

# Myanmar - Media Landscape

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## Overview

It is difficult to think of a country that has undergone a greater transformation in terms of its media landscape in recent years than Myanmar, which was led by successive military dictatorships for several decades, and where the state exercised

draconian controls over media. State propaganda publications were often the only insight into the country's political machinations, dissent was stamped out, and opposition voices simply not tolerated. Journalists were regularly jailed and privately-owned newspapers had not been permitted since the 1960s. In this way, the degree of state intervention in the media system in the past was total — and it remains extremely high.

Political parallelism in Myanmar's media landscape was and remains high. Political entities, whether the erstwhile junta, the military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party, or the now-ruling National League for Democracy, all exert a strong influence on the media. The relatively new phenomenon of private ownership means there is a high degree of political agenda setting. The junta ceded power to a quasi-civilian government in 2011. This was followed by a period of major reforms, chief among which was the abolition of pre-publication censorship and relaxation of media licensing regulations. With its high literacy rate, this country of some 51.5 million people is often referred to as a society with a reading culture. Distrust of the military-led government often meant that the information proliferated in state media was taken with a grain of salt, and was rather considered something to be gathered in tea shops — the country's true hub of news, rumour and conspiracy. If the teashop was the best source of news, it may have ceded its dominance to social media in recent times. The mass-circulation press is by no means new: State propaganda has unparalleled distribution networks, and this is something private enterprises have struggled to rival, much less compete with. Myanmar's digital penetration rate is perhaps the greatest technological leap forward in history. Ten years ago, a SIM card would cost around US\$2,500. They are now around \$1.50. The opening-up of the telco market, and the veritable explosion in popularity of social media as a news source, has immeasurably changed the way people consume news. To many in Myanmar, Facebook is the Internet. This has come at a time where the much-discussed phenomenon of 'fake news' is an issue all over the world and Myanmar is no exception. However, until quite recently, radio was considered the primary medium for accessing news. There is a stark rural/urban divide in Myanmar, and until fairly recently its poor telecoms infrastructure meant remote areas had no access to mobile networks. Those living in rural areas remain more likely to listen to the radio than their urban counterparts; however this is beginning to shift. Prior to the reform period, illegal broadcasts from organisations like the *BBC*, *Radio Free Asia*, *Voice of America* (VOA) and *Democratic Voice of Burma* (DVB), with its clandestine network of citizen journalists, gave an unfiltered perspective on what was going on inside the country. The student-led uprisings of 1988 had a lasting influence on the country's political scene. Thousands went into exile after the brutal military crackdown, and it was during this time that a vibrant exile media scene formed. DVB took up headquarters in Norway and Chiang Mai. *The Irrawaddy*, a donor-funded magazine (now publishing online only) was also based in Chiang Mai. Following a dramatic hijacking publicity stunt on a plane bound for India, *Mizzima* was formed in exile. All three organisations now operate in-country, albeit under conditions which remain challenging. The monk-led uprising of 2007, referred to in the international press as the Saffron Revolution, was a significant moment for the country's media: The military's grip on the flow of information became tenuous. Citizen journalists and bloggers were able to show the world the brutal crackdown on protesters, albeit at significant personal risk. Myanmar has — to put it lightly — a dubious track record on press freedom. After pre-publication censorship was lifted, media outlets quickly found that certain subjects remained sensitive, and that while they could now pretty well publish whatever they liked, that didn't mean there wouldn't be consequences after the fact.

It is important to note that Myanmar is home to an array of ethnic and linguistic groups. While the main language spoken is Burmese (referring to the language of the Bamar or Burman Buddhist majority), there are scores of languages in use. However, the government education system and state media is always in Burmese. Ethnic media outlets serve populations within their area, and in conflict-affected areas where there is contested governance will often harbour a bias toward their representative ethnic armed group. Burma News International (BNI) is a donor-funded network which brings together ethnic news outlets from around the country, presenting them in English and their respective ethnic languages. Countless other ethnic news organisations, from hard-copy print publications to grassroots Facebook-based outlets, exist around the country. As mentioned previously, the improvements to the country's mobile networks and associated boom in smartphone use have

highly increased social media usage. In the case of breaking news, many in Myanmar turn to information coming through on social media. People appreciate the sense of immediacy and candour this delivers, although in many cases lack the ability to make critical assessments about the veracity and bias contained therein.

As a profession, development opportunities are relatively new. In the past, there was little in the way of outside opportunities, and the strict controls exercised on the mass media by the state meant that the concept of journalism and what it is to be a journalist is still evolving to meet international norms. A recent study of 2500 media stories by the Myanmar Women's Journalist Society and the International Media Support-Fojo Media Institute, *Gender in Myanmar News*, shows female representation in the country's media is one of the lowest in Asia.

Only 16 percent of the voices in Myanmar news were found to belong to women (less than one in five), and women were rarely sought as 'experts' on any given topic.

## Media

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### Print

Prior to the reform period, 1964 was often referred to as the time the country last had a free press. Following relaxation of regulations under the Thein Sein government, pre-publication censorship was lifted in 2012. Where private news journals had been allowed to publish weekly, the government was now permitting dailies to go ahead. In 2013, licences for some 30 publications were granted. However, after an initial boom period, the realities of the difficulty of keeping print publications afloat began to set in. State media retains dominance in the field of print, given their extensive distribution networks and competitive advantage where production is concerned. They are also insulated from the profit imperative.

There is a high level of political parallelism within the print media in Myanmar. Political party-backed publications such as the National League for Democracy's *D-Wave* Journal, or the Union Solidarity and Development Party's *Union Daily* are prime examples of this. However, many media outlets harbour an inherent bias — often toward the Suu Kyi-led government. Ethnic media are likely to represent the interests and views of their associated armed wings, rather than the Bamar central state. The commercial capital of Yangon still grapples with infrastructure problems — an unstable electricity grid, as well as labour costs and issues surrounding print quality. Data on circulation and sales is difficult to come by. Where publications might inflate their readership for advertisers, they will similarly understate it when tax time rolls around. There is no accurate publicly available data. For most publications, finding and maintaining advertising clients is an ongoing struggle and one that makes the difference between running at a profit or a loss. Trademark cautions and legal notices populate the pages of state media, as well as select private publications. This can provide some steady income, albeit not as profitable as private advertising. In public opinion survey findings released by the International Republican Institute in 2017, 8 percent of respondents said newspapers were their primary source for news. An exhaustive list of the journals and newspapers published in Myanmar is unlikely to be accurate from one week to the next: The market is volatile and print properties regularly crop up and drop off.

### Radio

Broadcast media remains under state control, although senior Ministry of Information officials have indicated there is a gradual plan to allow a greater proportion of community radio content on the airwaves. Channels have been launched in

several ethnic areas, and in early 2018, the first official community radio program *Khayae FM* — covering agriculture, livestock, health, education, entertainment and news — was launched in Yangon's Htantabin Township. In the past this sort of broadcast would have been illegal. During the junta years, programs transmitted abroad such as *Voice of America*, *Radio Free Asia*, *Democratic Voice of Burma*, *BBC* and *Radio Australia* were popular and accessible.

Radio's popularity has endured in rural areas; however the advent of smartphones appears to have had an impact on this. This has not, as yet, been quantified. A handful of commercial radio stations such as *Shwe FM* and *Cherry FM* operate alongside *Myanmar Radio*, state-run under the auspices of MRTV.

## Television

State controls on the television broadcasting sector remain in place, however there have been some positive developments: Syndicated DVB content has appeared on television in-country for several years now. Their debate show has provided a platform for views that would previously not have been given airtime. In August 2015, the Thein Sein government enacted the Broadcasting Law. Change did not follow immediately, as there were no by-laws in place to allow implementation of the new policy. After putting out a call to tender on private TV broadcasting licences in 2016, 29 proposals were put forward. Five companies were awarded TV licences in 2017, including former exile organisations DVB and Mizzima, as well as the privately-held Fortune International, Kaung Myanmar Aung, and Young Investment Group. All five selected companies had to pledge to follow MRTV's rules and regulations, as well as editorial policy — however, it is not yet clear the extent to which this will impact their programming, and how they will respond if their content is flagged for censorship.

Television in Myanmar is a growing market and the ratings system employed at present is a primitive diary-based one. A partnership between US-based Nielsen and Myanmar Marketing Research and Development provides the most comprehensive data on the industry. In 2016, the TV advertising industry was estimated at being worth some US\$135m, representing around 75 percent of the country's total advertising spend, according to MMRD figures.

Because of the relatively high costs of subscription television services, many viewers in Myanmar install illegal satellite dishes. Prime-time advertising rates in broadcast media can reach up to US\$1,000 per second.

The IRI survey found 23 percent of respondents watched television for news, and 42 percent watched TV or listened to the radio every day. There are plans underway for the country to make the switch from analogue to digital broadcasting. The first phase was introduced in late 2013 in the major cities. The Ministry of Information has indicated a belief that the transition to digital should be complete by 2020; however it is not yet clear if that deadline will be met.

## Digital Media

Most major print publications in Myanmar have a web version, however there is a heavy focus on social media. As such, some of the most popular outlets such as *Voice* and *7-Day* offer paid sponsorship opportunities to advertisers for content native to the Facebook platform. This could include sponsoring a segment by a famed astrologer, or meteorologist. They also offer straight-up ad slots, in an arrangement made outside of Facebook's own advertising platform. One major publication offers businesses the opportunity to have their Facebook page tagged 'with' in a news post for \$400 a hit. Facebook's importance as a news source is manifestly demonstrated by a glance at the list of the top-ten most popular Facebook pages in the country: *7 Day*, *Eleven*, *BBC Burmese*, *Irrawaddy Burmese*, *VOA Burmese*, *Mizzima Burmese*, *MRTV-4* and *DVB TV* all make the list, and all are news outlets. The most popular brands are Telenor, MPT and Ooredoo.

Websites typically host the content from the print version, as well as an accessible PDF of that day or week's journal. Specific

pieces are written for web in the event of breaking news. Pushing content through to Facebook feeds is given high priority.

Live streaming of events, even government press conferences, is common. Search engine optimisation faces barriers due to font integration and basic challenges to the algorithm with the Burmese language.

As mentioned elsewhere in this report, there are news 'sites' which are exclusive to the Facebook platform. These are often local-level, but may still attract advertisers — again, entirely outside of Facebook's native advertising platform.

## Social Networks

As many will attest: In Myanmar, Facebook *is* the Internet. It enjoys supremacy over all other forms of social media, and can be seen in some ways as a digital extension of the teashop culture: A hub of political activity, rumour and gossip. While for much of the world, Facebook is a way to stay connected with friends and family, in Myanmar it is not seen in the same way: Facebook friends are not necessarily people who know each other in real life. For youths, it can offer the opportunity to connect with people they might not otherwise have the opportunity to meet due to prevailing conservative social norms. Hate speech on Facebook has become a widely recognised problem, and in Myanmar where communal tensions are highly combustible, the spread of inflammatory content can exacerbate the potential for conflict to boil over with real-life consequences. The platform (and its Messenger function) has been offered free-of-charge in the past. As with elsewhere in Myanmar, Facebook is often the primary source for news. Within minutes of a news event taking place, information on the subject is often being distributed on the platform — with varying degrees of accuracy and veracity — by different parties. The government has embraced social media with abandon, as these platforms offer immediacy and are suited to a low-resource setting. The Facebook mobile app (due to Myanmar's now-high digital penetration accounted for almost exclusively by mobile devices) is seen by many as a homepage of sorts, where they will see news from friends, people they follow, and news outlets. Citizen journalist networks and community-based news has become wildly popular. Similarly, the model for traditional news outlets is rapidly being replaced. The barriers to publishing online are near-zero. Some news outlets operate only on social media, and this often comes from an activist standpoint leading to a greater polarisation of views and a tendency toward self-selecting cognitive bias. A number of these Facebook-only news pages are monetising (albeit not in a major way) due to their unique ability to connect with local audiences. When news is breaking, people often turn to primary sources (sharing of content posted by individuals to social media). This can result in the spread of incorrect or misleading information. Twitter has enjoyed a slight uptick in popularity following a suggestion from senior government figure U Zaw Htay that people should join, however it is a tiny minority of the population in Myanmar using it. This is partly due to the constraints of the character count, where concepts are more difficult to express concisely in Burmese. There are also font integration issues. Private messaging channels such as WhatsApp and Viber are used for private networks.

## Opinion Makers

Myanmar is a conservative society, with the majority of the population following Theravada Buddhism. This means monks retain a high level of influence within society. Sermons are broadcast on state television each day. The country is also home to significant Muslim, Christian and Hindu populations.

There are a handful of actors who dominate the big screen, and they are often deployed in television advertising. They also enjoy large followings on social media. Pop stars and models also enjoy a high degree of influence, as do former political prisoners and high-profile activists. Blogging as a format is not enormously popular. As mentioned above, social media has offered a new platform for politicians looking to get their message across. Government bodies and political figures will regularly issue releases through Facebook, as do ethnic armed groups.

# Sources

News and Periodicals Enterprise (under [Mol](#))

- [Myanma Alinn](#)
- [The Global New Light of Myanmar](#)
- [The Mirror](#) (Kyemon)

Myanmar Consolidated Media

- [The Myanmar Times](#)
- [The Myanmar Times](#) (Burmese)

Newspapers

- [7-Day](#)
- [Daily Eleven](#)
- [Kamaryut](#)
- [Kumudra](#)
- [Mizzima](#)
- [The Voice](#)

Radio

- [Cherry FM](#)
- [Mandalay FM](#)
- [Padamyar FM](#)

Television

- [DVB](#)
- [MRTV](#)
- [Myawaddy](#)

Digital media

- [7 Day Daily](#)
- [DVB](#)
- [Irrawaddy](#)
- [Mizzima](#)
- [The Myanmar Times](#)
- [The Voice](#)

Opinion makers

- [Commander-in-Chief](#)
- [Information Committee](#) (formerly State Counsellor Information Committee)
- [Ministry of Information Webportal](#)

- [Myanmar State Counsellor Office](#)
- [Zaw Htay](#) (Presidential Spokesperson)

## Organisations

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### Trade Unions

While not ‘unions’ in the traditional sense, there are three main membership-based organisations advocating for journalists in Myanmar: The Myanmar Journalists’ Union (MJU), the Myanmar Journalists’ Association (MJA), and the Myanmar Journalists’ Network (MJN). In the past, the MJA has been regarded as having close ties to the Ministry of Information. The MJU and MJN are smaller organisations, with the MJU being perhaps more politically inclined due to its roots in the 88 Generation activist scene.

### Journalist Associations

The Myanmar Press Council was established under the transitional government and is now a body charged with investigating press disputes and advocating on behalf of journalists, and ensuring journalists comply with the ‘media ethics’ they have helped to outline. The Myanmar Broadcasters’ Association was formed in 2016, as an umbrella group that included 15 media agencies at the outset. The group’s aim was to bring Myanmar’s broadcast media into line with international norms, by providing training opportunities and workshops through donor-partner agencies such as DW Akademie.

The Foreign Correspondents’ Club of Myanmar is, somewhat confusingly, an organisation for local employees of international news organisations. The Foreign Correspondents’ Club (that is, foreign journalists working inside Myanmar) cannot be said to exist in any formal capacity; however they have been known to hold meetings from time to time.

There is an active local chapter of PEN, which was established in 2013. A donor-funded initiative aimed at promoting the role of women in journalism

### News Agencies

The state media mouthpieces (namely, Myanmar Ahlinn, The Mirror and The Global New Light of Myanmar) all take in news from state feeds around the country. This may come direct from Myanmar News Agency (MNA), which falls under the Ministry of Information, or from Myawaddy, which is a military-run news service. State media also retains subscriptions to Press Trust of India, Reuters and Tass. International wire agencies such as AFP, AP and Reuters have fully-staffed bureaus in Yangon. Other international news organisations retain correspondents or stringers.

### Audience measurement organisations

With TV audience measurement still largely based on a primitive diary system, broadcast audience measurements are difficult to come by. A partnership between US-based Nielsen and Myanmar Marketing Research and Development provides the most comprehensive data on the broadcast media industry, where the Ministry of Information and Press Council are likely to have access to the best figures on print distribution.

## Sources

News agencies

- [Myawaddy](#)
- [Reuters](#)

Industry bodies

- [Myanmar Broadcasters' Association](#) (MBA)
- [Myanmar Journalists' Association](#) (MJA)
- [Myanmar Journalists' Network](#) (MJN)
- [Myanmar Press Council](#) (MPC)
- [Myanmar Women Journalists Society](#) (MWJS)

## Policies

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### Media legislation

Legal regulation of journalism and media in Myanmar is often thought about more in terms of the ways in which specific laws can be weaponised against media practitioners, rather than protecting them in the course of their duties.

The 2014 Media Law sets out a fairly vague framework, and contains pronouncements about the rights of journalists. However, as can be seen with numerous cases, this has made little difference to the realities of reporting on the ground. Laws that are regularly used to criminalise journalism include the 1923 State Secrets Act, a sweeping Colonial-era holdover, as well as the Unlawful Associations Act. Defamation charges under 66(d) of the 2013 Telecommunications Law are common.

Broadcasting was regulated under the 1989 State-owned Economic Enterprise Law until the Broadcasting Law was pushed through in 2015. In 2014 the Printing and Publishing Enterprise Law (PPEL) was adopted, which officially abolished pre-publication censorship and carved out a place for independent print publications in a landscape dominated by the state. However, the state and military remain the biggest players in the media, and retain huge influence over any judicial proceedings that may be brought against media operators.

In 2015, the Thein Sein administration declared through state media its intention to “[strive] for the realisation of good governance and clean government in terms of transparency and accountability”, as a part of its move toward joining the Open Government Partnership (OGP). However, progress has stalled – due at least in part to the fact that RTI is included in the eligibility criteria for OGP membership.

The Media Development Thematic Working Group (MDTWG), chaired jointly by UNESCO and the Ministry of Information, has held workshops on RTI. In 2016, the Mol submitted a draft RTI Law for consideration by civil society and rights groups.



However, it would appear that since then, there has been little movement on the issue. Indeed, even organisations leading the charge on the Right to Information have themselves struggled to get information about progress on the issue.

The Ministry of Information has indicated that the move toward e-Government should pave the way for proactive disclosure, however there is currently no requirement of ministries or government bodies to provide substantive information.

While the country, then known as Burma, voted in favour of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, it has fallen short on Article 19, which pertains to Freedom of Expression.

Journalists are often given information in the form of press releases, but are rarely given access to raw data and primary source material that would allow them to verify the contents of official releases.

Access to government files can come with potentially huge repercussions: As has been seen in the Reuters case, the possession of official documents can be pursued legally as a breach of the archaic State Secrets Act. The traditional power gap that exists between the government and the populace remains large, and there is little inclination from figures of authority to supply information requested by media.

Civil servants are somewhat limited in what information they can pass on. The Office Manual, compiled in 2008 under the Civil Service Law, grades information on sensitivity. This ranges from Top Secret to Normal. Public servants can, therefore, be disincentivised from publicly commenting on work-related matters – another contributing factor to politicians being rather media-shy.

Access to parliament can be difficult for journalists to wrangle: They are required to register one week in advance of the parliamentary session they wish to attend. Access varies across state parliaments. In some of the regional capitals, journalists can access the chambers. In Yangon, they are placed in a room where they are able to watch proceedings on closed-circuit television – something they could do from any home or office with state television.

## **Accountability systems**

Accountability systems for media in Myanmar are weak and the country's history of censorship means that the media is vulnerable to attack on political grounds. A history of arbitrary arrest and a degree of malleability in legislation (and judicial process) means that this is still the case, particularly where the country's military is concerned. No legal protections currently exist for journalists' sources, and the state has a long and storied history of overreach.

As has been seen in the high-profile arrest of two Reuters journalists in December 2017, facing politicised charges are still a very real possibility for media practitioners. The pair had been working on a story about a mass grave, and were arrested after being handed documents by police. The documents were regarded as state secrets, as defined by a Colonial-era law. Most journalists regard their case as a set-up involving underhanded tactics on the part of the authorities, reminiscent of a junta-era approach to containing dissent. The police officers have also reportedly been charged, however their case is not playing out in a civilian court and thus there is little oversight.

## **Regulatory authorities**

The Media Council, as established under the 2014 Media Law, cannot be seen as a body distinctly independent from the influence of government.

The Press Council, for its part, is able to raise cases with the government. However, it has proved to be something of a

toothless tiger, and has more cases referred to it than it is equipped to handle.

The civilian-led government has been reticent to weigh in on issues of press freedom — something they have received much criticism over.

## Sources

Laws, Regulations and Institutions

- [Ministry of Information](#)
- [Myanmar Press Council](#)

## Education

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### Universities and schools

Since the country's democratic transition began, there have been an increasing number of opportunities made available for journalistic training. However, the country's sole official institutional offering is the Myanmar Journalism Institute, a donor-funded project which opened its doors in 2014. The Myanmar Journalism Institute can train about 50 reporters each year, and provide short-term courses for about 400.

The National Management College (NMC) is the only tertiary institution offering a degree in a media-related field. Its department of journalism offers a four-year Bachelor of Arts in Journalism. The NMC is a government institution under the Ministry of Education (MOE), and its curriculum was developed with assistance from UNESCO.

### Professional development

It is estimated there are around 4,000 journalists working in Myanmar. Professional development opportunities for journalists remain thin on the ground, and have largely been centred around the print media.

In the past, a lack of formal training centres meant journalists often received on-the-job training at established publications that operated under censorship. No universal cadetship-style scheme was in place, with each publication developing their own approach toward training and staff development. There are a high number of female journalists working in newsrooms, but to reach roles of any real seniority in the newsroom, this is often linked to age and experience. The various journalistic bodies in the country have worked toward developing professional standards (most often referred to as the 'media ethics'), however this exists only in a formal capacity under the Media Law. Conflict sensitivity and gender issues are being explored more frequently these days, but this varies from publication to publication. Programs aimed at boosting skills among radio and television reporters have been funded by the international community, although it is not certain if this level of funding will be maintained in the future.

## Sources

- [Myanmar Journalism Institute](#) (MJI)

- [National Management College](#) (NMC)

# Conclusions

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## Conclusion

Since the 2015 election of the government led by Aung San Suu Kyi, a Nobel laureate whose international reputation has suffered irreparable damage over her perceived failure to speak out over the military's ethnic cleansing of the beleaguered Rohingya minority, the international press remains under attack. A Reuters investigation into a Rohingya mass grave led to the jailing of two of their local reporters in late 2017.

The 2015 elections saw Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) deliver a convincing win. Many domestic media outlets, including former exile organisations, have an in-house policy — whether spoken or unspoken — of lending support to the government by not being overly critical in their coverage. The accommodation the NLD government has entered into with the military (which according to the 2008 constitution retains 25 percent of seats in parliament, amounting to effective veto rights at any attempts to change the constitution) means that media outlets are also not overly eager to confront the army. Defamation cases under clause 66(d) have soared since the 2013 Telecommunications Act was put in place. Media access to conflict areas remains sporadic. The arrests of journalists, drivers and sources has also had a significant chilling effect on field reporting from conflict-affected ethnic areas. Civil war and low-key conflict endures in the borderlands, most notably in Kachin and Shan states. Internationally it is Rakhine State that has garnered the most coverage, as it has been the site of what experts have called ethnic cleansing — something the Myanmar government has categorically rejected. Media access to the region remains almost completely cut off, with the exception of the occasional government-led trip. The international community and international media's focus on the plight of the Rohingya has led to a popular perception in-country that Western nations are bent on attacking Myanmar and undermining the democratic government. While the arrest of Reuters journalists has been met with an outcry of condemnation internationally, the response in-country has been rather muted. Journalists who report on this conflict report high levels of harassment and threats, and the level of hostility toward press which challenges the official line is at an all-time high. Continued media reform looks likely on mainstream broadcasting and print, despite delays in tackling regulatory issues from the NLD-led government. Despite initial promises that state media would be wound up, it would appear it is here to stay. It is clear that when it comes to reporting news, old sensitivities remain. The military's ongoing role in the country's political scene means that, for journalists, certain topics are off-limits — or come with dire consequences.

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- Internews (2013), [The Business of Media in Myanmar](#).
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