

David Callaway Presentation Speech - 2018 Golden Pen of Freedom

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen, friends and colleagues,

We're here to honour a genuinely courageous journalist, a dedicated media pioneer, and a true believer in the power that the craft of journalism can have – a tireless proponent of the positive force our profession wields when it comes to holding the powerful to account, for the betterment of society.

We're here to stand in solidarity with her and her news organisation as together they face immense pressures, deeply personal attacks, and orchestrated attempts to undermine the professionalism and credibility of a news brand that has captured the public imagination and truly embraced what it means to be 'social' in this digital media age.

We're here to denounce the incessant online attacks against a woman who has navigated war zones and reported from conflict areas, and yet who concedes that never before has she faced a challenge so large, so all encompassing, in terms of what she has been subjected to over recent years from the anonymous online troll armies of her opponents and critics.

Ladies and gentlemen, we're here to award the 2018 Golden Pen of Freedom to Maria Ressa, co-founder, CEO and Executive Editor of Rappler, the Philippines' leading digital-first news organisation.

A journalist with over 30 years of experience at the very top of her game, Maria saw the massive potential in an increasingly young demographic and its obsession with social media – especially Facebook. 97% of Filipinos online have a Facebook account, and like in so many parts of the world today, this is increasingly how people – particularly young people – are consuming and sharing information.

Facebook was where Rappler experimented before it launched its website in 2012. The platform - and social media - was crucial to its fast growth, with a then unique distribution model to build its loyal communities of readers and contributors. In just six short years, Rappler has become a critical lifeline for independent investigative journalism in the

Philippines, connecting with the stories that matter to people across the country – the stories that were not being told, or perhaps more accurately, that those in power do not want to be told.

Rappler is now part of the online fabric of a country that has willingly embraced social media to the extent that the platforms have become the new public space. But for all the positive aspects of this – and Rappler and Maria Ressa are testament to the optimism, potential and possibility of this ‘brave new world’ - in turn, it has given rise to highly effective ways of assaulting journalists and destabilizing professional media.

The 2016 election was the Philippines’ social media election - President Rodrigo Duterte came to power on a wave of populism fuelled by an impressive online campaign that galvanised support across the country for an outsider candidate and his hard-line approach to law and order.

But in a matter of months, the very forces that had propelled Mayor Duterte to the presidential palace turned on those who questioned the new administration’s increasingly controversial policies. The media in particular, and Rappler specifically, bore the brunt of much of the ire of the administration and its proponents. Organised, fiercely patriotic, and on the face of it anonymous legions of pro-Duterte supporters – many real, many more automated to appear so – took to the Philippines’ number one platform to drown out the criticism and attempt to fully control the discourse - by occupying the public space.

Maria calls it the phenomenon of the ‘weaponization’ of social media, and a quick glance at some of the threats and attacks that both she and her company have faced in the last two years explains why this is so accurate.

At its height, she counted 90 personal attacks an hour coming to her via email, social media and messenger. Rape and death threats, vile messages targeting her and her family as well as Rappler reporters; all coming with a frequency and gratuity that suggested something was going on that was beyond the usual for hate mail or the average vocal critic. She sent her staff to counselling, took extra security measures, and inevitably began looking over her shoulder.

At the World Editor's Forum, this form of pressure on journalists – particularly women – is ominously familiar. It is a form of oppression seen from governments in places such as Turkey and Mexico, Pakistan, and India, and more recently, in the U.S., where hate speech is on the rise and out in the open after years of simmering online. The threat to our work is growing more dangerous as we speak.

Last year's Golden Pen Award recipient, Can Dundar, remains in exile from his home in Turkey, as more of his colleagues from his newspaper, Cumhuriyet, are thrown in jail by a government that attacks journalists as enemies of the state. Since last year's award ceremony, in Durban, South Africa, 55 journalists have been killed around the world. Shot in the street, blown up in cars, assassinated in their homes.

Still, they pursue the truth.

At Rappler, the threats would NOT stop them from continuing to do their job: questioning the Philippine government's war on drugs, the growing accusations of human rights abuses and the actions of police 'death squads'; providing critical analysis of the impact of the zero tolerance policy of President Duterte; and ultimately challenging the statistics – and revealing the tragic body count – of this policy in action on the ground.

Maria has NOT backed away from publicly denouncing either the policies or the hate that has come as a result of the coverage, and Rappler has continued the reporting that was at the heart of the onslaught.

But Maria's almost forensic-level analysis of who and what is behind the abuse and the exposure of the sheer size and scale of the vast armies of online trolls, echoing and amplifying the messages of hate, denouncing Rappler's reporting and presenting 'alternative facts' as a means of discrediting the journalistic process, has been breath-taking in what it has revealed. The ruthlessness, speed and efficiency of the attacks would surely have overwhelmed a lesser individual.

The result? The government, of course, dismisses having any knowledge of what is being carried out in its name and says it cannot control how its supporters use the online space. In

parallel, and perhaps the timing is purely coincidental, but it has also chosen to pursue Rappler using the legal and judicial apparatus at its disposal. Officials in at least eight government agencies have attacked Rappler and there are a number of open investigations and court decisions pending.

A pattern in the country is emerging that has seen the online and off line worlds converge, both with the aim of squeezing out one of the few remaining independent critical voices in the Philippines' media space. But Maria – ever the eternal optimist, despite it all - along with colleagues from her own generation and the inspired media-savvy youngsters that have made Rappler what it is today, know all too well what is at stake – the country having only been free from dictatorship for three short decades.

There is no escaping it; online threats, orchestrated attacks and relentless harassment are as real as physical attacks, and have a much greater impact far more quickly than anything we've seen challenge the media up to now. There is no safe refuge for journalism online. If anything, it is even more at risk from attack from all sides.

We hope that by awarding the Golden Pen of Freedom to Maria Ressa, the Philippines' government will pause before it considers its next move, that it takes stock of what its actions mean for the democratic future of the country and its millions of people. A free media is the sign of a strong, confident political system, one that trusts its people and has understood the electoral bargain. Encouraging criticism and participation ensures accountability, something President Duterte should understand.

We hope the Golden Pen also deters those who seek to undermine media independence and the profession of journalism by showing the solidarity that the award represents. When all else fails, we should know that we have each other to rely upon if we are to continue making the kind of impact, breaking the sort of stories, and shining our light into those dark corners in a way our communities have come to expect. The way Rappler has been doing, and will keep on doing.

Ladies and gentlemen, please join me in applauding Maria Ressa, the 2018 laureate of the Golden Pen of Freedom.