



Speaking Truth to Power

Maria Ressa

Philippines

Maria Ressa has been fighting for her voice to be heard all her life. When she was just eight years old, the Philippines' President Marcos declared martial law; and that affected everyone's freedom of speech. Maria's family fled their homeland to start a new life in the United States, in Toms River, New Jersey.

It was challenging for everyone in the family to adjust to this new world. In order to make enough money so that Maria could go to a good school, her parents took the bus into New York City – two hours every morning, and two hours back every evening, through the heavy traffic of highway I-95.

For Maria, adjusting to life in the United States didn't happen overnight. She was the only person of color in her classroom, and also the shortest. "When we arrived in Toms River, I was the short, quiet kid who could barely speak English," she says.

It was her music teacher, Don Spaulding, who gave her the courage to overcome her doubts and to grow in self-confidence. "He nurtured me and others like me: kids looking to belong, looking for our place in the world," she wrote later. "I first found that in music, and then that became the foundation for the many other extra-curricular activities and academics that shaped my world." By the time she graduated from high school, she was voted "Most Likely to Succeed."

Maria went to college at Princeton University to study molecular biology. When she returned to the Philippines in 1986 on a Fulbright scholarship, she began her studies in journalism at the University of the Philippines Diliman. Finding herself once again in the country she had left at an early age, she began to feel a thirst for creating change outside of the laboratory. She wanted to right wrongs and reveal the abuses of power she saw around the world. *What better way to accomplish this than as an investigative reporter,* she thought.

For more than 20 years, Maria investigated environmental catastrophes, human rights violations, and political scandals for CNN. She's led CNN's Jakarta bureau, and traveled throughout the region on reporting trips. She made a name for herself as a hard-nosed reporter – someone who was never afraid to speak truth to power, even when it might put her in personal danger.

But because she is an entrepreneur at heart, despite all she had accomplished, Maria still felt something was lacking. She wanted to create something of her own. The answer came in the form of Rappler, which she started in 2012 with three other women. The idea behind Rappler was found in a simple equation: rap (to talk) plus ripple (to make waves).

Maria started Rappler because she didn't want to just report the news, she wanted to shape the world into something better, and more human. She believes in the power of technology to create change; and as climate change and conflict intensify around the world, a little bit of optimism achieved through technology can go a long way.

Their aim was to give a voice to the Filipino community and undo stereotypes that she had seen as a reporter for CNN and other Western media outlets. And in the Philippines, where human rights violations and climate change both pose existential threats, this combination is more essential than ever.

Rappler isn't like every other media organization, though. The Rappler-mobile looks a bit like one of Doc's inventions from the movie "Back to the Future." It's a small white truck, equipped with an almost comically large satellite on top — its antennas facing skyward. With those antennas, it's able to beam signals across the Philippines — a collection of more than 7,000 islands in the South Pacific Ocean — and spread news around the world. Still, the vehicle cost a pretty penny, especially for a Philippines-based media startup like Rappler: about \$100,000.

But on a human scale, the investment in that little white truck made a lot of sense.

When Typhoon Haiyan, otherwise known as Super Typhoon Yolanda, touched down in the Philippines in the fall of 2013, Rappler's truck was one of the first vehicles to make it to the storm-affected areas. The truck drove through debris, allowing a small team of reporters to get a better sense of the human impact of the storm. Its power strips also helped people to recharge their phone batteries when the power had gone out in their homes, so they could make calls to emergency services, and to family members, to let them know that they were alright. In other words, the little Rappler-mobile became a lifeline.

Rappler was just a small news media startup with a staff of about ten people at the time, but when they beat many of the biggest news outlets in the Philippines to the scene in the aftermath of the typhoon, the small team of journalists knew that they were filling an important void — one where journalism doesn't just inform readers and viewers, but truly serves them on a human level.

Maria's job hasn't been simple. The Philippines is the country that is most affected by climate change in the world. More than half of the ten deadliest storms that have ever hit the chain of islands have done so in the past decade and a half. Sea levels are rising, and the country's infrastructure isn't ready for these kinds of changes.

Now, under President Rodrigo Duterte, it is also a place where human rights are increasingly violated. Since he launched his brutal drug war in 2016 more than 5,000 people have been killed, including five journalists.

Rappler detected a number of privacy violations on Facebook, against women who were speaking out to oppose the "war on drugs." Where other news outlets stayed relatively silent, Rappler went on the offensive, publishing investigations and reports that showed the crimes being committed by the government in its quest to eradicate drugs and poverty. When Maria published an article on the topic, she earned the wrath of an army of online bots who supported the president. Later, when she reported on the shady business dealings of a powerful businessman, she was arrested and accused of libel — defaming someone's name.

Maria's battle is an uphill one. She has been arrested and bailed out of jail eight times in 2019 alone. For leading the war on fake news, she may be jailed for 12 years on libel charges. President Duterte has labeled Rappler itself a "fake news outlet." She is grateful that the British-Lebanese human rights lawyer Amal Clooney is championing her case. "We will pursue all available legal remedies to vindicate her rights and defend press freedom and the rule of law in the Philippines," Clooney has promised.

Maria has spoken out about climate change since well before the marches and manifestations led by Greta Thunberg kicked off. At the Reuters Institute's 35th Anniversary of the Journalist Fellowship Program, she spoke about how Rappler was working with the Filipino government to create a real-time map of climate threats and resiliency systems. "That's the closest to what I feel like we can do," she said. "Because we did help save lives. The reason why the community comes [to us] is not just because the platform is transparent to everyone, but also because they get information they can trust."

As climate change sets in, countries like the Philippines suffer the most obvious consequences of it. Maria calls Facebook "friend-enemies," as she strives to find ways to use this powerful social media tool to educate ordinary people, rather than being used as a weapon against them. At Al Gore's first global Climate Reality Leadership Corps training in 2016, she inspired thousands of people to become climate change champions where she urged attendees to use the power of social media to apply a "whole of society" approach to responding to natural disasters. "This is something that's in your hands," she said. "Largely, social media is free. It's about giving the information needed to build communities of action."

Despite the challenges she is facing, Maria strongly believes in the importance of exercising freedom of speech, and of journalists speaking truth to power. She has said that when the truth comes under fire, journalists need to be activists. For her courageous reporting, Maria was named by Time magazine as one of the journalists recognized as Person of the Year in 2018. In 2020 she was named by Time - "[100 Most Influential Women of the Century](#)".

And when she was awarded the Madeline Albright National Democratic Institute's highest honor, she said, "We are journalists, and we will not be intimidated. We will shine the light. We will hold the line."

Maria's fight to be heard, and to speak truth to power has led her from her childhood home in the Philippines halfway around the world, and back again. Now we all just need to work together to make *her* work matter.

Courage, as they say, is contagious.

*People who have the courage to change their societies
inspire each other and create rights for future generations.*

Amal Clooney

Call to Action: Be awake, aware, use social media responsibly. To join or support Maria's Rappler Plus:
<https://www.rappler.com/plus>

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