

The Necessity of Truth:  
How Social Media Is Used To Undermine Democracy

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## The Necessity of Truth: How Social Media is Used to Undermine Democracy

Journalism and news media have been all but transformed with the creation of social media. Twitter, Facebook, and other platforms allow information from both professional journalists and citizen reporters to connect every corner of the globe. Through the internet, we now have access to any information we want whenever we want it. But this new, constant information stream has developed too quickly for us to foresee some of its potentially harmful consequences.

Nicco Mele, keynote speaker at the 2020 Camden Conference on *The Media Revolution*, called this global information exchange *radical connectivity*<sup>1</sup>. In Mele's presentation at the start of the conference, he explained how radical connectivity means that news sources are no longer the only information-producing platforms. Now, sources are going direct. Politicians, leaders, companies, and private citizens are all able to release their own information over the internet. This can both make the job of a journalist easier and much more dangerous. In some cases, radical connectivity not only threatens truth-tellers, but democracy as well.

The Conference witnessed an example of a warrior for truth in Maria Ressa, editor of Rappler in the Philippines. Ressa worked as an investigative reporter, foreign correspondent and Bureau Chief in Jakarta and Manila for CNN. She co-founded Rappler, a small online news platform, in 2012 with a mission of speaking truth to power in the Philippines<sup>2</sup>. Ressa's battle with the Philippino government clearly illustrates how the rise of social media puts both

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<sup>1</sup> Nicco Mele, *The End of Big: How the Digital Revolution Makes David the New Goliath*. (New York, N.Y.: Picador, 2014), p. 1-2.

<sup>2</sup> Hannah Ellis-Petersen, "Maria Ressa: everything you need to know about the Rappler Editor." *The Guardian*, July 23, 2019.

reporters and democracy at risk. Ressa's website, Rappler, uses the internet and social media to spread its crucial information, but those same platforms are used to attack it. At the Camden Conference, she explained how Rappler's fact-based reporting on President Rodrigo Duterte resulted in an incredible onslaught of smear campaigns, fake news, and hate messaging. Her team first started reporting on Duterte's corruption in 2016, and as an immediate result she began receiving an average of 90 hate messages per hour<sup>3</sup>. Ressa calls this the "weaponization of social media"—using radical connectivity to spread lies and control citizens. She explained one crucial concept that connects to every threatened democracy today: authoritarians succeed by calling facts lies. When elected officials like Duterte use their platform to spread falsehoods and call their opposition liars, the population has to wonder: is there a truth? When the authoritarian government is trusted over the media, or when no one trusts any source at all, resistance is impossible, and, as Tim Snyder put it, "the game is over"<sup>4</sup>. In Ressa's case, she became not only distrusted but attacked. When government officials began posting calls to arrest Ressa, other online profiles all over the country followed violent tweets that degraded and sexualized her with statements such as "Maybe Maria Ressa's dream is to become the ultimate pornstar in a gangbang scene" and "Make sure Maria Ressa gets publicly raped to death when Martial law expands to Luzon." The government attempted to close Rappler down in 2018, and finally arrested Ressa in 2019. By the time she made it to the conference in February of 2020, Rappler had faced 11 cases and investigations in just over a year<sup>5</sup>. But sadly, Ressa's case is not at all uncommon, and she's lucky to be alive and walking free.

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<sup>3</sup> Maria Ressa, "[OPINION] The Role of America's Social Media Platforms In The Battle For Truth." *Rappler*, September 30, 2019.

<sup>4</sup> Maria Ressa, 2020 Camden Conference (speech, Camden ME, February 22, 2020).

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

Courtney Radsch, advocacy director of the Committee to Protect Journalists, provided the perspective of journalists who weren't so lucky. Through her work, Radsch has seen journalists like Patricia Mello endure smear campaigns so violent she referred to them as "virtual lynchings"<sup>6</sup>. At the conference, Radsch explained how Patricia Mello was accused of selling sex for information and her face was edited into pornography in response to her reporting on presidential candidate Jair Bolsonaro, who later became President of Brazil. She also mentioned the assassination of Daphne Caruana Galizia, a Maltese anti-corruption journalist. She was killed in a car bombing outside of her home in 2017. Her assassination was likely in response to Galizia's work uncovering corruption in the Maltese government<sup>7</sup>. Through Radsch's research with the Committee, she found that journalists like Mello and Galizia who report on politics in particular are likely to become the target of state-sponsored trolling campaigns and may even end up in jail for doing their jobs. According to Radsch, at least 70 countries are using social media manipulation campaigns to influence popular opinion. Social media allows corrupt, abusive regimes to degrade and attack their opposition, but journalists are trapped because they can't report effectively without social media. Radsch pointed out in her Conference presentation that journalists can't just simply leave social media if they're being threatened. They use social media to find stories, identify sources, and of course, connect with their audience. Many editors expect their journalists to use their social media accounts for work. But how can journalists and pro-democracy activists access the benefits of social media without having to face the wrath of angry authoritarians? This is exactly how radical connectivity threatens democracy: when social

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<sup>6</sup> Courtney Radsch, 2020 Camden Conference (speech, Camden ME, February 22, 2020)

<sup>7</sup> Sharon Braithwaite and Barbie Latza Nadeau, "Why Murdered Maltese Journalist Daphne Caruana Galizia is Back in the News." *Cable News Network*, November 30, 2019.

media makes easy targets out of journalists, authoritarian leaders who share the same platform can use it to silence them.

Joshua Tucker, professor and co-director of the Social Media and Political Participation (SMaPP) lab at NYU explained that social media is just as useful for the good guys as it is for the bad ones. In Tucker's presentation at the Camden Conference, he explained how social media can be a tool that provides voice to people who are excluded from access to mainstream media. The internet and social media allow people like Maria Ressa and her organization to get their information out into the world. How authoritarians receive that news is a different issue, but without the platform of social media, pro-democracy journalists and their stories would be censored and silenced before they could ever make it out into the world. In Tucker's words, social media allows for "democratized access to information"<sup>8</sup>. But he also pointed out that social media can be used as a tool for censorship as well, and governments can do this by either restricting access to content online or engaging with the issues online. When authoritarian leaders engage online, they use bots, trolls, propaganda, and misinformation campaigns to undermine any foundations of democracy. But, as Tucker points out, it's actually not just the authoritarians who we need to worry about on social media; right wing extremist groups, white supremacists, and terrorists can also spread information online. In the past, groups like the neo-Nazis who led the march in Charlottesville weren't able to organize. Now, with online chat sites like 4chan and 8chan, extremist groups can conspire and form coalitions that result in large public statements. These kinds of people are generally included in the group that doesn't believe in facts. Tucker's data collected from SLaMM proved that the majority of people who shared

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<sup>8</sup> Joshua Tucker, 2020 Camden Conference (speech, Camden ME, February 22, 2020).

fake news and conspiracy stories online around the 2016 election were NOT liberal or moderate. People were more likely to spread falsehoods online if they were conservative leaning<sup>9</sup>. This doesn't mean that all conservative-leaning people are right-wing extremists, but it's possible that harboring the same distrust for facts may lead to sympathy for hate groups. This kind of polarization diminishes our country's understanding of the truth and further threatens democracy.

At the Camden Conference, this lack of understanding became apparent when an audience member asked: "How do we know what truth really is?" This question, although seemingly harmless, shows exactly how authoritarian-like leadership has already begun to undermine democracy in our country. President Donald Trump, who has now made well over 15,000 false or misleading claims since the start of his presidency<sup>10</sup>, has "elevated trolling to a tool of statecraft," according to Courtney Radsch. Under the Trump administration, smearing news sources and tweeting hateful messages seems almost as commonplace as it is in the Philippines. Here in the United States, politicians and public figures are attacking both journalists and activists alike. According to a recent article in the *Columbia Journalism Review*, Trump's continued attacks on the press "rally the president's supporters, who see liberal bias in the mainstream press, ... and they mean to curb the press's credibility— all while distracting from stories like Russia's role in the election."<sup>11</sup> Keynote speaker Nicco Mele expressed the same concern at the Camden Conference, telling the audience that Trump's refusal to acknowledge the Russian government's role in the 2016 election was dangerous for the country. Because modern reporting generally supports Trump's opposition, his strategy is to discredit journalists and the

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<sup>9</sup> "Data Reports," *The Center for Social Media and Politics*, September 13, 2019.

<sup>10</sup> Glenn Kessler, Salvador Rizzo, and Meg Kelly, "President Trump Has Made 15,413 False or Misleading Claims over 1,055 Days." *The Washington Post*, December 16, 2019.

<sup>11</sup> Peters, Jonathan. "Trump and trickle-down press persecution." *Columbia Journalism Review*, 2017.

media in general. Conservative supporters then have no reason to question whether or not articles that cast a negative light on the administration are fake— if their president is telling them the media is corrupt and illegitimate, why shouldn't they believe him? This is the breakdown of democracy at work.

In Nicco Mele's view, journalism has been under attack since before Trump, although there is an obvious increase now. He calls this the "attack on expertise", and this doesn't just pertain to journalism and the media<sup>12</sup>. The climate crisis has resulted in skepticism of science and data analysis that never seemed prevalent before. Well-informed and tested data is no longer recognized in policymaking, and researchers like Joshua Tucker are often discredited along with the journalists who report on them. Now, the government is actively attempting to suppress science. A recent New York Times article tells of how the Trump administration has chipped away at the scientific community's grasp on policy: "Political appointees have shut down government studies, reduced the influence of scientists over regulatory decisions and in some cases pressured researchers not to speak publicly."<sup>13</sup> It seems like Maria Ressa's warning about crumbling democracies is all too applicable to our own country's situation.

Authoritarian leaders and governments around the world employ a specific strategy to control their citizens. They lie, attack, demean, and repress. Tyrannical leaders introduce their truth as the only truth, forcing the people to wonder if facts actually have any real value. When reporters, news sources, and science itself comes under attack, when truth-tellers are imprisoned and assassinated, when citizens are too afraid to discover the truth on their own, democracy collapses. It's happening right here in our own country. So how can we address the problem?

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<sup>12</sup> Nicco Mele, 2020 Camden Conference (speech, Camden ME, February 21, 2020)

<sup>13</sup> Brad Plumer and Coral Davenport, "Science Under Attack: How Trump is Sidelining Researchers and Their Work." *The New York Times*, December 28, 2019.

At the Camden Conference, members of the audience suggested a variety of solutions. Some called for a certification process for journalists, but reporters already have to go through an intensive vetting and fact-checking process in order to get their stories published. The certification and education of scientists doesn't keep their work from being questioned, even when their studies are peer-reviewed and checked for bias dozens of times by other professionals. Joshua Tucker pointed out that we don't need to be so skeptical about already reputable sources— or, in other words, we shouldn't need to fact-check the fact-checkers. We need to be able to trust journalists, researchers, and news platforms that have proven themselves reliable. We also need to understand how we're being used by our governments in the media. Many citizens likely don't realize how the spread of rumors and misinformation is a ploy to gain their support. They need access to information like what was shared at the 2020 Camden Conference. The fact that attendees of the Camden Conference have to pay a \$150-400 just to attend shows exactly why members of the working class may be inclined to distrust the media. The lectures are available for free a few weeks after the conference is over, but this still excludes the working class from actively participating in and contributing to the conversation. We need to make the live event accessible to the working class so as to not escalate the problem at hand.

The truth does exist, and it's important. It keeps our institutions running and our leadership in line. For authoritarian governments, the truth is easy to attack. But it's difficult to get rid of journalists who spend their entire professional lives fighting for facts like Maria Ressa. As long as their work can connect to an audience, democracy still has a chance— but we, too, have to fight to support them.

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