



**Freedom
Cartoonists
Foundation**
DESSINS POUR LA LIBERTÉ

Maria Ressa, The Fight for Our Attention, 03.05.2022, Geneva, Switzerland

What gets our attention is what gives our lives meaning. Where we spend our time determines what we accomplish, what we become good at. That's important to keep in mind as the battle for our minds is waged and won by manipulating our emotions ... not our hearts, but our hate.

Let me start by first thanking you for your attention.

I'll speak about 3 things: first, this fight for our attention in a new economy that is chipping away our free will; second, what that is doing to journalism and to editorial cartoons; and finally, how we can fight back.

I became a journalist because I believe that information is power - it's how we get justice. The death of democracy began when journalists lost our gatekeeping powers to the technology platforms that not only abdicated responsibility for protecting us ... but they also destroyed democracy by destroying the facts ... for immense profit.

Like the age of industrialization, when labor was commoditized, new laws were needed to protect the people. Today, there's a new economic model that brought new harms, a model Shoshana Zuboff called surveillance capitalism - when our atomized personal experiences are collected by machine learning, organized by artificial intelligence - extracting our private lives for outsized corporate gain. Highly profitable micro-targeting operations are engineered to structurally undermine human will - a behavior modification system in which we are Pavlov's dogs, experimented on in real time with disastrous consequences. This is happening to you - to all of us around the world.

Engagement based metrics of these American tech companies mean that the incentive structure of the algorithms, which is just their **opinion in code** implemented at a scale that we could never have imagined, is insidiously shaping our future by encouraging the worst of human behavior. Studies have shown that lies laced with anger and hate spread faster and further than facts.

These next three sentences took me years to come to, but I got there by examining data and living through some dark experiences. I have repeated them over and over, and will repeat again.

Without facts, you can't have truth. Without truth, you can't have trust. Without these, we have no shared reality, no rule of law, no democracy.

Journalists, human rights defenders, anyone under attack - we're defenseless against this information warfare, because that's what it is, and at this time, the move for profit and authoritarians using this technology to consolidate power - they align.

The same methodology used against me is used everywhere around the world - bottom up exponential attacks on social media - at least 90 hate messages per hour pounding a lie a million times that becomes a fact - then comes top down from the president. In my upcoming book's prologue, I showed where we first saw it impact the world - in 2014 against Crimea and Ukraine: pound and suppress facts to silence, then replace with the meta-narrative that was used 8 years later by Russia to invade Ukraine.

There is no difference between online and our physical world. They are one and the same. Online violence is real world violence. If you can make people believe lies are facts, then you can control them.

In my Nobel lecture, I said that an atom bomb has exploded in our information ecosystem, and because we need to prevent humanity from doing its worst, we need a new global coalition to put guardrails around tech.

The platforms want you to debate content moderation because if you're stuck there, they can make more money. So move further upstream to algorithmic amplification, its operating system, and go further upstream to its root cause: surveillance capitalism. That's where all our problems connect: safety, privacy, antitrust, and content moderation. They're not separate issues.

We cannot solve the global existential problems if we don't win the battle for facts.

Which brings us to journalism and the topics of the editorial cartoons in Geneva today, World Press Freedom Day: War in Europe, Covid Life, and the Climate ... these are the existential problems I mentioned in Oslo: truth, health and climate.

Kofi Annan loved editorial cartoons because they encapsulated meaning in a few frames, but even before social media, there was the Danish cartoon in 2005 that led to protests across the Muslim world, and in 2015, Charlie Hebdo. In the age of social media, where toxic sludge of anger, hate, conspiracy theories propel virality, cartoons - now called memes - inflame and attack. I know this first-hand.

The technology is choosing what journalism survives - and it isn't the best journalism or cartoon. It's often the worst - and what brings out the worst in us, what keeps you on

the platforms scrolling, bringing in profit at such great cost to humanity. We're letting hate create the future US - emergent human behavior.

So what can we do? A lot! Don't sit back and watch. This is a person to person battle for integrity.

This year, we will have more than 30 elections around the world. We can't have integrity of elections if we don't have integrity of facts.

In 6 days, the Philippines will vote in an existential moment for our democracy. The frontrunner for president is Ferdinand Marcos, Jr. the namesake of the dictator ousted by a people power revolt 36 years ago. The Marcoses are back partly because history was changed in plain view, with networks of disinformation that has convinced some Filipinos that Marcos the dictator was actually the greatest leader our nation has ever had.

So in the absence of any law to protect users - also an abdication of democratic governments to create something like a better business bureau for our minds - we have to act with what we have.

We decided to fight back by finding a way to create a whole of society approach to fighting viral lies and propaganda. We created a 4 layer pyramid of nearly 150 organizations - 16 news groups, including rural newspapers, at layer 1; layer 2 is called "the Mesh" - civil society groups, NGOs, human rights organizations, business groups, the Catholic church; layer 3 are 7 disinformation research groups analyzing every week how Filipinos are being manipulated and by whom; and finally, layer 4, the LAW - legal groups filing strategic and tactical litigation to protect those on the frontlines of our battle for facts.

You know, the Philippines is a young population: our median age is 25 years old - so I called this our #Avengers, Assemble moment - and it works! Within a few weeks of our launch, the solicitor general filed a petition at the Supreme Court against his own client, the Commission on Elections and Rappler, calling fact-checking prior restraint. We've had more legal complaints filed against us this year - more than 50 charges - than ever, but we hold the line.

We are all connected. Journalists are under attack, are discredited, because we push back against lies. We hold power to account. But in this existential battle for facts, we can't do it alone.

So you have to ask yourself the same question I did when the attacks against me and Rappler began: **What are you willing to sacrifice for the Truth?**

I know my answer. I know that these elections may determine whether I go to jail for the rest of my life. But worse than that threat is the idea that I didn't give it my all when it mattered. Right now. When so much is at stake.

What's happening in my country has already happened here and in every democracy around the world. We were the first domino to fall in May 2016, followed about a month later by Brexit leading up to Donald Trump.

If we fall further now, we won't be alone. There are more than 30 elections this year. You cannot have integrity of elections if you don't have integrity of facts. So this is it. Bring your super powers before it's too late for you. Join the battle for facts, the battle for the truth.

The time to act is now.