

Center for Humane Technology | Your Undivided Attention Podcast

Bonus: Replay of Episode 9: The Dictator's Playbook

Tristan Harris: We're saddened to learn that on Monday Maria Ressa a Pilipino-American journalist we had on this podcast last year was convicted on cyber libel in the Philippines along with her colleague Ray Santos Jr. Both are out on bail and are appealing the decision but they face up to 6 years in prison. Press freedom watchdog groups around the world have criticized the court's decisions as a direct attack on a democratic media outlet by the Duterte administration. Speaking to reporters after the verdict, Maria said, "For years I have been targeted by the authorities, by bot armies, by paid trolls, and fake news websites but I will not be silenced. I will fight this conviction and I will continue to do my duty to speak out and report the truth."

Tristan Harris: This is really hard news for both Aza and I to hear. We actually both just saw her in January at the Sundance Film Festival with the release of her new film, *A Thousand Cuts*. Which was just acquired by Front Line PBS. So in honor of Maria's work we are re-releasing our interview with her because unfortunately it remains as timely as ever and also recommend that people see the documentary *A Thousand Cuts*. And if you'd like to support journalists that are working in this area you can donate to organizations like Committee to Protect Journalists or Reporters Without Borders or The Freedom of the Press Foundation who are all working to support freedom of the press world-wide.

Maria Ressa: I remember getting 90, nine zero, hate messages per hour and I went to Facebook and I said, "I think I need help here."

Tristan Harris: This is Maria Ressa. Arguably one of the bravest journalists working in the Philippines today.

Maria Ressa: And they said, "Just go ahead and report it." And I thought 24 hours in a day, 90 per hour, even if it only takes me two minutes to report every single one, it is impossible, it should not be my responsibility.

Tristan Harris: Now Maria is not the type of person who shrinks from responsibility. When a terrorist organization abducted her journalist colleagues, Maria herself negotiated for their release, but for this particular threat, Maria didn't see how she or anyone in the Philippines for that matter, could get a handle on it. Those 90 threats lobbed her way every hour were so much bigger than her inbox, and a sign of how quickly Facebook's influence had spread and taken hold in the Philippines.

Maria Ressa: No organization in the world has ever worked that way. I opened the Jakarta Bureau for CNN. And it took me seven months of negotiations to be able to open that bureau for the interest of both CNN and the Indonesian government. So I think fast growth, this exponential growth that tech has enabled came with a cost. We were the first to feel that cost.

Aza Raskin: Maria and the citizens of the Philippines are still feeling that cost today. And if history is any guide, we will all pay the price. Unless we act quickly to fight what Maria first saw on Facebook, and then later watched it spill onto the streets,

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into ballot boxes and even into the highest chambers of government. She's taken her arguments to the heart of Silicon Valley and worked directly with the inventors of social media, pointing out not only its flaws, but how it can be so much better.

Tristan Harris: She may be one of social medias most powerful critics. She's less known for her underlying optimism and her fight to make these tools better.

Maria Ressa: I don't want Facebook, Twitter or YouTube, I don't want them to go away. They have to stop digging in their heels, they need to jump in and fix it because they can.

Aza Raskin: Today on the show, Maria Ressa, founder of the media site Rappler, takes us down into the streets of Manila so that we can see clearly this global threat, and think about how to reverse it.

Tristan Harris: I'm Tristan Harris.

Aza Raskin: And I'm Aza Raskin. And this is Your Undivided Attention.

Maria Ressa: I graduated school in 1986. The word "People Power" came out of the Philippines and that fundamentally traveled not just in Southeast Asia but to the rest of the world, right? It's sparked these people power movements. And the beginning part of my career was exactly about that, covering these transitions of governments from authoritarian one man style rule, to democracy and it is always chaotic. So it's always, the pendulum swings wildly like this right? But if I pull out big picture in my career, I covered Southeast Asia moving towards democracy.

Maria Ressa: And then the hard part is in the tail end of my career, I'm starting to see it swing back. And even worse, the accelerant is technology. We have governments now all around the world that are coming together. It's like a dictator's playbook, is in play. And the technology is the accelerant that is giving them more power because they have a scorched earth policy and they don't care how they maintain power. This has to be stopped. You guys here in Silicon Valley have that power. And I see such a reluctance to exercise the power even though your decisions, the decisions of tech platforms, their values for free speech, have actually caused a lot of these problems. I'm not saying I'm not for free speech, but what we've seen on the platforms is free speech is used-

Tristan Harris:: For free exponential hate.

Aza Raskin: Yeah.

Maria Ressa: Yes, it incites hate and we also know that online violence leads to real world violence. I mean, when is this stuff ... Whenever has this been okay? It never has been. So why would you want to create that world?

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- Tristan Harris: That's actually why I find your story so fascinating. It's because it starts with this appreciating technology as an accelerant for democratic forces and the excitement of more democratic media, and Rappler, which I'd love if you'll explain more for the audience, as a sort of news site and a vehicle, as one of the sort of first social media news sites.
- Maria Ressa: Yeah, Rappler started with 12 people. Within three years, we grew to almost 100 people and the technology allowed us to, at that point become the third top online news site in the Philippines within a year and a half.
- Tristan Harris: So you went from nothing to being the top third news site in the Philippines?
- Maria Ressa: Yes.
- Tristan Harris: And the Philippines has-
- Maria Ressa: So the Philippines has about 100 million people, now it's probably about 110 million people. And for the fourth year running, Filipinos spend the most time on social media globally. According to the 2019 numbers of Hootsuite, and we are so sure Filipinos spend the most time on the internet even though the speed is so horrible, we spend at least 10 hours a day on the internet.
- Tristan Harris: 10 hours a day? Because I actually remember that when we met at a conference, the StratCom Conference in DC, Strategic Communications and lots of State Department people there and just information researchers there and the graph-
- Maria Ressa: You stood out.
- Tristan Harris: Well, you stood out to me-
- Maria Ressa: I sat next to him.
- Tristan Harris: I think we spoke after each other, but actually I have the picture on my phone. I remember that the thing I was most called to take a picture of in your presentation was this graph of time spent on social media and that the Philippines was as the number one country. In fact you even said that the Philippines is the Facebook nation, because it has, what is it, 97% of the population is on Facebook?
- Maria Ressa: It's now 100%.
- Aza Raskin: Now 100%.
- Maria Ressa: Yeah, and Facebook has actually said that we are Ground Zero, I mean, of course I felt like the canary in the coal mine right? Because I celebrated this, I watched it. It's like oxygen to me. So I knew it like a titration experiment, you know when something is slightly off, and we felt it, leading from the campaign of then Mayor Duterte, to the presidential elections to after the presidential

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elections, and the weaponization of social media really didn't happen until after he was elected president.

Aza Raskin: Then let's back up just to explain the concept of Free Basics because I think this is really important for people to understand the impact of social media in developing markets, because what is Free Basics?

Maria Ressa: Free Basics means that when you get your cell phone, Facebook is built in and it is free, right? You get it automatic a curated version of the internet, immediately through-

Aza Raskin: Meaning that you can have like online access, is not just like the app is free, but now data is also free?

Maria Ressa: Data is free, right? So for most Filipinos who can't afford to pay for data and there's a lot, this opens a whole new world where in the past, a lot of people spent time on the internet because 10% of our population 10 to 12% live overseas. The largest revenue earner for the Philippines are overseas Filipino workers, the remittances home. And so what they do is 70% of the population would access the internet through internet cafes. This is before Free Basics. Once Free Basics came in, no need. That's why everyone is on Facebook. Right?

Tristan Harris: Right.

Maria Ressa: Free.

Tristan Harris: And so the key to Free Basis is that Facebook makes it free. And Free Basics was a distribution business strategy for Facebook, correct?

Maria Ressa: So it's Facebook and the telcos.

Tristan Harris:: And the telcos?

Maria Ressa: Right?

Tristan Harris: So they work together?

Maria Ressa: The duopoly that we had at that point, right? Both telecommunications companies carry Free Basics for Facebook. We weren't as smart as India and we embraced it.

Tristan Harris: What happened in India?

Maria Ressa: In India, the population civil society pushed back against Free Basics and Mark Zuckerberg had to deal with it. They don't have Free Basics and India.

Aza Raskin: So one way of looking at this is here comes an American company. And it sort of takes over the public sphere. But it doesn't take over any of the institutions that help moderate the public sphere. And in fact, there's no really recourse for

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somebody inside of the Philippines to now change the infrastructure that everyone is now communicating on.

Maria Ressa: So, I think there are two main themes in what you just said, which is the first is that the system that we wound up using, it is a form of colonialism because it was given to us but really created for a Western audience with the values of a Western audience. Obviously, the Philippine constitution is patterned after the United States. So we have similar values, which have never been reflected in the strength of our institutions.

Maria Ressa: So that's the first is that, we came in and we walked into this and for me, I understand at the beginning, I thought it was incredible because nothing was moving in our government. So what was the Philippines? Weak, law enforcement, endemic corruption, we have the same problems. So to a degree, the technology that was brought in that was created here in Silicon Valley seemed like a lifesaver.

Maria Ressa: The second point, though, is that we embraced it but we didn't realize that it would demand so much of us, we had no voice in how it developed. And the irony, of course, is that the values, American values that you built it with has been completely turned upside down. And it is been used by illiberal forces, people who want to control the information ecosystem. News journalists have two purpose, we distribute the news and we are the gatekeepers of facts. This is what we have agreed on. This is the social compact, the social contract that we've had, and in taking over, when Facebook became the world's largest distributor of news, its algorithms left behind the gate keeping functions.

Tristan Harris: The responsibility functions, the-

Maria Ressa: Yeah.

Tristan Harris: -journalist ethic standards. There is a notion of responsibility. There's a notion of standards of practice.

Maria Ressa: Yes. Absolutely.

Tristan Harris: There's a notion of being a responsible gatekeeper, not just the gatekeeper, but a responsible gatekeeper.

Maria Ressa: And that you're held liable for that. And I think this is part of the problem is that the illusion that was created here in Silicon Valley is that you can have this intense, immense growth without any responsibility. And that you can say, hey, it's someone else's fault, but it isn't. In the end, you created this. And so as a news organization, the business normally is headed by someone else, because that's the push for growth. And the editorial the gate keeping role is headed by the Chief Editor, whoever you want to call it, right? And it is always a clash between the business and the purpose, the primary purpose.

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- Maria Ressa: Whether social media platforms want to admit it or not, they are now in charge of the public sphere. When you're distributing information, which is what flows through the networks of Facebook, when you're distributing information, you can't actually distinguish fact from fiction. They don't want to have that responsibility. But journalists have evolved over time to have this set. And it's very complex. It takes a lot of experience to make these very, very difficult calls. And whatever call you make, you're responsible for that, right?
- Tristan Harris: What's an example of some of that discernment and moral weight? There isn't some easy calculated machine answer?
- Maria Ressa: No. It isn't.
- Tristan Harris: It's not a scorecard, it's not pros and cons, utilitarian net cost benefit. Give people a sense of the moral weight of some of those tricky decisions.
- Maria Ressa: I'll give you two examples. The first is there was a coup attempt in 2005 in the Philippines, and ongoing. The Philippines is the only place where the soldiers were gossiping so much that everybody knew a coup was going to happen the next day. And I had a reporter and so I was handling ABS-CBN, which is the largest news group. I had a reporter embedded with the group that was going to mutiny against the government, rebel against the government. It's the scout rangers, and they were telling our reporter, "Turn on your cameras and we will come out and start the coup." And we were like, "No, you come out first. And we will turn on the cameras." Because you don't want to be the trigger for a coup. Right?
- Tristan Harris: Right.
- Maria Ressa: Who makes that call? So that's one, that was a very easy one. We decided not to and you know what, it never happened. It didn't actually happen. These are the checks and balances, right? So when you're talking about real world consequences there are a lot of minute to minute decisions that determine what reality is going to become.
- Tristan Harris: And that comes from subtle, like world cultural knowledge about what does a kidnapping mean? What are the kinds of events? What are the trigger points? What are the things that had to be watchful for? Let's imagine someone just said that, "Let's just put that on Facebook." Or let's do it ... What's App, let's add a flashy title and then let's make it easy so you can one click share that to 25 other people without even hitting the other button. If we think about an algorithm that's enabling that kind of spread, now you have something amplifying it through a recommendation system, it doesn't know what the meaning of the word kidnap is, all it knows is there's this article that everyone seems to quote unquote, like.
- Maria Ressa: Right.

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- Tristan Harris: And they like it a lot. And they keep liking it and sharing it without the knowledge of the dynamics of this culture, this society, this checkpoint, this military that you need to call. All that local knowledge is gone and it's just left in the product of automated machines.
- Maria Ressa: Well, can I ask you a quick question on that?
- Tristan Harris: Yeah, go ahead.
- Maria Ressa: Why can't the social media platforms just when it hits a certain point, get an alert and have a human look at that.
- Aza Raskin: Aza here these are really serious issues. And we wanted to take a minute to really reflect on what Facebook should be doing.
- Tristan Harris: It was just a vanity fair where Sheryl Sandberg was interviewed by Katie Couric and Sheryl said the most viral stuff they get they fork it over to fact checkers. But Katie asked Cheryl this profound question. She said, "Well, how many content moderators do you have?" She said, "35,000 moderators." That's up from I think 10,000. They have 35,000 moderators for 2.7 billion users, which is about a third of the population of planet Earth. I mean, the math doesn't work out. If you imagine how much does a really big city, metropolitan city like Los Angeles, how much they spend on security, police, right, trust and safety effectively. They spend 25% of their budget on security, and Facebook in their just recently announcement, this is only a week ago in October 2019, Zuckerberg and Sheryl announced that they're spending more money on trust and safety than they did as all of their revenue when they went public as a company in the earlier IPOs.
- Aza Raskin: Good spin.
- Tristan Harris: So it's good spin. It sounds like a lot of money, right? They actually spend more on trust and safety than all of Twitter's revenue in a year. Okay, so that sounds like a lot, sounds like they're doing everything can but you have to actually put it in context, because as a percentage of their revenue, they're only spending 6.5 I think percent of their revenue on trust and safety. So they're spending one fourth on safety compared to the city of Los Angeles. And if they're running a 2 billion person city, is that enough? The one simple thing Facebook could do is why aren't they quadrupling the size of their trust and safety budget?
- Aza Raskin: Because right now underspending by four times.
- Tristan Harris: They're understanding by four times.
- Aza Raskin: Yeah. Maria is coming to Facebook and saying, like, "I am getting hammered. My country is getting hammered. And you guys are doing nothing."
- Tristan Harris: Right.

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- Aza Raskin: So what should Facebook do? Like right now? Today?
- Tristan Harris: Yeah, and there's three things they could do. They could turn off custom audiences for political ads. You can't do micro targeting.
- Aza Raskin: Yeah.
- Tristan Harris: They could turn off look-alike models. So you can't do ... I found these group of vulnerable minorities. And here's 100 user IDs and these are all the minority groups in the Philippines. And then now I can do a look-alike model, just give me 1000 more. Like that's a dangerous tool, let's turn off look-alike models. The third thing is having them delete all third party data that they collected on users. So everything they bought from other sources to do that targeting.
- Aza Raskin: I mean, one thing that they could do, I think we were talking about this before is just increase the friction that it takes to share. Right?
- Tristan Harris: Yeah.
- Aza Raskin: So that you have to really care about sharing something because often, if you give the human brain the chance to catch up to this impulse, like it'll do the right thing. That's what our prefrontal cortex is all about is helping us do the harder or lighter thing and our technology should be creating space for us to do that.
- Tristan Harris: And I know that there are people inside these companies who agree that the real place we went wrong was on making one click sharing the basis of the way that social media works, which is basically you participate by playing in the attention fame lottery, by playing in the attention casino.
- Aza Raskin: And how much money would it take to make that implementation change?
- Tristan Harris: It's basically is the two lines of JavaScript code.
- Aza Raskin: Yeah, exactly.
- Maria Ressa: So the content moderation policies, it's one of the things that's extremely frustrating to me because only a tech person could think like this. Journalists wouldn't try to tell you how to take things down based on a list of things. Because you can't.
- Tristan Harris: Well, this is the moral weight versus automation distinction.
- Maria Ressa: Right.
- Tristan Harris: How we agree with automated criteria or the kind of discernment, judgment, moral weight, the heaviness of that process, that a human mind has to weigh.
- Maria Ressa: But my point there is that before you can go to atomizing it, you had better have understood it first and fed the machine a lot more information and let

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people continue to do it because, sorry, and I know I'm getting upset, but content moderation without values. The guy who took down the Napalm Girl, Nick Ut's photo, he was a Filipino, right?

Tristan Harris: Could you explain that example? People may not be aware of it?

Maria Ressa: So in Norway, there was a newspaper that posted as part of their story, the picture of the Napalm Girl. The photographer was Nick Ut. He's based in LA and it was taken down by Facebook, because it was against content moderation policies and what it was naked. The girl is naked, she's burning. She's like this woman survived that. This is iconic this photograph. And yet, because the only criteria is naked or not? Naked. Check, done. Right? So David Kaye, who's the UN Special rapporteur for freedom of expression. He says, "Well, why don't we use the UN Declaration of Human Rights as a framework for content moderation, because that means you need to move away from these types of lists and automation and making people act like machines because we don't and the systems in the real world that we've created have so many greys that need to be evaluated if you have real power, and tech has real power, it determines the reality we live in now. And by pretending like it is a game where you can make a list, atomize it, this is why we have dystopia."

Aza Raskin: And the other side of that it's, the atomization of news meaning that everything you see in your newsfeed on Facebook or on Twitter, you will see something truly horrific, followed by a cute video of a cat, followed by a random post about somebody eating broccoli, back to something truly horrific. And because they're all mixed together like our brains just can't handle it. And it's just we can't normalize it. You shut it down.

Maria Ressa: Yeah, you shut it down.

Aza Raskin: You don't have time to feel the emotion that you're feeling right now.

Tristan Harris: Or to take it seriously because I think what people don't get and I know this is so personal for you, Maria, I get why it's emotional, but I think people need to understand a little bit better the human costs at the other end of this. So what's, what's the cost of this not being moderated appropriately?

Maria Ressa: Let me first pull out macro and then go to micro. We've now elected leaders, who in many different parts of the world, if you go by Oxford University's computational propaganda research project, just a few weeks ago, they said that there are now 70 countries around the world where cheap armies on social media have push back democracy. So we have elected populace style leaders who are using the democratic processes and again, using that to turn it upside down. Right? So that's on the macro end, we have no meaning-

Aza Raskin: I'll just add one thing there, which is often you hear the phrase that social media companies, their business model is advertising, that's not exactly right.

Maria Ressa: No.

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- Aza Raskin: It's that they built a lever to monetize changes to our beliefs, and our behaviors and our attitudes, and they're getting better and better and better at that. So it's not that these bad actors are abusing the system in a way that was unintended. They're using it exactly as it was intended.
- Maria Ressa: As it was intended, yeah, I agree. And have evolved over time, right? Because we're still partners of Facebook. We're partners of every single social media platform. But let's call it what it is. This is a behavioral modification system. And it isn't just about looking at your patterns, it is meant to intervene at the right point to change your behavior. And the people who have used it the most. It's our political leaders. I mean, again, let's go back Cambridge Analytica, who are the guys behind it, Steve Bannon funded by Robert and Rebecca Mercer. These guys are deeply connected. Let me not walk into American politics. But let's talk in the Philippines. Right? The partner company in the Philippines is also headed by a Duterte ally.
- Maria Ressa: So I think the last part of that is, how do we prevent humanity from unleashing the worst of humanity? It has been through things in like the Bible, Princeton's code of ethics, the principles, the Declaration of Independence of the United States, these codified agreements of values that we have, right? Where is that for the internet, I'm still waiting for that. That's on the macro level. On the micro level, I know this firsthand. I'm just a reporter. I lead teams in war zones, and I know how to protect my teams, when the gunfire is coming from this side and it's coming from this side. I know how to protect it. But in this world today, this is far worse than any war zone you can be in because it is personal, it comes to you when you wake up and before you go to sleep, and everyone sees it right.
- Maria Ressa: And it is meant to, it's psychological warfare, it's asymmetrical warfare, a person cannot stand up against an onslaught of information operations. Real World impact on me is this kind of ... This bottom up social media astroturfing that is meant to tear down the reputation, the credibility that I had built up as a journalist over the last 30 years, the messages that are seeded there are now mimicked by the government president Duterte top down a year later.
- Aza Raskin: Actually it would be helpful for you to describe quickly astroturfing and cheap armies.
- Maria Ressa: Sure, astroturfing means you take the idea that Rappler is CIA and in this one it was the mass base account a woman who later became a member of the Duterte administration campaign for him and is now back in the administration right? So she headed social media for the presidential palace. She writes in her Facebook page which has 5 million followers, Rappler is CIA? It's seeded, it's the very first time that idea it's like fertilizer, right? And then repeated over time, a lie said a million times becomes fact in social media.
- Tristan Harris: This is what Goebbels said who work for Hitler. Yeah.
- Maria Ressa: Right. Except-

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- Aza Raskin: Or Renee has this wonderful line, which is if you can make it trend you make it true.
- Maria Ressa: And here in the Philippines, there are great resources, a large amount of resources that are pushed on to this. So then once this is astroturfed, think about it. It's fertile ground. A year later, the same message comes out of president Duterte's mouth and he doesn't just say it to random, not even to a press conference. It is his second State of the Nation Address in July of 2017, where he accused Rappler of being owned by Americans. And I was covering the event and I immediately tweeted, Mr. President, you're wrong. But about a week later, we got the first subpoena for the lawsuits and then this is where the real world kicks in. Because the weaponization of social media was followed a year later by the weaponization of the law. Within five months in January 2018, the first case, the government tried to shut Rappler down and in a little over a year, we had 11 cases filed against me and Rappler.
- Maria Ressa: I've had to post bail eight times in a three month period. This year, I was arrested twice in a five week period, including coming from, I'm getting on the same flight tonight. Right coming from San Francisco. I got off the plane the second time I was arrested. I was picked up as soon as I got off the shoot. So-
- Tristan Harris: They did it at a Philippine's airport?
- Maria Ressa: Yes, I didn't even get through immigration. So yes, the real cost. All of this is meant to be not just to harass, but to shut us up. Because they've filed cases against like my board, for example, right. A former president of IBM sits on my board, he now has a case, a criminal case against him. And when you file cases against boards, the business and the editorial, business wants to shy away from these things, right? Editorial, we keep doing the story.
- Tristan Harris: Can you hold the line?
- Maria Ressa: We must, because obviously, the administration doesn't want the stories out but I joke, for every case I get a few awards, I would give everything back in these awards to just have a functioning democracy. We're just trying to do our jobs. But it's the people. It's the journalists at the front line in the Global South. And when Mark Zuckerberg spoke in Congress in 2018, and he said it would take five years and still thinking like it's the same paradigm that you need to have artificial intelligence to be able to do this, hello, wake up. Because in the Global South, every day that no action is taken, means someone dies. I don't want to go to jail. But every day that no action is taken those chances increase.
- Tristan Harris: You mentioned you get hate, sorry, 90 hate messages per hour. So I'd love for you to talk about just for a moment, what do we mean by that?
- Maria Ressa: Yeah, I mean, look, I was naive at the beginning because in July 2016, that was when we began to see the weaponization of social media start to happen. And now coincidentally, that's when this brutal drug war of the Duterte administration began. The UN now says that at least 27,000 people have been killed in this drug war since July 2016. Right? That's an incredible number. But

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the first casualty in our war for truth, and our battle for truth is the number of people killed because the government has parsed it. And they continue to threaten any journalist who tries to report what the real numbers are. So July 2016, we began to ... The drug war happened and I had one team, only one team that was going out every night, an average of eight people, eight bodies killed every night, right? So I knew something was happening, something bad.

Tristan Harris: And it's just the government calling anyone they want to a drug lord or a drug dealer, and going after them on that basis of that justification?

Maria Ressa: It was like being on a list and then when you're on that list, you can be put on the list because your village chief doesn't like you but here's a list that's given to the police and they knock on your door and people wind up dead. The police claim that these deaths are because people fired back. Even if they have no gun, we were extremely naive and began on our Facebook page #noplaceloforhate. And that's when I began collecting data. And I realized at that point that this is systematic. And we started by looking at how 26 fake accounts we proved, because I don't trust the machine, we proved it in Excel sheets that these 26 fake accounts could actually influence up to 3 million other accounts.

Maria Ressa: So there's your exponential spread. Once I understood that, then we began looking, we collected the data. I gave all of this to Facebook in August of 2016 because I wanted to do a story because this is huge, right? And the three people I spoke with were alarmed, but nothing was done and I waited a month I waited a month and a half. We came out with our story. It's the propaganda war weaponizing the internet. And it's a three part series, I wrote two of the three parts. As soon as it was released, that's what triggered the 90 hate messages per hour.

Tristan Harris: So you released this story, this propaganda war story. And this is after you ... Because you didn't get a response from Facebook. So there you are, you report this to the three people working for Facebook in Singapore. Don't get a message. Then you said later that two out of the three left their jobs.

Maria Ressa: They're no longer there.

Tristan Harris: No longer there. So you publish this propaganda story. And then what happens?

Maria Ressa: That's when I got pounded on my own accounts, hate messages, 90 of them per hour. How did I get to that number even, right? At the beginning-

Tristan Harris: What's that like for you? I mean, because 90 is just first of all, just coming in, your phone is dinging, I mean, or you're seeing ... Like what do you see?

Maria Ressa: So at the beginning-

Aza Raskin: More than one ding a second, right?

Tristan Harris: Yeah.

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- Aza Raskin: Or one ding a minute.
- Maria Ressa: Yes, it's insane. So when it was happening, I was watching it and at the beginning, I tried to respond to everyone because I think those were the principles that Rappler was built on, you engage. And I engaged.
- Aza Raskin: So, what kind of message did you get and what kind of response did you give?
- Maria Ressa: I tried to respond to the ones that weren't threatening me, to the ones that were half rational, but in the end, no one was responding back. It was really a pound, pound, pound, pound, pound, right. But they went from like, "You're horrible. You're wrong." Those are the really tame ones to rape threats, to murder threats, to I know where you live. I'm coming to get you, private messages, very coarse, very crass, hitting you in ways I suppose that they felt. Again, to me it was alarming. But I think the impact on me was, "Did I do the right thing? Is my data correct?" I went back. So at one point I was responding.
- Tristan Harris: What made you doubt whether the data was correct or not? And the propaganda story.
- Aza Raskin: Which is sort of the whole point of propaganda is to make you doubt.
- Maria Ressa: To make you doubt, right. So I did. And I'm pretty thick skinned, right? But I went back and I said, "This is correct." So I went, and then when I kept trying to respond, I realized it was impossible to respond to it. And then I just started counting how many times and then I took kind of the most creative ones. One I remember was so funny. It was like, "Your mother should have swallowed the sperm." Or something. It was gross, but it was ... I mean, it's hard to deal with the fact that you have to touch the grossness. My managing editor actually said, "Stop. Get off social media." Because for two weeks it did have an effect on me.
- Aza Raskin: What was that effect?
- Tristan Harris: Yeah.
- Maria Ressa: It's like PTSD, I guess. Because it makes you doubt yourself. So I was going back over it, going back over it.
- Tristan Harris: This is hate spam. It's attention spam. It's epistemic spam. You want solutions, you build a spam filter, which is the direction we went with email, where people still do send spam, but then we build the AI. So it's so smart that it actually does detect it. And I think they can certainly get better and there can be bigger investments there. And that should be done. But the other side is you put a cost to send an email. This goes to Bill Gates idea of an email tax back in the days of spam. And if it costs you something, the real solution is, the spammers because they send so much email, it would cost them a lot of money, hate messages tend to come from trolls who are sending lots of hate messages to lots of people.

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- Tristan Harris: And so for you to live on social media hating on the world will cost you a lot of money. And the people who send just a few emails, it doesn't cost him as much money so they can do it. Now you're not going to like it because it means that now, it's not a totally equal playing field. And it's all free. But you have to ask what world do I want to live in? And I think saying even if it's a virtual currency of I have so much attention, I can take at other people's lives. I'm going to allocate that much more carefully, if I know that when I share something, I'm going to be thoughtful about it. And you can imagine that if it ever does ever get identified as hate speech, it should be three strikes throughout, right?
- Tristan Harris: I mean, there's ways of creating counter incentives that at least create there's shadow banning, there's holding tanks, there's like temporary bans, there's objections from communities. I think the main thing is it shouldn't come from algorithms. And so the real question for our time is how do we scale human judgment? And how do we keep human judgment local to human situations?
- Aza Raskin: One of my favorite examples of taking a small group of people and scaling them up for moderation.
- Tristan Harris: For moral judgment. Yeah.
- Aza Raskin: For moral judgment comes from the Huffington Post, where they had this system, actually I don't know why they don't have it anymore.
- Tristan Harris: So how many posts had these paid moderators, right, these ones who were like the super moderators, the ones who were on their staff?
- Aza Raskin: Yeah.
- Tristan Harris: And they were moderating, oh, that's not good. That's not good. This is good, this is good. And then what happened is they had all these users just the readers, and so as the readers were marking what they liked, and didn't like, they built this clever system where the readers who ended up making the same moral judgments as Huffington Post paid staff, invisibly got promoted. So basically-
- Aza Raskin: Well actually, they'd get little badges. They'd get badges that would go from like, I'm a level one moderator, and I'm level two moderator. And eventually you hit level three, and all of a sudden your choices as a reader, were as powerful like you could flag and you could take down comments, but you never knew whether what you were doing actually matched what the paid staff were doing. And if you started to do things, like you built up your reputation, then you started to abuse it. Well, it would just ... Like statistically, you're doing things that no longer the paid staff was not doing. And so those powers would be revoked.
- Tristan Harris: Right.

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- Aza Raskin: This is just such a brilliant way of taking a small group of people and their values and scaling into a community.
- Tristan Harris: And scaling it to a moral judgment. Yeah, it's a great example, essentially, the Huffington Post values which they're imposing top down saying, "These are the values we want and what we want to be on our platform and what we don't want on a platform." But then finding organically, which people are mirroring the values of the people who are at the top saying, "Oh, let's just have the system that automatically promotes them when they align and automatically disempowers them when they start to go the other way."
- Aza Raskin: And it's a way that like, imagine if there are many Huff Posts, right and sort of like there are many Facebook groups that each community can come up with its-
- Tristan Harris: Own values.
- Aza Raskin: -Own values and then have a community that jumps on board and enforces them with very little overhead.
- Maria Ressa: My reporters were attacked in the same way one who's just in mid 20s. At that point, right. She was getting hammered as much as I was because she is the presidential reporter. She was following president Duterte and shortly after that, a few months after that, because she also continued to report and ask tough questions to the president, we were banned from palace coverage. She and I even though I don't cover the palace, and president Duterte said it was his decision that banning went to every single Rappler reporter to every single private event that the president is part of. We've now challenged this at the Supreme Court, and we've had other news groups, other journalists join this challenge at the Supreme Court. But again, is the judiciary captured? This is a question I ask myself all the time because by the end of president Duterte's term, in two and a half years time, he will have appointed 13 or 15 supreme court justices in the Philippines.
- Tristan Harris: So this is why we wanted to have you here. Your message is not heard by ... We're even just talking about the Philippines. And we haven't even gotten to the full Global South. I mean, the point is that, we've had other people on this podcast, Guillaume talking about YouTube recommendations.
- Maria Ressa: Yeah.
- Tristan Harris: And Renee, and we talked about the Western countries. Oh, my God, the yellow vests movement being amplified by Russian trolls and these sort of Western examples. But then for each of these Western examples, we know well, the anti-vaccine conspiracy movement, the 911 conspiracy, Sandy Hook, Alex Jones. These are the ones we hear about because we have a Western media that covers it because we live here and it reaches the inbelt of people living in Silicon Valley. But then we've just created this world where we're impacting a bigger world than we have the awareness for what we are impacting.

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Tristan Harris: It's irresponsible to have power that causes harm beyond the scope of what you become aware of it. If I hurt you by saying something that hurts you right now, looking face to face at Maria here in the studio, my nervous system, my evolutionary nervous system makes me feel what I'm doing to you, when you tear up a second ago, I tear up, right? Because it affects me that's built into my nervous system. There's a closed loop between what you feel what I feel, if I impact 100 million people in a country I've never visited. I can't feel that.

Maria Ressa: Right.

Tristan Harris: And it's easy to believe that we can just keep doing what we're doing. And so here we are, you've just come from a week in Silicon Valley. We have a lot of people from policymakers and media and people who are product managers, designers, leaders, at these technology companies, what is the thing you want people to know and understand?

Maria Ressa: I think, to the tech folks, right? It's not us. It's them. It's not us, it's them.

Tristan Harris: And who is that them?

Aza Raskin: And by that you mean, the users?

Maria Ressa: Someone else, right? It's someone else-

Maria Ressa: Yes.

Tristan Harris: It's the bad apples, it's not us.

Maria Ressa: Yes.

Tristan Harris: Instead of we are a bad apple factory?

Maria Ressa: Exactly they try to make it ... It's a bug. It's a reason. It's because we didn't do this one thing, but it's the system right? So the first is, if you take responsibility, you can fix it. If you're in denial, the longer you're in denial, the worse it will get.

Tristan Harris: And the worse it eats into you when you go to sleep at night.

Maria Ressa: Yes. And I guess-

Aza Raskin: Have you noticed any like markers of like that kind of denial? Or like the responses, you get, some responses we often get are, it's a neutral platform or net, net, it's good.

Tristan Harris: Or we're doing a lot of good things but you are not giving us credit.

Maria Ressa: One, there is no neutral platform because the systems that created it should have values right. And those values actually didn't fit the rest of the world. Early this month, a Cambridge Analytica whistleblower Chris Wylie, I cornered him

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and I asked him the role that the Philippines played. Because obviously our data is something I hold on to a lot right. And he said that the Philippines was the petri dish for Cambridge Analytica. And he said that even before Cambridge Analytica, SEL, the parent company had been operating in the Philippines. It makes sense. Large population, large adoption of social media.

Tristan Harris: And what did they do? What it was the way in which it was the petri dish?

Maria Ressa: He said that in countries like the Philippines and others in the Global South, this is where they experiment with tactics, tactics of manipulation. If it doesn't work, there's no problem because there are few regulations right? But if it does work, they then take those same tactics and his word was they port it over to the United States and to the West. We're you're testing ground where we are you will be, right? And the Philippines I focus on that because even during the days of Yahoo, digital products were first tested in the Philippines. We're English speaking nation we're 100 million people, so we're a little test case for you. If you don't do anything drastic, we really are your dystopian future.

Maria Ressa: I think you're getting there already anyway, but your institutions are just stronger than ours. In the Global South, and this is something Wylie had said, right? They tested all of these things. And he said that they didn't actually like demand payment for the leaders they helped elect. It was after they were elected, the contracts that they got, right, because then they have far more money to be able to give, I mean-

Aza Raskin: So it's I can freemium business model is what you're saying?

Maria Ressa: Yeah a little bit, right?

Tristan Harris: Well, and I think, one thing people don't understand is actually how inexpensive it is to run one of these campaigns. Like this is not even that expensive. So this is where it's like Facebook is an arms dealer for manipulation and psychological warfare. And its incentive is to drop the price to be as cheap as possible to enable mass chaos. Now, okay, we've taken people down a really dark deep road, which I'm fine with because it's the reality but I really want to get to-

Maria Ressa: How do we get out of it?

Tristan Harris: How do we get out of it? Maria, I'm actually kind of curious how you cope with this? Because I think I've learned to create psychological barriers in myself. It's so hard to actually take this in. And I'm just curious how you deal with it.

Maria Ressa: So first, there's Rappler. We're about 100 people, and we're holding the line. My job is to hold up the sky, so that my team can continue doing its work. We just finished a seven part impunity series in the drug war that won an award at the Global Investigative Journalism Network. So we keep doing our job. That's one. Two, I know how fast Facebook pivoted to mobile, they did it in two years time. And I was hoping.

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- Tristan Harris: Because the business interest is on the line.
- Maria Ressa: Exactly right. Well, in 2019, Facebook is aiming for \$69 billion income, right. So pivot man, because I think that we can still recover. The destruction has happened, Joseph Schumpeter said it's creative destruction. Let's create it. And let's do it purposefully. I do have faith in the smarts that are there. It's just please keep doing what you're doing Tristan, because you guys have to convince them of the reality we're all living through. It is dystopia and if they don't do anything substantive, it will take us down an irreparable path.
- Tristan Harris: This reminds me of our interview with Renee DiResta, where she said, "The global public square with Facebook is over. We're if we're hosting the Global Public Square. It's like, when's the last time you ever heard of the global public square? It doesn't exist. We don't have such a thing like that." Imagine a dinner table with 2 billion guests at the table, and everyone's trying to actually get a turn to speak and then they act. How do you think that's going to turn out? I mean, it's sort of self-evident.
- Aza Raskin: Throwing food at each other.
- Tristan Harris: Food fight.
- Aza Raskin: Yeah.
- Tristan Harris: And we have to start questioning certain presuppositions like does everyone deserve broadcast capability? And how if you are giving people increasing levels of broadcast capability, that it scales with increasing responsibility. Because the problem right now is, you can say anything and lie, and there's no responsibility for being wrong. So if you think of technology as this global super brain that connects all of our thoughts and posts and messages and stuff together, Twitter and Facebook right now are all just the excitatory neurons. It's just crazy spirals of positive feedback at different degrees of positive feedback, which, of course, it's going to turn into chaos and insanity.
- Aza Raskin: And one of the things I think about all the time is that scale itself does not scale. And that if you sign yourself up to be the single point of failure, then you're going to have every part of the world trying to make that thing fail in the direction that they want.
- Tristan Harris: Right.
- Aza Raskin: Right? And so it is an inherently brittle solution. And instead, you have to move to this kind of fractal solution with lots of different communities, with lots of different norms, because that means it's just a much harder system to take over because you have to do it differently in each different community.
- Maria Ressa: The second thing that keeps me really motivated is: I'm learning, because it does get me excited. We're building a tech platform. We're building a tech platform that takes that idea of building communities of action. Because most of the civic

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engagement groups don't scale when they have a platform, nation builder, countably, you look at these things, right? We have millions of unique users, 10s of millions, and we want to be able to build communities of action. So now, we're six sprints into a 10 sprint build, and we'll be rolling it out early next year.

Maria Ressa: What happens when journalists are in charge of some of those tech decisions? It's kind of interesting. I think that the tech platforms have to realize that the public sphere is now theirs to protect, to grow, to pollute, right, and that if they jump in now, it is still salvageable. There are many things that can be done. If a little journalist, if a little group in the Philippines like us can try to do this, with no resources, they can. And so I still have optimism. And finally, I have no choice but to be optimistic. Because we use the battle cry, hold the line, hold the line, because I'm not against government. I am for making sure that we have the rights guaranteed by the constitution, we will hold the line. So I think, the two biggest battles are climate and truth, right? But more than climate, you can't have action on climate if your information ecosystem sucks.

Tristan Harris: That's why we work on what we're doing. My personal biggest concern is climate. And it's the reason that we work on this issue is that our attention and our epistemic commons, our truth is the basis for all action.

Maria Ressa: Everything.

Tristan Harris: And we have to protect that. And so I hope people take seriously your call to action and I think just recognize what is actually worth doing right now. We want everyone to be the moral conscious of the world, and everyone to have that own sense of responsibility. If everyone walks around with that level of responsibility, the world gets better because it's a distributed system. It's a complex system. And so you can't do it in a top down way. It has to be through a massive responsibility movement. And I think that's the only thing to really ask for. And the weird thing is as much as that might feel hopeless when you say, "Okay, well, if I do that, well, what's the big deal? Like I'm just, going to change this one thing in my life, it's not going to do anything."

Tristan Harris: And it's like, well, if you talk about it, and then that inspires 10 other people to take responsibility from where they are, you won't be able to see it. I hate to get depressed every now and then around our work. I don't get the sense or I don't know how much this is actually making a difference. If this podcast is making a difference. If the speaking, if the work, if the briefings that we do make a difference, but you hear in invisible ways that those seeds are being sown, and it does make a difference.

Maria Ressa: So I think it makes a difference. I think obviously, right. So I think at no other point in time I became a journalist because of the power of journalism and that power, Spider-Man, great power comes great responsibility. You use this in your presentation, I think.

Aza Raskin: Right now it's with great power comes no responsibility.

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Maria Ressa: Right. Nothing comes for free. And I think this is it right things that Silicon Valley thought this great growth would happen. There's a cost to it. Right? And the cost is the world. At no other point in time have I seen information is power. That adage, this time proves it. And I think that your knowledge of technology, your audience, the inherent audience that you have here, they're the ones who can do something about this, and I hope we don't wait until a global Bretton Woods or declaration of human rights because by that point, it's too late for me. You know what I mean? And I guess you can always say this is existential, not just for me and Rappler, it's existential for journalism. Because we're attacked on two fronts by the business, and the credibility, and the attack.

Maria Ressa: So anyway, I still have hope. And we must have hope, because so much was done by so few here in Silicon Valley, you need to now pull up and say, "What are the values that drive us?" That's the most important thing and then, do something in each of these platforms, is part of the reason I was here. This is it. Like, you can't just do an incremental, this will be better, because we'll make this one small switch in a product. It's not that this is, look again at the world today. You think you can just make it be about advertising you've been gained. You've taken the rest of the world down this path. How do you fix it? Because if you don't fix it, then regulations will come in and it's starting already. But when we bring in the lawyers and the people inside, I'm hoping there's a movement inside tech, which you're starting, which you're doing right?

Tristan Harris: That's our hope. And what we've seen is the strongest thing that's changing in the industry is people on the inside, creating this sense of responsibility because it's much more expensive to make the economic argument to a Facebook or a YouTube to replace a disenchanted person, than to keep a newly motivated set of people who want to correct all these problems.

Tristan Harris: Maria, thank you so much for coming today. Honestly it's such a privilege. I admire you and your work so much. And so it means a lot that you're here.

Aza Raskin: It's truly humbling.

Maria Ressa: No, guys, thank you for having me. And I look at your work also, please come to the Philippines.

Tristan Harris: Your Undivided Attention is produced by the Center for Humane Technology. Our executive producer is Dan Kedemey. Our associate producer is Natalie Jones. Noor Al-Samarrai helped with fact checking. Original music and sound design is by Ryan and Hays Holladay. Special thanks to Abby Hall, Brooke Clinton, Randy Fernando, Colleen Haikes, Rebecca Lendl, David Jay, and the whole Center for Humane Technology team for making this podcast possible.

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