

ASMPH 2019 Commencement
Speech by Maria Ressa

Congratulations, Class of 2019!

You're graduating at an existential moment in history.

When global power structures are turned upside down by technology, triggering an erosion of all our rights.

When journalists around the world are under attack, democracy is under attack.

I know this firsthand: in 14 months, the Philippine government filed at least 11 cases and investigations. I was arrested twice in a 5-week period early this year, and I've posted bail 8 times in about 3 months. In order to travel, I have to post more than P500,000 in bonds.

Journalism is not a crime.

Yet, I've seen social media and our legal system weaponized against us – and any other perceived critics of government.

We hold the line. Because we live our mission. Because – as *Time Magazine* wrote – we are the Guardians of Truth.

This battle for truth is the battle of our generation.

Now more than ever, we know that information is power. Without the right information, it's impossible to fight back – whether it's to find a cure for a disease or to hold power to account.

We need to fight the insidious manipulation social media technology platforms have allowed: where lies laced with anger and hate spread faster than facts.

These lies are like a virus that has infected our information ecosystem, playing to the worst of human nature, turning us against each other. They replicate and cripple our body politic – spreading a disease that still has no cure.

A lie told a million times becomes a fact. Without facts, we don't have truth. Without truth, there is no trust.

This is why democracy is broken, not just in the Philippines but around the world.

I'd like to share 3 lessons with you as you go into battle for your identity, your profession, our democracy.

1. Embrace your values because with that comes your humanity.
2. Embrace your fears.
3. Embrace your journey.

Embrace your values

Remember **why** you chose to become a doctor.

You chose a specialized degree that has an embedded mission for a broken society. Seven out of 10 Filipinos die without ever seeing a doctor, and the statistics promise you no sleep – like: only 3 public doctors for every 100,000 people.

To those who chose business, how are you going to fight corruption?

Life is all about making choices. That's what we do every minute of the day.

These little choices define who you are, and if you're not clear about your values, you may wake up when you're older and realize you don't like the person you've become.

Every choice defines who you are, and they could be really simple like choosing to turn right instead of left – they lead to different paths. Or accepting a bribe because in your mind you've rationalized it as a gift.

Character is created in the sum of all these little choices we make.

Now, while you're sitting there before going into battle, choose the values that define you. Do it now. Because when you're tested – and it will come if it hasn't already – you have to know the lines you've set.

Draw the line: on this side you're good; on this side you're evil.

This is what prevents situational ethics. This makes sure you can't rationalize bad behavior.

You don't really know who you are until you're forced to defend it. Then every battle you win, or lose, every compromise you choose to make...or to walk away from – all these struggles define the values you live by and, ultimately, who you are.

Then when you're in battle, **avoid the hate**: the US against THEM, rich vs poor, dilawan vs DDS – these labels are meant to divide us. Populism is easy. Real leadership is not.

Find what we all have in common. That's our humanity.

Alone we accomplish very little – no matter how bright or talented you are. It's about what we can do together, to find what binds us together.

We build a stronger democracy by strengthening our common humanity.

Embrace your fears

I've been asked a lot in the past year: are you afraid? Of course, I've had those moments! But CNN trained me to be a conflict reporter, a war zone correspondent. I plan the way in and chart the way out of any field of battle.

What I've learned is that fear spreads and is debilitating. Fear is a luxury.

If you're in the middle of chaos, you need to stamp down your fear to have clarity of thought – that's essential to make the right decision. The way to do that is the 7Ps: "Proper preparation prevents poor performance."

So I go back to what I learned in school. Fear is your worst enemy. It stops you from doing what you want.

Whatever you're most afraid of, touch it. Hold it. Embrace it. Because once you do that, nothing can stop you.

In my case, dealing with the fear really started last December. That was when *Time Magazine* named me person of the year – one of the guardians of truth – and I realized I was the only one among us who was then both alive and free. That was the seed.

Then last April at the launch of the Clooney Foundation's Trial Watch, for some reason, it became real. I realized I could go to jail – 63 years, in fact, as Amal Clooney pointed out. I was on a panel: Mohamed Fahmy, who was jailed in Egypt for 438 days, was to my right. Jason Rezaian, who was jailed in Iran for 544 days.

I talked to them. I read their books. Could I endure what they went through?

What is the worst case scenario I could imagine.

Then I embraced it. And robbed it of its power.

Prepare for the worst, and hope for the best.

Embrace your journey

The founders of Rappler – 4 of us, women in our 50s now – well, we joke that we jumped off the cliff. In the Philippines, we're the only news group whose business is created and controlled by journalists. That's what we mean by independence.

So it's not a surprise that we would continue doing the story, even if – and especially if – it's bad for business. Yet, despite that, we found a new business model that has our revenues up significantly since last year. We'll take the risk to do the stories that matter.

The first casualty in our country's war for truth is exactly how many people have died in our brutal drug war. The police admit they killed more than 6,000 people – rolled back by PDEA right before SONA to 5,600. But human rights groups and the UN estimate that at least 27,000 people were killed from July 2016 until December last year.

Our impunity series looks at the lives behind these numbers. We fight impunity on two fronts: the Philippine government in extrajudicial killings and the exponential lies on social media – Facebook, which is essentially our internet.

Facebook is the world's largest distributor of news, but it ignored the responsibility that comes with that – the gatekeeping powers of journalism, that determines the quality of our democracies around the world.

I don't know where any of this will end. Like I said, we jumped off the cliff by standing up for our values, by upholding the mission of journalism, and holding the powerful to account.

Facebook is our frenemy: Rappler is one of its 3 fact-checking partners in the Philippines, but finding the lies is a game of whack-a-mole. What's more important is to find the networks of disinformation that spread the lies – and in that you see how all this is connected to geopolitical power play. In our digital forensics, we've shown links

to the alt-right in Canada, to the alt-right in the US, to Europe, and to Russian disinformation.

Embrace your journey. And don't forget to have fun.

I am daily inspired by our team in Rappler, their spirit, their sense of mission. Despite the threats we face, we are living our ideals now. This is our reality.

What you do today matters.

You will help define what our society will look like and how our democracy will survive and evolve.

This is a time of creative destruction. Even as we see what's being destroyed around us, remember: we are creating the future now.

Let's make sure it's the future we want.

Get ready for battle. Embrace your values and your humanity. Embrace your fears and embrace the journey. Class of 2019, our hopes are with you. It's going to be tough but I know you will change the world for the better.