we could have survived if we didn't have Filipinos supporting us behind the scenes, both in terms of crowdfunding and literally they would come to us and bring us food, but also the international community. I think one of the things Rappler did is because I used to track terrorist networks and the spread of the virulent ideology of Al-Qaeda in Southeast Asia, a group called Jemaah Islamiyah. It was very easy to transition to information cascades. And when we had the data, I think the world realized that this is happening to them.

And by 2022 you had the UN, UNESCO published a report, a 300-page report on gender disinformation, how women were being attacked, women journalists. But it isn't just the journalists, human rights activists, researchers, women in the public sphere, and how gender disinformation is one of the first signs of the weaknesses of the rotting part of democracy. I think, look, it's bleak at times. I have three co-founders, and we used to joke about this, because you can't help it. Of course, I was afraid, like how long will I have to stay in jail? I think the moment in my mind where I felt most invincible was when I just decided I could look at the dangers, the worst case scenarios, and be okay with them. It took me a few months to do that.

Because if it's violence, then okay, if it is jail, then okay. That's when I went to Amal Clooney and said, "Amal, please let me not stay in jail more than six months." But you can only joke about this, and I suppose that's humor. In Rappler among the four co-founders, we can, only one of us can be afraid at a time. We have to rotate the fear.

Judith Kelley:

Do you have like a baton you maybe pass [inaudible 00:44:57]?

Maria Ressa:

That's a good idea. No, we didn't have a baton, but we stayed in touch. I mean, they were the first to know about the Nobel, of course. I think the last part is, I talked to you about how our young journalists rose to the challenge. And in the newsroom, I always said this, "A decade from now I want to look back and know that we did everything we could, that we didn't drop it at a crucial moment." And I think that's now post-Duterte we're building tech. We just rolled out a matrix protocol chat app on top of a news organization. It's the first time that a news organization is doing this, but frankly, tech in the hands of journalists are better than tech in the hands of entrepreneurs in Silicon Valley. Sorry.

Judith Kelley:

But kindness, kindness of strangers, I think when you said that, it also reminds us that we are not alone.

Maria Ressa:

Oh, definitely.

Judith Kelley:

Sometimes it can feel incredibly overwhelming, but when you start to add up how many folks are out there who want to fight for the truth together.

Maria Ressa:

And it is global, right? This is a global-

Judith Kelley:

That's what you say in the book too, "Collaboration, collaboration, collaboration." Yes, yeah. Well, Maria, thank you so much for your time, and thank you for your fight for the truth, and for all of us for our freedom and for our future.

Maria Ressa:

Thank you for having me.

Judith Kelley:

Oh, you're so welcome. My guest is Maria Ressa. She received the Nobel Peace Prize and wrote, *How to Stand Up to a Dictator: The Fight for Our Future*. She's on Duke's campus to deliver the David Rubenstein Distinguished Lecture at the Sanford School of Public Policy. We'll be back soon with another conversation. I'm Judith Kelley, thank you for listening.