

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. Led by successive military dictatorships for several decades, 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.

From 2011 onward, major democratic reforms began to take place, and in 2015 broadly democratic elections were held. But the transition many had hoped would herald a new era for press freedom has since shown significant and worrying signs of backsliding. Journalists face restrictions in their ability to report, and can encounter legal repercussions after publishing.

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 — or at least against the central government and military.

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 for journalists 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

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

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

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.

The designation of armed groups as terrorist organisations poses a dilemma for journalists. Contacting the spokesperson of an ethnic armed organisation may see a media outlet or individual journalist run afoul of the government, putting them at direct risk of legal action.

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

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.

Media Development Organisations

Media development in Myanmar stalled for decades, under an oppressive censorship regime and an internationally sanctioned military junta. In 2011, when the military-backed transitional government took office, the grip began to loosen.

Since that time, international donors have flocked to the country, with a number supporting development in the media sector.

Training and development programmes have been used to promote individual and institutional capacity on job-specific, technical skills such as audio recording or improved storytelling and visual framing, or structuring a news article and writing analysis. There are also programmes aimed at strengthening the values of the journalistic community and boosting an understanding of the rights of the press and the right to information. The values promoted through these programs often align with democratic values, with human rights given a top billing.

While former exile media groups like The Irrawaddy, Mizzima and Democratic Voice of Burma have a longer history of international donor cooperation and associated capacity-development training, in-country outlets were not able to take advantage of such opportunities.

Partnerships with media development organisations have provided opportunities to journalists around the country, from small minority ethnic-affairs media outlets to nationwide publications. Some programmes focus on specific issues, such as gender inclusivity, or environmental matters.

In the first half of each year, a Myanmar Media Development Conference is held in Yangon, drawing in participants from across the country, from privately held organisations to state media institutions. Government figures and civil society join in discussions about promoting the role of the media, and the challenges to this.

Yangon Film School seeks to promote film as a medium for communicating messages about diversity, and works on a project basis together with international organisations.

Myanmar's chapter of PEN International runs a broad range of programs and workshops around the country, as well as advocating for legal reforms that protect freedom of expression and ensure the right to information.

UNESCO works with the Ministry of Information in developing media-related legislation, as well as promoting reforms for the sector by holding dialogues with key stakeholders.

Training opportunities for reporters are held around the country, providing institutional support to training centres such as the Myanmar Journalism Institute and the Journalism Department at the National Management Degree College.

UNESCO has promoted conflict-sensitive reporting, in a bid to facilitate improved communication between ethnic groups and the press. UNESCO is the key implementing agency for the UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity.

The country's first dual-language human rights podcast, Doh Athan, is a partnership between Fondation Hirondelle and Frontier.

The International Media Support and Fojo Media Institute (IMS-FOJO) has been involved in supporting independent media since 2006, with initial programming supporting exile media. Sweden, Norway and Denmark backed in-country programming between 2012 and 2015.

Programming for the period 2016-2019 is focused on media law and policy, ethical standards, and access to information. They engage across the government, civil society and the media sector.

From BBC Media Action's nationwide programming on radio and television, to Internews' work with ethnic media outlets in print, digital and broadcast, to projects run by DW Akademie, there are a range of opportunities available to staff at media organisations through such partnerships.

Sources

Universities/Schools of Journalism

- [Myanmar Journalism Institute](#) (MJI)
- [National Management College](#) (NMC)

Media development organisations

- [BBC Media Action Myanmar](#)
- [Fondation Hironnelle](#)
- [Frontier: Doh Athan](#)
- [International Media Support and Swedish Fojo Media Institute](#) (IMS-Fojo)
- [Media Development Investment Fund](#) (MDIF)
- [Myanmar Journalism Institute](#) (MJI)
- [PEN Myanmar](#)

Telecommunications

Mobile network ecosystem

Myanmar has undergone a rapid rollout of mobile networks from the previous situation of a state-backed monopoly. Prior to the reforms enacted by the Thein Sein administration from 2011, access to mobile phones was limited to the elite few who could afford to spend US\$2500 on a SIM card — only North Korea had fewer connected citizens, as recently as eight years ago.

In 2012, a tender was announced in state media. Some 91 companies and consortiums entered expressions of interest. As a result, two foreign companies were invited to provide services, and the state-backed monopoly of Myanmar Posts and Telecommunications (MPT) was reformed.

It was actually mid-2013, when the Qatari telephone company Ooredoo and Norway's Telenor were announced as the winners of the tender, selected from a whittled-down shortlist of 11 candidates.

Since then, coverage has expanded rapidly and 4G is now available in much of the country. While cable and optic fiber Internet connections are often prohibitively expensive, many homes and businesses rely on 4G for a faster and cost-effective solution.

A new mobile operator, MyTel, launched in 2018, bringing the total number of providers to four.

Company profiles

Following are the main telecommunications companies active in Myanmar:

- Telenor: A Norwegian telephone company, which launched 4G/LTE services in June 2017. Telenor claims it has the widest coverage in the country, serving 19 million customers in all states, regions and territories. In 2017, it was noted

as the fastest network in the country, based on consumer-initiated tests via Ookla. The company has set a five-year target of 90 percent population coverage.

- Ooredoo: The Qatari telephone company has rolled out its 4G Plus network across almost 300 townships around the country. The company claims more than 16 million people are able to access its network. In 2018, Ooredoo was found (by Ookla) to be the fastest 4G offering in the country.
- MPT - KDDI/Sumitomo: The MPT partnership with Japan's KDDI and Sumitomo Corp, has upgraded its networks to 4G. MPT was the sole provider of services prior to the tender that saw Telenor and Ooredoo enter the scene. At present, MPT claims to have the largest number of users. Recent figures indicate there are 28 million MPT users, and network coverage of 90 percent of the country.
- Mytel: Telecom International Myanmar Company Limited, operating as MyTel, is 49 percent owned by Viettel, which is controlled by the Ministry of Defence of Vietnam. The Myanmar Economic Corporation military conglomerate holds 28 percent of the joint venture, while the remainder is owned by a consortium of Myanmar companies. MyTel's launch was attended by senior military figures, including Commander-in-Chief Senior General Min Aung Hlaing. MyTel is widely seen as the military network. It was a late addition to the scene, with its announcement coming as something of a surprise. It currently has 72 percent coverage.

As of early 2018, 43.72m SIM cards had been sold by Myanmar's four operators, according to the Posts and Telecommunications Department. This represents a theoretical mobile penetration rate of 89.38 percent - a major increase on the 6.99 percent penetration recorded at the end of the fiscal year 2011-12.

However, the figure does not represent true penetration, as it is common for mobile users to own more than one SIM card. When the price of buying a phone number fell from more than US\$1000 to just K1500 in 2014, many buyers bought Ooredoo and Telenor SIMs to compare the new networks against the state incumbent. It is not clear which has emerged as the most popular, with the most active users.

Prior to the rollout of telephone company reforms, less than 2 million people nationwide used the Internet. In 2015-2016, the Posts and Telecommunications Department estimated there were at least 39 million Internet users.

Main trends

With room for growth on every front in the telecommunications sector, Myanmar offers great opportunities to tech investors. However, the country is notoriously a difficult place to do business, and technical capacity has taken some time to build. The uptake of smartphones has been one of the swiftest in human history, with many making the leap from having no phone at all to having a browser-equipped device. Facebook comes pre-installed on many devices. The social media platform has become enormously popular, particularly among young people. It has revolutionised dating for many youths: in an often conservative society, without much disposable income, the mobile revolution has paved the way for people to connect online.

The explosion in mobile connectivity and accessibility has had an enormous impact on the way people across all sectors do business: for example, a market vendor is now able to place orders for stock, or a farmer can more easily coordinate logistics. For the millions in Myanmar with family members working abroad or elsewhere in the country in seasonal or migrant labour, connecting with their loved ones is just a matter of picking up the phone.

Myanmar's digital revolution has paved the way for optimism about technological leapfrogging: in a country where millions are unbanked, the explosion in connectivity has opened up the possibility of mobile money made available to those in remote and rural areas, as well as those working overseas and sending remittances home.

Mobile networks have all partnered with banks to provide services. Wave Money is a joint venture between Telenor and

Yoma Bank. M-Pitesan is a joint venture between local lender CB Bank and Qatari telephone company Ooredoo. TrueMoney operates under AGD Bank's Mobile Banking license, separate from the mobile networks. Wave Money, TrueMoney and M-Pitesan are the three major mobile money providers. TrueMoney is particularly popular among migrant workers overseas for sending remittances. Red Dot, a mobile payment service launched in 2015, is now accepted in over 16,000 stores nationwide.

Apps often come pre-loaded onto mobile phones, a service offered by mobile phone shops which saves users data and makes things easier for those who are not so technologically literate. Facebook enjoys supremacy in the country, while other messaging apps such as Viber and WeChat are also popular.

Hate speech and propaganda has been a major issue in the country, with Facebook having drawn widespread condemnation for its lack of meaningful action on the matter despite warnings from civil society groups. The platform has been used to stoke communal tensions, and in some cases this has spilled over into violence - most notably in Mandalay in 2015, in days of rioting that left two men dead. Facebook has stated that there are some 18 million active users in the country, but given many people own multiple accounts it is unclear if this figure is overblown or understated.

In August 2018, Facebook announced that it had detected covert propaganda campaigns being run by the Myanmar military on its platform, which was being posted to look like independent content. This material was used to denigrate the Rohingya and undermine the civilian government. The company has not provided any transparency on just how many accounts were in the reach of such covert material, or if it received higher prominence from paid boosts or the site's algorithms. For those working in civil society and the tech-for-good sphere, the issue of military and government interference online is an extremely sensitive topic.

Font integration issues have posed challenges to developers. Attempts to launch a Myanmar-specific social media network have largely fallen flat, to date, with one notable example being MySquar. The site was hyped upon launch and optimistic investors rushed to back the project, however in late 2018 it was announced that it looked likely to enter administration with large amounts of funding having gone missing.

Mobile coverage

As of today, much of the country enjoys mobile coverage, and relatively high-speed 4G access. In previous years, only CDMA frequencies were available in major towns on the periphery. The construction of mobile towers around the country has improved reception, with 4G available in most towns.

More remote and sparsely populated areas remain off the grid (for example, swathes of mountainous and rugged Chin State or Sagaing and Nagaland), however much of the country is now online. The number of towers rose from 3,000 in 2013 to 11,700 in 2018. In the northern Rakhine State and in some of the areas bordering China, mobile phone services are available from neighbouring countries.

In late 2018, Rohingya rights group Kaladan Press alleged that Telenor mobile phone towers had been used as sniping positions in the ethnic cleansing of Alehthankyaw, with troops gunning down fleeing civilians from the vantage point afforded them by the structure. Telenor expressed concern over the allegations, and said that their access to the site had been limited, both due to internal security assessments and government restrictions.

Mobile ownership

Ownership of mobile phones has continued to grow in Myanmar. In 2016, a survey from MIDO and LIRNEasia put household

ownership of mobile phones at 83 percent, up from 57 percent on the previous year. The average number of mobile phones per household was 2.3, with SIM card ownership slightly higher than that at 2.9. In the same time period, the proportion of individuals who said they had never used a mobile phone reduced from 31 percent to 9 percent.

The increased availability of cheap smartphones has meant there is a high level of smartphone use: the average amount spent on purchasing a mobile phone was around US\$90, with US\$6 per month spent on top-up — with a pronounced disparity in expenditure on top-up between urban and rural dwellers, the latter spending half the amount over a month.

A gender gap continues to exist, with women 28 percent less likely to own a mobile phone than men in 2016. Over one quarter of active SIM owners owned more than one SIM card - around 56 percent said this was in order to ensure they got coverage wherever they went.

The gender gap is highest among lower income households, and in particular those spending and earning less than K500,000 per month, or around US\$320. The most commonly cited reason for not owning a mobile phone, according to a survey from LIRNEasia, was cost. The second most cited reason was there was 'no need' to own one, with the reasoning being that a mobile phone might be necessary for a family member engaged in business. However, others in the family would not have the same need if they were not running a business. It is here that the gender gap emerges, even though changing concepts about the role of women in society and the workforce are gradually bringing about a shift to attitudes, as well as the gender gap on mobile connectivity.

As mentioned above, digital and technological literacy is low: According to a survey by MIDO, only 18 percent of mobile users could create a login for a site independently, and 21 percent knew how to install an app. However, this is in part likely due to a lack of Myanmar-language options in app stores.

Sources

- [LIRNEasia](#)
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- [MPT](#)
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- [New Naratif](#)
- [Ooredoo](#)
- [Telenor](#)

Innovation

Landscape analysis

Myanmar's years of isolation meant that when opportunities were finally presented for expansion of the tech scene, they were taken up with great enthusiasm. With access to the Internet having been previously restricted to a select few, and the Internet being subject to censorship, a surprising number of urban youths developed the ability to circumvent such barriers. With those restrictions lifted, the tech space has expanded rapidly. This is particularly the case in the commercial capital of Yangon, where the main innovation hubs and initiatives are located.

However, programming directed at improving capacity does take place elsewhere in the country, but the major cities are still the destination of choice for anyone seeking a future in the tech sphere. Development organisations have prioritised inclusion initiatives, pushing for more women in tech. However, a pronounced gender disparity remains in much of the tech sphere.

While accessing the Internet has become infinitely more affordable in recent years, low incomes prevail across much of the country, limiting the ability of many young people to progress their skills. Digital literacy initiatives have been highlighted as crucial, particularly in the face of fake news and hate speech proliferating on data-privileged platforms like Facebook. This is something that has been championed by those working in tech, however the reach of such initiatives is often limited. The highest-profile one was *Panzagar* (Flower Speech), which allowed users to post digital stickers promoting peaceful, respectful and tolerant online dialogue.

Profiles of main tech parks, accelerators, hackathons

Myanmar's relative explosion of connectivity in the last few years has meant there is a thriving, albeit small, tech scene. Despite relatively poor availability of high-speed Internet connections, and high pricing, there is a rapidly developing domestic expertise base.

The Barcamp event, a hackathon and conference for tech types, drew thousands of participants. The country's main innovation hub is Phandeeyar, which works with civil society, developers and international organisations across a range of tech disciplines. Phandeeyar has fostered a community of developers who use their tech skills to innovate on a range of issues, from rural information access to data transparency.

The government's Cyber City development in Mandalay Region was established in 2007, and has been the subject of sporadic announcements. Early in 2018, a tender was announced which would further open the park to private businesses from around the world. Little is known about the site and businesses operating there.

Yangon's MICT park serves as a training centre for IT companies, and is home to the Myanmar Computer Professional Association.

Sources

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- [Cyber City](#)
- [Dangerous Speech Project](#)
- [MICT Park](#)
- [Phandeeyar](#)

Traditional forms of communication

Summary

Myanmar is a country of extraordinary ethnic diversity, with 135 officially designated ethnic groups. From the formerly nomadic people of the islands on the Andaman Sea, to the hardy hill tribe minorities in the foothills of the Himalayas, the country is rather more like several countries crammed together — a sometimes uneasy accord, as the faltering peace

process will attest.

While the number of 135 ethnic subgroups is somewhat disputed, owing to the fact that it was based on a cursory British colonial-era taxonomy which overblows the size of some groups and atomizes others, each ethnic block has distinct cultures and traditions. The central Bamar Buddhist majority is the largest group (estimated at some 80 percent), and the dominant culture is often imposed on the peripheries through government institutions. The push for mother-tongue education in ethnic regions is a fairly recent phenomenon.

In each of the seven states and regions and of the six self-administered zones, there exists a mix of ethnic groups and subgroups. Many parts of the country operate under mixed administration, with influence from both the centre and rebel groups that control vast swathes of territory and in some cases act as de facto state governments.

The ethnic minority groups speak their own distinct languages and dialects, which have often lacked a written form. Oral storytelling tradition is strong. Younger members of some groups have sought to consolidate traditional knowledge by bringing it online, making it available to a newer generation. Others have had their cultures and customs documented by independent media and researchers, such as the Kite Tales project.

For example, in Kachin State, Jinghpaw is the dominant language. Many Kachin are Christians. The church has taken on a major role underpinning Kachin life. However, the Kachin tradition of the Manau Festival (which has its roots in animism) involves traditional dance. The state's influence on the Manau detracts from the event's authenticity in some cases, which raises the ire of the Kachin people. A similar case can be found in the Naga self-administered area, where the central government has sought to impose more conservative values on the tribal gathering (including compelling the participants to wear bike shorts under the traditional, rather more revealing outfit).

The belief in Nat spirits, mischievous ghosts caught between realms, is a pervasive one across the Bamar heartland and further-flung areas. The Nat folklore is widely taught and ties in with the dominant Theravada Buddhist tradition. As such, Nat Pwe festivals are held around the country on auspicious dates, in keeping with the Buddhist calendar and lunar cycles. Nat Kadaws are men who dress in ornate women's clothing, and are considered to be able to channel spirits. Nat Pwe often involve offerings being made, as the crowd cheers the convulsively-dancing Nat Kadaw.

Myanmar has a strong tradition of dance, puppetry and theatre, as well as of more modern forms of communication, such as subversive comedy and cartooning.

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- The Kite Tales. [Myanmar's people in their own words](#)

Conclusions

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 and domestic 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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