

Journalist and author Maria Ressa describes herself on Twitter as a cynic, a pragmatist and an idealist. In the face of attacks against her and her publication, Rappler, the idealism and optimism that Ressa continues to exude has carried her through her professional challenges to make her an inspiration for journalists in the Philippines, and around the world.

By Colette Davidson

Maria Ressa's winning of WAN-IFRA' Golden Pen of Freedom award is far from her first accolade. She has received the Overseas Press Club Award for Best Documentary, the National Headliner Award for Investigative Journalism and an Emmy nomination for Outstanding Investigative Journalism. She was also handed the SAIS-Novartis International Journalism Award for her work in East Timor and received a Ferris Professorship of Journalism at Princeton University.

Ressa has been a journalist in Asia for over 30 years, with a career spanning across various media. As the bureau chief for CNN in Manila and Jakarta for nearly two decades, Ressa was a senior investigative reporter on terrorism in Southeast Asia. Her work there inspired her 2003 non-fiction book, "Seeds of Terror: An Eyewitness Account of Al-Qaeda's Newest Center of Operations in Southeast Asia," focusing on Islamic rebel group Jemaah Islamiyah and its links to Al-Qaeda.

In 2005, Ressa headed up the News and Current Affairs division of Filipino media company ABS-CBN for six years, where she worked tirelessly to redefine journalism by combining traditional and innovative media models. In 2012, she published her second book, "From Bin Laden to Facebook."

Ressa's interest and talents in technology and new media were an impetus for her becoming one of the founders and eventually the CEO of Rappler, a social news network that aims to inspire community engagement and fuel social change. It became one of the first websites in the Philippines to use online multimedia such as video, text, audio and photos, incorporating social media sites for distribution.

Since the website launched in 2012, with its primary bureau in the Philippines and another in Jakarta, it has not only brought people together, but provided fodder for attacks by the government.

Since March 2018, Rappler has been attacked by officials in eight government offices. The publication has had its license revoked by the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC), been pursued for cyber libel by the National Bureau of Investigation (NBI), and been accused of tax evasion by the Bureau of Internal Revenue (BIR), among others.

The accusations have come amidst Rappler's coverage of topics considered sensitive by President Rodrigo Duterte's administration, from questioning the government's handling of the drugs war and exposing police brutality, to human rights abuses and abuses of power.

Despite it all, Ressa has held her head high, refusing to bow to government pressure. After the government revoked Rappler's license in January 2018 – a move that received international condemnation from everyone from The New York Times to the Washington Post – the publication called it a direct attack on press freedom.

“This is pure and simple harassment,” Rappler said in a statement on their website. “We intend to not only contest this through all legal processes available to us, but also to fight for our freedom to do journalism and for your right to be heard through an independent platform like Rappler.”

When the tax evasion case came up with the BIR – who said the publication had willfully attempted to evade tax payments – Ressa again stood her ground.

“This is clear intimidation and harassment,” she said. “The government is wasting its energy and resources in an attempt to silence reporting that does not please the administration.”

While Rappler continues to face government pressure, Ressa herself has not been spared. She has been the target of a hostile, gender-targeted hate campaign in an attempt to challenge her credibility. She's received threats of rape and murder, and become the subject of such social media campaigns as #ArrestMariaRessa and #BringHerToTheSenate.

But instead of burying her head in the sand, Ressa has become the outspoken face of the press freedom fight in the Philippines, denouncing online harassment and attempts by the government to undermine democracy.

“It began a spiral of silence. Anyone who was critical or asked questions about extrajudicial killings was attacked, brutally attacked. The women got it worst,” says Ressa. “And we've realised that the system is set up to silence dissent – designed to make journalists docile. We're not supposed to be asking hard questions, and we're certainly not supposed to be critical.”

As Ressa and her team continue to fight for press freedom, they still face uphill battles. As of March, Rappler correspondents based outside Manila were banned from covering events involving President Rodrigo Duterte. And journalists at Rappler – like many others in the country – are continuously fending off attacks, with Filipino media groups recording at least 85 cases of attacks and threats against the press during the first 22 months of President Duterte's administration.

During a press freedom rally in January, following the revocation of Rappler's license, Ressa spoke out, rallying the crowd to have faith in a free press in the Philippines. It's a call that has held through as Ressa and Rappler continue to weather the storm.

“We’re not doing anything but journalism,” said Ressa. “We’re speaking truth to power, that’s what we do. That’s what makes a democracy successful. We’re not afraid.”

*Maria Ressa is WAN-IFRA’s recipient of the 2018 Golden Pen of Freedom award, an annual award that recognises the outstanding action, in writing or deed, of an individual, a group or an institution in the cause of press freedom.*