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SFU Public Square, Ouano Foundation, Global Reporting Centre, Vancity Office of Community Engagement, Digital Democracies Institute, SFU Vancouver Campus, The University of British Columbia.

Laurie Anderson, Dr. Joy Johnson, Lara Honrado, Carol Off, Maria Ressa, Andrea Crossan.

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on the unceded ancestral territories of the coast Salish peoples, the Squamish, Musqueam and the Tsleil Waututh and we're very pleased and honoured to be here. I'd like to begin by also saying that it's a real privilege to have you here tonight for this very special edition of what we call the SFU Vancouver speaker series.

Featuring none other than Dr. Maria Ressa. Oh, good, timing is everything. And just before you'll be hearing of course from Dr. Ressa shortly. But just before she received her Nobel prize, SFU gave her an honorary doctorate degree. So it's really good to have you here at your alma mater.

We have a number of guests I want to acknowledge here with us as well. Former Chancellor emeritus of Simon Fraser university Ann Jordina and also from OCAD university Anna Sorano President and vice Chancellor, welcome. And the MLA for Vancouver Kensington Mable Elmore. Now we are also delighted here at SFU to be welcoming tonight, Fei Wong. A long standing friend of Simon Fraser university. And in fact this room was named after Fei and her husband Milton both of whom were long term advocates and supporters of the university. And tonight when you go outside when we have the reception, you'll see a wonderful portrait out there of Fei and Milton . And Fei's husband Milton was one of SFU's beloved Chancellors from 1999 to 2005 and did a wonderful job. And their generosity and advocacy was responsible and instrumental for this school of contemporary arts getting set up and established here in the downtown eastside. So Fei, thank you so much.

Now Dr. Ressa is the 13th speaker in the SFU speaker series. And what we do is we try to bring in eminent thinkers from around the world who can share their ideas and

explore critical issues of the day. Past speakers have included Naomi Klein, Gwyn Dyer, Amitav Ghosh, Chris Hedges, Miloon Kothari, Richard Wilkinson and Shabana Azmi. We are pleased at SFU to do this in a partnership with internal partners SFU Public Square and SFU Vancity Office of Community Engagement. We are also especiall

any form at our events. And we thank you in advance for your cooperation. And now to

graduates at convocation. In a recorded message from her home in Manila, she remained resolute about her work and encouraged our graduates to embrace their fears, know their values and go out and create a more equal, sustainable and compassionate world. It was a moving and inspiring message that I know our graduates will carry with them into the years ahead. In this post truth era Dr. Ressa's unwavering dedication to fighting for the facts benefits democracy everywhere. It is an absolute honour to have her here tonight and to call her a member of the SFU community. Maria, thank you for joining us and I really look forward to hearing from you. Welcome to Simon Fraser university.

Thank you, Joy. We are indeed pleased you are here to be part of the SFU community. I mentioned earlier we have internal partners we work with. But on this occasion we are also working with a number of community partners. One of these is the newly formed Ouano foundation which was instrumental in bringing Maria Ressa here with us tonight. A brand new initiative that just coincidentally was launched this week.

And the Ouano foundation describes itself as and I quote, by, for and about women of the global majority dedicated to the realization of universal declaration of digital human rights. Yes, let's give them a big hand. This is a big week for the Ouano foundation. To tell you more about their work and to introduce Dr. Ressa and our guest moderator tonight carol Off, please welcome the CEO of the Ouano foundation Lara Honrado.

Thank you Laurie.

[Speaking an alternate language]

[Greetings in Filipino]

My name is Lara Honrado, I am a CEO of Ouano foundation. And on behalf of our founders Jennifer Ouano and Sharon Lewis and our small but mighty team. It is an honour to be a sponsor of tonight's event. Which is part of our public launch as you've heard. It is true, the Ouano foundation is by, for and about women of the global majority.

[Cheers]

Yeah, that deserves a cheer. Our mission, largely inspired by Maria Ressa, is to accelerate the global movement to create a new paradigm for human rights in the digital age with women of the global majority at the forefront. As you heard from Laurie, our goal was to create a universal declaration of digital human rights. We're so excited to be collaborating with Maria who is 1 of 20 outstanding global leaders of digital human rights. That we announced publicly yesterday. And many of them are in the room this evening. The global leaders of digital human rights are at the forefront of efforts to

happening and to take action. As a seeker of truth, and a die hard Trekkie, she's like Mr. Spock, guided by evidence and logic and facts. And like Mr. Spock, she is also sometimes confounded by the extremes of human behaviour. Especially by those with power. What Maria has to say about truth and trust, about the future of democracy and the pathway forward, is the most urgent message for all of us. Maria and with that I present Nobel peace prize laureate Maria Ressa in conversation with Carol Off.

I think they like you. Dr. Ressa.

Mom and dad, I hope you're listening! I was supposed to be a doctor.

And you are in many ways. And I have an honorary degree. So you may call me Dr. Off. Or as some like Dr. Orf apparently. Sorry about that. Had to do that. When I got the call from Lara, that was a lovely introduction, thank you. Basically when she asked me she said you know, I didn't want to do anything this month. But the trick to getting people to do things that they don't really want to do is to offer them things they would crawl over broken glass to do.

Across an entire continent if necessary. And so I was like yes, I will be there. What time? And here I am. OM!hon ofasy cathway enten«

hard to cut through. We're kind of taught to have to look tough, to be tough. But that really wasn't what I wanted to be as a reporter. Though you read it and one of the first things my boss told me when he saw my standup. That piece to camera that you do. He said you look 16, put a suit on and then drink brandy to lower your voice. So I did. I'm a good follower. And I got drunk before I finished. Because my voice is high.

But if you'd known you'd be Dr. Ressa one day you might have been more serious about it.

Yeah, so I guess I felt like the lesson in my whole life is if so many people are afraid to drop their shields, what could be the worst thing that could happen? And for me it was like okay, if I take the chance and drop my shields, I can have this incredible time. We have so little time. I always felt that. Especially when we were interviewing. We walk into a story with so little time. And you want to get a good interview. How? You're either a really hard hitting reporter. Sorry about that. Or that's what I tried to do in my reporting, was to have more. To have a real connection. And then in my life it became I have great friendships. I had strangers who I would meet who if you drop your shields, what can they do?

And they tell you things don't they?

judicial killings in Davao city. And I thought this man was playing a game, but I thought he was going to run for President. So we were in Davao city and I asked him, and he admitted on camera he killed three people. What do you do as a reporter?

I think I was okay, and then I followed up. He became very straight forward. He actually delivered every promise he made while he was campaigning. I am going to kill. I am going to kill so many that I will drop their bodies in Manila bay and they will feed the fish. The estimates of people killed, the human rights commission in the Philippines estimated up to 27,000 killed in his first three years.

So it wasn't just hyperbole, he said he was going to do that. And this was the beauty of your reporting style and this vulnerability that you get people to tell you things. Which he obviously was willing to tell you. And you were able to get others to tell you. And you as others at rap were able to document this. And this really got up the nose of a dictator, didn't it?

It counted and gave I guess when you're counting numbers, you can lose humanity in that. So what we did was to do an impunity series. And every story was about the life of someone who was killed. But we weren't the only ones that pissed him off.

But again, and to go back to how you did and again, the beauty of the reporting style, of you and the others at Rappler, that the 27,000 people that were society considered, well these were just people that were troublemakers. Drug dealers. But you put a face on each of those people. You gave them a name, an identity and family, and that was such powerful journalism.

I think that's what we do, right? And that series, that's what we spent time on. We put a dedicated team on that. And I didn't want them to be numbers. Because this was horrifying. I mean if you think about it right after, hours after President Duterte was sworn into office, the first killing happened. And we only had one team, we're small, about a hundred people in Rappler. That includes tech and every night this one team would come home. We would have eight dead bodies dumped on the sidewalk. So from July, August, September until the end of 2016, we knew something horrific was happening. But by December, when we were trying to keep count at the beginning the police were actually keeping count themselves. And part of that was because they were getting credit for this. But at the same time they realized if they gave the real count, they would also get criticism from human rights groups. So they started the numbers in plain sight. So then it was a combination of giving faces to these numbers. And some of the most horrific ones are the 5yearold granddaughter of a guy, an older guy who was just killed by the bullet. The casualties, so as we were doing that, then we were also keeping track of the changing numbers. This is you know, I called it death by a thousand cuts of

our democracy. But it is also death by a thousand cuts of history. It is death by a thousand cuts of facts.

And people.

Literally.

And that was such powerful journalism. And many things in between. But the second time I think you got up his other nostril pretty far, when you and the other reporters reported on the troll army, the online assault on democracy that you were able to document. Thorough document. And to show that they were pushing out fake news stories as a team hired to do so, manipulating the narrative and lying to the public. And that was the other extremely powerful work you did that was then after which the state really went after you personally.

Both online and in the real world, right? We have the data, we have the evidence. I will tweet this the very first series of the propaganda war. We called it the weaponization of social media. So the weaponization of social media from the data you tell a lie a million

times becomes a fact. You attack a journalist. Equals criminal. Say this a million times and people believe it. It's a fake bandwagon effect. It's AstroTurfing. Fake grass. But then after you do that for a year, then that same narrative comes top down from President Duterte himself, and he says you know journalist equals criminal. And then a week later we got our first subpoena. And that first maybe 14 investigations, by 2017 I was spending more time with lawyers than I was with Rapplers. But I think the reason I was so certain and the reason we stood our ground on this, the second part I wrote 2 of the 3part series. The second part was how facebook algorithms impact democracy. It was probably the first time that that was questioned as connected to this information operation.

I mean I also run after western media sometimes because they put misinformation and disinformation together. It's disinformation. It is insidious manipulation, it's information operations on us. So yeah, when that first came out, that was when I got pummelled. And I just pummelled online first.

You were at one point getting as many as 90 threatening horrific personal messages per hour.

Yes, all I could do at that point. At the beginning I was the truest of true believers in social media. And that is the greatest irony, I believe, part of Facebook's growth in the

Philippines was powered by the fact that we at Rappler when we were beginning, would go to colleges and universities to talk about social media for social good. For social change. I had hoped the technology could jump start development in countries like ours. And to see it turned upside down this way was so painful. But 90 hate messages per hour. At the beginning I was trying to respond.

[Laughter].

And then I couldn't, because there was just too much. So I just started counting. And I realized this is something new.

What was new. This is the first time. Because a lot of your book describes what you then started to pull away. Like a little thread in the sweater that starts to unravel. What do you think had been identified at that point?

I mean it's hate at exponential scale. Something I now call behaviour modification. It's free speech used to stifle free speech. You pound someone a million times, a target, until that person sinks. And so Joseph Conrad it was her, what I realized when we finally got the data and I realized. And I was afraid because my team Rappler is a young team, you know, our median age is 23 years old. And so I worried about our reporters. Our

And when I reported it, here's the part that's not so hopeful. No one really likes that's that journalism. It doesn't get distributed on social media is the other part, right? So at the beginning, we thought Oh my God, this is a fantastic story. Right? This quantifies it. And you look at the numbers and you just go Oh my God, why is no one reading it?

Or tweeting it. MO is"

Because I wasn't the only one being attacked. My young reporters were being attacked. And I thought you know, I have a track record. A long track record, and I have I'm older, but my young reporters, I was so worried about them. And the other part is how do you even talk about it? So what we did as a team, two things. Is the online violence, that worries me. So we increased security. And the second part is almost if I was having difficulty dealing with it, I wanted to make sure that our team could talk about it. And so we went to look for councillors, counseling. But it was so new that our counselors

As you were investigating and tracing where the source of this was, where this new thing that you felt this is new I have to find out what this is. And as you pulled the thread on the sweater, realizing okay, the troll farm that Duterte's office is running. It's coming from the state, outside, from troll farms. Other offshore sources of this. And you were getting that data where you started to circle around, with this thing called Facebook. And as you write in the book, I believe that Facebook represents one of the gravest threats to democracies around the world. How did you come to that conclusion?

Data, experience. I could go to jail for the rest of my life. And I haven't done anything differently than I have done as a journalist before Facebook. And that is where the Vector of attacks happened. And they didn't pay attention. Did I say Rappler is a Facebook partner? We're frenemies. It has become a behaviour modification system. Because I think part of it is if you're on Facebook, which I'm sure you are, you don't think about this as individual posts. But at scale, when they are able to get your personal thoughts, right? So as you put in your post, they have machine learning coming in to take all the posts you have ever had and create a model of you. A clone of you. These are your personal thoughts, ideas, connections and family. This is a clone of your life. And because they use machine learning to create it, they now own you. They take that. Then artificial intelligence comes in. And scoops up all of our clones and puts it up this is the core problem. That is the database that they use to

micro target advertising. And what's happened is that what was used for advertising is now used for geo political power play. And that is a danger. So online violence is real world violence. And impunity online is impunity offline.

The reason. The reason why democratically elected more illiberal leaders. Is because our information ecosystem has been determined by the algorithmic choices in my country of Facebook. 100% of Filipinos on the internet are on Facebook. For six years in a row we spent the most time globally on social media. So we're the Petri dish.

But Facebook, that's not its intention. It's amoral, right? It's not trying to manipulate elections. It's trying to make money. All of this is about exploiting all of this for the purposes of commerce. It's not to try and influence things in order to have power. The power is the money. Money is power, right?

Oh, I'm so sorry I ran you over with my car. Doesn't matter what the intent was. What matters is the impacts. And the harm. It's not just Facebook. It is all of these technology companies that were ahead of all of us in understanding how the real world can be mirrored in data. And then used it to keep us on the platforms and to get a they don't even need a license, to print money, right? This is and I don't think I quote him in the book. But I use this all the time. EO Wilson is a biologist who studies emergent behaviour in ants. There are three ways that this social media affects us.

Psychologically

our incentive structure upside down. And I would argue, turned our values upside down. So what kind of journalism? Oh the ones that lie. And the ones laced with anger and hate.

So it's not journalism, it's propaganda.

And we see journalism degraded even as the journalists come under greater attack. So here we are trying to do our best to hold power to account while our reach has been diminished. And the dangers to us have increased.

And spirit being undermined.

That's why you have to be Mr. Spock. You have to laugh because it's a crazy thing, right?

There may be people who have a lot that doesn't matter. Okay what does it matter, they've had too much power anyways. But what does it do to democracy? What is this erosion of truth and facts? What effect do we value most in this country?

Nothing is possible if you have no shared reality. And facts form our shared reality. And I've said these three sentences in numerous ways over the last seven years or so. If you have no facts, you have no truth. Without truth, you can't have trust. Without any of these three, we don't have a shared reality. How can we begin to solve the existential problems that we already have? Climate, Coronavirus. The facts. Those to me are the biggest challenges. If we don't have a shared reality, how can we even talk to each other? So I've gotten to a point where I keep trying to explain this in ways that capture your attention, I get it down to you know, think matrix. Like we're the human batteries for this huge thing. But we're giving our energy to power this. IE our data. And yet at the same time, we are not really connecting with each other. Because what we are doing is creating 3.2 billion Truman shows. How do you find meaning in your life? Anyway, sorry.

No, but this is exactly what you've told you and I about this about 2024 as being a watershed moment in your view where this erosion of these institutions, erosion of democracy, the discrediting of facts and truth that we're headed to a real cliff at that point. The authority and illiberal governments are going to have their field day.

the world's largest Muslim population. Where the front runner today is the son in law of former President Suharto. I covered the end of his 32 years in power. India will have the world's largest democracy elections. The United States will choose a President. If nothing changes in the trends we're seeing, if nothing is done with our information ecosystem, that will be the year where there are enough illiberal lead sources that autocracy inc will win.

And you could push back to these platforms saying, "I'm not a fan of the values of democracy, right?"

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We've seen it even more recently in Rwanda, the ability of using radio stations to within 100 days, have Hutu power kill and mobilize a population to kill Tutsis, we've seen it over and over again war in murder but we've seen authoritarian regimes. Come into your power without the use of this I'm just wondering to what extent is there a frightening disposition within our societies right now? To be led in this direction?

their investigation. And we took the data and we found a direct link to the Philippines. Not surprisingly it was Russian disinformation, a Facebook page called daily century. And it was later taken down by Facebook. But that was the Facebook page that in 2018 had attacked Rappler and other news organizations the most. This is like the bread crumbs are there. The geo political power play is shifting. It's using information warfare against us. And sorry, I get too geeky in the book, but Carol tells me it's not that boring, that you'll find it interesting.

Is it possible then, that what the tech companies and the platforms are doing, is to play into the very thing that works so well. With this disposition and the desire on the part of people to have simple solutions. Simple answers. That Q anon can connect all kinds of dots and make life so much easier. And so it is possible that the tech companies are doing that by providing these simple answers to complex things, they lure people into this world where, yeah, we want someone just to tell us be Godlike and tell us what to do.

I'm going to separate those two things to what the tech companies are responsible for and what digital authoritarians are responsible for or politicians who take advantage of those systems. I think social media platforms manipulate our emotions. They spark fear. Anger. Hate. That's the content that gets the widest disposition. Fear, anger, hate. That

changes us.

Nazification. It was the justification for why Russia would come in and annex Crimea. Except that what he said was identical to what an account had written a day before. A Dr. Supposedly Dr. Igor or something like that. And it has been translated into multiple languages. And it was about the doctor being prevented from treating people. Again this Nazification story. All of these accounts were taken down. But it was identical. A footnote in the book.

use it and you have the Nobel peace prize now you and others in a group have developed an idea for how we might get ourselves out of this mess before that eight seconds thing of 2024. Can you talk a bit about that?

So I wrote a 750 page book. This is where she coined the business model that now rules our lives. Surveillance capitalism. And in the beginning of September, 11 Nobel Laureate Dmitry had just so Mikhail Gorbachev had just died and Dmitry and I were presenting this plan. You go to the core, which is to stop surveillance for profit.

[Applause].

Yes, please, that one. And we broke it down to ten points. I will tweet it right after we get off here. But you can also go to the Nobel peace centre, it's their front page and also in Rappler. So the goal, the key here is we have to stop fighting amongst ourselves. The good guys tend to fight amongst themselves.

And then while the bad guys have already systemized how to manipulate us. So we need to scale these things and stop wasting time on things that don't matter. Content moderation is not the problem. It's a combination. It's part of the problem. But it isn't. It's like if you are trying to stop pollution in the river, you want to stop the factory that's polluting the river, not analyze the water and take out a small portion of it. What you want to do here is data privacy and user safety. Antitrust. And yes privatization those

are the laws that need to be put in place there. That's one way. But the other way is we really need to experiment with what civil society and what civic action means in the age of exponential propaganda. In the age of behaviour modification system. When we are losing our agency. So that's one of the things that we tried to do in the Philippines. And it worked. A whole society approaches in the battle for facts. We called it #factsfirstph. I said it was the Avengers assemble moment. This is it, I mean, you know, look at Europe, look at Canada. Look at the United States, this is a global problem. We did #factsfirstph as a four layer pyramid with law at the top. And the lawyers who were then part of this were more than 250 groups that took part in this. We were only at this time for three months so it wasn't enough. Ferdinand Marcos Jr. Began his campaign in 2014. It's asymmetrical.

We know the foundation of democracy is rule of law. So if you have something lying on top of it that's internationally not governed by any laws at all, then what is the point of individual countries like Canada having a democracy when so how do you establish the internet law that has to be put in place to govern how these tech companies operate.

While still allowing for the free speech that you and I cherish?

In the Nobel lecture I talked about, I compared the technology platforms, the technology companies to an atom bomb. That exploded in our information ecosystem. And & just

like after World War II, when the atom bomb exploded the world galvanized. Because it could see the damage. This one is a silent atom bomb. And it was so much harder to galvanize, but this is what we need to do. We need to do exactly what happened post World War II. The universal declaration of human rights was created. The U.N. was created. NAT

I just want to talk about Canada for a bit. Because one of the things maybe people don't know here, is that these attacks on women journalists are rampant in this country. And it is if you follow what these women are writing and the pushback they are trying to give and the lack of support they have both from our media agencies and from levels of government that they have appealed to. Police they have appealed to. They've had to go to the police in some cases for protection. But they are going through exactly what these women from around the world are talking about that's going on. And just in Canada, maybe you can give us some advice. We had something that happened here on the weekend, which is that we have a new leader of the official opposition. Pierre Poilievre, and one of the many things he's proclaimed he will do, should he become Prime Minister, and there's a very good chance of that, he said that he will get rid of laws immediately to get rid of the gatekeepers. And he doesn't define who the gatekeepers are exactly, but he has included the media and journalists in the list of gatekeepers that he thinks need to be curtailed. What would you say? What advice would you give us to explain or to deal with what possibly that means?

You asked me this earlier and I didn't define it. What do journalists do? Journalists are trained to be the connective tissue. But what we do that requires courage is to hold power to account. Please don't call us influencers. Because without the group that is

holding power to account, then you get impunity, right? Then uh this erosion, this is how institutions die.

But how do you do that when the credibility of that profession is undermined? Both journalism did a lot of damage to itself in these past years. But it's constantly being questioned and undermined and told that you're telling lies. How do you have that ability to play that role when you are fighting a rearguard action of this kind?

I think there are two answers. And we hear it when news heads get together. How do we restore trust? As if it's within our power to do so, right? In many ways, news organizations now are like we don't have power. Not in the same way. So this is the

already moved to the court of appeals. And they denied it. So we filed the motion for reconsideration. My timeline before I actually go to jail is much shorter. And it could be quick. And then the tax evasion charges. There are five of them. They are funny, they are creative. They decided that Rappler was not a news organization we're it shall and this is a direct quote. A dealer in securities. Like a stock brokerage. And so we didn't pay the tax for the stock brokerage house. Yeah, because we're not a stock brokerage. This one will be a decision before the end of the year. So what do I face when I go back? Yeah, I could go to jail. I mean, there are infinite threats. I try not to think about them. But I try to be prepared.

You always have a little bag with you. I almost wept when I read the part where you pack a little pillowcase in there. Just so you can.

You don't know. What will happen? When you prepare for the worst case scenarios and it doesn't happen, it's a bit of a relief.

I didn't go to jail today, honey. I came home for dinner. Most of us are terrified of getting a traffic violation and you're facing thh!

This is such a special honour tonight. I know we all really appreciate being in this room and thank you for the kind introduction, Carol.

One of the things that I think about as a journalist is when I come to events like this, I think about what lifts me and what needs to sit with me. So what are the things of this conversation that lift me? And earlier tonight I had the opportunity to be part of the conversation that Dr. Ressa had with the students. And at one point, Dr. Ressa was talking about how as we get older, we can become more cynical.

And how we must sort of continue to embrace and gravitate towards the good. And that's the thought that I considered as the thing that I want to lift me as I leave tonight, that I will be thinking about. And then the other thing that I want to have sit with me is the image of the social media ten foot tall devil going straight into my nervous system. I think that's another moment I may have to be considering later.

But also I want to personally thank you as you go forward. So there are so many things here tonight so if you could be patient and hold your applause until the very end.

Because it's a long list of people who put together this incredible event. SFU Vancouver,

