

Echo chambers in Myanmar: Social media and the ideological justifications for mass violence

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Abstract

The ways that information and ideas move in Myanmar are about to change. Less than 10% of the population currently has a mobile phone; government and private sector projections are that this will grow to at least 80% by 2016. Experiences from regional neighbours indicate that expansion of mobile phone networks will be accompanied by Internet access and widespread use of social media. What are the potential consequences of this, in Myanmar's current political context? Myanmar is amidst a fraught and vulnerable transition away from authoritarian military rule, with the rise of potentially violent nationalism and extremist religious movements of particular concern. Substantial literature establishes a relationship between the strengthening of such extremist views and dynamics created by widespread use of social media. This paper connects this literature to current understandings of how mass violence is justified – how those who give orders to kill, those who kill, and those who otherwise participate or stand aside are motivated to do so, and how doing so is legitimised and rationalised. The paper then seeks to understand how these dynamics may apply in Myanmar. This is a necessarily forward-looking topic, but the approach taken here will be to analyse the potential alignment between these new communication technologies and those existing communication practices developed as a part of surviving under, and sometimes resisting, authoritarian rule. Analysis of such potential alignments supports the hypothesis that expansion of Internet access in Myanmar, particularly the rise of social media, will contribute to dynamics that have the potential to strengthen the ideological justifications necessary for mass violence. Yet the analysis in this paper points to a new kind of opportunity: insofar as these dynamics are recognized and understood, it may be possible to disrupt them. To the degree that social media does become the dominant platform for mass communication of information and ideas, it may then be a powerful platform for challenging these discourses, and promoting alternate visions for the future.

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¹ This paper benefited from discussion of some of the concepts during presentation of a related paper at the conference, "Islam, Law and the State in Myanmar," Centre for Asian Legal Studies, National University Singapore, January 23-24 2014.

I spent the 2012 United States presidential election cycle in Yangon, Myanmar. Election day eve in the eastern US was early morning in Myanmar, and I sat with a group of American friends to watch results as the polls closed across successive time zones. Up at dawn, we had all pitched in to rent a cheap hotel room with satellite television, and we did our best to replicate the way we would watch an election back home: generic network coverage augmented by online news outlets, political blogs – and Facebook, where friends across the country were doing the same thing, posting updates, thoughts, and links.

In Myanmar, our Internet slowed to a crawl. We had one satellite news channel and the only Internet page that would load: Facebook. Part of the modern American election tradition culminates in television news channels calling the results of the election, and we sat and watched as Barack Obama was announced the winner in successive states. On Facebook, my friends back home were increasingly celebratory. Of course they were; I am from the relatively liberal west coast, as are many of my friends, and nothing on my Facebook ‘newsfeed’ suggested that President Obama was anything but the superior choice. Seated next to me was a friend from conservative parts of Pennsylvania – his newsfeed was a mirror image of mine; that is, in complete reverse, heavily weighted towards the Republican challenger, Mitt Romney.

Reading either of our separate newsfeeds provided a view into wildly divergent realities – the difference only becoming fully intelligible when we sat our laptops side by side and read them simultaneously. Our newsfeeds seemed to be hermetically sealed; discourse was not crossing over. Perhaps this effect was heightened by our vantage point. We were in Myanmar, after all. Facebook and satellite news were our only windows into America, and looking through them we saw two different campaigns, two different expected outcomes. Two different countries.

Information in Myanmar moves differently. Most of the country does not use Facebook; only 1% of the population has access to Internet.² That is exactly why this anecdote matters.

When we looked out over Yangon, we looked through windows in our communal hotel room. But more than glass mediated our view into the US presidential election. Eli Pariser has dubbed this the ‘filter bubble,’ his term for the way that information accessed online is filtered by search engines and social media interfaces, which seek to predict what users are likely to find interesting, desirable – and credible. Indeed, Pariser’s 2011 book *The Filter Bubble* opens with an anecdote strikingly similar to my experience on Election Day. “Without sitting down next to a friend, it’s hard to tell how the version of Google or Yahoo News that you’re seeing differs from anyone else’s,” says Pariser. “But because the filter bubble distorts our perception of what’s important, true, and real, it’s critically important.”³

For over a decade, Cass Sunstein of Harvard University, meanwhile, has raised concerns about negative impacts he believes new media are having on democracy in America. In 2001, Sunstein published *Republic.com*, in which he uses the concept of an “echo chamber” to encapsulate the idea that, as people self-select their information sources – and the friends from whom they get information – an individual’s pre-existing beliefs and assumptions are reinforced because he or she hears only information that aligns

² We Are Social, *2014 Asia-Pacific Digital Overview: We Are Social’s Snapshot of Key Digital Data & Statistics* (Singapore, January 16, 2014), 132, <http://www.slideshare.net/wearesocialsg/social-digital-mobile-in-apac>.

³ Eli Pariser, *The Filter Bubble: How the New Personalized Web Is Changing What We Read and How We Think* (New York, N.Y.: Penguin Books/Penguin Press, 2012), 16.

with these beliefs.⁴ For Pariser, this dynamic is produced by the invisible algorithms Google, Facebook and others use to filter content. For Sunstein, it is produced by the choices individuals make about who to listen to and take advice from and what to read. For both, the consequences for a democratic society are severe.

At the time *Republic.com* was first being published, one of the most controversial presidential elections in recent US history was being decided. The 2000 Presidential election was too close to call; the views of how to proceed reflected the polarized views of the US two party system, with the outcome ultimately decided by the Supreme Court. In an essay on these events, Sunstein argued that the election controversy was not the result of simple partisanship, but instead the product of the same media environment described in *Republic.com*. “The phenomenon, sometimes called group polarization, involves the tendency of like-minded individuals engaged in discussion with one another to fortify their pre-existing views – and indeed to move toward more extreme points of view in the general direction in which they were already tending,” he wrote. “If Republicans are talking only with Republicans, if Democrats are talking primarily with Democrats... there is a potential for the development of different forms of extremism, and for profound mutual misunderstandings with individuals outside the group.”⁵

Sunstein was writing before the rise of ‘social media’ such as Facebook, which has subsequently become a dominant media platform. Nearly ten years after the site came online in 2004, a survey released by the Pew Research centre in December 2013 found that 73% of adults in the US were using some form of social media, with 63% of adults checking Facebook at least once a day.⁶ Facebook, meanwhile, is seeking to establish itself not just as a social network but, as founder Mark Zuckerberg announced in March 2013, “the best personalized newspaper in world.”⁷ Research released by Pew a few months later found that approximately half its users get news from Facebook,⁸ a number that represents 30% of the US population.

That Facebook could enhance this echo chamber should not be surprising. Facebook users interact with and, as the Pew poll shows, receive information from “friends.” And these self-selected “friends” are often highly similar to the user. Sociologists describe this as a tendency towards homophily in social networks, which is another way to say “birds of a feather flock together.”⁹ As I watched the 2012 US presidential election, in other words, my window opened into an echo chamber populated, predictably, mostly by people like me; we had, after all, just the one satellite news channel, and we were interpreting it with the aid of the updates we were receiving on our newsfeeds. The election I saw was an election described in the comments and articles linked to by Democrats; I did not ‘see’ the election so much as read about it, via content carefully curated by other people with political viewpoints similar to my own. Republicans in rural Pennsylvania saw something different. If Pariser, Sunstein and others are right, the difference between my Facebook newsfeed and that of my friend from Pennsylvania is more than just a reflection of the dominant political viewpoints in our hometowns. The difference between the kinds of

⁴ Cass R. Sunstein, *Republic.com* (Princeton University Press, 2002). See also, Cass R. Sunstein, “Neither Hayek nor Habermas,” *Public Choice* 134, no. 1–2 (January 1, 2008): 87–95, doi:10.1007/s11127-007-9202-9.

⁵ Cass R. Sunstein, *Echo Chambers: Bush V. Gore, Impeachment, and Beyond* (Princeton University Press, 2001), 5.

⁶ Aaron Smith, “Social Media Update 2013,” *Pew Research Center’s Internet & American Life Project*, December 30, 2013, <http://www.pewinternet.org/2013/12/30/social-media-update-2013/>.

⁷ Kevin Morris, “Facebook Is No Longer a Social Network,” *The Daily Dot*, March 7, 2013, <http://www.dailydot.com/business/facebook-no-longer-social-network-news-feed/>.

⁸ Amy Mitchell, “News Use Across Social Media Platforms,” *Pew Research Center’s Journalism Project*, November 14, 2013, <http://www.journalism.org/2013/11/14/news-use-across-social-media-platforms/>.

⁹ Miller McPherson, Lynn Smith-Lovin, and James M Cook, “Birds of a Feather: Homophily in Social Networks,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 27 (August 2001): 415–44.

information we access – increasingly through Facebook – is also a productive force that contributes to shaping worldviews and political viewpoints, potentially driving polarization and extremism.

Information and ideas do move differently in Myanmar, but that is about to change. Myanmar's erstwhile state monopoly over telecommunications is breaking up and mobile phones, once available to only the handful that could afford expensive SIM cards, are becoming more common. In 2013, an estimated less than 4% of the population had mobile phones, though government statistics claim 10% – still the lowest penetration rate of any country in Asia save for North Korea.¹⁰ In early 2014, two international telecoms companies, Ooredoo and Telenor, received operating licenses to establish new networks across Myanmar; Ooredoo's publicly stated target is to extend network coverage to 97% of the population within five years.¹¹ Telenor's goal is 90%.¹² The target set by U Thein Sein, Myanmar's president, is slightly more modest: 80% of the population by 2016.¹³

In 2014, meanwhile, the costs of mobile phones and tablets that can handle basic Internet functions are dropping precipitously. Myanmar's regional neighbours are useful indicators in this respect and, where they have seen increased mobile access, that now also entails access to the Internet.¹⁴ Elsewhere in the region, too, Internet access has meant large percentages of the population using social media. A journalist commenting on recent data about use of social media in Asia perhaps put it best: Facebook is not a website visited by Internet users, "Facebook *is* the Internet."¹⁵ This is likely to hold true in Myanmar; social media not as a website or one source of customized news, but as the dominant platform by which people get ideas and information from outside their immediate circles of 'real life' family, friends, neighbours, and religious leaders. One regional marketing company, for example, identifies 1,240,000 Facebook users in the country.¹⁶ If the current estimate that approximately 1% of the population has access to the Internet is accurate, this would represent more than two Facebook accounts for every Internet user in Myanmar.

Underscoring Facebook's role as a source and conduit for information flows, the site is already used as a communication platform for government leaders and politicians, civil society, the private sector, and journalists. Government departments including the office of Myanmar's President regularly issue information and statements via Facebook. Journalists often scoop stories by trawling their newsfeeds. Even Myanmar's monastic community, which lives an otherwise ascetic life, uses Facebook to access and disseminate information. At an event I attended to discuss harmony between religious communities, for example, a Buddhist leader criticized American diplomats in attendance for bias in their criticisms

¹⁰ Jared Ferrie, "In Myanmar, Cheap SIM Card Draw May Herald Telecoms Revolution," *Reuters*, April 24, 2013, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/04/24/us-myanmar-telecoms-draw-idUSBRE93N1AX20130424>.

¹¹ Van Gyi Wednesday, January 29, and 2014-7:16 Pm, "Ooredoo, Telenor Finally Set to Get Myanmar Telecoms Licenses," accessed February 12, 2014, <http://www.irrawaddy.org/business/ooredoo-telenor-finally-set-get-burma-telecoms-licenses.html>.

¹² "Telenor on \$1bn Roll in Myanmar," *Bangkok Post*, March 8, 2014, <http://www.bangkokpost.com/business/news/398743/>.

¹³ "Myanmar's Mobile Penetration Rate Expected to Reach 80 Percent by 2015-16," *Eleven Myanmar*, accessed March 6, 2014, http://www.elevenmyanmar.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=5017:myanmar-s-mobile-penetration-rate-expected-to-reach-80-percent-by-2015-16&catid=44&Itemid=384.

¹⁴ We Are Social, *2014 Asia-Pacific Digital Overview: We Are Social's Snapshot of Key Digital Data & Statistics*.

¹⁵ Jon Russell, "Despite Claims of a Decline in the West, Facebook Is Stronger Than Ever in the Rest of the World," *The Next Web*, January 27, 2014, <http://thenextweb.com/facebook/2014/01/27/despite-claims-of-a-decline-in-the-west-facebook-is-stronger-than-ever-in-the-rest-of-the-world/>. Emphasis added.

¹⁶ We Are Social, *2014 Asia-Pacific Digital Overview: We Are Social's Snapshot of Key Digital Data & Statistics*, 132.

regarding religious violence. “I also follow the US Embassy Facebook page,” the monk said to those assembled. “One month ago, the US embassy issued the statement regarding the attack on a mosque, without confirming the information. But I was very sorry not to see a statement issued regarding the attack on a very dutiful soldier in Rakhine State.”¹⁷ A few chairs over to his left sat another monk, U Wirathu, who has become so infamous for his anti-Muslim sermons that last year TIME Magazine published a cover story with the headline “The Face of Buddhist Terror” emblazoned over his photo.¹⁸ In March 2014, U Wirathu had 29,958 followers on Facebook and was leading “media trainings” to instruct attendees in how to use Facebook.¹⁹

There are perhaps deceptively simple technological reasons why Facebook may become the dominant platform in Myanmar. Facebook is an application that can be installed on phones and tablets, to be easily mastered by people not otherwise familiar with using the Internet to search for news and information. In a country where the speed of Internet connectivity can be infuriatingly slow, the standalone Facebook apps on mobile devices will often load when other sites will not. Perhaps most important for Burmese language users, it is relatively easy to use and read Burmese script on Facebook, an issue that has long plagued users of SMS messaging, email, and even word processing software. If you have ever experienced the frustration of waiting for an Internet page to load in Myanmar, or the bewildering helplessness of trying to read a Burmese language page or document without Unicode or the right fonts installed, you will know these are sufficiently compelling technological factors to determine choice of platform. That these issues will be addressed in the near future matters little; if Facebook is already the platform where all your friends are, it is reasonable to assume that you, too, will join them there. Even more so if the company pursues special arrangements with mobile network providers to enable users to access Facebook without incurring any extra charges or requiring a data plan, as it has in other emerging markets.²⁰

Over the next few years, then, people in Myanmar will have access to those same kinds of communication and information platforms that are available in the US and elsewhere. What are the consequences of this fact, in Myanmar’s current political context? Put another way: my experience viewing the 2012 elections was notable because of my vantage point in Yangon, as it threw into stark relief the degree to which my understanding of American politics on that day was filtered by a lens of my Facebook friends’ own making. What are the implications for people in Myanmar if their understandings of important events, topics, and threats are similarly filtered?

These are important questions because Myanmar is attempting to transition from decades of authoritarian military rule to democracy, a process that some have called breath taking but that is nonetheless highly fraught and vulnerable. Myanmar is facing – and will soon face – its own controversies, controversies which may make disputes over, for example, who won the US presidential elections in 2000 appear minor and easily resolved. In the background, and increasingly the foreground, are bloody conflicts between Buddhist and Muslim communities. Extremely hateful rhetoric, particularly on the part of some extremist religious leaders, has already attracted international media attention; the TIME Magazine story titled “The

¹⁷ Matt Schissler, “Sleeping Dogs,” *New Mandala*, January 20, 2014, asiapacific.anu.edu.au/newmandala/2014/01/20/sleeping-dogs/.

¹⁸ Hannah Beech, “The Face of Buddhist Terror,” *Time*, accessed March 12, 2014, <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,2146000,00.html>.

¹⁹ Kayleigh Long, “Monk Expands Teachings,” *The Myanmar Times*, March 24, 2014.

²⁰ April Deibert, “Google ‘Free Zone’ and Facebook ‘Zero’: Products Targeting Developing Populations,” *Innovation Series*, February 19, 2013, <http://www.innovation-series.com/2013/02/19/google-free-zone-and-facebook-zero-products-targeting-developing-populations/>.

Face of Buddhist Terror” is only one example.²¹ International organizations dedicated to monitoring human rights and identifying potential for genocide and mass violence have begun issuing warnings. “These elements are ingredients for potential catastrophic violence in the future, including potential crimes against humanity and/or genocide,” warned Physicians for Human Rights in August 2013. “If left unchecked, this particular combination could lead to mass atrocities on a scale heretofore unseen in Burma.”²² Meanwhile, after a visit in February 2014, the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in Myanmar concluded that this violence, “if left unaddressed, could jeopardize the entire reform process.”²³

At what point do these ingredients combine and combust – or, do they not? The fiery anti-Muslim rhetoric that has attracted international attention is concerning – but when does it give way to actual violence? Scholars studying mass atrocity have long wrestled with such questions, both in retrospective attempts to understand why history’s horrors came to take place and to develop monitoring tools so that they never again happen again. This broad literature base employs a variety of approaches, focusing on material and political conditions as well as the ideas that can enable or drive such violence. While it is not the purpose of this paper to comment on these myriad approaches, it is axiomatic that, to some degree, without ideational justification violence on a mass scale is not possible. Jonathan Leader Maynard at Oxford University summarized the literature establishing this axiom, to more clearly apply the broad concept of ideology to understanding how atrocities occur. In doing so, Maynard places special importance on how atrocities are justified – how those who give orders to kill, those who kill, and those who otherwise participate or stand aside are motivated to do so, and how doing so is legitimated and rationalised.²⁴

For Maynard, understanding how large numbers of people may be mobilized to enact violence hinges on the central questions of how atrocity-justifying arguments are communicated, and how they are found to be persuasive.²⁵ The question of how and why particular arguments are persuasive is an old one, as important now as it was for classical rhetoricians like Aristotle. For Aristotle, one of the (three) most important modes of persuasion was *ethos*, referring to the authority or credibility of a given speaker. Taken to an extreme degree, this is “epistemic dependence,” the tendency to depend on authorities in their various fields to determine what is true. This is a kind of societal division of labour, a process that leads one to, for example, accept that smoking cigarettes causes cancer without grasping the full details of medical science.²⁶ This also helps to explain why large groups of people sometimes adopt views that appear absurd to another audience. Not out of some kind of psychosis, primitive ignorance or susceptibility to brainwashing, but as the result that logically follows from relying exclusively on information from one set of authorities. German scholar Michael Baumann calls this “epistemic seclusion.”²⁷ Sunstein might call it an echo chamber. Maynard demonstrates the core role this plays in enabling mass violence.

²¹ Beech, “The Face of Buddhist Terror.”

²² Physicians for Human Rights, *Patterns of Anti-Muslim Violence in Burma: A Call for Accountability and Prevention*, August 2013, 2.

²³ Tomás Ojea Quintana, *Statement of the Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in Myanmar*, End-of-mission statement by the Special Rapporteur (Yangon, Myanmar, February 19, 2014), <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=14263&LangID=E>.

²⁴ Jonathan Leader Maynard, “Rethinking the Role of Ideology in Mass Atrocities,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 0, no. 0 (0): 1–2, doi:10.1080/09546553.2013.796934.

²⁵ Leader Maynard, “Rethinking the Role of Ideology in Mass Atrocities.”

²⁶ John Hardwig, “Epistemic Dependence,” *Journal of Philosophy* 82, no. 7 (1985): 335–49.

²⁷ Michael. Baumann, “Rational Fundamentalism? An Explanatory Model of Fundamental Beliefs,” *Episteme: A Journal of Social Epistemology* 4, no. 2 (2007): 150–66, doi:10.1353/epi.2007.0016.

Epistemic seclusion, or the echo chamber, does not exist in a vacuum; these concepts do not explain the origins of a given discourse that, directly or indirectly, helps to justify atrocity. However, they are useful to explain how such discourses can grow, in persuasive power, in reach, and in the directness and explicitness with and for which violence is called. They are particularly useful concepts in the Myanmar context because such discourses already exist, both in the virulently hateful speeches of the extremists that attract media attention and in the conversations that make up quotidian life. I ground this conclusion on my own observations as I have resided in a working class neighbourhood along the edge of a riverside industrial area in western Yangon. My observations are not part of any formal ethnography – I am not a trained anthropologist. But over the last 18 months, I have spent at least a few nights a week sitting on the street corner, eating, drinking rough tea or beer, and discussing a variety of issues. I have similar discussions in the local teashops, where I sit nearly every morning, and in other regular interactions with friends and neighbours. Religion, politics, and history are not uncommon topics.

My conclusion stems from a kind of accidental ethnography, and I have noted a variety of discourses that all, ultimately, illustrate and justify misperceptions about Islam and fear of – and bias against – Muslim communities.²⁸ Sometimes, these are everyday disputes, misunderstandings, or economic grievances. Other times, they are earnestly held beliefs about Islam as inherently violent, and the risk Myanmar as a Buddhist country faces from a takeover by a global Muslim threat.²⁹ My observations are primarily from just one neighbourhood in one part of Myanmar, of course, but there is nothing in particular about this neighbourhood that indicates it should be considered unique. Suggesting their wider application is the fact that one can see the same arguments and discussions replicated on social media, and in the widespread popularity of the religious figures, organizations, and political figures repeating similar messages. That there exists a kind of “siege mentality” has also been remarked upon by others, who note the developing strength of feeling in Myanmar that it is under grave threat as a Buddhist nation.³⁰ I have not yet heard many serious, explicit justifications for violence. Indeed, some of the friends with whom I have had debates on religious tolerance have been no less happy to support campaigns to prevent further religious violence. Nonetheless, such fears and misperceptions are a piece of the foundation on which such a violent edifice can be built.

In a context like Myanmar, then, how might the concerns described by Sunstein, Pariser and others apply? Will increasing access to social media in Myanmar promote group polarization and increase extremism? Will this strengthen the ideological justifications necessary for mass violence and tip Myanmar over that indefinable ledge and into the abyss? The beginnings of a modest answer to these questions can be developed by exploring alignments between established methods of communication in Myanmar and those new ones that will become available. This will not provide any definitive predictions, but it will indicate potential tendencies sufficiently to present a basic hypothesis, and thus necessitate discussion of the potential consequences and necessity for response.

²⁸ I have chronicled some of these notes, discourses, and experiences in infrequent posts kindly hosted on the Australian National University blog *New Mandala*. See, <<http://asiapacific.anu.edu.au/newmandala/author/matt/>> accessed 17 March 2014.

²⁹ Matt Schissler, “Everyday Ethnic Tensions in Myanmar,” *New Mandala*, March 27, 2013, asiapacific.anu.edu.au/newmandala/2013/03/27/everyday-ethnic-tensions-in-myanmar/. Further analysis of these observations was presented in the paper, Matt Schissler, “Whither the Moderate Mainstream? Religious Violence and Myanmar’s Changing Information Environment” (presented at the Islam, Law and the State in Myanmar, Centre for Asian Legal Studies, National University Singapore, 2014).

³⁰ Kyaw San Wai, “Myanmar’s Religious Violence: A Buddhist ‘Siege Mentality’ at Work,” *S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies Commentaries* No. 037/2014 (February 20, 2014); Nyi Nyi Kyaw, “Securitization and Islamophobia Analysis of the 969 Movement in Myanmar” (presented at the Islam, Law and the State in Myanmar, Centre for Asian Legal Studies, National University Singapore, 2014).

The approach taken in this paper is loosely based upon a similar, but far more ambitious, project undertaken by the anthropologists Robin Jeffrey and Assa Doron, who explored the transformations wrought by rapid increases in mobile phone access in India by asking, first, how ideas and information had been communicated in the past.³¹ “The cheap mobile phone is the most disruptive device to hit humanity since shoes,”³² they note in the introduction to their research, published in 2013 as *The Great Indian Phonebook*. Jeffrey and Doron illustrate this claim with a hypothetical, in which a boatman on the River Ganga dials his phone to lodge a complaint with the chief of a major company. “The scene is our fantasy. It has never happened; but it could,” they note. “For the first time, even the poorest, lowest-status people in India can connect to the wealthiest and most highly placed.”³³ Their fantasy is apropos, because something remarkably similar has been playing out in Myanmar over the last two months.

On January 28th, Minister of Livestock, Fisheries and Rural Development U Ohn Myint travelled to inspect a village in central Myanmar’s Magway Region. His subsequent interaction with residents, who had come to complain about lack of clean water, has become a national issue. “I can go around and slap everyone’s faces,” he told the assembled group. “If anyone insults or opposes the government, [I will] hit them and lock them up.” What is different now, however, is that U Ohn Myint’s statements were captured on video. Shared on Facebook, the video spread like wildfire and was soon taken up by Myanmar’s recently liberalized print media. Within a few days, a small protest had been staged in faraway Yangon and the issue had been mooted at parliament in the capital. Two weeks later, it continued to be a controversy. On February 10th, more than 1,000 local residents in Magway staged a demonstration calling for the Minister’s dismissal.³⁴

This is the quintessential example of a repressive authority figure being called to account in a way made uniquely possible by new technology, an example of the surveillance-from-below ‘*sous-veillance*’ popularized by Steve Mann.³⁵ New communication technologies – mobile phones, the Internet, social media – have opened the way for such processes, enabling people to generate, share, and disseminate new information and ideas to a sometimes global audience. These technologies have been credited with the creation of relatively open spheres for deliberation in the face of strong restrictions in places such as China³⁶ and even the mobilization of successful democratic movements such as during the Arab Spring.³⁷ At its most breathless, however, such rhetoric also smacks of the latest incarnation of utopianism that seems to accompany each generation of new technology, and it is important to note that new technologies may also strengthen authority and control.³⁸ For the same reasons that these technologies may be powerful tools for political mobilization, they are no less powerful when similarly harnessed by states and

³¹ Robin Jeffrey and Assa Doron, *The Great Indian Phone Book: How Cheap Mobile Phones Change Business, Politics and Daily Life* (London: Hurst & Company, 2013), 19.

³² Ibid., 2.

³³ Ibid., 1.

³⁴ Nyein Nyein, “Marching Villagers Call for Burma Minister to Be Sacked Over Comments,” *The Irrawaddy*, February 11, 2014, <http://www.irrawaddy.org/burma/marching-villagers-call-burma-minister-sacked-comments.html>.

³⁵ Steve Mann, Jason Nolan, and Barry Wellman, “Sousveillance: Inventing and Using Wearable Computing Devices for Data Collection in Surveillance Environments,” *Surveillance & Society* 1, no. 3 (September 1, 2002): 331–55.

³⁶ Orion A. Lewis, “Net Inclusion: New Media’s Impact on Deliberative Politics in China,” *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 43, no. 4 (2013): 678–708, doi:10.1080/00472336.2013.769387.

³⁷ Philip N Howard and Muzammil M Hussain, *Digital Media and the Arab Spring* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

³⁸ Morozov for examples calls the latest “cyber utopianism.” Evgeny Morozov, *The Net Delusion the Dark Side of Internet Freedom* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2011).

entrenched powers.³⁹ Nonetheless, in the Myanmar context it is certain that these technologies will present a radical shift from the past, as they will offer a mechanism for even the poorest peoples in remote corners of Myanmar to share and access information and ideas that they might not have otherwise, or at least not as quickly.

Ultimately, how these technological capabilities impact politics is a product of how they are used. In India, Jeffrey and Doron detail the role new mobile phone technology played in supporting a nascent Dalit political movement as it swept to elected power on the backs of a dedicated party organizing, built phone call by phone call.⁴⁰ Their research is more instructive as a comparison for Myanmar because of insights on the interactions between a new technology and already established practices and requirements. This interaction was disruptive in India – to gender roles and authority structures, economic practices, and class and political hierarchies. “The new tool accords the possibility of... [using] the technology to save money independently of a spendthrift husband, infect others with commitment to a cause, or communicate with a sweetheart without approval of the family,” Jeffrey and Doron wrote, and it was the cumulative effect of these changed dynamics that had deep reverberations across one of the world’s largest countries.⁴¹

What, then, are established methods of communication that might be disrupted – or align particularly powerfully – with new technologies growing in Myanmar? In particular, what alignments might there be that indicate any potential towards those dynamics identified in the US, such as Sunstein’s ‘echo chamber’? The following paragraphs highlight two. The first was reaffirmed for me in discussions following a presentation of some of the early thoughts that motivated this paper, at a conference hosted by the National University of Singapore (NUS) during January 2014. “Don’t you think you may be overplaying this whole Facebook thing?” another participant, an NUS research fellow focused on South Asia, asked following my presentation. “In Pakistan, social media is the least popular method. It is mass SMS messaging that is used to share information.” As we continued this discussion over the lunch break, the Myanmar heads around the table shook vigorously. “Nobody will use mass SMS messaging in Myanmar,” another participant, a Muslim woman who lives in Yangon, told our NUS colleague. “People are afraid to receive such messages, because they could be punished. But it is no crime to log into Facebook. You are simply scrolling down the page, and you see what other people share.”

To note that logging into Facebook is no crime is an example of new information technology aligning with older practices that are deeply embedded within Myanmar. Consumption of information on Facebook and other social media platforms is passive. It is a tool one may use to access information while simultaneously maintaining plausible deniability. One may use a fake identity on Facebook, though the company officially prohibits this. Even for those whose social media identities correspond to real identities, one need only scroll down a page where others are sharing potentially illicit information. Others who are willing to share such information and take the risks, do so, or do so with an account that is unattached to any traceable identity. Sharing objectionable material is the crime of the poster, not the passive user who scrolls by. This is a new version an aphorism related by Christina Fink in *Living Silence*, her 2001 book about life under the authoritarian regime: “We have no mouths, only ears.”⁴²

³⁹ Kikue Hamayotsu, “The Limits of Civil Society in Democratic Indonesia: Media Freedom and Religious Intolerance,” *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 43, no. 4 (2013): 658–77, doi:10.1080/00472336.2013.780471.

⁴⁰ Jeffrey and Doron, *The Great Indian Phone Book*, 146–158.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 11, 14.

⁴² Christina Fink, *Living Silence: Burma Under the Military Rule* (Bankok; Dhaka [Bangladesh]; London; New York: White Lotus; University Press; Zed Books; [Distributed in the USA exclusively by Palgrave], 2001), 128.

Such established strategies for accessing and disseminating information are not passive or thoughtless reflexes, nor are they evidence of low levels of formal education. Quite the opposite – they are highly refined, carefully developed skills for surviving under, and sometimes resisting, an authoritarian state. Maintaining plausible deniability was a mechanism for containing and controlling risk; with this maintained, one could push the boundaries of safety and acceptability. Christina Fink describes, for example, a strategy used during the 1980s in which student activists used seemingly innocuous book sharing networks to establish precarious, but no less important, feelings of collective solidarity. After finishing a given text, the reader would add a short comment and the name of their hometown, and then pass on the book. “For those who had developed political ideas,” noted Fink, “knowing they had similarly-minded peers in other parts of the country was very important. They often felt isolated among their own school mates.” One need only glance over the geography of previous readers to feel the presence of a community; but one need not take risks to do so, beyond possessing a piece of nondescript literature.⁴³ In another more overtly political strategy, students distributed pamphlets by placing them in stacks on the top of buses, to be scattered as the vehicles pulled away.⁴⁴ Sharing pamphlets is the crime of the distributor, not the passive user who stoops to pick up an unknown piece of paper – or scroll across a comment posted on Facebook.

The second established practice that is likely to align with new communication technology is the long-standing salience of rumor in Myanmar, not as gossip but as a way to convey information word-of-mouth, outside of formal media or any organized authority.⁴⁵ Anointing this the “dominant form of discourse” during life under authoritarian rule, in 2003 anthropologist Monique Skidmore described rumor as a way to build community and a sense of intimacy, and a way to provide clarity and make sense of a world that could otherwise seem unintelligible and opaque.⁴⁶ Perhaps most importantly, rumor could enable decision making within extraordinarily difficult circumstances. “Rumors are extremely important,” she noted, “because they are one of the few forms of mundane information that allow individuals and families to speculate on outcomes, to gamble on courses of action, to assess options, and to weigh probabilities.”⁴⁷ It is no wonder, given long-standing media censorship and state propaganda, that people in Myanmar developed other approaches for transmitting and sharing information.⁴⁸

I have witnessed this latter use of rumor first hand, particularly at tense and bewildering moments. On March 20th 2013, for example, a mob of at least 1,000 people rampaged through the Muslim area of Meiktila, a town in central Myanmar; later, we would learn that at least 44 people had been killed, including some 20 children massacred in a school⁴⁹, and more than 10,000 people displaced⁵⁰ and 800

⁴³ Ibid., 184.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 188.

⁴⁵ This draws upon a definition of rumor, contrasted against legends, myths, gossip, hoaxes and conspiracy theories, offered in Pamela Donovan, “How Idle Is Idle Talk? One Hundred Years of Rumor Research,” *Diogenes* 54, no. 1 (February 1, 2007): 62, doi:10.1177/0392192107073434.

⁴⁶ Monique Skidmore, “Darker Than Midnight: Fear, Vulnerability, and Terror Making in Urban Burma (Myanmar),” *American Ethnologist* 30, no. 1 (2003): 13, doi:10.1525/ae.2003.30.1.5. See also, Monique Skidmore, *Karaoke Fascism: Burma and the Politics of Fear* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 45.

⁴⁷ Skidmore, “Darker Than Midnight,” 13.

⁴⁸ This is consistent with one of the most common explanations for why rumors spread and are relied upon, though this is not the only reason. See, Donovan, “How Idle Is Idle Talk?”

⁴⁹ Physicians for Human Rights, *Massacre in Central Burma: Muslim Students Terrorized and Killed in Meiktila*, May 2013, <http://physiciansforhumanrights.org/library/reports/meiktila-report-may-2013.html>.

⁵⁰ A year later, more than 3,300 remained displaced. See, Si Thu Lwin, “A Town Stained in Blood Takes Tentative Steps Toward Peace,” *The Myanmar Times*, March 21, 2014, <http://www.mmtimes.com/index.php/national-news/9924-a-town-stained-in-blood-takes-tentative-steps-toward-peace.html>.

buildings razed⁵¹. Soon after, smaller outbreaks of violence spread to other areas of Myanmar.⁵² When violence spread to another area, the feeling of tension in my neighbourhood in western Yangon was palpable. That night, our questions had a felt urgency: Were there really riots in other townships, as we had heard? Were homes being looted in the southern end of our neighbourhood, at that very moment? As we stood on the street and discussed these things that night, we had agreed to watch and listen and warn each other if needed. I had shared information from a news story just published that evening, saying that the rumors of riots in the other township were spreading but untrue. But how could one really know, and plan appropriately? The news media was unreliable, referencing a government source would prompt derisive laughter; accessing dependable information was difficult. What sources could be trusted? We had all felt more secure when an auntie on our block announced that she had spoken with friends in the area in question. “I called my friend who works in the market there,” the auntie told us. “She closed her shop but she said there is no fighting.”⁵³

Social media in general, and Facebook in particular, simulates these old forms of discourse to an uncanny degree. What is Facebook if not an online forum for spreading information word-of-mouth, click-by-click? One interacts with “friends” on Facebook, after all, who make comments and post links. The information shared via Facebook may be rumor or may be ‘news,’ but it always comes from friends and is stamped with their imprimatur of truth. News stories and state propaganda may still be beyond credulity, but they gain credibility when transmitted by friends and family. The latest incarnation of Facebook adds to this still, by aggregating posts by “friends” discussing the same topic. In real life, information gains credibility through repetition.⁵⁴ This can take time, and time can serve as a filter. On Facebook, repetition can happen in seconds. It is not just rumors that are shared; Facebook is used to share and monitor information from formal media and other organized authorities, just as formal media and organized authorities use it to disseminate this information. The monk who wished to criticize the American diplomats at the conference on religious harmony, for example, did so in response to a message distributed on the Facebook account used by the US Embassy.⁵⁵ He follows them on Facebook; they regularly update their account. U Wirathu has nearly 30,000 Facebook followers.⁵⁶

New technologies, meanwhile, enable speakers to reinforce the in-built credibility of word-of-mouth information with YouTube videos, photographs, and links to other information sources. For example, earlier in the same day after the violence in Meiktila, a friend had emailed me a Facebook link to a video of men speaking Burmese and threatening revenge for violence against Muslims. “The Muslims are going to be really angry now,” he had said as he called to make sure I had seen the video. “I just want to let you know to please be careful.” The video was clearly a fake, and in a Facebook post a few days later I wondered why it had been taken seriously in spite of its hackneyed dubbing and low quality.⁵⁷ At other times, I have had real-life debates about the likely veracity of such videos, often with neighbourhood friends that share my scepticism but nonetheless feel compelled by the emotional pull of the footage. In May 2013 a video was making the rounds, purporting to be of a Buddhist beheaded by Muslim extremists

⁵¹ Human Rights Watch, *Burma: Satellite Images Detail Destruction in Meiktila* (Human Rights Watch, April 1, 2013), <http://www.hrw.org/news/2013/04/01/burma-satellite-images-detail-destruction-meiktila>.

⁵² Jessica Phelan, “Myanmar: Anti-Muslim Violence Spreads Beyond Meikhtila,” *Global Post*, March 25, 2013, <http://www.globalpost.com/dispatch/news/regions/asia-pacific/myanmar/130325/myanmar-sectarian-violence-meikhtila>.

⁵³ After this Facebook post generated considerable discussion, it was repurposed for a blog post on *New Mandala*. See, Schissler, “Everyday Ethnic Tensions in Myanmar.”

⁵⁴ Ian Maynard Begg, Ann Anas, and Suzanne Farinacci, “Dissociation of Processes in Belief: Source Recollection, Statement Familiarity, and the Illusion of Truth,” *Journal of Experimental Psychology*, 1992.

⁵⁵ Schissler, “Sleeping Dogs.”

⁵⁶ Long, “Monk Expands Teachings.”

⁵⁷ Schissler, “Everyday Ethnic Tensions in Myanmar.”

in southern Thailand. “I don’t know if the person in the video is really Buddhist or not. But I saw it and when I see things like that, I feel it,” a friend told me as we had discussed the video on the corner one afternoon, motioning a punch as he spoke.⁵⁸ Later, after anti-Muslim riots in Lashio were sparked by rumors of violence against a Buddhist woman by a Muslim man, he and our other friends and I had agreed to be cautious about what to believe and not to spread misinformation. “If I don’t see it with my own eyes,” he had said, “I won’t do anything.” A few minutes earlier, another of the friends sitting with us had been earnestly attesting to the reliability of a video showing a monk being killed in Meiktila. “Do you want to watch it? I have it on my phone,” he told me. “Everyone does.”⁵⁹

It would be easy to dismiss this as the product of low education levels or the nascent familiarity audiences in Myanmar have with parsing multi-media content. Surely, a population that has not had ready access to such media will find it particularly compelling. There is something additionally persuasive about information conveyed via multimedia – but this is true of all audiences, not just those in Myanmar. Sunstein and Pariser wrote in an American political context where the moving pictures and inflammatory language of political attack ads on television help decide elections. Yet social media may generate dangerous dynamics not just because it is a platform that can help manifestly unreliable information seem reliable. Indeed, the information shared on Facebook and other platforms may be individually accurate, yet deeply problematic in aggregate. If information is sourced from media platforms that are only as neutral in their selection of what to present as those doing the filtering, the resulting picture will be skewed. Epistemic dependence is understandable when one accepts that cigarettes cause cancer, but it becomes dangerous when it dominates one’s understanding of the world. Burmese Buddhist Facebook users may see videos of a monk being killed, and no corollary videos of subsequent violence against Muslims. They will feel no less the victim under threat than Muslim users inundated with similar information and imagery.

It may also be that this analysis overplays the ascendant dominance of Facebook. The platform may decline in popularity, as some have recently predicted.⁶⁰ It is not, however, Facebook per se that is the issue so much as it is the alignment between any new media technologies that facilitate or encourage individuals to source information within cocoons of like-minded people, and established communication methods in Myanmar that encourage people to turn to and trust such sources. *Republic.com*, after all, was published before Facebook came to prominence, and the concerns Sunstein raised will last beyond the life of any one platform. The implication is not only that ‘echo chambers’ might emerge in Myanmar, but also that the combination of these echo chambers and already established methods of communication may have significant potential to persuade individual minds and shape their assemblage as popular consciousness. Sunstein was writing about the United States; his arguments may have even stronger applicability in Myanmar.

The above analysis results in a string of provisional statements that are sufficient to produce a strong initial hypothesis. Social media may encourage tendencies towards homophily. It may also encourage epistemic seclusion that reinforces existing views, makes them more extreme, or makes extreme views easier to logically adopt. These dynamics may be magnified in Myanmar, because of the country’s particular histories of authoritarianism and the correlative strategies required for survival and resistance. If this paper’s analysis is accurate, it would indicate that the expansion of Internet access in Myanmar,

⁵⁸ Matt Schissler, “Conversations after Lashio,” *New Mandala*, June 3, 2013, asiapacific.anu.edu.au/newmandala/2013/06/03/conversations-after-lashio/.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ John Cannarella and Joshua A. Spechler, “Epidemiological Modeling of Online Social Network Dynamics,” *arXiv:1401.4208 [physics]*, January 16, 2014, <http://arxiv.org/abs/1401.4208>.

particularly the rise of social media, will contribute to dynamics that have the potential to strengthen the ideological justifications necessary for mass violence.

Ultimately, the purpose of this paper is not to make morbid predictions as to if or when Myanmar may reach a tragic tipping point. Whilst observations about dynamics in the American political context are applicable in Myanmar, this alone is insufficient to illuminate the potential for future violence. Echo chambers have encouraged group polarization in the United States, but this has not meant an automatic slide into an ideological justification for mass violence. Such ideological justifications are necessary, but it is only when they combine with other factors that violence occurs. Nonetheless, this paper does highlight ways that the dynamics touched off by the introduction of social media may reverberate powerfully in Myanmar. That this conclusion is drawn based upon lessons from the American context indicates that these reverberations are not likely to fade with economic development, education, or time and the passage of key ‘trigger moments’ such as Myanmar’s 2015 elections or national census.⁶¹

The analysis in this paper also points to a new kind of opportunity: if the ways that the justifications for mass violence may be produced are better understood in Myanmar, it may be possible to disrupt them. Recognizing the negative effects of selective sharing of information and ideas within cocoons of like-minded people would indicate, for example, the limitations of exclusively relying on the law to regulate “hate speech” or pressing Facebook to remove objectionable material. Hate speech or speech that incites violence is dangerous, but to stretch the boundaries of these concepts so as to attach legal sanction to selective sharing of news and information would do harm.⁶² Each individual piece of information is not objectionable and becomes problematic in aggregate; more and more diverse information is needed, not less. Myanmar needs broader conversations about all the discourses that contribute to justifying mass violence, so that these discourses can be delimited as outside the bounds of what is acceptable – not as a matter of law, but of societal norm and personal commitment. To the degree that social media does become the dominant platform for mass communication of information and ideas, it may then be a powerful platform for challenging these discourses, and promoting alternate visions for the future.

⁶¹ International Crisis Group, *Myanmar Conflict Alert: A Risky Census - International Crisis Group*, February 12, 2014, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/publication-type/alerts/2014/myanmar-conflict-alert-a-risky-census.aspx>.

⁶² For a discussion of the limitations of these existing legal categories, see Susan Benesch, “Vile Crime or Inalienable Right: Defining Incitement to Genocide,” *Virginia Journal of International Law* Vol. 48, no. No. 3 (2008), <http://papers.ssrn.com/abstract=1121926>.