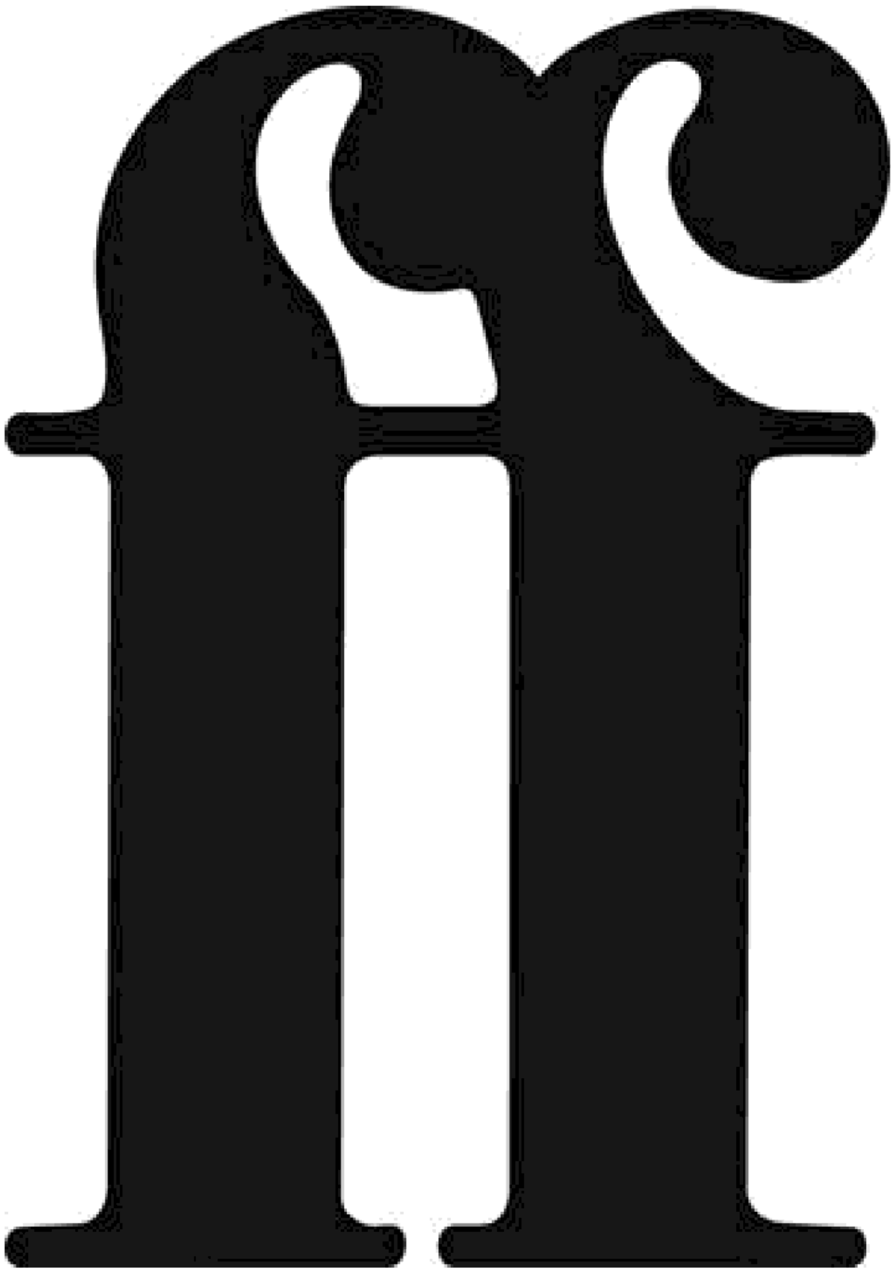

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Preface: ‘Telegram!’

He came out of the sea and was arrested on the beach: two men in suits standing over his clothes as he returned from his swim. They ordered him to get dressed quickly, pull his trousers over his wet trunks. On the drive the trunks were still wet, shrinking, turning cold, leaving a damp patch on his trousers and the back seat. He had to keep them on during the interrogation. There he was, trying to keep up a dignified facade, but all the time the dank trunks made him squirm. It struck him they had done it on purpose. They were well versed in this sort of thing, these mid-ranking KGB men: masters of the small-time humiliation, the micro-mind game.

Why had they arrested him here, he wondered, in Odessa, not where he lived, in Kiev? Then he realised: it was August and they wanted a few days by the seaside. In between interrogations, they would take him to the beach to go swimming themselves. One would sit with him while the other would bathe. On one of their visits to the beach an artist took out an easel and began to paint the three of them. The colonel and major grew nervous – they were KGB and weren’t meant to have their images recorded during an operation. ‘Go have a look at what he’s drawing,’ they ordered their prisoner. He went over and had a look. Now it was his turn to mess with them a little: ‘He’s not drawn a good likeness of me, but you’re coming out very true to life.’

He had been detained for ‘distributing copies of harmful literature to friends and acquaintances’: books censored for telling the truth about the Soviet Gulag (Solzhenitsyn) or for being written by exiles (Nabokov). The case was recorded in the Chronicle of Current Events. *The* Chronicle *was how Soviet dissidents documented suppressed facts about political arrests, interrogations, searches, trials, beatings, abuses in prison. Information was gathered via word of mouth or smuggled out of labour camps in tiny self-made polythene capsules that were swallowed and then shat out, their contents typed up and photographed in dark rooms. It was then passed from person to*

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person, hidden in the pages of books and diplomatic pouches, until it could reach the West and be delivered to Amnesty International or broadcast on the BBC World Service, Voice of America or Radio Free Europe. It was known for its curt style:

'He was questioned by KGB Colonel V. P. MEN'SHIKOV and KGB Major V. N. MEL'GUNOV. He rejected all charges as baseless and unproven. He refused to give evidence about his friends and acquaintances. For all six days they were housed in the Hotel New Moscow.'

When one interrogator would leave, the other would pull out a book of chess puzzles and solve them, chewing on the end of a pencil. At first the prisoner wondered if this was some clever mind game, then he realised the man was just lazy, killing time at work.

After six days he was permitted to go back to Kiev, but the investigation continued. On the way home from work at the library, the black car would pull up and take him for more interrogations.

During that time, life went on. His fiancée conceived. They married. At the back of the reception lurked a KGB photographer.

He moved in with his wife's family, in a flat opposite Goloseevsky Park, where his father-in-law had put up a palace of cages for his dozens of canaries, an aviary of throbbing feathers darting against the backdrop of the park. Every time the doorbell rang he would start, scared it was the KGB, and would begin burning anything incriminating: letters, samizdat articles, lists of arrests. The canaries would beat their wings in a panic-stricken flutter. Each morning he rose at dawn, gently turned the Spidola radio to 'ON', pushed the dial to short-wave, wiggled and waved the antenna to dispel the fog of jamming, climbed on chairs and tables to get the best reception, steering the dial in an acoustic slalom between transmissions of East German pop and Soviet military bands, pressing his ear tight to the speaker and, through the hiss and crackle, making his way to the magical words: 'This is London'; 'This is Washington.' He was listening for news about arrests. He read the futurist poet Velimir Khlebnikov's 1921 essay 'Radio of the Future':

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> Radio will forge the unbroken chain of the global soul and fuse mankind.

The net closed around his circle. Grisha was taken to the woods and roughed up. Olga was accused of being a prostitute and, to make the point, was locked up in a VD clinic with actual prostitutes. Geli was taken to remand prison and refused treatment for so long that he went and died.

Everyone prepared for the worst. His mother-in-law taught him a secret code based on sausages: 'If I bring sausages sliced right to left, it means we've been able to get out news of your arrest to the West, and it's been broadcast on the radio. If I slice them left to right, it means we failed.'

'It sounds like something out of an old joke or a bad film, but it's nevertheless true,' he would write later. 'When the KGB come at dawn, and you mumble drowsily, "Who's there?" they often shout, "Telegram!" You proceed in semi-sleep, trying not to wake up too much so you can still go back to a snug dream. "One moment," you moan, pull on the nearest trousers, dig out some change to pay the messenger, open the door. And the most painful part is not that they have come for you, or that they got you up so early, but that you, like some small boy, fell for the lie about delivering a telegram. You squeeze in your hot palm the suddenly sweaty change, holding back tears of humiliation.'

At 08.00 a.m. on 30 September 1977, in between interrogations, their child was born. My grandmother wanted me to be called Pinhas, after her grandfather. My parents wanted Theodore. I ended up being named Piotr, the first of several renegotiations of my name.

*

Forty years have passed since my parents were pursued by the KGB for pursuing the simple right to read, to write, to listen to what they chose and to say what they wanted. Today, the world they hoped for, in which censorship would fall like the Berlin Wall, can seem much closer: we live in what academics call an era of 'information abundance'. But the assumptions that

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underlay the struggles for rights and freedoms in the twentieth century – between citizens armed with truth and information and regimes with their censors and secret police – have been turned upside down. We now have more information than ever before, but it hasn't brought only the benefits we expected.

More information was supposed to mean more freedom to stand up to the powerful, but it's also given them new ways to crush and silence dissent. More information was supposed to mean a more informed debate, but we seem less capable of deliberation than ever. More information was supposed to mean mutual understanding across borders, but it has also made possible new and more subtle forms of conflict and subversion. We live in a world of mass persuasion run amok, where the means of manipulation have gone forth and multiplied, a world of dark ads, psy-ops, hacks, bots, soft facts, deep fakes, fake news, ISIS, Putin, trolls, Trump ...

Forty years after my father's detention and interrogation, I find myself following the palest of imprints of my parents' journey, though with none of their courage, risk or certainty. As I write this – and given the economic turbulence, this might not be the case when you read it – I run a programme in an institute at a London university that researches the newer breeds of influence campaigns, what might casually be referred to as 'propaganda', a term so fraught and fractured in its interpretation – defined by some as deception and by others as the neutral activity of propagation – that I avoid using it.

I should add that I'm not an academic, nor is this an academic work. I'm a lapsed television producer, and though I continue to write articles and sometimes present radio programmes, I now often find myself looking at my old media world askance, at times appalled by what we've wrought. In my research I meet Twitter revolutionaries and pop-up populists, trolls and elves, 'behavioural change' visionaries and info-war charlatans, jihadi fanboys, Identitarians, meta-politicians, truth cops and bot herders. Then I bring everything that I've learnt back to the

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hexagonal, concrete tower where my office has its temporary home and shape it into sensible Conclusions and Recommendations for neatly formatted reports and PowerPoint presentations, which diagnose and propose ways of remedying the flood of disinformation, 'fake news', 'information war' and the 'war on information'.

Remedying what, however? The neat little bullet points of my reports assume that there really is a coherent system that can be amended, that a few technical recommendations applied to new information technologies can fix everything. Yet the problems go far deeper. When, as part of my daily work, I present my findings to the representatives of the waning Liberal Democratic Order, the one formed in no little part out of the conflicts of the Cold War, I am struck by how lost they seem. Politicians no longer know what their parties represent; bureaucrats no longer know where power is located; billionaire foundations advocate for an 'open society' they can no longer quite define. Big words that once seemed swollen with meaning, words that previous generations were ready to sacrifice themselves for – 'democracy' and 'freedom', 'Europe' and 'the West' – have been so thoroughly left behind by life that they seem like empty husks in my hands, the last warmth and light draining out of them, or like computer files to which we have forgotten the password and can't access any more.

The very language we use to describe ourselves – 'left' and 'right', 'liberal' and 'conservative' – has been rendered near meaningless. And it's not just conflicts or elections that are affected. I can see people I have known my whole life slipping away from me on social media, reposting conspiracies from sources I have never heard of; Internet undercurrents pulling whole families apart, as if we never really knew each other, as if the algorithms know more about us than we do, as if we are becoming subsets of our own data, as if that data is rearranging our relations and identities with its own logic – or perhaps in order to serve the interests of someone we can't even see. The

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grand vessels of old media – the cathode-ray tubes of radios and televisions, the spines of books and the printing presses of newspapers that contained and controlled identity and meaning, who we were and how we talked to one another, how we explained the world to our children, how we spoke to our past, how we defined news and opinion, satire and seriousness, right and wrong, true, false, real, unreal – these vessels have cracked and burst, breaking up the old patterns of how what relates to whom, who speaks to whom and how, magnifying, shrinking, distorting all proportions, sending us spinning in disorientating spirals where words lose shared meanings. I hear the same phrases in Odessa, Manila, Mexico City, New Jersey: 'There is so much information, misinformation, so much of everything that I don't know what's true any more.' Often I hear the phrase 'I feel the world is moving beneath my feet.' I catch myself thinking, 'I feel that everything that I thought solid is now unsteady, liquid.'

This book explores the wreckage, searches what sparks of sense can be salvaged from it, rising from the dank corners of the Internet where trolls torture their victims, passing through the tussles over the stories that make sense of our societies, and ultimately trying to understand how we define ourselves.

Part 1 will take us from the Philippines to the Gulf of Finland, where we will learn how to break people with new information instruments, in ways more subtle than the old ones used by the KGB.

Part 2 will move from the western Balkans to Latin America and the European Union, where we will learn new ways to break whole resistance movements and their mythology.

Part 3 explores how one country can destroy another almost without touching it, blurring the contrast between war and peace, 'domestic' and 'international' – and where the most dangerous element may be the idea of 'information war' itself.

Part 4 will explore how the demand for a factual politics is reliant on a certain idea of progress and the future, and how the

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collapse of that idea of the future has made mass murder and abuse even more possible.

In Part 5 I will argue that in this flux, politics becomes a struggle to control the construction of identity. Everyone from religious extremists to pop-up populists wants to create new versions of 'the people' – even in Britain, a country where identity always seemed so fixed.

In Part 6 I will look for the future – in China and in Chernivtsi.

Throughout the book I will travel, some of the time through space, but not always. The physical and political maps delineating continents, countries and oceans, the maps I grew up with, can be less important than the new maps of information flows. These 'network maps' are generated by data scientists. They call the process 'surfacing'. One takes a keyword, a message, a narrative and casts it into the ever-expanding pool of the world's data. The data scientist then 'surfaces' the people, media outlets, social media accounts, bots, trolls and cyborgs pushing or interacting with those keywords, narratives and messages.

These network maps, which look like fields of pin mould or photographs of distant galaxies, show how outdated our geographic definitions are, revealing unexpected constellations where anyone from anywhere can influence everyone everywhere. Russian hackers run ads for Dubai hookers alongside anime memes supporting far-right parties in Germany. A 'rooted cosmopolitan' sitting at home in Scotland guides activists away from police during riots in Istanbul. ISIS publicity lurks behind links to iPhones ...

Russia, with its social media squadrons, haunts these maps. Not because it is the force that can still move earth and heaven as it could in the Cold War, but because the Kremlin's rulers are particularly adept at gaming elements of this new age, or at the very least are good at getting everyone to talk about how good they are, which could be the most important trick of all. As I will

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explain, this is not entirely accidental: precisely because they had lost the Cold War, Russian spin doctors and media manipulators managed to adapt to the new world quicker than anyone in the thing once known as 'the West'. Between 2001 and 2010 I lived in Moscow and saw close up the same tactics of control and the same pathologies in public opinion which have since sprouted everywhere.

But as this book travels through information flows and across networks and countries it also looks back in time, to the story of my parents, to the Cold War. This is not a family memoir as such; rather, I am concerned with where my family's story intersects with my subject. This is in part to see how the ideals of the past have fallen apart in the present and what, if anything, can still be gleaned from them. When all is swirling I find myself instinctively looking back, searching for a connection with the past in order to find a way to think about the future.

But as I researched and wrote these sections of family history I was struck by something else: the extent to which our private thoughts, creative impulses and senses of self are shaped by information forces greater than ourselves. If there is one thing I've been impressed with while browsing the shelves in the spiral-shaped library of my university, it is that one has to look beyond just 'news' and 'politics' and also consider poetry, schools, the language of bureaucracy and leisure to understand, as French philosopher Jacques Ellul put it, the 'formation of men's attitudes'. This process is sometimes more evident in my family, because the dramas and ruptures of our lives makes it easier to see where those information forces, like vast weather systems, begin and end.

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Part 1: Cities of Trolls

Freedom of speech versus censorship was one of the clearer confrontations of the twentieth century. After the Cold War, freedom of speech appeared to have emerged victorious in many places. But what if the powerful can use 'information abundance' to find new ways of stifling you, flipping the ideals of freedom of speech to crush dissent, while always leaving enough anonymity to be able to claim deniability?

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Consider the Philippines. In 1977, as my parents were experiencing the pleasures of the KGB, the Philippines was ruled by Colonel Ferdinand Marcos, a US-backed military dictator, under whose regime, a quick search of the Amnesty International website informs me, 3,257 political prisoners were killed, 35,000 tortured and 70,000 incarcerated. Marcos had a very theatrical philosophy of the role torture could play in pacifying society. Instead of being merely 'disappeared', 77 per cent of those killed were displayed by the side of roads as warnings to others. Victims might have their brains removed, for example, and their empty skulls stuffed with their underpants. Or they could be cut into pieces, so one would pass body parts on the way to market.[1]

Marcos's regime fell in 1986 in the face of mass protests, the US relinquishing its support and parts of the army defecting. Millions came out on the streets. It was meant to be a new day: an end to corruption, an end to the abuse of human rights. Marcos was exiled and lived out his last years in Hawaii.

Today Manila greets you with sudden gusts of rotting fish and popcorn smells, wafts of sewage and cooking oil, which leave you retching on the pavement. Actually, 'pavement' is the wrong word. There are few, in the sense of broad walkways where you can stroll. Instead, there are thin ledges that run along the rims of malls and skyscrapers, where you inch along beside the lava of traffic. Between the malls the city drops into deep troughs of slums, where at night the homeless sleep encased in silver foil, their feet sticking out, flopped over in alleys between bars boasting midget boxing and karaoke parlours where you can hire troupes of girls, in dresses so tight they cling to their thighs like pincers, to sing Korean pop songs with you.

During the day you negotiate the spaces between mall, slum and skyscraper along elevated networks of crowded narrow walkways that are suspended in mid-air, winding in between the multistorey motorways. You duck your head to miss the buttresses of flyovers, flinch from the barrage of honks and sirens below, suddenly finding yourself at eye level with a pumping train or eye to eye with the picture of a woman eating Spam on one of the colossal advertising billboards. The billboards are everywhere, separating slum from skyscraper. Between 1898 and 1946 the Philippines was under US administration (apart from the Japanese occupation between 1942 and 1945). US navy bases have been present ever since, and US military food has become a delicacy. On one poster a happy housewife feeds her handsome husband tuna chunks from a tin. Elsewhere a picture of a dripping, roasting ham sits over a steaming river in which street kids swim; behind them an electric sign flashes 'Jesus Will Save You'. This is a Catholic country: three hundred years of Spanish colonialism preceded America's fifty ('We had three hundred years of the Church and fifty years of Hollywood,' Filipinos joke). The malls have churches you can worship in and guards to keep out the poor. It's a city of twenty-two million with almost no notion of common public space. Inside, the malls are perfumed with overpowering air freshener: lavender in the cheaper ones with their fields of fast-food outlets; a lighter lemon scent in the more sophisticated. This makes them smell like toilets, so the odour of the latrine never leaves you, whether it's sewage outside or the malls inside.

Soon you start noticing the selfies. Everyone is at it: the sweaty guy in greasy flip-flops riding the metal canister of a public bus; the Chinese girls waiting for their cocktails in the malls. The Philippines has the world's highest use of selfies; the highest use of social media per capita; the highest use of text messages. Some put this down to the importance of family

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and personal connections as a means of getting by in the face of ineffective government. Nor are the selfies narcissistic necessarily: you trust people whose faces you can see.

And with the rise of social media the Philippines has become a capital for a new breed of digital-era manipulation.

I meet with ‘P’ in one of the oases of malls next to sky-blue-windowed skyscrapers. He insists I can’t use his name, but you can tell he’s torn, desperate for recognition for the campaigns he can’t take credit for. He’s in his early twenties, dressed as if he were a member of a Korean boy band, and whether he’s talking about getting a president elected or his Instagram account registered with a blue tick (which denotes status), there’s almost no change in his always heightened emotions.

‘There’s a happiness to me if I’m able to control the people. Maybe it’s a bad thing. It satisfies my ego, something deeper in me ... It’s like becoming a god in the digital side,’ he exclaims. But it doesn’t sound creepy, more like someone playing the role of the baddie in a musical farce.

He began his online career at the age of fifteen, creating an anonymous page that encouraged people to speak about their romantic experiences. ‘Tell me about your worst break-up,’ he would ask. ‘What was your hottest date?’ He shows me one of his Facebook groups: it has more than three million members.

While still at school he created new groups, each one with a different profile: one dedicated to joy, for example, another to mental strength. He was only sixteen when he began to be approached by corporations who would ask him to sneak in some mentions of their products. He honed his technique. For a week he would get a community to talk about ‘love’, for example, who they cared about the most. Then he would move the conversation to fear for your loved ones, the fear of losing someone. Then he would slide in a product: take this medicine and it will help extend the lives of loved ones.

He claims that by the age of twenty he had fifteen million followers across all the platforms. The modest middle-class boy from the provinces could suddenly afford his own condo in a Manila skyscraper.

After advertising, his next challenge was politics. At that point, political PR was all about getting journalists to write what you wanted. What if you could shape the whole conversation through social media?

He pitched his approach to several parties, but the only candidate who would take P on was Rodrigo Duterte, an outsider who looked to social media as a new route to victory. One of Duterte’s main selling points as a candidate was busting drug crime. He even boasted of driving around on a motorcycle and shooting drug dealers while he was mayor of Davao City, down in the deep south of the country. At the time, P was already in college, attending lectures on the ‘Little Albert’ experiment from the 1920s, in which a toddler was exposed to frightening sounds whenever he saw a white rat, leading to him being afraid of all furry animals.[2] P says this inspired him to try something similar with Duterte.

First, he created a series of Facebook groups in different cities. They were innocuous enough, just discussion boards of what was on in town. The trick was to put them in the local dialect, of which there are hundreds in the Philippines. After six months, each group had in the region of 100,000 members. Then his administrators would start posting one local crime story per day, every day, to coincide with peak Internet traffic. The crime stories were real enough, but then P’s people would write comments that connected the crime to drugs: ‘They say the killer was a drug dealer,’ or ‘This one was a victim of a pusher.’ After a month they dropped in two stories per day; a month later, three per day.

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knows exactly how many have been killed in the campaign. Human rights organisations estimate 12,000, opposition politicians 20,000, the government 4,200. At one point thirty-three were being killed a day. No one would check if the victims were actually guilty, and there were frequent reports of drugs being planted on the victims after they were dead. Fifty-four children were executed too. The alleys of Manila's slums filled up with corpses. Men on motorbikes would drive up and just shoot people in the head. The prisons became as crowded as battery chicken farms. A politician who pushed back against the killings, Senator Leila de Lima, suddenly found herself on trial: imprisoned drug lords were giving testimony that she was involved in their business. Online mobs bayed for her arrest. She was locked away pending a trial that never began: a prisoner of conscience, according to Amnesty International.[4] When the country's archbishop condemned the killings, the mobs turned on him. Next it would be the turn of the media: the so-called 'presstitutes' who dared to accuse the president of murder.

And the greatest presstitute the regime would target was Maria Ressa, the head of the news website Rappler. This was ironic, as it was Maria and Rappler who had inadvertently helped bring Duterte into power.

#Arrest MariaRessa!

After talking to Maria for a while, I noticed how uncomfortable she felt at being made the subject of the story. She was far too polite to tell me this herself straight away, but I noticed she was always turning our interview away from herself and towards the work of her journalists, the dramas of others. In her career she's always been the one who covers things: first as the head of the CNN bureaus in South East Asia, then as the head of news at the Philippines' largest television network, and ultimately as the creator and CEO of Rappler. And now it was not only me interviewing Maria in her office as she tried to swallow a rushed lunch of peanut butter and tinned sardine sandwiches (a Philippine speciality); there was also a documentary crew from the English-language version of the Qatari TV channel Al Jazeera, who were following Maria around to document her battle with Duterte and disinformation.

The Al Jazeera crew asked whether they could film me interviewing Maria, and as they crouched in the corner with their huge cameras I felt increasingly ill at ease. I too am used to being the one who observes and edits, and whenever I become the subject of someone else's content, I find myself a little too aware of how I can be recut and recreated later. In my own time as a documentary producer I learnt the skill of making contributors feel significant, meaningful, maybe a touch immortal for a moment while I filmed them, knowing that later in the edit I would have the power to shape the material. The final story would be accurate, but there's oh-so-often a painful gap between a person's self-perception and the way they are portrayed, between the reality reconstructed in the edit and the one the subject feels is true. That day in Manila I consoled myself that I would be able to reassert narrative control by writing about the Al Jazeera crew in the book you are reading now.

So there we were, one set of journalists filming another sort of one interviewing a third. The job of journalists is to report information on reality, on where the action is. But, as Maria's own story showed, information itself is now where the action is.

Maria was originally from Manila, but when she was ten her mother had taken the family to the US, where Maria was the smallest, brownest girl in Elizabeth, New Jersey, and precocious enough to be the first in the family to go to university (Princeton). She returned

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olds who knew more about social media. When you walk into Rappler's orange and glass open-plan office you notice how young and largely female the staff are, with a small band of older journalists overseeing them with a hint of matronly severity. In Manila they're known as 'the Rapplers'.

When Duterte began his social media-inspired presidential campaign, he and Rappler seemed perfect for each other. The TV networks didn't take him seriously. When Rappler held the Philippines' first Facebook presidential debate, he was the only candidate who bothered to turn up. It was a runaway success. A poll of Rappler's online community showed Duterte was ahead. His message – to vanquish drug crime – was catching on. Rappler reporters found themselves repeating his sound bites about the 'war on drugs'. Later, when Duterte went on his killing spree, they would regret using the term 'war'. It helped to normalise his actions: if this was a 'war', then casualties became more acceptable.

The trouble started with a wolf whistle. At a press conference Duterte whistled at a female reporter from a TV network. The Rappler reporter in the room asked him to apologise. Rappler's online community filled up with comments saying she should be more respectful of the president. 'Your mother's a whore,' they wrote. The Rapplers were taken aback. This language didn't sound like their community. They put it down to the vestiges of sexism: any time a woman held a man to account, she would be attacked.

Meanwhile, Duterte's language didn't let up in its coarseness.[6] He called the Pope and US presidents sons of whores; enquired whether a journalist he didn't like was asking tough questions because his wife's vagina was so smelly; bragged about having two mistresses; joked about how a good-looking hostage should have been raped by him when he was mayor, instead of by her kidnappers. On TV Duterte said he wanted to eat the livers of terrorists and season them with salt; that if his troops raped three women each, he would take the rape sentences for them.

I learnt a little about the linguistic context behind such statements when I visited the comedy clubs in Quezon City, the section of Manila where teenage prostitutes and ladyboys congregate by night next to the TV towers of national broadcasters. The comedians pick out victims in the audience and roast them, taunting them about the size of their penises or their weight – and this right in front of entire families, who all laugh along at their relatives' humiliation.

This is the language Duterte partially taps into with his incessant stream of dirty jokes. It's a use of humour he shares with a troupe of male leaders across the world. Russian president Vladimir Putin made his rhetorical mark by promising to whack terrorists 'while they are on the shitter'; US president Donald Trump boasted of grabbing women 'by the pussy'; Czech president Miloš Zeman called for 'pissing on the charred remains of Roma'; Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro told a female politician she was 'too ugly' to be raped and that black activists should go 'back to the zoo';[7] while in Britain the anti-immigration politician Nigel Farage, his outsized mouth gaping in a braying laugh, poured down pints and belched out rude jokes about 'Chinkies'.

This toilet humour is used to show how 'anti-Establishment' they are, their supposedly 'anti-elitist' politics expressed via the rejection of established moral and linguistic norms.

When dirty jokes are used by the weak to poke fun at the powerful, they can bring authority figures back down to earth, give the sense that their rules can be suspended.[8] That's why dirty jokes have often been suppressed. In 1938, for example, my paternal great-grandfather went down to the cafeteria of the Kharkiv mega-factory where he worked as an accountant, had a drink, told a wisecrack about the balls of the Head of the Presidium of the

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