

What if Scale Breaks Community? Rebooting Audience Engagement When Journalism is Under Fire

Julie Posetti, Felix Simon, and Nabeelah Shabbir

JOURNALISM INNOVATION PROJECT • OCTOBER 2019



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Published by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism with the support of the Facebook Journalism Project.

All data was correct at the time of production.

Declaration: The CEOs of Rappler (Maria Ressa) and The Quint (Ritu Kapur) now sit on RISJ's Advisory Board.





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Acknowledgements

The authors are particularly grateful for the generosity and openness of the research participants at Rappler, Daily Maverick, and The Quint who invited the lead author to be embedded in their newsrooms in the interests of sharing their learning with the global journalism community. Many thanks also go to RISJ research colleagues for scholarly review of this report, in particular Professor Rasmus Kleis Nielsen. Thanks also go to Tim Anger for donated graphic design services in the form of infographics for this report. And to Christina Koster for publication assistance. Finally, we are grateful to Emily Goligoski for early review and feedback.

Executive Summary and Key Findings

This report focuses on how digital-born news media navigate audience engagement in the context of *both* rapid developments in a digital, mobile, and platform-dominated media environment *and* significant political pressure, including the ‘weaponisation’ of social media to target and harass independent news organisations and individual journalists, along with their audiences.

It is based on analysis of data from Participatory Action Research, including fieldwork and interviews at three news organisations in the process of actively redefining audience engagement. They are **Rappler** (the Philippines), **Daily Maverick** (South Africa), and **The Quint** (India) – all commercial news organisations of the Global South, whose public interest journalism has been recognised with top international industry awards.

We show how these outlets, two of which – Rappler and The Quint – relied heavily on social media for distribution and audience engagement at the outset, are now faced with the risks accompanying open and social journalism at-scale, including the ‘weaponisation’ of online communities by political actors, and the frequently changing priorities of the platforms. And we ask: ‘What if Scale Breaks Community?’

We find that, in response to political attacks, and the risks associated with various forms of what we’re calling ‘platform capture’, these news organisations are evolving, and are increasingly focused on forging deeper, narrower, and stronger relationships with audiences, emphasising physical encounters, investment in niche audiences over empty reach, and moving communities to action. We also identify a suite of specific experiments and innovations they have engaged in – some proactive, some reactive, and others defensive.

Open and ‘social journalism’ at-scale, it turns out, was not a final destination (nor necessarily a ‘safe’ one) for these news organisations, but a transformative moment on the continuum of audience engagement innovations, from live events to off-platform dialogue.

None of our case organisations has moved from one stable equilibrium to another – all continue to evolve by ramping up live events; emphasising engaged storytelling methods, formats, and beats; pulling back from (and reactivating) social media engagement between news workers and audiences; developing editorial-led technological solutions to the problems of ‘platform capture’; expanding bespoke newsletter offerings; leveraging semi-closed apps like Telegram; and – importantly – moving to membership as a natural progression along their separate trajectories of audience engagement innovation.

These initiatives don’t come with success guaranteed, but all our case organisations are constantly experimenting and evaluating, in part guided by an overall ambition to have deeper, narrower, and stronger relationships with their most loyal and trusting audiences.

We believe the lessons being learned through innovative and experimental responses to existential crises in the three cases examined here are broadly instructive for news organisations worldwide. If Rappler, Daily Maverick, and The Quint can reboot audience engagement with their limited resources, while facing extreme external pressures, so too can many other news organisations in less challenging circumstances.

Key findings:

- Relationships with communities don't just 'resist' scale (Morgan 2019: 12). Scale can break communities, especially when combined with various forms of 'platform capture', including the 'weaponisation' of online communities, and frequent changes to platforms' products and policies.
- Once weaponised at-scale, audiences can't be recalibrated through direct engagement at-scale – instead, deeper, narrower, and stronger is key: smaller audiences properly engaged can still play a significant role through collaboration, distribution, and impact.
- Orchestrated online harassment campaigns targeting news outlets and their journalists can be extremely damaging to them (creating significant health, safety, and security risks), but also to their online communities, impacting significantly on 'engagement work.'
- Some audience engagement revolutions come full circle. For example, Rappler's social media-born 'communities of action', leveraged to rapidly grow a news organisation and effect change (at-scale), often in partnership with government agencies, now thrive on physical encounter and help defend the outlet against the Duterte Government.
- Daily Maverick's resistance to social media distribution and brand-based audience engagement on the platforms, in favour of driving engagement through events and newsletters, may have contributed to its early membership success.
- Civic engagement through community partnerships and citizen reporting initiatives (e.g. Rappler's Move.PH and The Quint's MyReport) can still deliver loyal audiences and pathways to fresh revenue streams, even if some 'at-scale' audiences have turned toxic.
- Technology still has an important role to play in audience engagement innovations, but that role should be editorial-led, with public interest oversight. That is the objective of Rappler's new publishing platform, to be launched early 2020.
- A key indicator for journalism innovation is the capacity to remain audience-led and reboot engagement when online communities are 'weaponised', or when platforms tweak their T&Cs or algorithms (see The Quint's WhatsApp challenge in Chapter 4).
- Despite the very real risks identified, partnerships with the platforms connected to journalism 'engagement work' are still possible, as continued use of social media and specific projects like The Quint's gender-oriented 'Me, The Change' campaign show.
- Two-way listening is essential for the development of strong, loyal communities of action built around editorial missions. But neither news organisations, nor individual journalists have to listen to all of the people all of the time.
- Building a membership programme is not straightforward, and in these case studies it often involves the skilful combination of existing elements (e.g. events, community partnerships, citizen reporting portals) with new approaches (e.g. bespoke newsletters, access to 'behind-the-scenes' content).
- Members are not seen as 'cash-cows', but as loyal communities and collaborators on civic engagement, editorial, and product-development projects, potentially helping the outlets grow and improve.
- Loyal audiences and members can be seen as guardians of the outlets and their mission: providing challenging and independent journalism in countries where media freedom is under threat, and democratic norms are eroding.

1. Introduction

How do digital-born news media handle audience engagement in contexts that are, on the one hand, characterised by a rapid move to a digital, mobile, and platform-dominated media environment, but where they, on the other hand, face significant and organised political pressure, including the ‘weaponisation’ of social media to target, threaten, and harass independent news media, individual journalists, and their audiences?

That’s the issue we focus on in this report, where we examine three international news organisations in the process of actively redefining audience engagement. They are Rappler (the Philippines), Daily Maverick (South Africa), and The Quint (India) – award-winning news organisations in the Global South, which is frequently ignored and under-studied by Western researchers. They are ‘Petri dishes’ in environments where innovation is often expressed as ingenuity born of necessity and adversity (Posetti 2018). All digital-born (Nicholls et al. 2017) commercial news publishers, they are committed to journalism’s democratic mission through critical, independent reporting and civic action.

Two of these outlets (Rappler and The Quint) were ‘platform-born’ and relied heavily on social media for distribution and audience engagement for rapid early growth. But they now face the effects of ‘weaponisation’ of online communities – at-scale¹ – fuelled by political attacks on the organisations and their journalists, along with orchestrated disinformation campaigns that have either destabilised their democracies or threaten to do so (Posetti et al. 2019; Bradshaw and Howard 2019).

A key feature of these attacks is prolific, brutal, and frequently sexualised online harassment targeting their journalists, in particular the women among them, which has in turn chilled the interaction of their audiences within online communities. Such attacks also include a range of digital security threats targeting their sites and online spaces, designed to hamper their ability to publish, compromise their data, and hinder user experience. These outlets also demonstrate how the platforms’ frequent product and policy changes can dramatically impact their off-site audiences and referrals, such as when Facebook de-emphasises news, and messaging applications like WhatsApp (also owned by Facebook) change policies for publishers.

In response, they have variously advised their journalists to withdraw (at least temporarily) from real-time social media engagement, closed comments or offered them as membership-only functions, shut down citizen blogging platforms, ended participatory reporting projects dependent on partner organisations that either became hostile or withdrew in response to political pressure, and dramatically altered social media-dependent distribution strategies.

In short, the scale – achieved in part through social media – risked breaking the open digital communities on which these news organisations were built as things changed and political attacks escalated. As Rappler CEO, Executive Editor, and co-founder Maria Ressa notes in this report: ‘We were so naive!’

Here, we show how an early focus on open and social journalism at-scale has evolved into a focus on forging deeper, narrower, and stronger relationships with audiences, emphasising curated conversations, physical encounters, and investment in niche audiences over empty reach.

¹ By ‘at-scale’ we mean large, highly interactive, and frequently public (and/or unmediated) online audiences.

Journalism Innovation Wheel



This is the final publication from the wider Journalism Innovation Project, which aimed to identify key indicators or markers of 'sustainable' journalism innovation through deep study of the characteristics, structures, and practices of news organisations succeeding at innovation. In the first report from the project (Posetti 2018) we introduced the Journalism Innovation Wheel to demonstrate that journalism innovation can happen along many different dimensions, often concurrently.

We also observed that the experiences of news organisations in the Global South responding to the challenges of innovating in an era of perpetual change, in a climate of significant risk, and often with far fewer resources, would likely be instructive to those in high-income democracies. So, instead of the standard practice of undertaking research in Western newsrooms and seeking to extract learning for global application, we suggested a reverse trajectory.

Additionally, we noted new journalism innovation considerations, such as the implications of digital technology's 'unintended consequences' – like gendered online harassment (Mijatovic 2016; Posetti 2017; RSF 2018), and orchestrated disinformation campaigns propelled by unmediated social platforms (Ireton and Posetti 2018; Bradshaw and Howard 2019). And, we identified the need to respond innovatively to media freedom threats.

Consequently, for the second report (Posetti et al. 2019), we undertook a deep study of three international newsrooms combating disinformation through innovative reporting and storytelling. Rappler in the Philippines, Daily Maverick in South Africa, and The Quint in India were selected because of their commonality as commercial, digital-born enterprises driven by a strong mission to produce independent journalism with the aim of serving the public interest and defending destabilised democracies. Additionally, they had each been targeted through orchestrated digital disinformation campaigns and politically motivated attacks on media freedom, threatening their viability. We concluded, among other things, that:

1. The ability to 'pivot' in response to a crisis is an innovation marker.
2. Audiences can be part of journalism innovation.

In this final report from the project, we focus on the audience engagement segment of the Journalism Innovation Wheel, to emphasise critical challenges that are moving from the Global South to the West. We identify creative responses to these challenges from the trio of news organisations we focus on. What we have discovered is a suite of innovations – some proactive, some reactive and defensive – designed to deepen and strengthen audience engagement through narrower, bespoke channels.

Responding to the Risks of ‘Platform Capture’

We also see how organisations change in response to the risk of various forms of ‘platform capture.’ By ‘platform capture’ we mean the combination of:

1. The manipulation of the platforms and their mass user base for malicious purposes, such as orchestrated disinformation campaigns designed to destabilise democracies (Ressa 2016; Cadwalladr and Graham-Harrison 2018; Posetti et al 2019; Bradshaw and Howard 2019);
2. The encouragement of such dependency by the platforms themselves, which have frequently changing priorities for distribution and engagement, expressed through algorithms that veer from amplifying to attenuating news content (Bell et al. 2017; Nechushtai 2017);
3. Some news organisations’ over-reliance on social media for distribution and audience engagement.

This has ultimately led to the exploration and active uptake of membership as a model that is starting to deliver deeper and ‘safer’ engagement, along with additional revenue. But ‘engagement work’ is changing rapidly, with ‘pivots’ increasingly common over the past three years, highlighting the need to build contingencies to enable organisational agility and to grow communities with deeper roots. We have seen this demonstrated even in the six-month period since we published our last report on these news organisations’ innovation efforts (Posetti et al. 2019). For example, The Quint has had to dramatically alter its messaging app engagement strategy, and membership programmes at Daily Maverick and Rappler are actively under way, while The Quint has recently launched its membership offering.

Defining ‘Audience Engagement’

Historically speaking, ‘engagement work’, as practised by journalists and news organisations, is a relatively recent concept, slowly displacing the one-way, top-down conversation that dominated journalism throughout much of the 20th century, where ‘audience feedback was rarely sought and hardly valued, with journalists viewing the audience more as revenue providers than dialogue partners’ (Nelson 2017).

However, new possibilities for audience participation and collaboration² have made audience engagement a key concept and a top priority for news producers – from the embedding of real-time audience data in newsroom routines (Cherubini and Nielsen 2016) through to crowdsourcing and collaborative reporting. Here, we focus on the deeper, participatory, and community-building aspects of audience engagement (Lawrence et al. 2018; Lewis et al. 2014), rather than audience analytics or metrics, which are often emphasised in reference to ‘audience development’, and tend to be more transactional measurements of engagement.

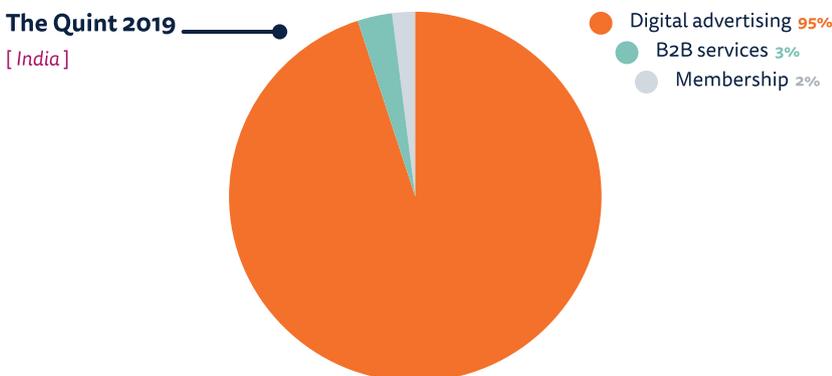
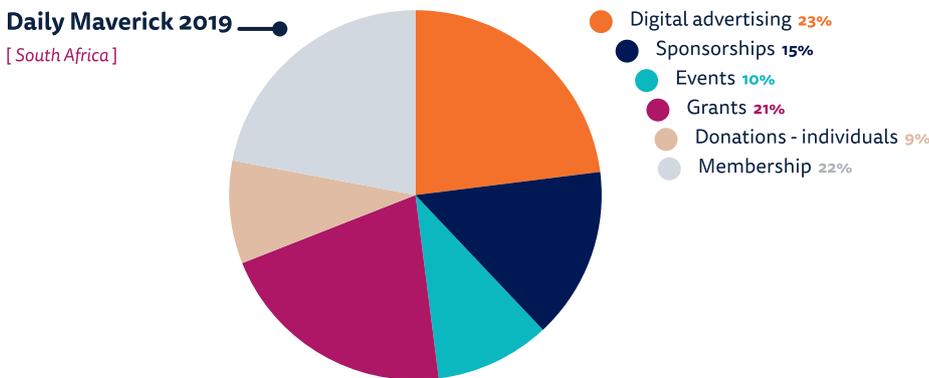
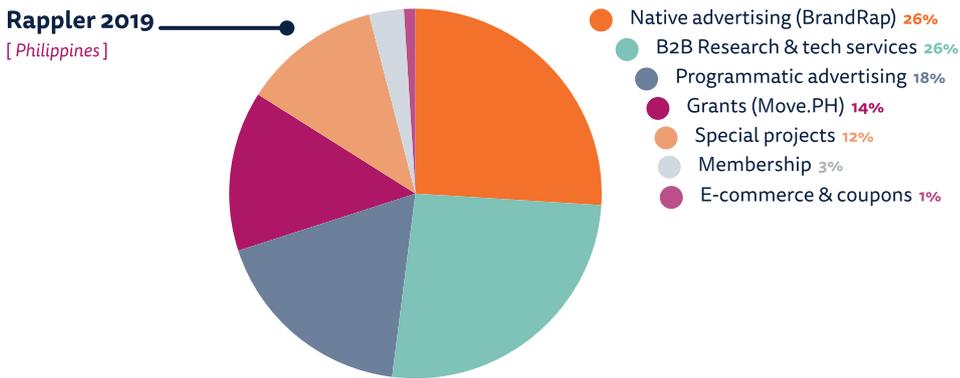
Our Approach to the Research

For the research underpinning this report, the lead author was embedded in the three case organisations during February and March 2019 for a week each. Additionally, she was added to internal discussion groups, editorial email lists, and agenda-setting diaries during her attachments to the newsrooms.

² Cf. Jay Rosen on the Citizens’ Agenda (http://archive.pressthink.org/2010/08/15/citizens_agenda.html) and Alan Rusbridger on ‘audience mutualisation’ (<https://www.theguardian.com/sustainability/report-mutualisation-citizen-journalism>).

The main dataset consists of: the lead author’s field notes; content published by the outlets; 45 in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted in the field with editors, CEOs, journalists, product heads, social media editors, community managers, innovation and research lab leaders, and a range of others, including those occupying hybrid or ‘bridge’ roles. In August and September 2019, eight follow-up interviews (via digital apps and face-to-face meetings) were conducted by the research team with key research subjects, including two new interviewees from The Quint. Additionally, five email interviews were done to ensure accuracy and identify issues emerging since the original fieldwork. The interviews were transcribed, coded, and subjected to thematic analysis before being synthesised with the text-based qualitative data.

Pieces of the business model pies: Revenue distribution



[Note: All data supplied by the news organisations]



Rappler CEO and Executive Editor · Maria Ressa

In 2012, four senior female journalists with extensive experience in legacy TV news and investigative magazines launched **Rappler** (a portmanteau of rap and ripple – snappy news from the street can spread through communities like a ripple), as a Philippines-based ‘social news outlet’ for an 18–35s audience. It was designed to create what CEO and Executive Editor Maria Ressa calls ‘communities of action’, and it grew from a Facebook page called Move.PH – ‘Move Philippines’ (now its civic engagement arm). Rappler launched an Indonesian bureau in 2015, which is now run as a partnership with a local startup. Today, Rappler’s known for its social media-savvy, big data investigations into disinformation, its hard-hitting ‘drug war’ investigations, and its civic journalism initiatives, encouraging its communities not only to get informed but to take action, in areas such as poverty alleviation and ‘democracy-watching.’ Rappler currently employs approximately 95 staff. It launched a membership programme to diversify revenue and deepen relationships with its communities in late 2018. But its biggest audience engagement investment to date is a bespoke platform designed as a tech solution to ‘platform capture’, launching early 2020.



Daily Maverick CEO · Styli Charalambous

Daily Maverick is one of South Africa’s earliest digital-only news businesses, with newsrooms in Johannesburg and Cape Town. It was founded in 2009 by Editor-in-Chief Branko Brkic and Publisher Styli Charalambous from the ashes of a failed quality feature magazine called *Maverick* (also founded by Brkic). Daily Maverick has had a commitment to quality commentary and analysis from the start, and it’s become one of South Africa’s leading sources of investigative, explanatory, and longform journalism, with an additional focus on multimedia content and podcasts. Significantly, although it is digital-born, it’s always been social media agnostic and emphasised in-person engagement with its communities through events. Its audience skews older and educated. At the time of writing, Daily Maverick had about 75 employees, including eight trainee journalists. DM launched its burgeoning membership programme in mid-2018. It’s known worldwide for its investigations into corruption and ‘state capture’, for which it won the top international investigative journalism prize in GIJN’s (Global Investigative Journalism Network) 2019 ‘Global Shining Light’ awards – an honour it shared with Rappler. (<https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2019-09-29-guptaleaks-wins-global-shining-light-investigative-journalism-award/>)



The Quint CEO · Ritu Kapur

The Quint is an Indian mobile- and social-first journalism outfit based in New Delhi, which started life as an English-language Facebook page in March 2015. In a country with the world’s largest youth population, in an online media environment that is ‘mobile-first and platform dominated’, its envisaged audience is aged 18–35 years. The Quint, founded by husband and wife TV executives Ritu Kapur and Raghav Bahl, has been participatory from the get-go. Its flagship audience engagement formats are MyReport (www.thequint.com/my-report) a citizen journalism portal which was developed after the newsroom noticed a strong response to early engagement with Quint blog posts, and WebQoof, which engages audiences as misinformation informants and combatants. It also uses a messenger bot on Facebook to talk to readers about issues they are interested in. With bureaus in six main cities, the media company employs 134 editorial staff, with two dozen reporters regionally based, and a national stringer network. The Quint quietly launched its membership venture in mid-2019. It’s known for its editorial gender activism and on-the-ground reporting.

2. Engagement Evolution: Reimagining Audiences Amidst Upheaval

The ‘weaponisation’ of online audiences and the social platforms, on which many news organisations have relied to connect with their communities over the past 15 years, represents a major disruption in the short history of digital audience engagement – one which demands strategic and innovative responses from news organisations internationally. This is a particularly urgent problem in volatile democracies like the Philippines, South Africa, and India.

Perhaps ironically, given their online birth, the news organisations studied here are increasingly focusing on offline relationship-building designed to support civic engagement and collective action in response to myriad interlinked social and political crises. These crises have included legal action, demonisation by political leaders, prolific online harassment, and digital security threats that have challenged and necessarily changed their audience engagement strategy and practice.

Responses include partial retreats from direct engagement between journalists and audiences, media literacy campaigns focused on the need for civility and responsible sharing in online communities, active collaborations with civil society organisations and ‘loyal’ audiences to ‘defend truth’ and media freedom, and, in all cases, experimentation with membership programmes. There are also ongoing innovations in engaged reporting, along with investment in development of new technologies designed to enhance audience engagement experiences and create safer spaces for online interaction, including a new publishing platform in the case of Rappler.

Timelines mapping the trajectory of audience engagement³ at Rappler, Daily Maverick, and The Quint – from the organisations’ inception to the present – enable a comparative analysis of audience engagement innovations. They are pursuing challenges and opportunities within complex cultural and political contexts that demand a combination of strategic and spontaneous acts of innovation. What they are learning in the process is instructive globally, particularly considering many of these challenges

(e.g. orchestrated online harassment of journalists, and viral disinformation designed to disrupt elections and democratic institutions) are rapidly moving from the Global South to the West (Occeñola 2019).



Daily Maverick’s Senior Reporter Rebecca Davis, who sends out a monthly personalised newsletter to members, pictured at an event. In the background, the media platform’s slogan is clear: ‘Defend Truth.’ *Image: Supplied*

³ See Engagement Innovation Timelines at the end of Chapter 3.

Leveraging Foundational Civic Engagement

One of the stated missions of the news organisations studied here is the development of online communities designed to trigger ‘social action’ on critical issues like climate change, gender equality, corruption, transparent governance, and poverty. For example, at Rappler, the idea was to leverage social media for ‘social good’: a digital and more audience-engaged version of traditional ‘activist’, ‘campaign’, or ‘movement’ journalism (Russell 2016) – at-scale.

‘The core of Rappler really is the civic engagement,’ Rappler’s long-term head of Digital Communications Stacy de Jesus says.⁴ Rappler was built from the ground up as a social news organisation. It had a clear mission – to use online channels to grow ‘communities of action’, and to help build institutions bottom-up to support democracy in the Philippines – only 25 years after the end of the Marcos dictatorship. These communities drove distribution through social media engagement ‘mega pushes’, leading to ‘phenomenal’ early growth. As Rappler’s audiences grew, the staff increased from 12 in 2012, to 75 in 2013, topping 100 by 2014.

The Move.PH community, which remains Rappler’s civic engagement arm, is both digital and physical. It is supported by a network of grassroots community organisers who plan and facilitate Rappler events, technology and digital media literacy training sessions, and contribute to community-generated editorial campaigns across the country. This has involved active and highly audience-engaged responses to social (hunger), political (media freedom threats, democracy erosion, corruption), and environmental (emphasising climate change) crises, as well as critical incidents, such as disasters (Posetti 2015; Anderson 2017). ‘All of this is aligned with our community-building and relationship-building and our hunger for pushing for social good, but at the same time, it’s also aligned with our revenue goals and missions,’ Stacy de Jesus says.



The Rappler team, led by Executive Editor/CEO Maria Ressa at an editorial meeting. Featured on the screen is Gemma Bagayaua-Mendoza, who oversees Content and Research Strategy. Image: Julie Posetti

One of Move.PH’s initiatives was Project Agos, launched in 2013 as a community-building effort a month before the devastating typhoon Haiyan. There are 20 typhoons a year on average in the Philippines and disengaged people want to ‘get involved’ during disasters and crises, Rappler CEO and Executive Editor Maria Ressa observes. Agos involved collaborations with audiences, government agencies, and NGOs to crowd-map⁵ disaster impact and deliver critical and potentially life-saving information to communities to act on, along with training in new communications technologies. The project covered 38 provinces, 22 cities, 8 government agencies, and 16 civil society organisations. Workshops were also organised to share knowledge.

⁴ De Jesus left Rappler when she moved to Europe in mid-2019.

⁵ ‘Philippine hazard maps online’, Nov. 2013. <https://www.rappler.com/move-ph/issues/disasters/hazard-maps>

This commitment to civic engagement triggered by public interest journalism is a theme common to all three news organisations studied here. South Africa's Daily Maverick sees itself as strongly independent and egalitarian, and aims to practise accountability journalism that helps defend South African democracy and institutions at a time when both are increasingly under fire. It's an upstart news organisation that punches above its weight in terms of impact, and irritates many of its establishment media rivals. An activist spirit has led to several investigations with international reach and policy ramifications. For instance, the outlet made global headlines with its whistleblower-based #GuptaLeaks, and Bell-Pottinger disinformation investigations. These projects exposed a web of corruption connected to state capture⁶ and uncovered a disinformation campaign designed to manipulate South African politics, ultimately contributing to the demise of disgraced former President Jacob Zuma and the collapse of the UK public relations firm Bell-Pottinger. 'Phenomenal stories resonate', Daily Maverick founder and Editor-in-Chief Branko Brkic says, pointing to the potential to build deeply invested communities around high-impact public interest journalism.

The DM brand of 'voicely' reporting taps into South Africa's activist media tradition, which was critical in mobilising against apartheid, particularly in the 1970s and 1980s. Associate Editor Marianne Thamm points to a form of audience engagement that moves well beyond interaction with and around Daily Maverick content, and includes organised physical protest: 'South Africans took control of the narrative themselves, not the journalists ... or anyone else,' Thamm says. 'We had marches, but there was also this pushback against Zuma and state capture which was a physical demonstration of anger and FFS!' This kind of organised community response – often at the grassroots level and instigated by civil society organisations – underpins the rapid growth of Daily Maverick's new membership base, as analysed below in Chapter 4.



Daily Maverick trainee journalists Tessa Knight and Karabo Mafolo.
Image: Leila Dougan

Educational, explanatory, and advocacy journalism designed to effect social change through civic engagement also forms a core part of The Quint's editorial mission and engagement strategy in India. The Quint has worked with BBC Hindi, Google, and Facebook to fund and expand upon special advocacy projects in a range of formats. 'Swachh Digital India', the BBC partnership which co-produced a video series in July 2017, encouraged readers to engage in fact-checking.⁷ In September 2018, The Quint and Google India held a day-long event based around a theme core to the media's readership and business strategy: International Languages Day.⁸ With funding from Facebook, the site also launched an award-winning gender-themed editorial campaign called 'Me, the Change', on notable female voters.⁹ This was followed by the use of a survey to crowdsource

⁶ State capture is generally used to describe a type of systemic political corruption in which private interests significantly influence a state's decision-making processes to their own advantage. *The Economist* notes it is 'unfamiliar elsewhere in the world, [but] the term is widespread use in South Africa, especially since the publication in October 2016 of *State of Capture*, a report by Thuli Madonsela, the former public protector' – an ombudsman whose powers are guaranteed by the constitution. See: <https://econ.st/2FMZDnz>.

⁷ This ran separately to the WebQoof initiative mentioned in our last report, which is for audiences who monitor and detect mis- and disinformation.

⁸ 'Indian language internet users in India are at 234 million and have already overtaken the number of English users (175 million). Encouraged by a decline in smartphone and data prices, Indian language users are expected to account for nearly 75 per cent of India's internet user base by 2021.' <https://www.exchange4media.com/industry-briefing-news/quint-hindi-and-google-india-present-bollove-your-bhasha-92083.html>

⁹ The Quint, 'Me, the Change.' <https://www.thequint.com/me-the-change>

women's stories, and a live political event that contributed to a change¹⁰ in local legislation around stalking. Such engagement-driven reporting is designed to move communities to action.

See the 'Circles of Engagement Innovation' infographic on the next page for a visualisation of progressively narrower, deeper, and stronger modes of audience engagement - ultimately leading to a core of 'engaged communities of action' - as practiced by our three case organisations.

Enabling the 'Citizens Agenda'

'Citizen journalism' (Gillmor 2004) has also been an important feature of 'engagement work' across the three outlets. Rappler started citizen blogging website X.Rappler in 2015 in response to the demand from Move.PH communities, and from their broader audiences, to be published as Rappler contributors. The platform enabled self-publishing by the blogging community and it was designed in part to manage the workload created by highly successful audience engagement efforts.¹¹

Daily Maverick began with a heavy emphasis on publishing commentary from informed citizen 'opinionistas' (academics, social commentators, etc.), and its investigative reporting repertoire grew from there. With a clear thread back to its origins, Daily Maverick has just launched Maverick Citizen, a sub site focused on what Branko Brkic describes as 'forgotten communities' in South Africa's highly stratified society. It emphasises human rights issues and civil society concerns that are not well covered by their competitors, but are 'ripe for engagement,' according to DM Communities Manager Francesca Beighton.



At The Quint, the active engagement of the citizen blogging community inspired the development of its youth-oriented citizen reporting portal, MyReport. One year since launch, there are around 700 citizen journalists in the MyReport network. However, its audience is not conceptualised as a set of bonus news providers. Built on a platform designed in-house to be optimised for mobile, MyReport is imbued with two different approaches to community-building. First, there

¹⁰ 'The Quint Launches "Me, the Change" to Showcase the Aspirations of First-Time Women Voters', 17 Nov. 2018.

<http://www.adageindia.in/others/the-quint-launches-me-the-change-to-showcase-the-aspirations-of-first-time-women-voters/articleshow/66665973.cms>

¹¹ X.Rappler was shut down in mid-2019 – see discussion below.

Circles of Engagement Innovation

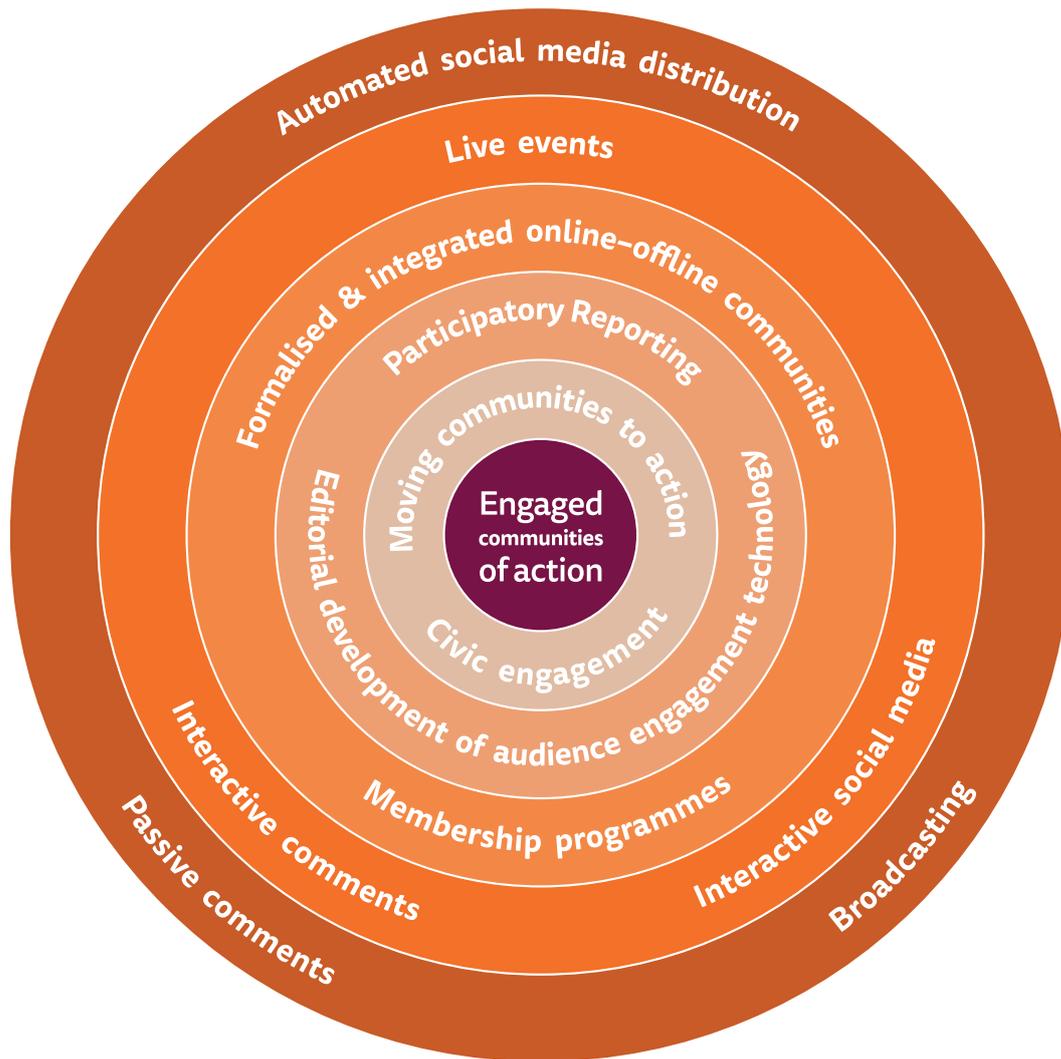


Figure:
Concentric circles denote increasingly concentrated - narrower, deeper, stronger - 'engagement work'

Examples of 'engagement work' at each level of depth

- Rappler's #DefendPressFreedom and #HoldtheLine campaigns; Daily Maverick's #Guptaleaks inspiration for mass anti-corruption protests; The Quint's 'Me, the Change' and 'Talking Stalking' campaigns
- Rappler's Project Agos and new engagement platform; Daily Maverick's engaged newsletters and fledgling 'memberful reporting' efforts; The Quint's MyReport and WebQoof
- Rappler's Move.PH and Rappler Plus; Maverick Insider; The Quint's premium membership scheme
- Rappler's Social Good Summit; Daily Maverick's The Gathering; The Quint's editorial campaign events; interactive social media activity at The Quint and Rappler; interactive comments at all three outlets
- Daily Maverick's approach to automated social media distribution

is an educational element, which means that citizen journalists are given guidelines on 'how to shoot'; their best practices are shared with each other. Secondly, contributors are likely to stay engaged because of The Quint's new certification process, gained when a citizen reporter has submitted two or more stories. According to Associate Editor, Innovation Aaqib Raza Khan, 'once they have submitted more than ten stories, we will start paying them. We want to provide readers with an incentive to stay engaged. And there has been an upswing in the number of people who want to submit stories.'



MyReport contributions are solicited through social media callouts and entreaties attached to contributors' stories. 'A group of young citizen journalists, who are passionate to be the change, through powerful, compelling stories. Join this movement,' the pitch reads. And it has led to direct local impact. For example, within a week of a citizen journalist exposing the garbage problems within the hill station of Shimla, the local authorities had cleaned it up. 'It is a remote area where we otherwise wouldn't have had the resources to know about this problem,' Aaqib Raza Khan says. The Quint's MyReport community also intersects with the hundreds of contributors to its WebQoof fact-checking unit, which, fuelled by audience collaboration, is designed to combat



In March 2016, The Quint Hindi launched as a separate website; 43.6% speak Hindi as their mother tongue in India. Pictured to the far right (in glasses), Editor-in-Chief of The Quint Hindi, Neeraj Gupta. Image: Julie Posetti

digital-era disinformation through detection, investigation, and active debunking (Posetti et al. 2019).

Complex Audiences Demand Nuanced Engagement Strategies

Audience engagement strategies are multi-faceted, highly complex, and subject to frequent innovation at The Quint because it publishes in two languages, running separate news sites in Hindi and English, as well as a standalone website on health and fitness.¹² These reach different linguistic audiences in different states, and there are real distinctions in terms of content engagement between them. 'There is no single language, social or class strategy that we have in India,' The Quint's Associate Editor, Innovation Aaqib Raza Khan says. Audience engagement is also affected by restrictions of internet bandwidth in India. While The Quint publishes stories in 360 video formats – heightening engagement by placing users in control of the story – provision has to be made for raw videos to buffer in less connected parts of the country. Interactives are also being designed to be more lightweight for audiences.

These issues are of concern at Daily Maverick as well, and to a lesser extent, at Rappler. And at DM and Rappler, international audiences are also being cultivated as part of a broader audience engagement strategy. Apart from global interest in its disinformation investigations, Rappler has an Indonesian joint venture with local startup IDN Times in Bahasa,¹³ while Daily Maverick has just launched a UK-based editorial project called 'Declassified UK.' Funded by a grant, it's focusing on national security issues.¹⁴



The screenshot shows the top navigation bar of The Quint website with logos for Bloomberg Quint, हिंदी, FT, and MEON. On the right, there are buttons for 'Support The Quint', 'Subscribe', and 'Login'. The main banner features a stylized illustration of two women in purple and yellow. One woman is looking at a smartphone with a Facebook icon, and the other is on a mobile phone. Below the illustration, the headline reads: **Me, The Change: For Young Women Voters, Mobile Phone Zaroori Hai!** To the right of the headline, it says 'One in a Quintillion' and 'Follow Us On:'.

The Quint's 'Me, The Change' project was designed to prompt Indian women to become democratically active ahead of the 2019 elections.

¹² <https://fit.thequint.com/>

¹³ After launching as a Rappler offshoot in 2015, Rappler's Indonesian expansion was scaled back in 2018 due to the impact of the Duterte Government's costly attacks – from mounting legal cases to prolific online harassment. <https://www.rappler.com/about-rappler/about-us/194167-rappler-idntimes-partnership>

¹⁴ Declassified UK's first story with international impact: <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2019-09-11-how-the-uk-security-services-neutralised-the-countrys-leading-liberal-newspaper/>

A Maverick Resistance to Social Media

Unlike the other two outlets studied here, which have large social media profiles¹⁵ and prolific activity levels on the platforms, Daily Maverick doesn't emphasise social media for engagement or distribution. In fact, while several of their 'marquee journalists' have large and influential audiences built around their individual social media brands,¹⁶ social media engagement is effectively automated. Editor-in-Chief Branko Brkic has eschewed the platforms from Day One – 'I don't trust them', he says – preferring to focus instead on what some of his colleagues frame as 'retovation'. DM has bucked many innovation trends, going back to in-depth 'accountability journalism' produced by a suite of highly respected and experienced former print journalists focused on exposing corruption, promoting social justice, and aiding transparency as foundations for audience investment.

They're experimenting with video, podcasts, and documentary forms in the interests of developing younger audiences, and they've recently launched additional niche sub sites including Business Maverick¹⁷, and the lifestyle-oriented Maverick Life¹⁸ aimed at specific audiences. But engagement is primarily facilitated through personalised email newsletters and physical events.



'Phenomenal stories resonate', says Daily Maverick Editor-in-Chief, Branko Brkic, pictured here at a daily editorial meeting. Image: Leila Dougan

Community-building through engaged newsletter conversation is a marker of success in the Daily Maverick roster of 10–12 newsletters. These are sent daily, such as the First Thing, afternoon, or business newsletters; three times a week, in the case of the cartoon newsletters; weekly, such as for sports (Monday) or food (Friday); or monthly, from writer Rebecca Davis. Newsletters Editor, John Stupart, works with a proofreader and the day editors, and starts at 5 am for the morning newsletter, an investment that's paid off: 'One afternoon's worth of newsletter traffic will get ... a whole week of Facebook traffic,' he says. The newsletter audience has grown at least eleven-fold in five years. 'So ... as of today [September 2019] we have 115,024 subscribers, which is great, it's phenomenal considering five years ago we were at 10,000. Average open rates, depending on the email but generally speaking, are about 26% to 30%. It's about 6 to 10% higher than the global average for media newsletters.'

While newsletters have been around from DM's beginning in 2009, they have now evolved to become a central part of how the outlet reaches out to, and engages with, its audience – 10 million newsletters were sent out in September 2019. From a production communication perspective, a memo is shared with the newsroom, encouraging input or feedback on the newsletters' content, there's also a WhatsApp group with the newsletter creators, and there is wider interaction and inspiration with newsletter editors around the world via a dedicated Slack channel. This sustained effort was ramped up before membership was a recognised audience engagement strategy internationally, and before newsletters experienced a revival within the industry as a niche-audience builder.

¹⁵ See tables on p.23

¹⁶ Associate Editor Ferial Haffajee has about 479,000 followers on Twitter: <https://twitter.com/ferialhaffajee>, fellow Associate Editor Marianne Thamm has 35,700 followers <https://twitter.com/MarianneThamm> and features writer Rebecca Davis has 42,300 followers: <https://twitter.com/becksplanb?lang=en>

¹⁷ <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/business-maverick/>

¹⁸ <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/maverick-life/>



Origins

This Manila-based startup was founded in 2011 (as a Facebook page) by media executive and former CNN bureau chief, Maria Ressa, and three editor colleagues. Website (www.rappler.com) launched 2012. Indonesian bureau converted to brand partnership with local outlet (2015).

Business model

Commercial, mixed model – advertising, sponsored content, business-to-business services, grants, donations, membership.

Audience profile

English-speaking Millennials (Bahasa audiences via Indonesian joint venture).

Reach and distribution

10 million unique monthly visitors (September 2019; source: Rappler). Social media: Twitter: 3.1 million; Facebook: 3.93 million; YouTube: 480,000; Instagram: 336,000. Social media, civic engagement, and newsletter-driven.

Content

Nationally focused multimedia, video/live video, text, podcasts, newsletters, user-generated content, social.

Staff

Approximately 95 employees, 63% female (representing a 127% increase in staff since February 2019).

Impact

Known for its investigative journalism into the Duterte Government's deadly 'drug war', for revealing the orchestrated digital disinformation campaigns destabilising the young democracy, and for its media freedom activism.



Origins

Founded in 2009 by Editor-in-Chief Branko Brkic and CEO Styli Charalambous, one of South Africa's earliest digital-only news businesses. It has newsrooms in Johannesburg and Cape Town (<https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/>).

Business model

Commercial, mixed model – advertising, membership (one year old at time of publication), events, sponsored content, grant funding and donations.

Audience profile

English-speaking, politically engaged.

Reach and distribution

2 million unique monthly users (September 2019. Source: supplied); 115,000 newsletter subscribers. Social media: Twitter: 416,300; Facebook: 129,471; YouTube: 2,800. Instagram: 4,643. Distribution predominantly newsletter and event-driven.

Content

Nationally focused longform text, multimedia, video, documentary, podcasts, newsletter suite.

Staff

Approximately 75 employees, (representing a 167% increase in staff since February 2019) gender balanced. Recently hired eight new trainee journalists.

Impact

Known for its political analysis and commentary, investigative journalism into corruption (e.g. #GuptaLeaks), and exposing the Bell-Pottinger disinformation scandal.



Origins

English- and Hindi-language national Indian news startup founded and funded by journalists and media executives Raghav Bahl and Ritu Kapur. The Quint launched in January 2015 on Facebook, and as a website in March 2015. (www.thequint.com) Headquartered in New Delhi. Multiple bureaus.

Business model

Commercial, mixed model – advertising, events, sponsored content, partnerships and membership.

Audience profile

English- and Hindi-language speaking Millennials.

Reach and distribution

24.8 million unique monthly visitors (Aug. 2019/ComScore, desktop and mobile). Social media (aggregated): Twitter: 550,900; Facebook: 8.2 million; YouTube: 2.5 million; Instagram: 247,000. Distribution is predominantly social media-driven.

Content

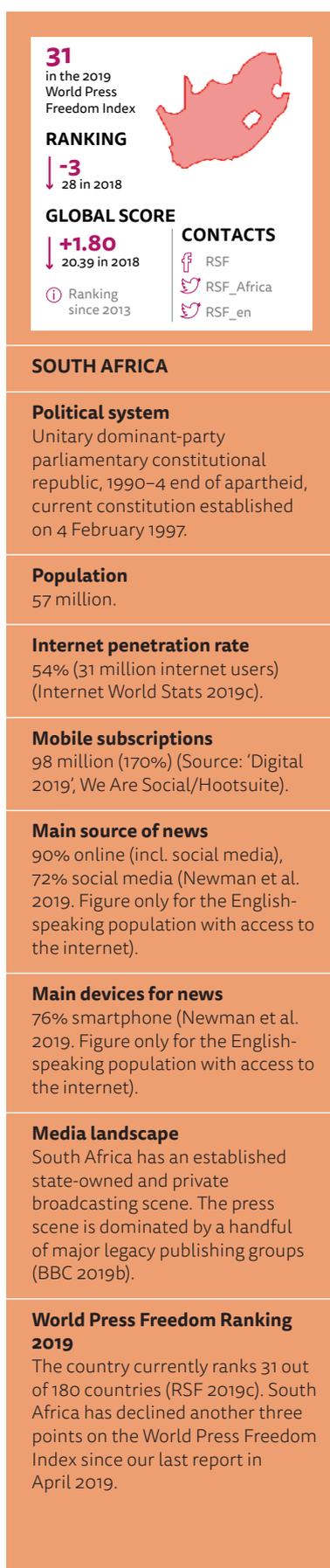
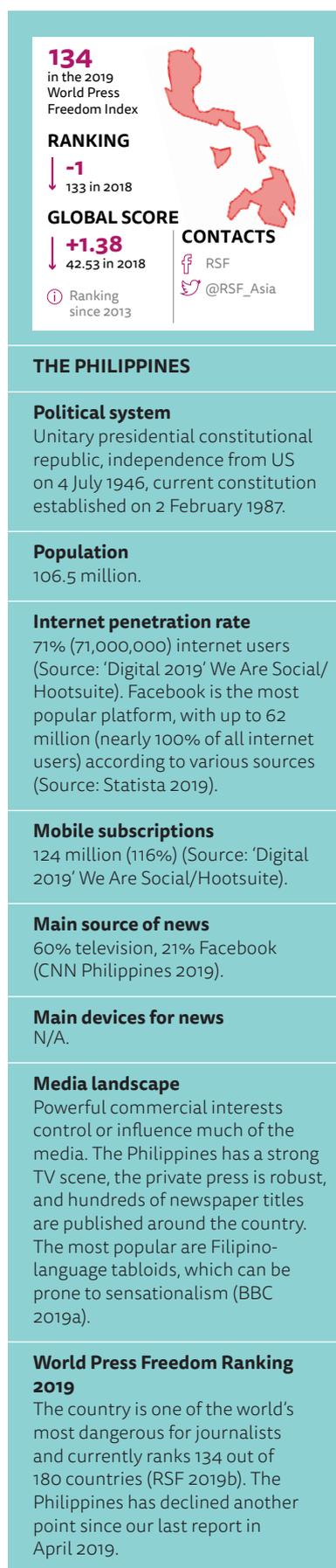
Multimedia, video/live video, documentary, podcasts, newsletters, graphic journalism, citizen journalism portal MyReport, bespoke social and mobile content.

Staff

Approximately 134 employees, gender-balanced.

Impact

Known for its advocacy journalism on gender issues and the fact-checking/anti-disinformation initiative, WebQoof. Its investments in 'on-the-ground' and investigative reporting are also noteworthy.



3. Engagement Transitions in Response to External Threats and Audience ‘Toxicity’

The capacity to respond innovatively to external threats and the ‘unintended consequences’ of digital transformation is a key marker for sustainable journalism innovation identified within these news organisations (Posetti et al. 2019). This is linked to organisational culture and, in particular, a deeply held and passionately espoused commitment to what each separately refers to as their ‘mission’. This ‘mission’ is closely tied to their self-identified role as ‘guardians’ of democracy and open societies, which has caused them to be targeted by political actors seeking to chill media freedom and critical reporting in their countries, frequently in concert with orchestrated disinformation campaigns. Features of these attacks include threats of violence against the outlets, and the abuse and harassment of journalists, their sources, and their audiences – most frequently propelled via social media.

What Rappler’s CEO and Executive Editor Maria Ressa calls ‘the weaponisation of the tools of free expression’ – the manipulation of social media platforms and communities by malicious actors – has also developed a form of audience toxicity that undermines established methods and practices in the realm of audience engagement. This toxicity is evident in the brutal online harassment of journalists (Mijatovic 2016; Posetti 2017; Posetti and Storm 2019) – a global problem that poses real challenges for the model of engaged journalism, built on the social web’s facilitation of interactive, collaborative, and participatory journalism. It is also evident in falling trust in the news media and the conflation of credible, independent journalism with misinformation and ‘fake news’ (Nielsen and Graves 2017; Ireton and Posetti 2018).

By the time Rodrigo Duterte was elected President of the Philippines in May 2016, Rappler staff had already noticed a rise in toxicity – in both the tone and themes of the discourse – within online communities, which Duterte’s campaign leveraged so effectively that Facebook declared him the ‘undisputed King of Facebook conversations’ a month before the poll (Etter 2017). ‘Because we lived on social media, we felt it first,’ Ressa says. They were also among the first to experience the destructive impacts of social media ‘weaponisation’ (Occeñola 2019) against news media in the Philippines that were scrutinising Duterte’s ‘Drug War’, and the pile-up of bodies from extrajudicial killings associated with it¹⁹ (Posetti et al. 2019).

These are not trends limited to fragile democracies in the Global South, as many US and European journalists are increasingly aware from first-hand experience. However, the potential impacts in the Philippines, South Africa, and India are arguably more urgent and dangerous (Posetti and Storm 2019). Attacks on freedom of expression also create risks for broader society and cause the withdrawal of audiences from engaging openly with critical journalism, with implications for storytelling and reporting, distribution, and the financial viability of commercial news media.

The Chilling Effects of Orchestrated ‘Patriotic Trolling’ and Gendered Online Harassment on Audience Engagement

When it began critically reporting on the Duterte Government, Rappler and its largely female staff met an orchestrated ‘patriotic trolling’ (Nyst 2017) campaign of online harassment linked to

¹⁹ See Rappler investigative reporter Patricia Evangelista’s ongoing series on extrajudicial killings associated with Duterte’s ‘Drug War’: <https://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/investigative/168712-impunity-series-drug-war-duterte-administration>. Rappler was named joint winner of the Shining Light Award at the Global Investigative Journalism Conference in September 2019. They shared the prize with Daily Maverick, which was recognised for the #GuptaLeaks investigation.

the state. It exposed staff to physical as well as digital safety threats (Posetti 2017) and turned the open online communities in which they operated ‘toxic’, thus poisoning the scalable engagement-centred news ecosystem that forged Rappler. Stacy de Jesus, who was responsible for Rappler’s social media team when the online abuse was at its peak, describes the nature of the attacks, which were frequently sexualised and involved threats of violence:

We hope you get raped, no one will even kiss you, you look ugly so it becomes physical, and then, also, at the same time emotional like no one will ever love you, we hate you so much, blah, blah, blah. And then, for Rappler as a whole, we’ll bomb your office ... And then, some of them would just crop the head of Maria [Ressa] or [political journalist] Pia [Ranada] and put it in a very sexual kind of image. For me personally, I got a personal attack saying, in Tagalog, ‘Babantayan kita’, which means basically, because I walk home, I should watch out for them because they will be wherever I am.²⁰

Rappler now has security guards posted at the front door of its office – to keep the ‘trolls’ out, but also to provide pre-warning of police raids.



Online harassment crosses over into the physical realm, with two men responding to orchestrated online attacks on Rappler by bringing their abuse to the newsroom door. Image: Rappler

Chilling online harassment has also been levelled at Daily Maverick journalists in South Africa. The #GuptaLeaks investigations led to DM’s exposure of an orchestrated disinformation campaign run by the now defunct UK-based PR firm Bell-Pottinger, which manipulated and racialised economic debates using ‘sock puppet networks’ and ‘troll armies’ that targeted journalists – especially female journalists – reporting on #GuptaLeaks.

Pauli Van Wyk is one of Daily Maverick’s leading investigative reporters, attached to the outlet’s ‘Scorpio’ investigations team. She led coverage of #GuptaLeaks with Branko Brkic, and she has since broken major corruption stories involving the populist Economic Freedom Fighters party, making her the target of some of the worst gendered online harassment endured by South African journalists. In Van Wyk’s case, her editors saw signs that ‘the online threats would cross over into physical violence’, Managing Editor Jillian Green says. In addition to boosting her physical security,

* Reminders

WHEN IN THE OFFICE:

-  For anything out of the ordinary, **CALL AT ANYTIME**. Then turn on Facebook Live.
-  **Leave nothing in plain sight.** Leave your personal things at home. Close and turn off your laptops immediately. Keep your phones in your pocket.
-  **Refer all questions to managers.** Not all guests are friends. Let’s not get chummy.
-  **They cannot force you to do anything. BUT they can take anything they see.**
-  **Wait for our lawyers.** They are on stand by and constantly monitoring the situation. Atty: _____ Atty: _____

This infograph was produced by Rappler management to remind staff to be alert – and report – in the event of a police raid

²⁰ Read about Rappler’s early defensive strategies against online harassment here: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000259399/PDF/259399eng.pdf.multi>

and ensuring she took a social media break, Daily Maverick management encouraged her to move out of Johannesburg for a period to reduce her exposure to risk. 'If Pauli hasn't been threatened with rape 20 times by lunchtime today, it's not a normal Friday,' Brkic says, explaining that such attacks on his journalists have worsened and increased during the course of 2019.²¹ Associate Editor Ferial Haffajee recently wrote a personal essay about the way these threats are crossing over from the virtual to the physical realm in her own working life, causing her to withdraw from social media: 'I enjoyed Twitter. Until it turned on me' (Haffajee 2019).



Daily Maverick Managing Editor Jillian Green. Image: Leila Dougan

The screenshot shows the top of a web article. The header includes the site name 'DEFEND TRUTH' and navigation links: 'SCORPIO OPINIONISTAS ZAPIRO SECTIONS SUPPORT DM NEWSLETTER CONTACT'. The article title is 'REFLECTION Twitter and the rest of social media are a rising threat to media freedom — and I am part of their roadkill' by Ferial Haffajee, dated 6 August 2019. The article text begins: 'The internet and the powerful social media platforms now host among the worst forms of violence against journalists and are a rising threat to media freedom. Women journalists come in for particular targeting in a trend now called cyber-misogyny. Naming it makes it no less painful, as I have found.' The author's name 'Ferial Haffajee' is visible with a profile picture and interaction buttons for 'Follow', 'Save', and 'More'. A 'DISPLAY ADVERTISEMENTS' toggle is also present.

The Quint's staff also regularly face significant online harassment in their daily work. One source of the attacks is Hindu nationalists who accuse journalists of being 'anti-national.' Various journalists at The Quint who were interviewed as part of this study pointed out that the attacks against women were often particularly severe and accompanied by threats of physical violence, ranging from sexual assault to rape and murder. In principle and in practice, The Quint's response is broadly summarised as four possible actions:

- 1 Work routines are changed (e.g. rotating staff to minimise exposure) and journalists are not always tagged on social media alongside their articles to prevent attackers from having an easy time.
- 2 Regular exchange among colleagues is encouraged and, if necessary, supplemented by counselling and workshops.
- 3 If attacks get worse, employees also have the opportunity to take time off.
- 4 The Quint may try to take legal action (if possible) or ask Facebook and other platforms to block accounts and take down hateful content.

²¹ Van Wyk is named in a case brought by the South African National Editors Forum (SANEF) on behalf of five journalists who've been subjected to prolific online violence. A judgment in the case was still pending at the time of writing. Also, in June 2019 the Gauteng High Court imposed penalties on the Economic Freedom Fighters leader Julius Malema for inciting brutal online harassment of another journalist: <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2019-06-06-eff-court-losses-mount-as-karima-brown-wins-battle-but-faces-criticism-of-her-own/>

Counting the Costs When ‘Everything is Flipped Upside Down’

Targeted online harassment fuelled by political actors seeking to demonise journalism undermines direct audience engagement efforts at all three news organisations, but they’ve been felt most acutely at Rappler, which lost approximately 50,000 Facebook followers,²² as digital and legal attacks mounted following President Duterte’s election in 2016. Senior managers directly attribute this audience hit to an orchestrated #UnfollowRappler campaign. Over the next two years, Rappler lost about 20 employees²³ – four left due to fear, others were looking for greater financial rewards, and wanting to avoid the continuing sustained online and government attacks.

This toxicity was fuelled by a presidential pursuit of both Rappler and senior staff, most notably Maria Ressa, through disinformation-laced public rhetoric, and slap suits. At the time of writing, Ressa was facing 11 cases and up to 63 years in jail (Reed 2019), after being arrested and detained twice in 2019. ‘They just flipped everything upside down,’ Ressa laments, acknowledging that the prospect of partnering with the Duterte Government on any kind of community-building or development project is now highly unlikely.

As a result, Rappler paused Project Agos, along with a number of other Move.PH initiatives when long-term partner the Department of Education pulled out of an agreement. Another casualty of audience toxicity was the X.Rappler citizen blogging portal. It closed in mid-2019 after a series of DDOS (Distributed Denial of Service)²⁴ attacks designed to inhibit Rappler’s user experience, and other security breaches. According to Ressa these included misuse of the platform for propaganda posts and attempts to plant malware. In the end, this audience collaboration project became unsustainable because scale, political attacks, and ‘platform capture’ broke community – in the sense that the community became polluted and ‘weaponised’, and also in the sense that the convergent threats made the collaborative platform unmanageable for Rappler.

But ‘flipping everything upside down’ isn’t the sole preserve of illiberal democracies. It’s also the habit of the platforms’ ‘disruptive’ business models – a feature of what we’re calling ‘platform capture.’ For example, until very recently, the Facebook-owned messaging app WhatsApp was The Quint’s main tool for collaborating with audiences on the WebQoof disinformation identification and debunking project (Posetti et al. 2019). However, a change in WhatsApp’s terms and conditions against ‘automated or bulk messaging, or non-personal use, even if that determination is based on information solely available to us off our platform,’²⁵ which is designed to help curtail disinformation, directly affects news publishers trying to counter the problem within the app. So, The Quint has been forced to transition its entire audience in disinformation-busting and other citizen reporting projects to another app, Telegram (which has not yet followed WhatsApp’s



Since President Duterte’s election in 2016, Rappler staff have noticed a rise in toxicity – in both the tone and themes of the discourse – within online communities. *Image: Julie Posetti*

²² This represented about 1% of Rappler’s overall traffic at the time.

²³ Rappler’s senior executive staff took a 20% pay cut in 2018 as an investment in the survival of the outlet and the respect of their team. Staff numbers dropped from over 100 in 2016 to approximately 80 a year later.

²⁴ See definition at Technopedia: <https://www.techopedia.com/definition/10261/distributed-denial-of-service-ddos>

²⁵ As per the WhatsApp Terms and Conditions: <https://faq.whatsapp.com/en/general/26000259/>

strategy). WhatsApp users who interact with The Quint are currently being asked to move to Telegram if they want to continue engaging with the news organisation after 7 December 2019. As Head of Audience Growth and Social Media Medha Chakrabartty explains, a referral programme has been rolled out to incentivise existing subscribers:

We have 26,000 people on Telegram right now, and on WhatsApp we have 100,000–140,000. The challenge is to move them all while keeping in mind they might not be responsive or might have their misgivings.

Like Rappler, The Quint pursued scale from the outset by accepting platform risk. These ‘indirect’ attacks from platforms have made them vulnerable, as CEO Ritu Kapur, who is ‘constantly in conversation’ with WhatsApp, says: ‘I’m constantly telling them that, listen, WhatsApp is where misinformation is floating. You must encourage credible use publishers to also be on that platform to combat all the fake content!’ Like Rappler with the political climate, it’s not just that ‘scale broke the community.’ The Quint is now forced to move its community to where it currently doesn’t exist. As Aaqib Raza Khan puts it, it is akin to moving house across the street; most don’t want to do it for the lack of a good reason. ‘Right now Telegram is a very hollow space.’ Medha Chakrabartty emphasises that rebuilding trust is the main takeaway for engaging with communities:

One or two emails a day will come to us telling us hey they don’t trust Telegram ... as a publisher it’s a huge learning ... for us to ace exactly how to build that trust and make people realise you’re going to be okay ... come along with us to Telegram!

In the meantime, The Quint continues to use Facebook for interacting around human interest stories, the Facebook Messenger bot to check the temperature of what audiences care about, and focus on Instagram (another Facebook-owned platform) as its main social media site for news. Medha Chakrabartty says it can be hard to keep up.

Facebook fiddles with its own tools so much that if today I think I have figured out anything on Facebook ... tomorrow Facebook will come up with five more tools ... yesterday Instagram introduced artificial reality filters which haven’t rolled out in India yet. To know and do all of that, and always be in the know, is definitely a challenge ...

Which is why building deeper, narrower, and stronger communities is now essential for news organisations.

Going Full Circle: From Offline to Online and Back Again

Daily Maverick’s CEO Styli Charalambous says he used to question DM’s reluctance to develop a social media brand and distribution strategy but he now wonders if this avoidance was a strategic win in light of audience toxicity, ‘platform capture’, and other risks associated with engagement restricted to the realm of social media. The outlet has a long tradition of favouring in-person meetings with its audiences over digital interactions. Eight years ago, it began an annual audience engagement event, ‘The Gathering’, long before many international news organisations started diversifying their revenue streams to include events. The objective was – and still is – to connect the editorial staff directly with their audiences through face-to-face conversations around their stories. The first ‘Gathering’ in 2010 attracted 200 participants, and in 2018 around 1,050 tickets were issued, a growth of 425%. Another analogue-era revival is the publication of a Daily Maverick yearbook, and printed books featuring collections of longform features and investigations from DM’s crew of high-profile journalists and commentators.

Earlier than many other digital-born news organisations, Rappler, too, understood the need to build and blend online and physical communities connected to its content. 'If the premise of the whole social news network company is to really be social and build a community around it, and if you really want to hear what people have to say, then you have to also meet them on the ground,' Rappler's former Head of Digital Communications and Move.PH Stacy de Jesus says. 'Plus, if it's community-building, it's relationship-building. So, it's very important for us to really see people.'

Despite the ongoing attacks on Rappler, its annual 'Social Good Summit'²⁶ – a gathering originally conceived as a means to demonstrate social media's power for 'social good' – continues in partnership with civil society organisations, unperturbed by the potential overflow of the attacks on Rappler. Most recently, in September 2019, the event emphasised the need for community-building offline. These long-term strategies for offline community development have also paid off for Rappler, with community-organised events being staged around the Philippines to support fundraising for the organisation and its founders since the legal threats began in early 2018.

At The Quint, physical events also predated their move to membership. For example, a #TalkingStalking²⁷ event was held prior to a petition to raise support for a bill to make stalking a non-bailable offence. In addition, The Quint also flew the ten women featured in 'Me, the Change'²⁸ – a 'first-time women voters' campaign funded by Facebook India – to Delhi for an event moderated by a Bollywood actor and attended by stakeholders such as policymakers and NGOs. 'They somehow made genuine impact,' says Senior Reporter Maanvi; invitations came from all over the world to highlight the women's work in promoting rugby, safety at school, or rare tribal languages.

Working to Mitigate the Impacts of 'Platform Capture': Hits and Misses

Pointing to Rappler's culture of optimism and capacity for perpetual innovation, Maria Ressa regards the 'upending' of its engagement-oriented business model as a motivator for necessary change, causing staff to unite internally and recalibrate their audience engagement strategies: 'The best thing that could have happened to Rappler is coming under attack. We were forced to change really fast because of the attacks ... it brought out the best in us,' she says.

It also taught Rappler a fundamental lesson: once weaponised at-scale, audiences can't be recalibrated through direct engagement at-scale. They learned this when they began a campaign called #NoPlaceForHate²⁹ in August 2016, in which they tried to engage rationally with abusers and counter hate speech with calls for civility. The plan, triggered by months of costly online abuse and serious threats directed at Rappler staff and retreating Rappler audiences, was to automatically delete any comments on the website, or posts on Facebook, that did not 'contribute to the conversation.' As a result, many Rappler community members, referred to as 'loyals' by management, became defenders of Rappler and its staff online. Stacy de Jesus recalls:

People started saying, 'Finally. Thank you.' [and] 'There was a time when I really decided to unfollow you even if I wanted to get your updates because the comment section was really toxic.' So, it actually empowered the community to speak up. However, after a certain amount of time it's not even a good debate, it's like people talking over each other because now you have an empowered community from both sides and no one's listening to each other.

²⁶ See Rappler's archive of summit content: <https://www.rappler.com/move-ph/social-good-summit>

²⁷ <https://www.thequint.com/quintlab/talking-stalking/>

²⁸ <https://www.thequint.com/quintlab/me-the-change/event.html>

²⁹ <https://www.rappler.com/views/143975-no-place-for-hate-change-comes-to-rappler-comments-thread>



Starting today, we will be aggressively deleting crude and disrespectful posts and comments that violate standards of civility.

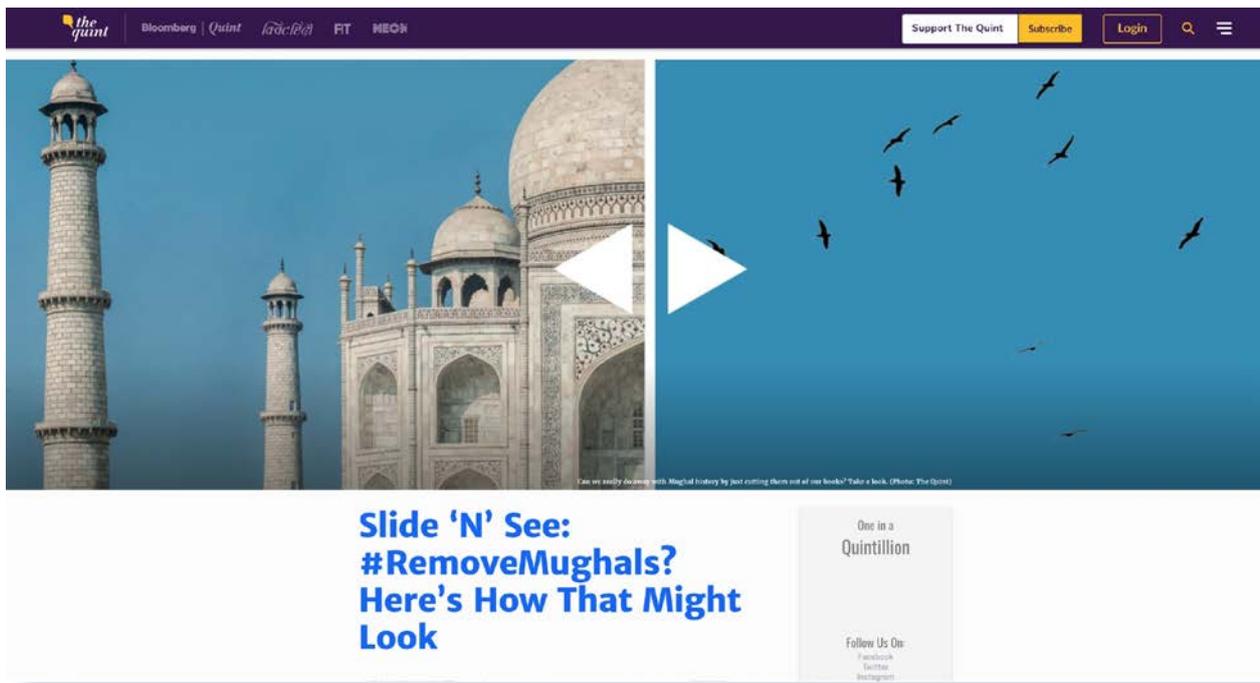
De Jesus describes the #NoPlaceForHate campaign as 'idealistic'. But Ressa goes further: 'We were so naive about it. I thought, people just don't realise. I never realised how systematic this was, and how really social media had been weaponised.' So, Rappler abandoned #NoPlaceForHate, and instead 'pivoted to defend truth, media freedom, and democracy.' This strategic shift was informed and enabled by its big-data-based investigative journalism on the emergence of orchestrated online attacks. 'The data showed us how systematic and focused the attacks were,' Ressa says, referring to the Rappler database known as the 'SharkTank' that stores masses of data on disinformation networks (Posetti et al. 2019). The Move.PH civic engagement focus is now on Rappler's anti-disinformation and media freedom campaigns #HoldtheLine and #DefendPressFreedom.

These campaigns not only drive direct engagement with audiences, including grassroots events staged by Move.PH communities wanting to express support for Rappler and its journalism, they also provide quantifiable financial benefits. Ressa says:

People have actually been crowdfunding us, even before we created the Rappler Plus [membership]³⁰ community. They had donated a significant amount – 5 million pesos (approximately US\$96,000) by the end of 2018 [when the programme launched]. And some people were repeatedly giving.

The crowdfunding total had reached US\$200,000 by September 2019. They are investing directly in Rappler's defence and survival – and in the survival of the accountability journalism they believe in, and that makes them by definition an extremely loyal audience. 'We know that the people we have right now are "loyals", they believe in our values,' Ressa says of the character of those who've stuck with Rappler through the attacks.

³⁰ See detailed discussion below.



for social cohesion in a divisive climate, despite the problems of ‘patriotic trolling’ connected to disinformation campaigns. For example, a 2016 photo interactive³¹ addressed a rise in religious bigotry with links to Hindu nationalism by imagining a world where India derived no influence from its Mughal past. Aaqib Raza Khan, Associate Editor, Innovation, created a ‘slider’ effect where readers swiped forward and backwards on photos of digitally altered national monuments.

Innovative responses to the critical business model challenge of platform-dependency, an aspect of ‘platform capture’, have been essential to Rappler’s survival. Notably, these responses include a fact-checking partnership with Facebook and other initiatives. Maria Ressa describes Rappler’s relationship with Facebook as ‘frenemies’, acknowledging that they couldn’t have built Rappler without the platform, while also being strongly critical of its conduct.

A multi-faceted engagement strategy that fuses the reporting, business, and community-building arms of Rappler also remains core. For example, early work involved in mapping Rappler communities (Ressa and Shepherd 2013) and collaborative disaster mapping with Project Agos is applied to tracking and assessing online propaganda networks, both for its own reporting purposes and as part of a new business model, which involves the monetisation of this research for third-party clients. It’s also used to provide strategic advice to other businesses.

This long-term investment in engagement and community-building is paying off: revenues are currently up 70% year-on-year, and the improving financial position has allowed Rappler to hire 15 new staff in 2019. Additionally, it is close to launching a new publishing platform optimised for user experience and engagement, which it also hopes to monetise through business-to-business sales. ‘Look here!’ Ressa says, ‘We’re finding a sustainable business model for the mission of journalism.’ The model remains audience-centred and technology-aided with civic engagement at its core.

³¹ A. R. Khan, ‘Slide “N” See: #RemoveMughals? Here’s How that Might Look’, The Quint, 2016. <https://www.thequint.com/tech-and-auto/tech-news/interactive-removemughalsfrombooks-heres-how-it-may-look>



The Trajectory of Engagement Innovation: Rappler

- August **2011** ● Rappler is launched as a Facebook page called Move.PH focused on community-building for social good (e.g. alleviating poverty and hunger, anti-corruption campaigns)
- January **2012** ● Rappler.com launches as a website, online communities are invited to help set the editorial agenda. First annual Rappler Social Media for Social Good Summit held
- 2013** ● Innovating in engaged storytelling formats through social and mobile video (doing remote live broadcasts three years before Facebook Live)

● REACH is launched (tool for mapping communities on Twitter and measuring Rappler audience engagement)
- May **2013** ● Rappler publishes a series on the machinations of 'information cascades' connected to election discussion which maps their audiences and describes their characteristics and behaviours (www.rappler.com/nation/politics/elections-2013/27978-social-media-political-change-mapping-rapplerdebate)
- October **2013** ● *Project Agos*: collaborative disaster responses involving crowdmapping in partnership with government agencies, NGOs: 'It was part of a strategic way of community-building and engaging' (Stacy de Jesus, former Head of Digital Communications and Move.PH)
- 2014** ● Rappler launches #Budgetwatch (including snakes and ladders gamification and other engaging formats/methods), #HungerProject (designed to crowdsource solutions to hunger) and the Gender Equality Project (campaign supported by a commercial partnership)
- 2015** ● X.Rappler community blogging platform for citizen contributors launched
- June **2016** ● The attacks on Rappler begin in the aftermath of President Duterte's election, dramatically changing the experience of audience engagement. Social videos 'came to the rescue of sales' when advertisers pulled out in response to online attacks on Rappler, through a bespoke 'native advertising' production service that provided a new revenue stream
- August **2016** ● Rappler's #NoPlaceForHate campaign launched in parallel with events in an effort to counter online attacks on Rappler and its staff as they escalate
- October **2016** ● Maria Ressa begins a three-part series on the 'weaponisation of the internet' that represents a turning point for Rappler (<https://www.rappler.com/nation/148007-propaganda-war-weaponizing-internet>)
- July **2017** ● Rappler CEO Maria Ressa begins a counteroffensive, speaking openly for the first time about the impact of the online attacks on Rappler and her staff, and the ways they're trying to combat toxic digital communities (<https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000259399/PDF/259399eng.pdf.multi>)
- October **2017** ● Rappler publishes the Philippines' first 360 interactive video documentary series about terrorism in Marawi, produced collaboratively. <https://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/videos-podcasts/186138-virtual-reality-war-marawi>
- October **2018** ● Spontaneous crowdfunding campaigns to defend Rappler against legal threats ahead of membership push.

● Concurrently, Rappler starts #HoldTheLine and #DefendPressFreedom – collaborative media freedom campaigns designed to harness and grow community support for Rappler and Ressa as the legal attacks on them mount. Includes media literacy partnerships with schools and NGOs
- December **2018** ● Rappler Plus (membership arm) launches
- February **2019** ● Rappler Plus begins monthly member events and bespoke content, e.g. personalised newsletters from the two most prominent 'Rapplers' (Maria Ressa and Editor-at-Large Marites Dañguilan Vitug)
- July **2019** ● The X.Rappler aggregated community blogging platform is closed due to unsustainability caused by a combination of targeted digital security attacks and abuse of the platform for disinformation. Rappler concludes the resources required to manage the community, curate the content, and ensure it's a 'safe space' for community contributors to self-publish aren't available
- October **2019** ● Work close to completion on a new publishing platform optimised for audience engagement. 'We've built a platform that maps communities and we're now able to monetise it' (Maria Ressa)
- September **2019** ● Rappler Plus membership reaches 1,000



The Trajectory of Engagement Innovation: Daily Maverick

- October **2009** ● Daily Maverick is founded as a digital-only news startup, with a website heavy on expert commentary and analysis, and a standalone newsletter 'First Thing'
- 2009-18** ● DM is in ongoing financial trouble and constantly on the lookout for new revenue sources
- October **2010** ● DM holds its first event for 200 people under 'The Gathering' brand - it goes on to become a regular and influential fixture on the events calendar over the next nine years. Over 1,000 tickets are sold in 2018
- February **2011** ● Daily Maverick launches Free African Media, a grant-funded online 'newspaper' for the whole of Africa. It stopped running in 2011 and there are currently no plans to revive it, unless a strong opportunity presents itself
- June **2011** ● *iMaverick*, a daily subscription newspaper for iPad users, is launched but the extreme workload is unsustainable for the very small team and the experiment ends
- September **2012** ● *iMaverick* is turned into a weekly newspaper and has around 7,800 subscribers
- September **2012** ● DM makes its mark as a source of robust investigative journalism with unflinching coverage of the Marikana Massacre (where 34 striking miners are gunned down by police after months of strikes on South Africa's platinum belt), challenging the still dominant newspapers. (www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2012-09-08-the-murder-fields-of-marikana-the-cold-murder-fields-of-marikana)
- January **2014** ● *iMaverick* stops publishing due to little interest from advertisers and having reached only 8,000 regular subscribers. DM decides to refocus on a new website, mobile, as well as events to make up for lost revenue (www.marklives.com/2014/03/africas-first-tablet-magazine-imaverick-closed)
- January **2016** ● DM disables the comment function on all its web pages due to continued trolling, harassment, and racist remarks
- May **2017** ● DM brings back comments using the 'Civil Comments' service that works until the startup providing the service goes under in December 2018
- June **2017** ● The investigative unit *Scorpio* is introduced to the world as the #GuptaLeaks investigation breaks
- July **2017** ● DM begins work on a documentary related to #GuptaLeaks and focusing on Bell-Pottinger and its ultimate demise
- October **2017** ● 'Innovation tour' around US newsrooms hosted by Poynter inspires drive to reader revenue and subsequent consultation with the Membership Puzzle Project³² about a membership programme
- May **2018** ● DM launches a recurring donation effort, as a precursor to membership and minimum viable product testing. It gets good support and influences the design of the membership task
- August **2018** ● Membership programme 'Maverick Insider' is launched, 200 people sign up on launch day
- December **2018** ● DM launches 'Thank God It's Food' (TGIF), a weekly newsletter and features on food culture
- December **2018** ● 'Maverick Insider' has 4,436 members who signed up for a recurring contribution
- February **2019** ● DM reintroduces the comment function, disabled in 2016, exclusively available to Maverick Insiders
- March **2019** ● DM launches Business Maverick, a foray into business primarily driven by a newsletter strategy in the mould of 'First Thing'
- May **2019** ● DM launches Maverick Life, focusing on lifestyle and literary journalism, again relying on a newsletter approach to driving distribution
- August **2019** ● 'Maverick Insider' crosses threshold of 7,000 members
- August **2019** ● MPP and Daily Maverick run a joint membership and audience training workshop in Cape Town as part of a grant to support DM's membership efforts. There are plans to replicate this.
- September **2019** ● Niche sub-sites 'Maverick Citizen' (human rights and civil society issues) and 'UK Unclassified' (national security themed) are launched

³² The Membership Puzzle Project (MPP) is a collaboration between the Dutch journalism platform De Correspondent and New York University. Its aim is to gather knowledge about how to build sustainable news organisations that restore trust in journalism and move readers to become paying members of an online community. <https://membershipuzzle.org/>



The Trajectory of Engagement Innovation: The Quint

- January **2015** ● The Quint is launched as a Facebook page
- March **2015** ● The Quint is launched as a commercial, English-language news site, Quintillion Media
- Smartphone 'selfie interviews' in the field become a mainstay of The Quint's reporting
- March **2016** ● The Quint Hindi is launched as a separate language vertical with the aim of growing the Hindi-speaking audience (in the census of India of 2011, 528,347,193 of a total population of 1,210,854,977 stated that their mother tongue was Hindi; a slight increase since the last census: http://censusindia.gov.in/2011Census/C-16_25062018_NEW.pdf)
- Ten-year-long venture with Bloomberg commences
- February **2017** ● Quint Neon, The Quint's video vertical directed at reactions to viral news is launched
- Quint Labs, The Quint's 'innovations wing' focused on multimedia storytelling, begins its work. It creates a dashboard of different storytelling types
- July **2017** ● The Quint starts a partnership with BBC Hindi on fact-checking called Swachh Digital India
- August **2017** ● Launch of the first of The Quint's gender-themed campaigns, with 'Talking Stalking.' The campaign won a WAN-IFRA Award for 'Best Innovation to Engage Youth Audiences', and provided the advocacy for an eventual change in local law (Ganguly 2018)
- December **2017** ● Event at Oxford Bookstore, New Delhi, to raise support for Stalking Bill
- May **2018** ● MyReport, a citizen journalism portal, user-participation platform, and contribution model, is launched
- June **2018** ● WebQoof, a resource-intensive fact-checking/de-bunking, audience contribution-powered public service function, is launched
- September **2018** ● The Quint starts a campaign on Indian languages with the support of Google (www.thequint.com/quintlabbol-quint-hindi-google-india-event/)
- November **2018** ● Launch of 'Me, the Change', a gender-themed campaign to speak to women ahead of 2019 elections in partnership with Facebook India: 'It's really helped us to build a niche following, amongst people who are not interested in news or gender' (Medha Chakrabarty)
- January **2019** ● 'Me, the Change' event (Maanvi 2019)
- Experiments in subscription to ad-free offering
- July **2019** ● Premium membership introduced: first ever webinar on the national budget with Editor-in-Chief Raghav Bahl for members. There are plans to add webinars to Quint FIT
- The final book in Editor-in-Chief Raghav Bahl's 'Super Trilogy', *Super Century: What India Must Do to Rise by 2050*, published by Penguin Random House India, is also sent to members

4. Early Lessons from the Move to Membership

We've moved away from where we started – taking something in the physical world and amplifying it times four in the virtual world. Those were the easy days! Now, it's more about developing a trust system where people feel safe and willing to enlarge their trust-based networks.
 Rappler CEO and Executive Editor, Maria Ressa

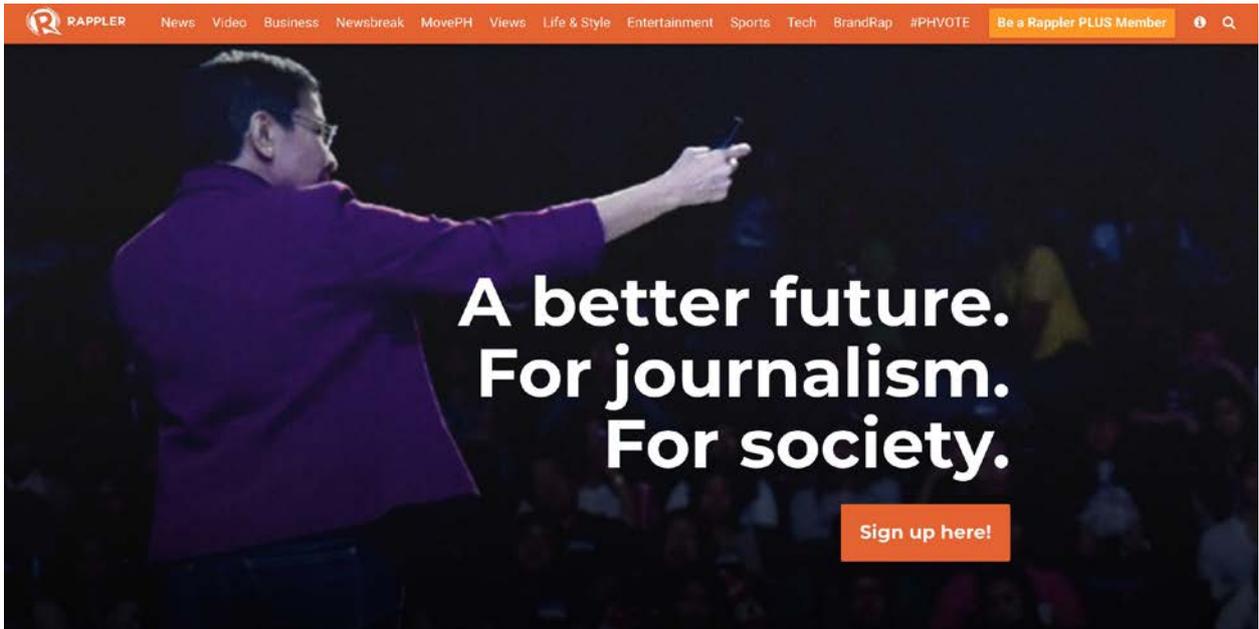
When audiences turn toxic – at-scale – significant changes in audience engagement and more fundamental innovations are required. None of the news organisations studied here began with a membership programme, but in the past year each of them has turned to membership as a way of deepening audience engagement in a 'safer' space and monetising the loyalty generated by their independent journalism and their civic activism in reference to attacks on democracy and media freedom. While their level of investment in membership varies, in each case it's been a natural trajectory from either experimentation with social platform engagement and community-building (Rappler and The Quint), events connected to their editorial missions (all three), or their newsletter strategy (Daily Maverick).

Despite some distinctions, in all cases the move towards a membership programme is the result of difficult business and political conditions that have led the news organisations to attempt to translate the existing loyalty and trust of their core audiences into more formally structured communities of interest and action. So, how is each of these organisations approaching the transition to membership? What are the characteristics of their membership models? And what are their goals for membership?

The Long Road to Membership – Diversifying Income Streams, Protecting the Outlet, Defending Democracy

Building a membership programme is not straightforward, and in our cases it often involves the skilful combination of existing elements and activities with fresh initiatives. For example, the launch of the membership programme Rappler Plus in late 2018 was preceded by two years of discussions about the viability of the plan. There were concerns that the Philippines wasn't ready to embrace membership in the way the trend was evolving internationally (such as creating bespoke content and providing exclusive access to it), particularly in the context of audience toxicity fuelled by political attacks. There were also considerable doubts if Rappler had the resources to build and maintain a membership scheme, with the ongoing distraction of 11 concurrent cases brought (or aided) by the state against the company and its managers. 'I was pushing back a lot,' Rappler's former manager of Digital Communications Stacy de Jesus says. 'I said, "I don't know if we're equipped to actually provide this in terms of community management-wise, database management-wise and in terms of [people] in general.'"

But Ressa's response was 'What do you mean "it's not ready"? We'll discover it as it goes!' While acknowledging the importance of research data and technological and organisational capacity in the context of pursuing innovation, Ressa is also mindful of 'analysis paralysis' – a risk she highlights as the flipside to 'shiny things syndrome' (Posetti 2018). A decision was ultimately made to pursue the model as an innovation designed to temporarily sustain the organisation at a time of genuine existential crisis. 'We want to convert readers into loyal members who stand for Rapplers,' Maria Ressa says. 'Rapplers' is a term of endearment for Rappler staff used by both the organisation and its supporters.



The primary candidates for membership were the existing communities of Rappler’s Move.PH civic engagement arm, and those already contributing to the crowdfunding of Rappler and Ressa’s legal defence from early 2018. While Rappler has only reached a mass of 1,000 members so far, each paying US\$70/year, there is steady growth. And, as Managing Editor Glenda Gloria says, ‘crisis brings opportunity.’ But Ressa says diving into membership at the time that Rappler did was more of a stop-gap measure, given that it was not ready structurally, nor technologically, to prioritise membership. Rappler’s biggest audience engagement investment is actually the new publishing platform it is preparing to launch in early 2020.

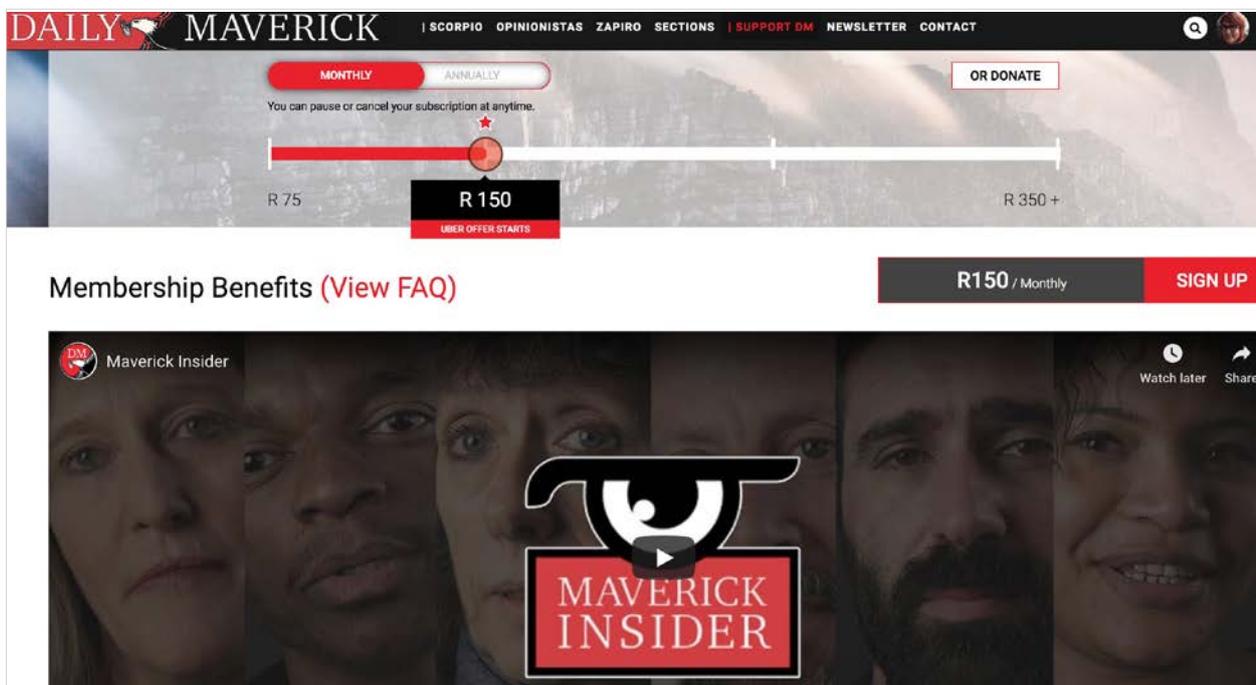


While Rappler’s membership programme came into existence as a result of the need to diversify revenue streams and for the outlet to have a loyal community that could act as a source of support in unstable political conditions, Daily Maverick’s membership push was mainly born out

of financial necessity. As publisher Styli Charalambous explains, DM has gone through repeated crises for most of its existence:

It was always the same crisis from the first year of operation. As a small, independent digital-only publication, focusing on politics, born into a time of Google, Facebook and Jacob Zuma, survival was always going to be our biggest challenge. We have only ever known a cash-crisis way of existing.

But towards the middle of 2017, the situation had become increasingly precarious. A solution needed to be found. After an ‘innovation tour’ around US newsrooms hosted by Poynter, and subsequent consultation with the Membership Puzzle Project about developing a membership programme, Daily Maverick decided it was a viable way to establish a more stable source of income, while sticking with its mission of providing investigative and critical journalism for the South African public. The idea of introducing a membership programme – a first for South Africa – that would become ‘Maverick Insider’ started to develop, as DM realised that paywalls wouldn’t work with its mission in an unstable democracy with an enormous population of working poor.³³



‘Maverick Insider’ launched on 15 August 2018. ‘Insiders’ are supposed to help keep DM’s content free for those who cannot pay, emphasising the value the organisation places on the democratic function of news participation in a highly stratified society. Daily Maverick sees its members as a community, which it encourages to engage in ‘whatever way they can,’ Charalambous says. ‘Insiders’ contribute a voluntary amount (over a minimum threshold of 75 Rand (US\$4.90) per month) in return for, among other things, an exclusive ‘behind-the-scenes’ newsletter and the option to comment on articles. But Charalambous stresses that anyone who contributes even the smallest amount is also included in the greater Maverick Insider community, although there are some tiered benefits attached to Maverick Insider. Creatively, there is also a plan to expand the Insider programme to allow members to contribute in non-financial ways, making membership more accessible to low-income earners.

³³ South Africa remains one of the countries with the highest inequality rates in the world. Based on the international poverty line of US\$1.90 per day, 18.8% of South Africans were poor in 2015. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/southafrica/overview>

At the time of writing 'Insider' stood at around 8,000 members, with an eye towards 10,000 by the end of 2019. DM hopes to eventually grow this number to 30,000–40,000 members and aims for a scenario where philanthropy, commercial activities, and member investment each account for one third of overall revenue. For Communities Manager Francesca Beighton, in the news media context the whole enterprise is something to admire:

It's an incredibly brave business move to start this membership [in South Africa], and it is constantly underwritten by this genuine need to defend truth, and a genuine need to keep it as personable as possible.

Not unlike Daily Maverick, The Quint's membership efforts are part of a rationale to make the outlet's financial position more secure, by diversifying income sources, ultimately helping to maintain it as an outlet providing freely accessible, public service journalism. Five years after launching as a Facebook page in 2014, The Quint began experimenting with a membership programme in March/April 2019 to 'empower independent journalism'³⁴ but the project is still in its nascent stages. Members pay between 200 and 5,000 rupees (US\$3–70) and they're encouraged to sign up with their locations, mobile numbers, and names. Among the benefits for The Quint's 'premium' members are live webinars, which allow them to interact with the outlet's editorial staff. In addition, they receive an ad-free service, access to a premium Telegram group, free entry to The Quint's paid events, and special newsletters. 'With every new special project or members-exclusive initiative we launch, we learn something new,' says Aaqib Raza Khan, Associate Editor, Innovation. 'For example, with our experience in hosting webinars for members, we now wish to tweak the format a bit, make it more participatory, and more dynamic.'

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- Opportunity to get published on The Quint every month.

Building Membership Communities to Defend Democracy and Media Freedom

Approaches to membership can vary widely – from Rappler's 'communities of action' where the membership model aims to support the creation of communities that move people to take positive social action, to Daily Maverick's 'Insiders' who support DM's mission of providing investigative public journalism accessible to as many South Africans as possible. But a unifying

34 'Decode Budget 2019 with Raghav Bahl.' <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KKWsR9OeUaU>

feature of these strategies is that members are not seen as 'cash-cows', but as guardians of the outlets and their mission: providing challenging and independent journalism in countries where media freedom is under threat and democratic norms are at serious risk of erosion or collapse.

At Rappler, for example, the membership scheme is now an integral part of the outlet's mission of building communities of action that help keep the illiberal forces in the country at bay, while also supporting the outlet itself in its legal struggles, as Stacy de Jesus observes:

The bigger mission of the membership is ... building that community of action. [The next step] is to provide a safe space for them to interact with each other, and then, the third part of it is

really a community of action that not only empowers us as a company because they believe in our mission for bringing about social change, and believe in our mission of journalism pushing forward democracy and what it can do for a nation, but also, empowering other communities, which we have done since 2013, and this is really what our community knows about us.



The slogan on the back glass wall refers to the 'See the New, Now' technology-focused round table discussion series that Rappler launched in April 2019. Image: Julie Posetti (source: Rappler: <https://www.rappler.com/brandrap/tech-and-innovation/227727-video-see-new-now-roundtable-discussion-series>)

Move.PH was pivotal in facilitating the launch of Rappler Plus. 'The community that knows us is really the people who we met on the ground through our activities, outreach programmes, which is always based on social issues. So, it's always like-minded individuals around social good advocacies,' de Jesus explains. Rappler has also started to blend Rappler Plus members with Move.PH communities. De Jesus describes an audience engagement 'funnel' in which casual 'readers' interacting with Rappler content online were:

Moved down the funnel into a community of action which is Move.PH where they were mobilised into different campaigns. That could be on disaster risk reduction, or they plot reports on a map of rescues, information or relief efforts. And then, now that they're active, basically, we move them down the funnel, and Rappler Plus is at the bottom.

As with Rappler, Maverick Insider has a focus on community-building, which Daily Maverick sees as a core part of its appeal and mission. While 'Insiders' are supposed to help keep DM's content free for those who cannot pay, thus providing investigative and critical journalism for the broader South African public, the outlet also wants to foster a community that shares these aims and values, and has the defence of South African democracy and media freedom at heart.

Transparency, the engagement with members, and staying in close contact with them are paramount in this context. One avenue it's pursuing is member events where Insiders get the chance to interact with DM's journalists and staff and have a look behind the scenes – something that has been very important for DM. 'People want to be part of the Insider group. They want to

understand how we do what we do,' as Associate Editor Ferial Haffajee says. This is a perspective corroborated by Daily Maverick Communities Manager Francesca Beighton: 'That's what was number one on their [the members'] wish list, engagement with the journalists.'

An important tool supporting this interaction is email, which is partly explained by the fact that Daily Maverick has never invested in a dedicated social media manager in its decade of operation. Especially in the early stages of the membership scheme, Francesca Beighton would devote a lot of her time to fostering relationships between 'Insiders' and the outlet through individual personalised emails. 'In those first few months every time somebody signed up they got a written email from me, until I was doing five hours of emails a day!' she says.

This dovetails with DM's general philosophy that 'Maverick Insiders' should benefit from their membership as much as possible, beyond the feeling of doing something for the greater good. This extends to commercial benefits from Insider partners, as Beighton explains:

I need to really try and get some benefits for my Insiders that they will really enjoy. Styli [Charalambous] did a brilliant deal with Uber ... There is ad-free browsing, the ability to comment. ... We're trying to get discounts on books for them. We're trying to figure out other companies, particularly South African companies if we can, the smaller companies if we can, that we can give a leg up to, and also be able to offer something to our Insiders.

Membership as a Journalism Engagement Innovation Incubator

A core element of the membership schemes at all three organisations is tailored audience engagement, particularly through events for members, but also including other forms of outreach. Close contact and engagement with members are crucial, not only because the resulting transparency is desired by the latter, but because the outlets see it as a part of their mission to listen, communicate, and engage equally with their supporters. Beyond building 'communities of action', or communities who are willing to support the outlets (financially), audience engagement efforts also allow these outlets to foster innovation and to improve their products and journalism. Members are seen as important providers of feedback who help the outlets improve – not just from a product perspective, but in terms of content and editorial output, too.

Monthly member-only events on themes relevant to Rappler's reporting mission began in February 2019. So far, they've covered disinformation, the rising influence of China, and the social impacts of technology. These are designed to generate meaningful discussion, deepen investment in the brand, and feed back into Rappler's reporting. 'It's increasingly important to meet people face to face,' Maria Ressa says. '[Rappler Plus] is not only their safe space, this is where we're trying to build an environment where they can give feedback to us, or direct during outreach programmes, during events, we're still exploring with different channels of interacting with them,' Stacy de Jesus adds.

Along with speaking engagements, previously scheduled grassroots Move.PH events focused on disinformation-coping tactics have been significant membership drivers for Rappler, according to our interviewees. There are also members-only newsletters, and exclusive live-streams for members. But Ressa quipped that the biggest trigger for membership spikes is when she's arrested or slapped with a new writ: 'The irony of course is that membership spikes when bad things happen to me and to Rappler. So, you know, I'm not so sure I want membership to grow that much!'

However, the events and other outreach activities are not only about providing a service to Rappler



Maria Ressa live-streams a conference panel featuring her colleague Glenda Gloria at the Global Investigative Journalism Conference to Rappler Plus Members (Hamburg, September 2019). Image: Julie Posetti

Plus members. They are also valuable audience research opportunities, which are applied to developing Rappler's new publishing platform, itself designed to maximise audience engagement.

Back in South Africa, Daily Maverick's stated aim is to bring down the 'fourth wall' between the newsrooms and their audience in order to improve their journalism. Consequently, DM has also started to use members as a feedback mechanism, for instance in its product and editorial development, something the outlet hasn't previously done enough of, as Charalambous admits:

So we did a pilot [of a new podcast] and we tested it with our members and got feedback from them. We'd never do that in the past. ... We're more inclusive and more sort of open to getting feedback and testing. I think that's something we haven't done enough of with a lot of it, is testing.

These efforts also extend to Daily Maverick's reporting, for instance by using Insiders as a source for tips and insights, which also ties in with DM's desire, and Insiders' demand, for members to become more involved in the outlet's work. Consequently, DM has started to put together a 'rolodex' of Maverick Insiders who are experts in different areas (e.g. wine farmers) for their journalists to contact, and both the community editor and the newsletters editor will regularly forward information from members and readers to journalists that may be a lead or valuable source material. 'We're also looking into the possibility of having story pitches, where Insiders can pitch ideas, and then other Insiders, or even the entire user database could up-vote them,' Communities Manager Francesca Beighton says.

However, these 'memberful reporting' (Quarmby et al. 2019) strategies are still developing and not

yet fully embedded – unsurprising given Maverick Insider’s short life. The up-voting function, for example, is not yet in place and the calls for story pitches, so far, have had mixed success. ‘It’s still very much in the experimental phase. What we’ve learnt is that we have to be very specific in our requests,’ Beighton says. The other thing they’ve learned is that personalised newsletters are a very important tool for ‘converting’ open access readers to members. Around 50% of new ‘Insiders’ are grown from DM’s newsletter subscriber base.

Given The Quint’s more recent entry into the world of membership, the outlet cannot yet be properly compared to Rappler and Daily Maverick in this context, with just 1,300 members signed up to date, and ‘onboarding’ on average 250 members per month. However, The Quint, too, has put a focus on audience participation and sees its flagship audience engagement formats MyReport and WebQoof as important tributaries to its fledgling membership programme. MyReport – where users submit their own stories – in particular, is an important driver to The Quint’s membership option.

Where do we Go from Here? Future Perspectives on Membership

None of these news organisations sees the introduction of their membership programmes as the end point, but as the beginning of a new phase on the continuum of audience engagement innovation. For membership programmes to succeed, they will require constant nurturing, incremental improvements, and further development, something all our interviewees were keenly aware of, as the future plans they outlined to us illustrate.

Underpinning Rappler’s membership strategy is the research group it has grown, which has both helped the organisation understand the habits and roles of its audiences in terms of content discovery, distribution, and interaction, and provided opportunities for business growth at critical times. But Ressa stresses that the biggest piece of Rappler’s audience engagement puzzle is technological – its new publishing platform is not just optimised for user experience, audience engagement, and membership, it is designed to ‘move users to action for impact in the real world’.



DM Editor-in-Chief Branko Brkic has called The Gathering – an annual event staged since 2010, as ‘our next attempt to bring our brand, our world view, and our raison d’etre to the world of conferences.’ *Image: Supplied* (<https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/opinionista/2012-10-29-a-gathering-like-no-other/>)

in Ressa's words. The platform, in development for three years, will include features connecting audiences to context and the causes they're interested in as a way of giving them an opportunity to act. It's also intended as a business-to-business monetisation opportunity.

At Daily Maverick there are other plans to involve members to improve the editorial output, solicit feedback on stories, generate new commentary and story ideas, and widen the net of experts. Engagement efforts are currently supported on an organisational level by Communities Manager Francesca Beighton, who made a pitch for the job as a loyal Daily Maverick follower and regular participant in the outlet's annual audience engagement event, 'The Gathering.' And DM plans to hire an Engagement Editor in the near future, who would help other editorial staff through training and knowledge-sharing designed to increase audience engagement opportunities.

DM reporters and editors interviewed for this study, many of whom – as outlined above – have been brutally trolled in retaliation for their critical reporting, and because of their gender, were apprehensive about the reintroduction of comments, even in the safer 'Insiders only' environment. One strategy for addressing this involves plans to engage Maverick Insiders as community moderators in the comment section. 'We'll ask them to volunteer to become moderators. We had 50 people respond saying that they'd like to moderate for us ... but we're still trying to find the time and the right solution to devote to training and vetting them,' Francesca Beighton acknowledges.

The Quint's membership programme remains fledgling and is not currently a significant area of investment for the organisation. There are substantial financial challenges, and significant resources are required to manage the very large contributor communities. CEO Ritu Kapur is taking a deliberately considered approach to the development of membership, pausing to ensure the strategy is right and that the platform can handle it: 'I don't think we've cracked it. We're still seeing how audiences will respond and what's the best way to take that forward,' she says.

For Kapur, membership has been in a 'quiet' phase, as her team figures out technological challenges. 'We haven't really rolled out the initiative. We are identifying it ... you think it's just journalism and you're reaching out to the audiences, but it needs a lot of tech.' Future components of the membership programme will likely

be bespoke newsletters, as well as a strong focus on providing members with a 'look behind the scenes' of The Quint's reporting. For example, 'Every reporter who's going out and doing the deep-dive, investigative piece from the ground also records, simultaneously, behind-the-scenes video on what went into getting that story.' As The Quint operates in an environment with a substantial lack of trust in the news media,³⁵ this idea of providing transparency dovetails with its aim of becoming an engagement platform for those who are wanting to hold on to independent news media in India.



Media executives and co-founders of The Quint Ritu Kapur (foreground) and Raghav Bahl (background) hold an editorial meeting in New Delhi; Kapur says the website has been 'participatory from the get-go' and prides the team on being both gender and linguistically diverse. *Image: Julie Posetti*

³⁵ Only 39% of the respondents in the 2019 India Digital News Report said they trust the 'news they use' most of the time, and just 36% said they trust the 'news in general' most of the time (Aneez et al. 2019).

5. Conclusion

In this report, we have focused on audience engagement, one of the most important and intersectional dimensions of the Journalism Innovation Wheel (Posetti 2018). Based on Participatory Action Research, including field research and interviews at Rappler (the Philippines), Daily Maverick (South Africa), and The Quint (India) we show how all three have evolved their audience engagement work to focus on deeper, narrower, and stronger relationships with audiences, emphasising curated conversations, physical encounters, and investment in niche audiences over empty reach.

Responding to a combination of the risks of ‘platform capture’, political pressures, and the ongoing move to a more digital, mobile, and platform-dominated media environment, organisations that had earlier embraced open and social journalism at-scale increasingly focus on more niche communities, and more direct engagement around specific projects. These include: citizen journalism initiatives and audience-fuelled fact-checking in the case of The Quint; a burgeoning membership and events community at Daily Maverick (which remains social media ambivalent); and Rappler’s strengthening of more niche ‘active communities of action’ – on and offline – to aid the defence of democracy and media freedom.

Our cases show how, in addition to action and impact-oriented civic engagement, the creation of ‘safer’ digital spaces to facilitate community-building through audience collaboration and interaction is now an important mission for news publishers, requiring real and dedicated effort. This is especially true in countries like the Philippines, South Africa, and India. There, a combination of the political demonisation of independent journalism, the ‘weaponisation’ of the platforms to destabilise democracy through viral disinformation (Posetti et al 2019), and some of the world’s worst cases of online harassment targeting journalists (Posetti 2017; Haffajee 2018; Ayuub 2018) have created a particularly toxic environment online, chilling audience engagement and citizens’ participation in public political debate, and leaving open, at-scale approaches to audience engagement vulnerable to abuse.

Open and ‘social journalism’ at-scale, it turns out, was not a final destination (nor necessarily a ‘safe’ one) but a transformative moment on the continuum of audience engagement innovations, and scale has risked breaking community. This has led to ongoing experimentation at the three organisations studied here, with a common emphasis on activist journalism (Russell 2016) projects designed to create engaged ‘communities of action’ (sometimes in defence of the outlets themselves), the development of more niche audiences, and ‘safer’ spaces for community interaction and participation that respect gender and racial equality, and are inclusive of marginalised communities.

There’s also experimentation with new membership programmes. Interestingly, for South Africa’s Daily Maverick, which never fully embraced social media, preferring offline engagement with audiences and more closed forms of online interaction, the transition to membership has been most successful, with membership now accounting for 22% of revenue.

None of our case organisations has moved from one stable equilibrium to another, and all continue to evolve, experiment, and try new things. They do this by ramping up events, emphasising engaged storytelling methods, formats and beats, pulling back from (and reactivating) social media engagement between news workers and audiences, developing new technological solutions to the problems of ‘platform capture’, expanding bespoke newsletter

offerings, leveraging semi-closed apps like Telegram, and – importantly – moving to membership as a natural progression.

These initiatives don't come with success guaranteed, but all our case organisations are constantly experimenting and evaluating. They demonstrate successes, failures, and agile responses to critical incidents along the trajectories of audience engagement innovation. In the process of recalibrating audience engagement, these news organisations are effectively coming 'full circle' – remembering the importance of forging deeper, narrower, and stronger relationships with their audiences, emphasising physical encounter and investment in niche audiences over scale. They're doing this with the intention of keeping their journalism 'paywall-free', in the interests of ensuring the right to access public interest information in their countries - to support open, transparent, and accountable governance. In the process, they're also discovering new revenue streams that, in some cases at least, may contribute to their business sustainability.

The lessons being learned through innovative and experimental responses to existential crises in the three cases examined here are broadly instructive for news organisations worldwide. If our case organisations, with their limited resources and extreme external pressures, can experiment, so can many other news organisations.

We hope their experiences, trials, mistakes, and learning help guide news organisations globally, as the 'breakage' of online communities caused by the manipulation and 'weaponisation' of audiences – at-scale – is 'ported' to the West (Occeñola 2019; Bradshaw and Howard 2019).

That is, 'platform capture', which features orchestrated disinformation and harassment campaigns designed to disrupt democracy and chill media freedom, are not the preserve of the Global South – they are increasingly manifesting in the West.

As Rappler Editor-in-Chief Maria Ressa observes: 'We are democracy's dystopian future.'³⁶



Daily Maverick Editor-in-Chief Branko Brkic and Rappler Editor-in-Chief Maria Ressa meet after their outlets were named joint winners of the top international award for investigative journalism at the Global Investigative Journalism Conference in Hamburg, September 2019. *Image: Maria Ressa*

³⁶ Read or watch Maria Ressa's speech to the global investigative journalism conference in Hamburg, September 2019: <https://gijn.org/2019/10/08/full-text-maria-ressas-keynote-speech-for-gijc19/>

Appendix: List of interviewees

All designations were correct at the time of participation.

Rappler · The Philippines 	
Gemma Bagayaua-Mendoza	Head of Research and Strategy
Marga Deona	Platform Strategist
Patricia Evangelista	Investigative Journalist
Lilibeth Frondoso	Head of Multimedia and Video Production
Glenda Gloria	Managing Editor
Miriam Grace Go	News Editor
Chay Hofileña	Investigations Editor
Stacy de Jesus	Former Head of Digital Communications
Nam Le	Technology Consultant
Pia Ranada	Political Reporter
María Ressa	Founder, CEO, and Executive Editor
Carla Yap-Sy Su	Head of Strategy and Connections

The Quint · India 	
Poonam Agarwal	Associate Editor for Investigations
Raghav Bahl	Co-founder and Editor-in-Chief
Malavika Balasubramanian	Editor, WebQoof
Urmi Bhattacheryya	Gender Editor
Medha Chakrabartty	Head of Audience Growth and Social Media
Neeraj Gupta	Editor, Hindi Quint
Amrita Ghandi	Editor, Neon
Sunil Goswami	Head, News Video
Sohini Guharoy	Former Head of Audience Growth and Social Media
Namita Handa	Associate Editor
Ritu Kapur	Co-founder and CEO
Aaqib Raza Khan	Associate Editor, Innovation
Rohit Khanna	Executive Editor
Maanvi	Senior Correspondent
Jaskirat Singh Bawa	Senior News Editor
Shelly Walia	Senior News Editor

Daily Maverick · South Africa 	
Francesca Beighton	Communities Manager
Branko Brkic	Co-founder and Editor-in-Chief
Styli Charalambous	Co-founder, Publisher, and CEO
Rebecca Davis	Senior Reporter
Leila Dougan	Multimedia Journalist
Jillian Green	Johannesburg Managing Editor
Ferial Haffajee	Associate Editor
Janet Heard	Cape Town Managing Editor
Nkateko Mabasa	Junior Reporter
Marianne Merten	Senior Political Reporter
Ayanda Mthethwa	Trainee Journalist
Greg Nicholson	Reporter
Chanel Retief	Trainee Journalist
Yanga Sibembe	Trainee Journalist
Bheki C. Simelane	Junior Reporter
John Stupart	Newsletter Editor
Marianne Thamm	Senior Investigative Journalist
Lelethu Tonisi	Trainee Journalist
Pauli van Wyk	Senior Investigative Journalist

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Rasmus Kleis Nielsen and Lucas Graves (Factsheet)

