

## CHAPTER 3

# Rappler.com: Innovation in the Philippines

**R**appler.com is a social networking and news site in the Philippines whose stories inspire community engagement for social change. Rappler comes from merging the words “rap” (to discuss) and “ripple” (to make waves). Its founders describe it as journalism in “a new world of limitless collaboration enabled by digital technology and connected by social media”.

Rappler represents an example of a phenomenon identified much later in the United States as “activist journalism”. Jan Schafer, executive director of the J-Lab in Washington DC, wrote about the phenomenon in June 2013 for the Nieman Foundation’s web site. Details of the article can be found in the readings in the last chapter. The aim was to move news from being a commodity to a catalyst for empowering citizens.

Journalists in the Philippines got the idea much sooner than their counterparts in the United States. Rappler launched its beta or introductory version to the public on 1 January 2012, after its founders spent several months thinking about journalism’s role in Filipino society. Rappler focuses on “uncompromised journalism” that was intended to inspire smart conversations and ignite a thirst for change in the Philippines, founder and CEO Maria Ressa said. The core staff – all veteran broadcast, print and web journalists – work with idealistic digital natives eager to report and find solutions to problems. It is the only media company in the Philippines owned solely by journalists. Think of it as crowdsourced journalism with a social purpose. “We are web artists, designers, publishers and professionals combining the best of broadcasting and information technology processes,” Ressa said.

Information is the raw material of journalism. Sites like Rappler and the concept of crowdsourcing allow for the sharing and spread of information via the Internet, mobile phones and social media. This sharing of information gives people tools to understand and learn from the reality they live with.

In this sense, journalism and crowdsourcing are democratising agents. It is also why one of the main indicators of democracy in any nation is the independence of the media. Historically, the Philippines has had a tradition of democracy and free media. As Ressa noted during an interview with the author, "Each of us finds our meaning and creates our interpretations, personal myths and world views from the information we consume – all to try to make sense of our daily lives." In other words, the quality of the information we receive via the media is very important for many aspects of our lives, and for a functioning democracy.

At the time of Rappler's launch at the start of 2012, Ressa gave an interview to TheNewMedia.com blog. She said she believed the business models of journalism – both in practice and in terms of business methods – were outdated because of digital technologies. "It's like we're living through a time of cataclysmic change, but the 'professionals' were too busy sticking to what we knew to actually feel the ground shifting beneath our feet. What would happen if we imagined news for the Internet and mobile, incorporating a bed of social media? How would journalism change – in processes and philosophy? Then add another idea: crowdsourcing. For the first time in our history, journalists can actually do more than just tell stories. We can act by giving direction to hundreds, thousands, tens of thousands of small actions for change." Rappler represents the intersection of three worlds: professional journalism, the wisdom of the crowd and digital media technologies, especially the mobile phone.

Ressa clearly has applied lessons she learned in her earlier careers to this new project. Her work with the public is described in the second volume of *Asia's Media Innovators* published in 2010. During an interview with the author in Manila in June 2010 for the previous volume, Ressa cited the book *The Wisdom of Crowds* by James Surowiecki as one of her inspirations. "Large groups of people are smarter than an elite few, no matter how brilliant [the latter] – better at solving problems, fostering innovation, coming to wise decisions." Four criteria were required for this process: The first was diversity of opinion – each person should have private and personal information; the second was independence – people's opinions should not be determined by the opinion of those around them; the third was decentralisation – where people were able to specialise and draw on local knowledge; and the fourth was aggregation – where various mechanisms existed for turning private judgments into a collective

decision. One could argue that the democratic nature of Philippines society satisfies the first three of these criteria, and Rappler provides the aggregation. Ressa's experiences working with the crowd in her earlier career are described later in this chapter.

Several things made Rappler unique, Ressa said. One was the site's Mood Meter, which tracks the emotions that news stories elicit from the audience. Readers can click on the emotion that any given Rappler story makes them feel. The options are happy, sad, angry, don't care, inspired, afraid, amused, or annoyed. Rappler developed the mood categories with the help of a group of psychologists, Ressa told the Nieman Foundation. "The idea behind the Mood Meter is actually getting people to crowdsource the mood for the day," Ressa said. "If you actually go through the exercise of identifying how you feel, you're more prone to be rational. ... That's really the rationale, aside from the fact that it's cool."

Ressa has been thinking about the overlap between emotions and social connections for a long time. She realised how fast emotions spread in the virtual world, noting examples from 2011 such as the Arab spring, the riots in London and the Occupy Wall Street movement. This is the subject of a book she wrote called *10 Days, 10 Years: From Bin Laden to Facebook*, which was published in the Philippines on 12 October 2012 – the tenth anniversary of the Bali bombings. The book was later published internationally in March 2013, and is available in hardcover and e-book on Amazon.

Ressa's book tells the story of the 10 days one of her reporting teams at TV network ABS-CBN spent in captivity at the hands of the Abu Sayyaf group in the jungles of Sulu in June 2008. The team consisted of reporter Ces Drilon, her cameraman Jimmy Encarnacion and his assistant Angelo Valderrama. Ressa creates the narrative of the kidnapping against the backdrop of the global spread of terrorism and its shift to a new battleground: the Internet and social media. Ressa said that in the book, readers would see the next phase of terrorism after authorities worldwide successfully broke down old terror groups. The battle now shifts to cyberspace, she said. "The people they recruited are still there and they continue to grow in much more sporadic ways. Some people call them lone sharks, lone wolves. They're not lone wolves if you follow social network theory." She cited the case of the son of a Jemaah Islamiyah leader who put up a website and a Facebook page with more than 54,000 followers. "When

you have 54,000 followers, ComScore says your reach is up to 86 per cent more than the number of Facebook likes you have so that reach goes to millions. And now, that JI leader's son who has the same radical ideology can sit in his room and reach millions of people. That is the danger ahead."

This book follows Ressa's first book, *Seeds of Terror: An Eyewitness Account of al-Qaeda's Newest Center of Operations in Southeast Asia*, published in December 2003. In the second book Ressa wrote: "September 11, 2011, marked the tenth anniversary of the 9/11 attacks. Four months earlier, U.S. President Barack Obama sent navy seals in a covert operation and killed Osama bin Laden. I couldn't help but juxtapose our ten days of hell with bin Laden's ten-year reign of terror. October 12, 2012, marks ten years since the Bali bombings, Southeast Asia's 9/11. 10 days, 10 years. That was how this book's title began, because I wanted to take counterterrorism ideas and frame them in a narrative that would show their real world implications. This is how bin Laden affected my world.

Ressa noted that research had shown that 80 per cent of the way people make decisions was determined by what they felt. "At the same time, neuroscientists say that the simple act of labelling our emotions increases our ability to reason. That's why I believe the Mood Meter can mitigate the spread of emotions through social networks online and offline. It's a hearts and minds approach to news!" Ressa said brain scans showed that the Internet and social media were stimulating people's emotions and rewiring their brains. "Globally, emotions are spreading quickly through large swathes of societies with both positive and negative effects. Social media helped spread courage and hope to challenge dictators during the Arab Spring, but it was also used to plan riots in London." Ressa said she hoped Rappler's "hearts and minds approach" would encourage greater self-awareness among Filipinos and lead to greater transparency and responsibility. "Only then can we avoid some of the pitfalls of our brave, new world as we build the future together. Tomorrow begins today."

Rappler is the only news service in the Philippines owned and operated by journalists. They have an established track record with crowdsourcing and social media. "Among our team are the creators of the citizen journalism programmes of the top two television networks in the country."

Ressa expects Rappler to make money through digital advertising because of trends in technology uptake in her country. Internet penetration was still low compared with Europe, but mobile phones were very popular.

More than half of all new Internet connections were via the mobile phone as of mid 2013. "So the Philippines will move beyond computer access to mobile phone access when people go online. Filipinos have always been early adaptors of new technologies. In the past the Philippines has been labelled the "texting capital of the world" because of the volume of SMS. Typically 2 million SMS were sent each day in 2013.

The same thing is happening with social networking. As of mid 2013, the Philippines represented the largest Facebook market in the world, according to ComScore. About 30 million Filipinos were on Facebook compared with about 15 million television households. At the same time it was ranked in the top 10 in the world on Twitter. "There's no doubt in my mind that the Philippines will follow the trend in the West – meaning more people (and advertising) will move away from television and go online. Today, online spending is much less than print and broadcast media, but studies have already shown they prompt engagement and action." More than 80 per cent of Filipinos used the Internet daily – this included places like Internet cafes – for an average of 6.8 hours a day compared with 60 per cent of the population who watched television, for about 3.7 hours a day, Ressa said. She suggested these numbers offered opportunities for web sites that could offer solutions to social problems, at the same time as building a sustainable commercial venture.

Rappler grew quickly after its launch. In its first six months it received almost 3 million page views a month. To put those numbers into perspective, it took the websites of the main daily newspapers in the Philippines several years to reach this level of traffic. Almost eighteen months after its launch, Rappler's audience was soaring. "We had an excellent May 2013, hitting more than 19 million page views, mainly because of the Philippines elections," Ressa said. "We've also more than doubled our first year revenue this May." Most traffic came through social networking channels.

Ressa believes technology lets Rappler work in new ways to create connected communities and to tap "the wisdom of crowds". Ethics was an important point of discussion. At the time of the launch her staff ran workshops with people around the country. "In the age when everyone is a reporter, it's good to discuss standards, responsibilities and ethics. Our journalists are running workshops and engaging the public in ways we have rarely done before." In fact, Ressa used her previous experience working with audiences and applied those lessons at Rappler.

## Earlier experiences with crowdsourcing

Ressa was senior vice president for news and current affairs at ABS-CBN, the largest network in the Philippines. "This network reaches every Filipino around the world ... that is our boast," she chuckled during an interview in her office in Quezon City. The formal interview took place on 10 June 2010 in Manila, after initial research two days earlier. Ressa took up her position at the start of 2005, after 18 years with CNN, mostly recently as bureau chief in Jakarta.

In 2007 ABS-CBN ventured into this area. It involved audiences with their mobile phones in what Ressa calls the merging of the mass base of traditional media with the grassroots and participatory nature of new media. She conceived and launched the program *Boto Mo, Ipatrol Mo* (BMPM), which translates as "patrol your vote". "Patrollers", as they came to be known, contributed story tips and information in a range of ways. ABS-CBN merged the traditional power of broadcast media and cable television with the Internet and especially mobile phones, to create the world's first example of a media company's campaign to get citizens to work together to "patrol" their votes and push for clean elections.

The message was simple, Ressa said: "Get the people to care and take action. If you see something wrong or good, tell us. If you see someone trying to buy votes, snap a picture on your cell phone and send it to us. If you see a town mayor using public vehicles for his campaign, shoot a video with your cell phone and send it to us. If you see violence, tell us about it, and after a verification process, we will put it to air." Ressa said that campaign was about empowerment: "We wanted to send the message that vigilance was important, that should not become part of the problem but provide the solution – and that if you want a better future, you are not alone."

To build the audience for BMPM, Ressa and her team ran a series of all-day, on-air and multi-platform workshops and registration drives. These included youth activities, summits, concerts, gatherings and workshops. The team also gave more than 50 lectures and talks nationwide. Before each BMPM workshop, the network publicised the events and ran stories about them in news bulletins. "People registered to vote in their area and registered to be a Boto Patroller. We had a minimum of 1,000 people [attend the workshops] every month. It was exhilarating. We saw a thirst for hope. They were looking for something to do." At these events Ressa and three

of her senior news managers talked about journalism. “We talked about what we do and why we do what we do.” They also discussed ABS-CBN’s standards and ethics manual.

“Those workshops were great for getting a sense of where people were and what they wanted.” Three quarters of the population is aged between 5-40. “It is an extremely young population.” Ressa said journalists were not educators, but given that at the time 90 per cent of the population of the Philippines got their information from television news, it was inevitable that news would have an “advocacy” role. Western journalists did not get involved, she said. But it was different in the Philippines. “Journalists are always first responders in any disaster. So what do we do?” ABS-CBN set up a public service arm for when disasters strike. “We deploy our public service team and we deploy our journalists at the same time. They go together. I want our team to report, but they cannot report if no one is helping in a disaster. We are an activist news organisation and I have embraced it [that concept].”

In 2008, the International Association of Business Communications (IABC) gave ABS-CBN its Gold Quill award for the Boto Mo, Ipatrol Mo campaign. The IABC called BMPM an effective campaign that was well executed despite having only a “modest budget”. It made “thoughtful use” of strategic partners – “all based on a bold, honourable mission”. The 2007 campaign was also successful in terms of revenue: profits from that year’s election were almost four times higher than in the 2004 presidential election. In terms of brand awareness, the campaign was “priceless,” Ressa said.

The “patroller” campaign also deliberately set out to educate viewers and audiences about freedom of expression and freedom of information. “Public education about journalism is not great [in the Philippines]. We realised we have to talk about these kinds of things and explain them to our viewers.” Ressa admitted it was difficult to measure the impact of the workshops. Audiences would always come to television news because of the quality of the storytelling. Ressa said it took time to get audiences to contribute video, because culturally it was not something that Filipinos did, and data charges were expensive. Patrollers sent videos to the station’s web site, and posted it on YouTube. ABS-CBN established a YouTube site. “We embraced the stuff [technologies] already available to citizens: Gmail, YouTube and Facebook. We used other people’s servers,” she chuckled.

In May 2013, analyst Terrence Lee noted on his SGE Insights blog in Singapore the success of Rappler: “Asia is not exactly the first place that comes to mind when you think about cutting edge journalism, especially when it comes to the convergence of technology, open data and media. For that, we typically look to the United States, where the *New York Times* unveiled Snow Fall (a groundbreaking multimedia journalism feature) or where Forbes did the unprecedented by opening up its platform to outside contributors, and where media startups like Circa, Medium and Storify are trying to reinvent how content is created, distributed and published. But if we look closely enough, media innovation is indeed happening right under our noses in Asia.” He was writing about Rappler.com

### **Crowdsourced investigative journalism in the Philippines**

Crowdsourced journalism has had a long and progressive history in the Philippines. In 2009, Knight International journalism fellow Alex Tizon worked with the Philippine Centre for Investigative Journalism to start Suriin Ang Kahirapan, which translates as an “audit of poverty”. It was a crowdsourced project that allowed a team of investigative journalists to work with citizens in the country’s poorest regions in the lead-up to the country’s 2010 national elections. The project monitored the effectiveness of anti-poverty programmes and provided reports to be published by the centre and national media, Tizon wrote on the web site of the International Centre for Journalism in Washington.

Tizon was a former national correspondent for the *Los Angeles Times* and a Filipino-American. He began his 12-month Knight International Journalism Fellowship in May of 2009. He wrote: “The project aims to engage the most disenfranchised Filipinos in the provinces and encourage them to become more involved in their own governance. Suriin also is designed to get a more accurate picture of the causes of rural poverty so that lawmakers in Manila will know how to address the problem. The poverty rate in these five provinces ranges from 52 per cent to 65 per cent. For these people – many living on less than \$2 a day – survival is a daily struggle.

“One of the Suriin project’s innovations is to use ‘crowdsourcing’ as the primary way to find out how poverty is affecting Filipinos in the provinces. In traditional journalism, reporters come up with story ideas and then gather information from various sources. Crowdsourcing refers

to the practice of encouraging stories to originate from average people,” Tizon wrote.

Staff from the Philippine Centre for Investigative Journalism went to five provinces to train volunteers to become citizen journalists. The volunteers’ tasks included monitoring government poverty programmes, gathering and organising information and recording events in their communities, and then supplying reports to the Philippine Centre for Investigative Journalism. “Rural Filipinos have long felt disconnected from and ignored by powerbrokers in Manila,” wrote Tizon. “When Suriin citizen journalists tell their stories, they’ll have the ... opportunity, maybe for the first time in their lives, to wield enormous power.” The Suriin project was made possible by a grant from the Philippines Australian Community Assistance Program.

The next chapter considers other examples of crowdsourcing in the Asian region, in China, Japan, India, the Philippines and Australia.