Challenging Duterte: Maria Ressa and the Philippine Media

By Edward Guthrie

Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte has thrived by cultivating a reputation for running roughshod over the rule of law, most notably in his bloody war on drugs, where thousands of mostly poor Filipinos have been gunned down in extrajudicial killings since he came to power.

The country’s media has also come into his crosshairs, including through the use of fake news on Facebook to muddy fact and fiction to Duterte’s benefit. But in taking on the widely respected Philippine journalist Maria Ressa and her pioneering website Rappler, Duterte may have met his match. The future of media freedom in the country is at stake, writes Edward Guthrie.

WITH HER SHARP MIND, unflinching attitude and acerbic humor, journalist and businesswoman Maria Ressa has built a news brand in the Philippines that is at the center of a struggle for the future of free expression in that country. Not one to back down from a fight, Ressa is just the sort of person to get under the skin of the bullying, misogynistic autocrat in control of the presidential palace in Manila.

It is a battle now fully joined. Ressa, who is increasingly an international media hero, faces mounting legal challenges brought by the government of Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte. If she falls, she may end up losing the Rappler news outlet she created and be imprisoned on tax evasion charges that most international journalists say are spurious at best.

On the other hand, she is among the most formidable opponents Duterte faces as he uses his brand of bare-knuckle populism to stamp his stern visage on the country. Despite his hostility to the rule of law, or perhaps because of it, and open flouting of the norms of democratic behavior, Duterte is still enormously popular. His approval ratings in the third quarter of 2018 dipped into the 70 percent range after he called God “stupid,” while railing at the Catholic Church, one of his favorite targets in a deeply religious country. Prior to that, his ratings were close to 90 percent.

After a three-decade career as a correspondent — most of that time for CNN in the Philippines and Indonesia — Ressa has become an international symbol of resistance to the rightward lurch of domestic and global politics. She is also one of the shrinking number of journalists holding the line against government pressure in the Philippines. Her case is closely watched by journalists throughout Southeast Asia, where she has many friends and supporters.

This month, she was named one of Time magazine’s persons of the year. She was one of a group, which Time called the “guardians,” that also included murdered Saudi commentator Jamal Khashoggi; the staff of the Capital Gazette in the US, five of whom died in a mass shooting at the newspaper’s offices in June; and Reuters journalists Wa Lone and Kyaw Soe Oo, who have been detained in Myanmar for nearly a year for their reporting on the persecution of the Rohingya. In November, the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) gave Ressa the Gwen Ifill International Press Freedom Award, among a brace of other honors she has received. In the US to receive the award when news came that she was facing the tax charges, she came home to fight in person and posted bail to avoid arrest.

This is typical of Ressa, who launched Rappler — an online news service based in the Philippines — on the strength of an idea and with the backing of a handful of well-connected Filipino venture funds. She became vulnerable to the tax charges when she also attracted foreign backers. Her lawyers say the transactions involving foreigners were legitimate and that the company remains Filipino-owned under domestic law. Her critics have attacked Rappler for being a tool of foreign interests, something she vigorously denies.

Regardless, anyone following this drama knows it is only vaguely about the law. It is about power: Ressa does not give in, she pushes back; and the clever and technically savvy Rappler website, which she founded in 2012, has become the principal thorn — one of the few remaining thorns — in Duterte’s paws as he imposes his dark vision on the Philippines. Having threatened, bullied and jailed many of his opponents, Duterte has also cowed much of the media into submission, including the Philippine Daily Inquirer, which had been the most respected news group in the country before it caved in to political pressure on its businesses and sold out to an ally of Duterte. Others face down Duterte as well, including to some extent the country’s largest TV news network, ABS/CBN, where Ressa once ran the news operation. But if Rappler falls, the fate of independent journalism in the Philippines seems sealed, at least until Duterte leaves office in 2022.

FACEBOOK AND DEATH

Duterte, whose purposely crude language and disdain for women’s rights seem to echo Donald Trump, goes much further than the US showman-leader. He has used an appeal to rid the nation of crime at the barrel of a gun to boost his popularity. It has worked. Many Filipinos, fed up with corruption, inefficiency and poverty, have bought into the notion that gunning down street-level drug users is a good idea. With some 20,000 dead so far, Rappler is one of the few news organizations left to openly challenge this pogrom, which most critics say targets the poor and unfortunate while leaving criminal syndicates largely alone.

“It is easier to navigate a conflict zone, a war zone, than it is to navigate the social media world and the legal weaponization of laws in our country. But we hold the line,” Ressa told reporters in Manila after her plane touched down from New York.

The two areas of Rappler’s coverage that seem to have most unnerved the Philippine government revolve around significant investigations of police impunity into the drug-war killings and the continued use of Facebook to spread disinformation and distortion for political ends.

In the Philippines, Facebook is incredibly powerful due to deals with telecom companies that bundle the social media platform with smartphone packages. Rappler has tracked the use of
the platform to distort and deceive the public in ways that echo the “information wars” in other countries. As she told the CPJ award audience in New York in November:

Our problems in the Philippines are partly caused by your problems here: American social media technology platforms, once empowering, are now weaponized against journalists, activists, and citizens, spreading lies across borders; and a president so much like ours whose attacks against the press [and women] give permission to autocrats [like ours] to unleash the dark side of humanity and extend their already vast powers with impunity, especially in countries where institutions have crumbled.

Rappler itself is a product of social-media technology, using algorithms to track the impact of stories on the audience in real time and boosting traffic through engagement with readers. Rappler calls itself a “social news network,” and Ressa’s focus on technology to help drive traffic has at times even alienated some of her natural allies among other Filipino journalists who have at times criticized Rappler for being too focused on click rates and eyeballs.

That skill, however, has also made Rappler a formidable opponent of those who use the distortion of news for political ends. “When people don’t know what is real and what is fake, when facts don’t matter, then the voice with the loudest megaphone gains more power,” Ressa told a Philippine senate hearing in January 2018 on the use of trolls and social media to spread fake news.

She accused Duterte’s supporters of spreading coordinated lies through Facebook. She and her technology team at Rappler have tracked how attacks and fake news are used to undermine truth and journalism. “Rappler couldn’t have become Rappler without Facebook,” she told the senators, but she cautioned that the platform is dangerous on geopolitical, financial, political and other levels, as she flashed screen shots and charts to illustrate her point on how a network of trolls is used to spread disinformation in the Philippines on Facebook.

AND ABOUT THE DRUGS

The other area where Rappler has shined its spotlight is on Duterte’s drug war, the central plank of his public appeal. When running for office, he repeatedly said he would rid the nation of criminals and drug dealers through violence — and the gruesome results have been widely reported. The head of the Philippines Commission on Human Rights has said the death toll from the policy may be as high as 27,000; police used a figure of 4,814 in August. Duterte has revealed in the bloodbath, barely bothering to deny his role. Lashing out at an International Criminal Court investigation into the killings, Duterte said during a speech on Sept. 27, “What is my sin? Did I steal even one peso? Did I prosecute somebody who I ordered jailed? My sin is extrajudicial killings.”

In October 2018, Rappler began running an extraordinary series called “‘Some People Need Killing’ — Murder in Manila,” by journalist Patricia Evangelista. The six-month investigation details how the police used and sometimes paid vigilantes, gang members and others to racket up the body count in the grimmest district of Tondo, the worst slum in Manila and one of the worst in the world.

In the series, which is street-level reporting at its best, a young thug named Angel details how he was recruited into a vigilante gang by police and middlemen and was paid per killing. “Every time they said we had a job, they meant we were going to kill,” Angel is quoted as saying.

Before Angel himself was arrested in what seems a trumped-up show of police investigation, he participated in numerous killings, all of them attributed to the war on drugs. “We only got paid if we killed,” Angel told Evangelista.

Rappler concluded from its investigation that the police used vigilante gangs to carry out the war on drugs in back alleys inhabited by the poorest of the poor. The police, the series concluded, “coordinated with vigilantes, selected targets, took credit for murders, and on occasion paid for assassinations in the name of the war against drugs.”

The violence of the war on drugs, the use of murder as a tool of public policy and the open disregard for law and the courts is nothing new in the Philippines. Presidents, warlords, politicians and various kinds of insurgents have been murdering with impunity in the country for generations. Duterte just took it a step farther, turning the use of death directed against the underclass into a political selling point. Duterte learned the tactic when he cut his political teeth as a prosecuting attorney in sprawling Davao City on the island of Mindanao at the end of the era of the late dictator Ferdinand Marcos, who also used wars against drugs to justify violence, albeit on a more modest scale than Duterte.

In Davao in the mid-1980s, communist rebels fought against the military and police-backed vigilantes in a gruesome dirty war with a daily body count. Duterte was known as a tough city official in touch with both vigilantes and communists for political ends. He became mayor of Davao in 1988 and was widely praised for cleaning up the city using death squads and extrajudicial executions. His reputation grew as he figured out how to take his political reputation onto the national stage in a country ripe for the message he would deliver via social media and elsewhere: drugs are a scourge and he would use any means...
necessary to end the problem. Duterte's open disdain for women, crude jokes and foul language only seemed to burnish his allure.

Duterte’s simplistic message — like that of other current autocratic populists — was fraught with danger, but that hardly mattered. His team of trolls and Facebook experts, helped by Cambridge Analytica, the political consulting firm linked to Brexit, the Trump campaign and others, and which is embroiled in the global scandal over the use of Facebook users’ data, cast him as a hard man of action, and he easily won the 2016 election for a single six-year term. It is ironic that he succeeded President Benigno Aquino Jr., whose mother Corazon led the battle against Ferdinand Marcos in the 1980s and was widely seen as the moral force of the nation after she became president in 1986.

FEMALE JOURNALISTS

Into this political soap opera came the Philippine media, including Ressa and the Rappler staff, most of whom are women. They were ready to challenge Duterte as they had previous presidents.

Ressa is one of a long line of female journalists in the Philippines who in the last 30 years or more reshaped the media landscape. Where once the Philippine press was largely the province of clubby, hard drinking male reporters who could easily be swayed by tough politicians, cops, soldiers and tycoons, the end of the Marcos era saw the emergence of feisty magazines and tabloids run by crusading female editors and publishers who challenged Marcos and helped pave the way for the emergence of Corazon Aquino. Rappler and Ressa are firmly in that line.

It could hardly be lost on close observers of the Philippines that Ressa was introduced at the CPJ awards gala by Sheila Coronel, one of the Philippines’ best investigative journalists and an icon of the Asian press freedom movement. Now a professor of journalism at Columbia University in New York, Coronel began her career as a student editor during the Marcos era, and she faced death threats, libel accusations and possible arrest during another dangerous era for the media while she built the Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism into a uniquely forceful media institution.

“Rappler and Maria stood up to Duterte,” Coronel said. “They showed how he weaponized the Internet, unleashing fake news and troll armies, they exposed police impunity in the war on drugs. They told the truth and so made enemies.” Ressa also showed how a “newsroom led and staffed by women can stand up to a misogynist president,” Coronel added.

In her speech to the CPJ, Ressa put Rappler's woes in the context of something much larger. “When President Trump called CNN and The New York Times ‘fake news,’ a week later President Duterte called Rappler fake news. When President Trump took away the accreditation of CNN’s Jim Acosta, he was following what President Duterte did earlier this year to our reporter Pia Ranada. He also banned me from the [presidential] palace, even though I haven’t reported during his administration.”

Later, Ressa put her struggle into a moral and professional context. “You don't really know who you are until you're forced to fight to defend it,” she said. “We at Rappler decided that when we look back at this moment a decade from now, we will have done everything we could: we did not duck, we did not hide. We are Rappler, and we will hold the line.”

Edward Guthrie is a pen name for a longtime observer of Asian politics and the media who has lived in Southeast Asia for many years.