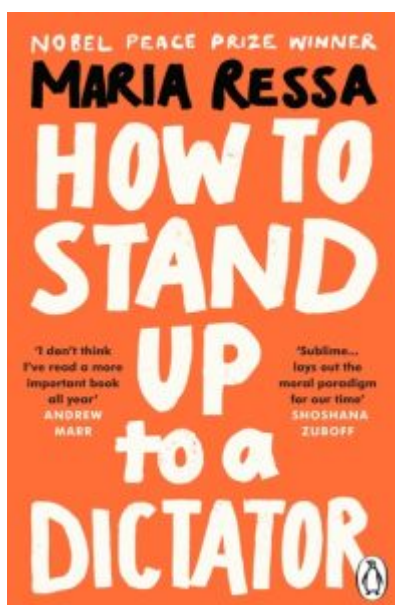


How to Stand Up to a Dictator: The Fight for Our Future

*In **How to Stand Up to a Dictator: The Fight for Our Future**, Maria Ressa considers the links between authoritarianism and social media, recounting her work exposing disinformation networks seeded by the Duterte government and consequent attempts to silence her. Ressa's memoir is a fascinating, if depressing, account of how democracy has been threatened, in the Philippines and beyond, through the strategic spread of disinformation, writes **Duncan Green**.*

How to Stand Up to a Dictator: The Fight for Our Future. Maria Ressa. Penguin. 2022.



Reading this book by the 2021 Nobel Peace Prize winner, [Maria Ressa](#), got me thinking about the mental landscapes of the journalists I know. Articles are essentially linear (beginning, middle end), and a good journalist keeps shades of grey to a minimum if they don't want to lose their readers. For those activist journalists who are motivated to change their world, this often translates into quite a black and white, goodies v baddies understanding of politics. It's all about identifying the good guys, and in terms of your own protagonism, "speaking truth to power." It manages to be both uplifting and a bit frustrating at the same time.

At least that was the feeling I got on reading [How to Stand Up to a Dictator](#). Maria Ressa is a fascinating figure – journalist, rights activist and entrepreneur, with quite exceptional levels of courage, stamina and energy. Her book is in part autobiography, in part an account of how the digital world went from a source of hope, to a dark cesspit of trolls and misinformation, amid gathering clouds of autocracy, state repression and “lawfare” against any source of independence or resistance. It’s a fascinating, if depressing, case study of the rise of 21st Century populism [discussed by Moises Naim](#).

Her book is in part autobiography, in part an account of how the digital world went from a source of hope, to a dark cesspit of trolls and misinformation.

Ressa briefly covers her complicated early years, raised in the Philippines and US, a painful emotional tussle between her mother and grandmother. A kind of moral awakening took place when she attended Princeton, but the early years seem a pretty humdrum account of friendships, moments (awkward; lightbulb) and early career (a Fulbright scholarship back to the Philippines, and a first job at CNN).

No great insights here, but they crystallised into what she calls “the mission of journalism.” She rose rapidly through the ranks, first at CNN, covering an exciting time in South East Asian history – the [liberation struggle in East Timor](#), the 1998 [fall of Suharto](#) in Indonesia, all against the backdrop of the initial optimism engendered by the Philippines’ earlier “[People Power](#)” revolution against the dictator Ferdinand Marcos.

This was a ‘golden age’ when, up until the early 2000s, the news media were still the gatekeepers.

In journalistic terms, this was a “golden age” when, up until the early 2000s, “the news media were still the gatekeepers. Journalists listened to different sides and consolidated what they learned to help the public make their own informed decisions. The pact felt sacred.” How the world has changed.

After making her reputation at a regional level, she then left CNN and went home in 2005 to head up the largest Filipino news company, [ABS-CBN](#). This was the dawn of digital media, and she embraced it, especially Facebook. The Philippines is a digital outlier – 2021 was the 6th year in a row that Filipinos spent more time than any other nationality on social media and the internet. Many of the dark trends we have all become familiar

with first surfaced there.

But this all lay in the future. Ressa pioneered the use of Facebook to encourage “citizen journalism” and was filled with optimism about the potential of digital to democratise everything. These were the years of the Arab Spring and in 2011, she founded [Rappler](#), an online activist news platform dedicated to social change.

Now, she says, she “cringes to remember that [optimism]. Those very same developments that I welcomed in 2011 would soon be fine-tuned by the platforms’ business models, co-opted by state power, and turned against the people, fuelling the rise of digital authoritarians, the death of facts, and the insidious mass manipulation we live with today.”

Ressa’s initial optimism was crushed by the arrival of the blood-soaked Duterte era in 2016, and her growing disillusionment with Facebook.

Ressa’s initial optimism was crushed by the arrival of the blood-soaked [Duterte era](#) in 2016, and her growing disillusionment with Facebook, which ignored all her attempts to warn them about what was going on. Smiling selfies with Mark Zuckerberg rapidly turned into “a belief that Facebook represents one of the gravest threats to democracies around the world.”

The second half of the book rather loses its way in a strange mix of nerdy social network diagrams to demonstrate the role of trolls and evil chatbots, and a personal account of the walls closing in – in the shape of Duterte’s “lawfare” harassment against independent journalism in general and Ressa in particular.

From 2018, we enter into a succession of lawsuits, trolls and resistance, exacting a growing toll on Ressa, even as she became a global figure both for her criticisms of Facebook, and resistance to Duterte. This culminated in her [Nobel Peace Prize](#) in 2021, but this is a shaft of light amid the gathering gloom.

Looking back on all this, how does she see her role?

“I have lived through several cycles of history, chronicling the wild swings of the pendulum. When journalists were the gatekeepers to our public information ecosystem, those swings took decades. Once technology took over and abdicated responsibility for

our emotional safety, history could be changed in months. That's how easy it became to shift our history through our emotions.

When that happened, it transformed the old checks and balances on power and transformed our world. We elected incompetent populists who stoked our fears, turning us against one another, fueling and feeding off our fear, anger and hate. They appointed officials like themselves: their goal was not good governance but power. When termites eat away at wood, we didn't see that the floor we stood on could collapse at any minute."

In response, her theory of change is, somewhat disappointingly to "fight technology with technology, protect investigative journalism, and build community to fight back."

Right now, that doesn't feel like a fair fight, but I hope I'm wrong.

Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics and Political Science.

Main Image: Maria Ressa speaking at a conference on combating extremism in social media in 2015 via [Store Norske Leksikon](#).

This post was originally published on [Oxfam's From Poverty to Power blog](#).
