



Commissioner's Book Club:

How to Stand Up to a Dictator

Discussion guide

Introduction

The prompts and questions that follow are meant to encourage discussion and support reflection. Human rights-related books highlight challenging issues and topics—take care of yourself in the ways that you need while you dig in.

For more suggestions, including different ways to reflect and share, check out [the Book Club How-to resource](#).

Author Bio

Maria Ressa is one of the most renowned journalists of our time. An openly lesbian woman and winner of the Nobel Peace Prize for her efforts to safeguard freedom of expression, she challenged corruption and wrongdoing in her native country, the Philippines, standing up to then-President Duterte by standing up for the truth in the face of intense personal and political attacks.

She is CEO, cofounder, and president of Rappler, the Philippines' top digital news site, and has been a journalist in Asia for over thirty-six years. She was TIME Magazine's Person of the Year in 2018 and won the UNESCO World Press Freedom Prize in 2021. Among the many other awards she has received are the prestigious Golden Pen of Freedom Award from the World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers, the Knight International Journalism Award from the International Center for Journalists, the Shorenstein Journalism Award from Stanford University, and the Sergei Magnitsky

Award for Investigative Journalism. She grew up in the Philippines and the United States and currently lives in Manila.¹²

Summary

Maria Ressa's memoir, *How to Stand Up to a Dictator*, shares her personal story of challenging authoritarianism in the Philippines. She recounts her experiences, where she faced government harassment and arrest for exposing corruption and misinformation. The book highlights the dangers of unchecked power and the role of social media in spreading misinformation. Her story illustrates the critical role of a free press in safeguarding democracy.

Ressa's personal account of confronting authoritarianism and defending press freedom in the Philippines resonates deeply with our mandate to promote and protect human rights in BC—especially during the current global democratic crisis unfolding around us.

When I read this book a couple of years ago, I learned a great deal about the history and situation in the Philippines but also about the universality of the values Ressa has been fighting for. As we face these global threats, the imperative to look for guidance from those who have been engaged in these struggles around the world becomes even more important.

- Commissioner Govender

Linking the book to human rights in B.C.

Ressa's courageous reporting, and the state-led legal attacks she endured, underscore the fundamental role that access to truthful information plays in a healthy society. These concerns are directly aligned with international human rights frameworks, including Article 19 of the **Universal Declaration of Human**

¹ Harper Collins Canada. 2025 "Maria Ressa Books & Biography."
<https://www.harpercollins.ca/author/cr-203515/maria-ressa/>.



Rights, which protects the right “to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.”³

In Canada, similar protections exist under **Section 2(b) of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms**,⁴ which guarantees freedom of thought, belief, opinion and expression—including freedom of the press. At the provincial level, the **British Columbia Human Rights Code**⁵ reinforces these protections by prohibiting discrimination based on political belief or activity, which is particularly relevant when considering the targeting of journalists and whistleblowers. In Canada, it is important to note that the protections for our right to free speech and press are limited by hate speech laws, which is important for the appropriate balancing of human rights.

This link between misinformation and systemic harm is also addressed in the **Commissioner’s 2023 report From hate to hope: Inquiry into hate in the COVID-19 pandemic**.⁶ The report highlights how mis- and disinformation—especially online—can fuel hate and create climates of fear for targeted communities. In Ressa’s book, we see this play out through coordinated online attacks, harassment campaigns and state-sponsored legal intimidation, used to silence dissent and smear truth-tellers. The Commissioner similarly calls attention to the urgent need for regulation, public education and digital accountability. The Commissioner is currently bringing attention to the freedom of the press through her inquiry into media exclusion zones. This inquiry is reviewing the restrictions placed on media by the Vancouver Police Department during an April 2023 decampment in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside. BCOHRC believes that hearing directly from members of the media is critical to understanding as well as communities’ experiences with exclusion zones.

³ United Nations. 2015. “Universal Declaration of Human Rights.” [udhr_booklet_en_web.pdf](#).

⁴ Government of Canada. 2024. “Section 2(b) – Freedom of expression” Charterpedia. <https://www.justice.gc.ca/eng/csj-sjc/rfc-dlc/ccrf-ccdl/check/art2b.html>.

⁵ BC’s Office of the Human Rights Commissioner. 2025. “Human Rights in B.C.” <https://bchumanrights.ca/human-rights/human-rights-in-bc/>.

⁶ BC’s Office of the Human Rights Commissioner. 2023. “From Hate to Hope.” <https://bchumanrights.ca/inquiries-and-cases/inquiries/inquiry/inquiry-into-hate/>.



Discussion guide questions and prompts

Here are some questions to ignite discussion or thought on the connections between the book and human rights. The provided prompts are not the only or complete answers, but some ideas you might want to incorporate into your conversation:

1. What does courage mean to you, and how does Maria Ressa demonstrate it in the book?

- Answers will vary.

2. Why is freedom of the press essential in a democracy?

- A free press helps people understand what's happening in their country and holds leaders accountable. Without it, governments and corporations can hide corruption, abuse power and silence criticism. In the book, Maria Ressa shows how losing press freedom can damage democracy—when the media was silenced in the Philippines, lies were used to support violent policies. Democracy only works when people can speak freely and access truthful information.

3. How does Ressa's story show the importance of human rights?

- Ressa's story shows that human rights are not just ideas on paper; they protect real people. Her courage reminds us that these rights must be actively defended, even in places that call themselves democratic. When human rights are denied to one person, everyone's rights are at risk.

4. What parallels can you draw between the challenges Ressa faces and issues in our own communities, regions and/or country?

- In Canada, misinformation and online hate are also growing problems. Like in Ressa's story, online attacks can silence people and stop them from participating in public life. Her story challenges us to ask how we're protecting vulnerable voices at home.

5. Why is digital literacy important today?

- Digital literacy means knowing how to tell what's true and what's false online. It helps people avoid falling for scams or spreading lies that can hurt others. Learning how to check facts, spot bias and ask good questions are key skills for living in a digital world. Even small



actions—like calling out hate or helping others understand their rights—can make a big difference. As Ressa says, "Without facts, you can't have truth. Without truth, you can't have trust. Without trust, we have no shared reality."

6. What role did international support and recognition (like the Nobel Peace Prize) play in Ressa's story?

- International awards helped shine a light on what was happening in the Philippines and gave Ressa some protection. The Nobel Peace Prize, in particular, reminded the world that freedom of the press is a human rights issue.

7. In what ways did Ressa's identity affect how she was targeted?

- Ressa faced gendered attacks, with online abuse often focusing on her being a woman. She was called names and mocked in ways that male journalists often aren't.

8. What impact did the online harassment have on Ressa's personal life and mental health?

- Ressa describes how constant attacks wore her down, isolated her and made her question her safety and future. She lost sleep, her movements were watched and her family was worried. But she also talks about building mental strength—what she calls her "emotional armor." Her honesty helps readers understand the hidden cost of fighting for truth.

9. What did Ressa mean when she said, "You don't really know who you are until you're forced to fight for it"?

- This quote captures the moment when values become action. It's easy to believe in justice when life is easy—but it's much harder when doing the right thing comes with risk.

10. What does Ressa's story teach us about long-term change?

- Ressa says, "Hold the line"—don't give up, even when it's hard. That message is deeply important for human rights work everywhere, including in Canada.

