

Maria Ressa, **How to Stand Up to a Dictator: The Fight for Our Future**, New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2022, 301 pp., \$29.99 (hardcover).

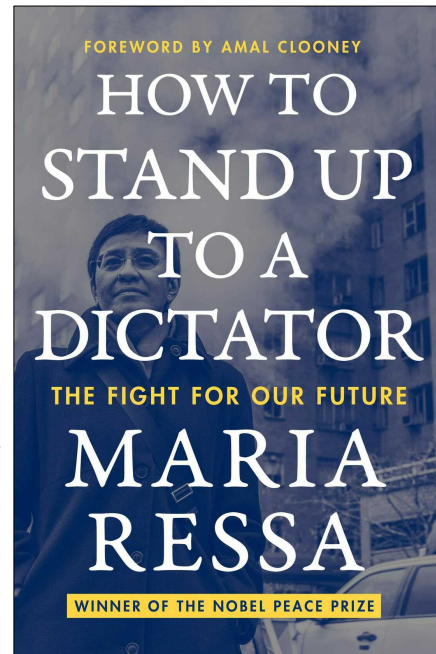
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The audacious title of this book is not hyperbolic. Maria Ressa has stood up to dictators to defend democracy, and endured harrowing consequences in response, including death threats, arrest, prosecution, financial peril, and more. She and her team have, in her words, “survived a thousand cuts” (p. 177). Without denying the fear these struggles arouse or the psychic toll they take, she claims that they have made her stronger and reinforced her determination to defend democracy against autocracy.

***How to Stand Up to a Dictator: The Fight for Our Future*** is literally a “how to” manual, written in accessible and *urgent* journalistic prose. A foreword by human rights lawyer and activist Amal Clooney compares Ressa’s struggles to those of Gandhi, King, and Mandela. The twelve chapters document specific conflicts with repressive adversaries, most prominently former Filipino President Rodrigo Duterte. Ressa identifies lessons learned from these ordeals and summarizes them in simple homilies that function as chapter subtitles. For example, choose learning, draw the line, silence is complicity. There is no index. However, substantive endnotes support Ressa’s account, including archived links to stories that authorities sought to suppress. This makes the volume a remarkable censorship case study as well as an illuminating personal narrative and compelling defense of press freedom.

Ressa is cofounder and CEO of *Rappler*, the Philippines’ leading digital news site, which has exposed public and private corruption, as well as social injustices stemming from the country’s legacy of colonialism. She has earned many journalism and human rights accolades culminating in the Nobel Peace Prize in 2021, which she shared with Dmitry Muratov, editor of Russia’s independent newspaper, *Novaya Gazeta*, for their respective “efforts to safeguard freedom of expression, which is a precondition for democracy and lasting peace” (Nobel, 2021, para. 1). Ressa and Muratov subsequently coauthored a “10-Point Plan to Address the Information Crisis,” which is reprinted in the book (pp. 267–268).

Ressa was born in the Philippines and immigrated to the United States with her family when she was nine. She excelled as a student and graduated from Princeton in 1986 where she completed pre-med requirements but discovered her intellectual passions in the liberal arts. Instead of medical school, she applied for and won a Fulbright fellowship, which took her back to the Philippines. She earned a master’s degree there and holds dual Filipino-U.S. citizenship. Ressa considers the Philippines her home: a place where she feels “comfortable being an outsider looking in, wanting to belong but comfortable with observing” (p. 35).



A rekindled connection with a Filipino childhood friend who had become a television news anchor introduced Ressa to journalism. She was soon spending most of her waking hours at PTV, working on the news documentary program, *Probe*, which established an affiliation with CNN while the network was still in its formative stages. CNN hired Ressa as an investigative reporter and foreign correspondent. She became the network's Manila bureau chief from 1987 to 1995 and Jakarta's from 1995 to 2005, where she covered political developments throughout Southeast Asia.

With cofounders Chay Holfilena, Beth Frondoso, and Glenda Gloria, Ressa created the online news site *Rappler* in 2011 before any of the major digital platforms were routinely live streaming. Because *Rappler* was pioneering an Internet-based journalistic innovation, she had the foresight to include an ongoing research agenda in its organizational plan. This produced a rich data set that adds empirical support to Ressa's analyses.

Optimism about the democratic community-building potential of the Internet was still widely shared by activists and academics when *Rappler* was conceived. That potential briefly appeared to have been realized by the success of the 2010 Arab Spring democratic protests. In retrospect, however, those protests actually served as siren calls for global elites to mobilize defenses against digitally enabled democratic activism.

Ressa reports that she initially saw Mark Zuckerberg's Facebook as an ally in democratic struggles. She contends that she now cringes at the memory of that naïveté:

[the] developments I welcomed in 2011 would soon be fine-tuned by digital platforms' business models, co-opted by state power, and turned against the people, fueling the rise of digital authoritarians, the death of facts and the insidious mass manipulation we live with today. (p. 105)

It is this disillusionment that transformed Ressa from a journalist-researcher into an activist.

This volume leverages Ressa's Nobel laureate visibility to amplify international concerns about the rise of state and corporatist autocracies, which she contends are enabled by the "weaponization of the internet" (p. 137; see also her Nobel Lecture, Ressa, 2021). Ressa claims that the Philippines served as an early test case for this weaponization: incubating and distributing Russian and Chinese disinformation and misinformation campaigns well before the 2016 U.S. presidential election. The country was, and still is, one of the world's heaviest users of the Internet, both in terms of access to and time spent online. While it is a multilingual nation, a majority of Filipinos speak English and are familiar with American popular culture. This makes it an attractive, unregulated, experimental laboratory for testing new products and ideas before they are introduced in the United States. Ressa describes the Philippines as "a fraud hub" for "click and account farms, information operations, and the rise of political influencers in the grayer areas of the advertising industry" (p. 124). By 2019, the Philippines was the leading global source of online attacks by both humans and bots.

*Rappler* began exposing online "Black Ops" campaigns as early as 2014 (p. 128). After the information warfare that accompanied the presidential elections of Duterte in the Philippines and Donald Trump in the United States, *Rappler* created a database designed to monitor the emerging information ecosystem—what Ressa describes as "a kind of Interpol for disinformation networks" (p. 131). This

database, called Sharktank, indicates that journalism is no longer functioning as a gatekeeper of facts and information. According to Ressa, "The new gatekeepers, the technology platforms, had put in place rules that give the equivalent of nuclear weapons to digital populists and authoritarians to turn our society and democracy—all around the world—upside down" (p. 151). The *de facto* effect on journalism (beyond undermining the business model of print journalism, especially local journalism) creates a form of commodification that monetizes page views and engagement times, favoring emotionally driven sensationalism, reminiscent of the yellow journalism that thrived in the United States in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

While Ressa focuses primarily on the effects of the weaponization of journalism at the level of praxis, her argument is theoretically informed, drawing most heavily on Shoshana Zuboff's (2019) work on "surveillance capitalism." Ressa reports on a collaborative brainstorming session with Zuboff in 2021, quoting the latter's assertion that, "journalism is coerced into self-optimization for social media . . . . Ultimately, it's surveillance capitalism that is deciding what journalism survives" (p. 249). Ressa's response is to advocate a new form of civic engagement.

Her plan for reform is secured by three pillars. First, hold technology accountable through regulation that protects journalistic standards and ethics. Second, grow investigative journalism. Third, build global communities of action to protect frontline journalism through collaborations among free press, media, and civil society groups. These communities of action, as she conceives them, would include collaborative efforts to create databases to defend facts and shorten the time it takes to correct lies and misinformation. Ressa considers this step critical since fact-checking was historically the foundation of modern journalism. Her prescription is put forth with honesty and humility. "Will it work?" (p. 257), she asks, and admits that she does not know. However, she is confident that action is better than becoming a complicit victim in the rise of authoritarianism.

Ressa's combative rhetoric reflects her location as an activist on the frontlines of these struggles. The "weaponization of the internet" (p. 137) by authoritarians is, however, real and expanding rapidly. China, for example, has excelled in development of advanced digital applications designed to surveil and control its population, and it has exported its surveillance norms and technologies to over 80 countries (Scharre, 2023). According to legal ethicist Nina Farahany (2023), both the major U.S. tech corporations and China are currently making significant advances in brainwave surveillance apps, designed to influence thought patterns, which, she contends, place "cognitive liberty" itself at risk.

Ressa concludes *How to Stand Up to Dictators* by urging readers to join the effort to "hold the line" for democracy and free expression, strongly empathizing that, "Now is the time to act" (p. 262), because the weaponization is rapidly accelerating.

## References

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