

[ADRN Interview]

Gatekeeping Saves Democracy: How Fake News is Plaguing Asia

Maria Ressa
(Journalist, CEO of Rappler and Nobel Peace Prize Laureate)

■ **Sook Jong Lee:** Hello everyone, it is a great opportunity to have Maria Ressa with us today. She is a well-known journalist and Nobel Peace Prize laureate, who is working very actively not only inside the Philippines but also internationally. Maria, thank you very much for your time.

■ **Maria Ressa:** I'm so glad that it worked. It's good to be here. Thank you for having me.

I. Level of Media Freedom in the Philippines After the Duterte Government

■ **Sook Jong Lee:** You faced 10 times of arrest warrant during the Duterte government. Since the Philippines has a new president now, Bongbong Marcos, the son of the former president, I would like to ask if media freedom has improved.

■ **Maria Ressa:** I've been asked this a lot, and I will say immediately, "Yes."

This January, I had four tax evasion charges that could have put me in prison for 34 years. Rappler was also charged with ridiculous criminal tax evasion. After four years and two months, three justices of the Court of Tax Appeals threw it out, and we were acquitted. And when you read the verdict, you actually realize, "How did these even make their way to the court?" The independent judiciary is slowly coming up, which means that the checks and balances are slowly kicking back in. So that's a first step.

The last administration used a tactic of harassment and intimidation to make journalists voluntarily give up their rights, which many have called it the "chilling effect." I would call it "Siberia." We lived in "Siberia" during that time period and there were costs for standing up to power.

It is still pretty early, but President Bongbong Marcos, the only son and the namesake of Ferdinand Marcos who was accused of stealing 10 billion US Dollars in 1986, has spent more of his first 100 days traveling outside the Philippines. He cares what the rest of the world thinks, and he also seeks to vindicate his family name. I hope that he listens and continues to focus on the economy like his father did. This is a difficult time for the post-COVID world. While the Philippines growth rate is significantly better than the West, whether or not this translates into real policies helping our people is a challenge ahead.

We were so low in the past that everything is in a slight improvement.

II. Duterte's Legacy of Media Repression and the Philippine's Way Forward

■ **Sook Jong Lee:** Friends in the Philippines were talking about the possible backlash under the new President, since he may try to legitimize his father's legacy and the authoritarian period of your country. What is your opinion on this view?

■ **Maria Ressa:** This is happening in almost every country around the world. We are testing history. With the rise of the far right and with lies spreading faster than facts through social media, it makes every part of history debatable. The facts are debatable.

Everything that we see on social media has two algorithms working: the first is Facebook's "friends of friends" algorithm, which essentially polarized us. We saw this happen in the Philippines in 2016 when Duterte was elected. If you were pro-Duterte, you moved further right. If you're anti-Duterte, you moved further left. This is what happened in the United States, in Hungary, and in Brazil.

[The second algorithm is] the recommendation engine in YouTube and Facebook, where if you click on a video on SNS, the recommendation engine brings something more extremist. So there's a polarization and downward radicalization. [Both] are embedded in our society, and civil society groups used tactics like name and shame to determine what "right" is. But when lies are rewarded, the world turns upside down and this becomes debatable.

Your question becomes more complicated for Marcos in this information ecosystem. In terms of actions, because the bar was set so low by the previous administration, we now see a little bit of a professional governance from the new President. He shows up and he doesn't curse. Policy is clearer and the appointments are clearer. This administration does listen to the public backlash for bad policy; however, despite the fact that we've suffered from the weaponization of the law, I'm also of the same mind that we need to be fair and look at the actions today and not necessarily the past. Was he a tax evader? Did he fail to pay his taxes? It's ironic because he now encourages Filipinos to pay their taxes.

So, it's very confusing – where is the moral high ground? At the same time, this is where I become slightly pragmatic. As a journalist in Rappler, my task is to hold power to account. We will give you the context of this. Both India's Prime Minister Modi and the Philippines President Marcos could not travel to the United States. But when they were democratically elected by their people, they could travel. A lot of these things go away. And they were overwhelmingly elected. So we need to stay vigilant and we need to keep doing the stories.

Rappler and I still have three criminal cases against us. There's a 5th tax evasion charge, cyber libel case, and securities case connected to foreign control. We have to be optimistic; otherwise, it can be debilitating.

III. Solutions to Political Polarization Caused by SNS Disinformation

■ **Sook Jong Lee:** You mentioned about many different perspectives about the history, and it is happening in Korea too about its colonial, the authoritarian period. It is dividing our civil society, not to mention our politicians. We also have not only newspapers, but also YouTube and social media that make us difficult to see whether there is truth or if the divided society can compromise or come up with a consensus about historical interpretations. In this kind of environment, what will be a good advice to control information and encourage the divided politics to come up with a more constructive common ground?

■ **Maria Ressa:** First of all, I always felt that Korea was in a better place. When we go back to Milan Kundera's quote, "The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting." The design of social media today turns a lie into a fact—a lie told a million times becomes a fact. As I said in the Nobel lecture, this has now become an individual battle for integrity, for facts, and for values.

This is why it's great that Korea not only just held the regional meeting of the Second Summit for Democracy, but also will be holding the next Summit. It is good that the Third Summit for Democracy is coming to Asia-Pacific where, according to the latest V-Dem report, it has seen the worst decline of the quality of our democracies globally. The rest of the world has gone back to 1986 levels. In Asia-Pacific, we're at 1978 levels.

So, what's the solution? First, because of the culture of Korea, traditional news organizations still have significant power. They're losing business control and their business model is dying quickly. It's interesting that in Korea, Google is not number one, and Naver is. But Korean news organizations have given up too much power and relationships to Naver. We should not be fighting downstream; we have to fight upstream. So the long-term solution is education.

The medium-term solution is legislation, and short-term is the awareness that we are being insidiously manipulated by social media. Our biology, our emotions are being used against us. And on social media, according to an MIT study from 2018, lies spread at least 6 times faster than facts. The fact that [these lies] incite hate, fear, and tribalism, is part of the reason we're so polarized. They appeal to the worst of human nature, of society, and the impact is not just at the individual level, but sociologically at the group level.

We behave differently in groups. In my book, I talked about the Milgram Shock Experiment, in which there were test subjects behind the screen and participants were told to keep giving longer and longer electric shocks to the subjects and watch as they more and more. With authority, the participants continued to give electric shocks. When we're in groups and when authority gives us permission to be our worst selves, we do it. This is where, some of the warnings from Timothy Snyder's *On Tyranny*, such as "Don't follow the group," come into play. That's the second level.

The third level is emergent human behavior of our evolution as a species. This is addictive. Our young generation have higher levels of depression and sleeplessness. One of Meta's own internal reports, which was one of the 10,000+ documents released by the whistleblower, Frances Haugen, actually showed that young teenager girls on Instagram have increased levels of eating disorders. The impacts and harm [of social media] are very clear aside from killing democracy—more than that is the rise of fascism.

IV. Freedom of Speech vs. Gatekeeping?

■ **Sook Jong Lee:** Today, we have ongoing debates about social media and its horrible disinformation effect. But as a journalist, when you face the conflicting principles, namely freedom of expression and protection of privacy and human dignity, how do you reconcile these?

■ **Maria Ressa:** It is false to say that they collide because this is not a freedom of speech issue. It is actually a "gatekeeping" issue. News organizations were supposed to be the gatekeepers to the public sphere, and readers were able to hold [the media] accountable. If they distributed or echoed a lie, they could be sued.

Right now, the tech companies make more money in surveillance for profit. We didn't even have a name for that business model until 2019, when Shoshana Zuboff wrote *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*. This book goes into how these tech companies use machine learning to create models that know us better than we know ourselves. Those models are then scooped up by AI and become the motherload database that is used for microtargeting.

Microtargeting is not the old advertising strategy we know. It knows your weakest moment to a message and sells it. This advertising marketing model is now what is exploited by geopolitical powers. We have seen experiments before, but that exploitation really began in 2014 when Russian disinformation began to target Crimea, America, and even Korea. As they succeeded, they were replicated in different countries around the world.

This is a part of the reason that we are seeing illiberal leaders being elected democratically, because if you don't have integrity of facts, you cannot have integrity of elections.

V. Social Media's Impact on the Global Information Ecosystem

■ **Sook Jong Lee:** If we extend this debate to North Korea, where it not only has an illiberal leader but also a totally closed society with people indoctrinated, what would be a good way for the democracies to intervene in the psyche of North Koreans about the freedom and democracy issues? Have you thought about the North Koreans?

■ **Maria Ressa:** If you look at the world today, we have several cases. When Russia invaded Ukraine, the world came together, reacted on it, and the ICC came up with an arrest warrant. That's the quickest the world has acted since the World War II. Syria, for example, was very disjointed.

People thought that democracy doesn't really need to get nurtured and that it will survive all of these "death by a thousand cuts." You also have Taiwan, which is engulfed by information operations by mainland China. You have the Koreans, and you see them as different stages of it.

What I'm worried about is that if we don't do anything significant with our information ecosystem, we will wind up like North Korea. When you say North Korea indoctrinates, I say social media is a behavior modification system.

On January 6, 2021, we saw violence on Capitol Hill for the first time. On January 8 of this year, we saw violence in Brazil. One of the aspects that has not been sufficiently researched yet is the role of YouTube, for example, in Brazil, in the United States, in the Philippines, and in South Korea. In a research by the Harvard Belfer Institute, they clustered the algorithms of YouTube on Zika virus, COVID, and also on Jair Bolsonaro. Their results showed that Bolsonaro, a far right figure, was able to be elected because of Youtube algorithms. The contents recommended by the algorithms clustered together the far rights who would never have been able to find each other in the real world. They were too far fringe, but they had common terrorist idea that the enemy of my enemy is my friend. This is what happened—the clustering algorithm of recommendation engines provided a support base.

Did the same clustering algorithm create the violence on January 6, 2021? I go back to Yuri Andropov, a former KGB chairman, who talked about disinformation in a way that democratic countries take seriously. He said, "disinformation is like cocaine—sniff once or twice, it may not change your life. If you use it every day, though, it will make you an addict—a different man." This is where we are in 2023 after algorithms have exploited us and used our data to change the way we think and the way we act through our emotions.

■ **Sook Jong Lee:** Thank you. Do you have any comments for the Asia Democracy Research Network?

■ **Maria Ressa:** One last thing I would like to add on the ADRN is that our research will be inadequate unless we get access to big data. The big tech companies have those data over us, and they are frankly the only way we can hold them accountable. It is almost like we are in the dark, tossing spaghetti against the wall when they have the resources and we don't.

Thank you very much for having me. ■

- **Maria Ressa** is the founder, CEO, and executive editor of Rappler, the top digital-only news site that is leading the fight for press freedom in the Philippines. In October 2021, Maria was one of two journalists awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in recognition of her “efforts to safeguard freedom of expression, which is a precondition for democracy and lasting peace.” Among many other awards for her principled stance, she received the prestigious Golden Pen of Freedom Award, the Knight International Journalism Award, the Gwen Ifill Press Freedom Award, the Shorenstein Journalism Award, the Columbia Journalism Award, and the Sergei Magnitsky Award. Ressa has been a journalist in Asia for more than 30 years, most of them as CNN’s bureau chief in Manila, then Jakarta. In 2005, she took the helm of ABS-CBN News and Current Affairs, and for six years managed more than 1,000 journalists for the largest multi-platform news operation in the Philippines.

The East Asia Institute takes no institutional position on policy issues and has no affiliation with the Korean government. All statements of fact and expressions of opinion contained in its publications are the sole responsibility of the author or authors.

This program was funded in part by the National Endowment for Democracy (NED).

“Gatekeeping Saves Democracy: How Fake News is Plaguing Asia”

979-11-6617-593-0 95340 Date of Issue: 13 April 2023

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