

New Technologies, Established Practices: Developing Narratives of Muslim Threat in Myanmar

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This chapter was prompted by concern for Buddhist-Muslim violence in Myanmar. Drawing methodological inspiration from a study into the significance of mobile phones in India (Jeffrey and Doron 2013; 2012), the chapter asks: What are established communication practices in Myanmar that might be disrupted – or align particularly powerfully – with the growing use of new technologies and media that will arrive along with telecommunications networks? The chapter seeks to answer this question using an approach of ‘observant participation’ (Vargas, in Hale & Calhoun 2008), drawing from experiences living in western Yangon and participating in activist networks seeking to disrupt anti-Muslim violence. After a section (I) detailing technological change under way in Myanmar, the chapter turns to a discussion of those established practices (habitus; metis) developed to communicate during life under authoritarian rule (section II). The section following then explores everyday narratives regarding Islam as they are currently produced by organized political forces and circulate online and through everyday life in western Yangon (section III). The final section (IV) discusses potential alignments between new technologies and established practices, situated in the context of these narratives.

During the first week of July 2014, violence between Buddhist and Muslim communities wracked Mandalay, Myanmar’s second largest city, leaving two persons – one Buddhist, one Muslim – dead and property belonging to both sides destroyed. ‘[S]cores of Buddhist men on motorcycles converged on a Muslim neighbourhood in Mandalay brandishing swords, yelling anti-Muslim slogans and ransacking Muslim shops... set off by reports that a Muslim man had raped a Buddhist woman,’ opened the coverage by the *New York Times* (Fuller and Moe 2014). ‘Facebook Post Stokes Anti-Muslim Violence in Mandalay,’ ran the headline for another news story, as it adduced the violence as deriving from the Facebook posts of a leading nationalist monk famous for his virulent anti-Muslim sermons (Mezzofiore 2014). Though not the first such violence in Myanmar, the incident marks the first time violence was explicitly connected to uses of social media. While coverage from other news outlets was slightly more cautious in drawing such causal connections,² civil society, religious leaders, and even Myanmar’s central

¹ This chapter also benefited from discussion and feedback on the following conference papers: “Whither the ‘moderate mainstream’? Religious violence and Myanmar’s changing information environment,” Islam, Law and the State in Myanmar, Centre for Asian Legal Studies, National University Singapore, 23-24 January 2014; “Echo chambers in Myanmar: Social media and the ideological justifications for mass violence,” Communal Conflict in Myanmar: Characteristics, Causes, Consequences, Australian National University Department of Political & Social Change Research Colloquium, Yangon, 17-18 March 2014.

² The *New York Times*, for example, noted that Facebook posts about the incident shared by a prominent Buddhist leader, ‘appeared to have partly spurred the violence.’ See Fuller and Moe 2014.

government seemed to take a similar position, with the latter going so far as to shut down access to Facebook for two nights because it ‘could lead to a bigger conflict’.³

Locating the cause of riotous violence in a social media post can seem misplaced in a country where only a fraction of the population is estimated to have access to the Internet.⁴ Mobile phones and Internet access are widespread in Mandalay, but other recent instances of violence have been experienced at times in places in Myanmar where Internet access had not yet expanded. Since June 2012 large-scale violence has occurred in Rakhine State and central Myanmar, where 140,000 and 3,000 people remain displaced, respectively (UNOCHA 2014; Si Thu Lwin 2014). Smaller scale incidents involving the destruction of mosques, homes, and shops belonging to Muslims have also occurred in areas as diverse as Shan and Kachin states in northern Myanmar, the former capital of Yangon, and Bago Region and Kayin State to the east.

New telecommunications infrastructure is under development, however, and will soon make mobile phone and Internet access available for the majority of Myanmar’s population, along with concomitant media and communication platforms. The pace of this growth is expected to be rapid, and while it is important to adopt a critical eye when appraising pronouncements of a future for Myanmar that is technologically determined,⁵ it is also important to consider the material effects of these technologies. Scholarship in the field of the history of technology is a persuasive reminder that it *matters* how technologies are able to accomplish particular purposes, both those they are designed for and those unforeseen, processes which interact with and help to constitute politics (Hecht 2001: 267). Thus the adage: ‘[t]echnology is neither good nor bad; nor is it neutral’, and technology may reflect, strengthen, perform, and change existing power relationships (Allen and Hecht 2001: 1, 10).

Significant changes to Myanmar’s technological and media environment are underway but still nascent; understanding their emergent interrelationship with Buddhist-Muslim violence is as much an anticipatory concern as it is yet an empirical one. Therefore, in an effort to open the way to further inquiry, this chapter will consider the potential alignments between newly-arriving technologies and those everyday communication practices developed as a part of surviving under, and sometimes contesting, decades of authoritarian rule in Myanmar. This approach is loosely based upon a similar 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 first asking how ideas and information had been communicated in the past. In doing so, Jeffrey and Doron were able to identify ways in which cheap mobile phones materially disrupted established practices; they then discuss the implications of these disruptions for gender

³ Disruptions were quickly noted after the second night of violence (*Eleven Myanmar* 2014b). Government authorities later confirmed that they were responsible for this disruption (*The Irrawaddy Blog* 2014).

⁴ Estimates on the exact percentage of the population that has access to the Internet vary. In a forum involving government, civil society and technology companies during July 2014, for example, government attendees estimated connectivity at less than 5 percent. Market research companies, meanwhile, have estimated the number as just 1 percent, while the Myanmar Computer Federation estimates 25 percent of the country is already online. Whatever the actual percentage is it is quite low, but changing rapidly. See for example, We Are Social 2014; *The Star* 2014.

⁵ Eric Schmidt, chairperson of Google, for example told a group assembled at the Yangon ICT Park in March 2013 that the country is set to ‘leapfrog 20 years of difficult-to-maintain infrastructure and go straight to the most modern... We have a chance to see how a new nation can shape itself, not just its own destiny, but also its relationships with neighbours, its economic growth and what I believe will be its extremely rapid social development.’ See Schmidt 2013.

and social relations as well as overtly political undertakings such as election campaigning (Jeffrey and Doron 2013; 2012).

What, then, are established communication practices in Myanmar that might be disrupted – or align particularly powerfully – with the growing use of new technologies and media that will arrive along with telecommunications infrastructure? In order to illustrate potential interactions between these established practices and new technologies, and consider their potential relationships to anti-Muslim antagonism and violence like that experienced in Mandalay, this chapter will make use of existing anthropological literature as well as my own experiences living in a working class neighbourhood along the Yangon River. Although this was not a premeditated ethnographic undertaking, while actively participating in a variety of civil society initiatives that seek to, *inter alia*, promote peace and prevent Buddhist-Muslim conflicts, I began employing a methodological approach of ‘observant participation’ (Vargas 2008: 165) in line with what some have described as an ‘activist’ or ‘engaged’ scholarship (Hale and Calhoun 2008). Wherever possible, observations discussed below are selected from those already published in occasional posts to a popular blog.⁶ While other reflections will also be included, those experiences already subjected to online discussion, debate, and re-interpretation are particularly well suited for a chapter concerned with the circulation of discourses on social media.

New Technologies

During the year 2012, when I first moved into western Yangon, only one friend in my ward had a mobile phone; within less than two years, nearly all of them did. This is an experience in the country’s urban centre, but it is being replicated nationwide. 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 four per cent of the population had mobile phones, though government statistics claimed 10 per cent – still the lowest penetration rate of any country in Asia save for North Korea (Ferrie 2013). In early 2014, two international telecoms companies, Ooredoo and Telenor, received operating licenses to establish new infrastructure across Myanmar; Ooredoo’s publicly stated target is to extend coverage to 97 per cent of the population within five years (*Reuters* 2014). Telenor’s goal is 90 per cent (Srisamorn 2014). The target set by U Thein Sein, Myanmar’s president, is slightly more modest: 80 per cent of the population by 2016 (*Eleven Myanmar* 2014a).

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 (We Are Social 2014). Elsewhere in the region, too, Internet access has meant large percentages of the population using social media such as Facebook and Twitter. A journalist commenting on recent data about the use of social media in Asia perhaps put it best: Facebook is not a website visited by Internet users, ‘Facebook *is* the Internet’ (Russell 2014, emphasis added). This is likely to hold true in Myanmar, with social media not as one website among many but as the dominant platform by which people make their way online.

⁶ The posts were first shared on Facebook, and then kindly published by *New Mandala*, a Southeast Asia focused blog affiliated with the Australian National University. See, <http://asiapacific.anu.edu.au/newmandala/author/matt/>.

In Myanmar, social media is already extremely popular. One regional marketing company, for example, identifies 1,240,000 Facebook users in the country (We Are Social 2014: 132). If the current estimate that approximately one per cent of the population has access to the Internet is accurate, this would represent more than two Facebook accounts for every Internet user in Myanmar. The messaging application known as Viber, meanwhile, boasts an even wider user base in Myanmar at five million users (Millward 2014). Underscoring the popularity of social media, Facebook 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. The President's spokesperson is known as the 'Facebook Minister,' for example, and winners of bids for offshore oil and gas concessions were recently announced by a ministerial Facebook status update. It is no wonder then that Myanmar journalists often scoop stories by trawling their newsfeeds.

Even Myanmar's monastic community, which lives an otherwise ascetic life, uses social media to access and disseminate information. At an event I attended to discuss harmony between religious communities, for example, a Buddhist leader criticised American diplomats in attendance for bias in their criticisms 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' (Schissler 2014a). A few chairs to his left sat U Wirathu, the religious leader whose Facebook posts have been credited with sparking the riots in Mandalay during July. In March 2014, U Wirathu had 29,958 followers on Facebook and was leading 'media trainings' to instruct attendees in how to use social media (Long 2014).

There are perhaps deceptively simple technological reasons for why Facebook may become particularly popular in Myanmar, unlike in China with its diversity of social media platforms (Fong 2012). Facebook can be installed on phones and tablets by users and phone shops, 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. Twitter, conversely, does not lend itself as well to use in Myanmar language, at least at the present moment. Those who have 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 correct fonts installed⁷, will know these are sufficiently compelling technological factors to determine choice of platform. These issues are being rapidly addressed, but it may not matter; 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 (Deibert 2013).

⁷ The process of making the Myanmar alphabet legible electronically has been an inconsistent one, and as of 2014 the majority of users continued to use font-based approaches rather than Unicode, creating a mishmash of legibility that technology companies have yet to resolve.

At the same time, care should be taken not to over-centralise any one platform. Facebook may decline in popularity, as some have recently predicted (Cannarella and Spechler 2014), and other applications will grow in popularity. Facebook and Viber are two units of analysis salient in the present moment, but the concerns of this chapter will be relevant for other platforms were they popular instead, or when they become so. It is, ultimately, important to approach the concept of ‘technology’ without prefiguring those considered to be most important (for example, ‘social media’). The reality invariably will be one in which multiple technologies are interacting with one another and with the existing social and power relations that they are simultaneously helping to re-shape (Sterne 2003). Myanmar’s telecommunications infrastructure is growing and this will introduce mobile phones, Internet access, and a host of applications and media sources not previously encountered by most people in the country, along with other important changes such as expansion of roads and electrification that are a necessary to power and maintain a new grid. This will be happening at the same moment that Myanmar’s economy is opening up to globalisation and people will be making use of a host of other material objects and technologies not previously encountered widely.

Established Practices

This section will explore two long established communication practices in Myanmar – rumours and the maintenance of plausible deniability – and their potential to align or be disrupted by new technologies and media. These are two strategies that contribute to managing risks, constructing communities, and accessing and disseminating information. This is not to drape over these strategies an ascribed functionality or, on the other hand, assume wholly autonomous agency for those employing them. But these strategies cannot be reduced to mechanical reactions, thoughtless reflexes, or the product of ignorance and low levels of formal education, though Myanmar’s national education system is in disarray. Instead, this section will examine them as *habitus*, Bourdieu’s formulation for history turned into nature, those practices that are both spontaneous, in that they are the immediate product of individual choices, and non-spontaneous, in that they are always rooted in those past conditions and structures that guide social action (Bourdieu 1995). *Habitus* is a useful heuristic for considering communication practices in Myanmar because it emphasises that they are techniques of the body that both dictate, and may be altered by, uses of new technologies (Sterne 2003: 380). ‘The “book” from which children learn their vision of the world is read with the body,’ Bourdieu notes (Bourdieu 1995: 90), just as, in updated form, there is always a person whose fingers are tapping on a tablet or a keyboard (Sterne 2003: 381).

The first potential alignment between existing practices and new communications technologies was reaffirmed for me in discussions following a presentation of some of the early thoughts that motivated this chapter, at a January 2014 conference hosted by the National University of Singapore (NUS). ‘Don’t you think you may be overplaying this whole Facebook thing? I would not expect it to become a form of vernacular media,’ a participant with a research focus 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 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 technology aligning with older practices that are deeply embedded within Myanmar. Information on social media platforms can be consumed by individuals who, though they have held the information in their hand, never have to lay claim to it as such. My Myanmar colleague at NUS was thus indirectly invoking Goffman’s framework for ratified and unratified participants in an exchange, those who are addressed and drawn in to communicating and those who remain outside yet listen in (Goffman 1981: 131–132). Applied to social media in Myanmar, this would mean that one may access information while maintaining the plausible deniability of a bystander, one who overhears communication but is not involved and thus not at risk. On social media this distance may be maintained while the message is nonetheless held close and engaged, with an intimacy and freedom to extend the encounter that is unavailable to a bystander who must position their body close enough to hear and, eventually, decide if they will risk entering into the exchange. It is understandable that SMS messages might be seen as the opposite given that the recipient is addressed directly, their participation ratified – an intimate encounter with information that risks culpability should the exchange face sanction later.

One may strengthen plausible deniability further by using fake identities online. Where companies such as Facebook officially seek to require the use of real names, this is only of limited distinguishing value given that people in Myanmar rarely use surnames. 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. If sharing objectionable material is a crime, it is the crime of the original poster not the user who scrolls by. This is a new version of the aphorism related by Christina Fink in *Living Silence*, her 2001 book about everyday life during military rule: ‘We have no mouths, only ears’ (Fink 2001: 128).⁸

Maintaining plausible deniability was then a mechanism for containing and controlling risk; with this maintained, one could push the boundaries of safety and acceptability. 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 schoolmates’. One could glance over the geography of previous readers to feel the presence of a community; but one needed not take risks to do so, beyond possessing a piece of nondescript literature (Fink 2001: 184). 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 (Fink 2001: 188). Sharing pamphlets is the crime of the distributor, not the bystander who stoops to pick up an unknown piece of paper. Bystanders may briefly read the message and maintain positioning as unratified and inculpable, unless and until they decide to pocket the message and declare their involvement in the exchange. The same pamphlet may be encountered on Facebook and consumed at leisure, the phone or tablet pocketed without any analogous declaration.

⁸ For an updated look at the uses of plausible deniability by social activists, see Prasse-Freeman 2012, 388.

The second established practice that is likely to align with newly-arriving communication technology is the long-standing salience of rumour in Myanmar, as a way to convey information word-of-mouth, outside of formal media or any organised authority.⁹ Anointing this the ‘dominant form of discourse’ during life under authoritarian rule, Monique Skidmore described rumour 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 (Skidmore 2003, 13; Skidmore 2004: 45). Rumour could also enable decision-making under difficult circumstances. ‘Rumours are extremely important,’ Skidmore 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’ (Skidmore 2003: 13).¹⁰ It is no wonder, given long-standing media censorship and state propaganda, that people in Myanmar developed such alternative approaches for transmitting and sharing information.¹¹

This latter use of rumour has been particularly evident to me at tense and bewildering moments. On 20 March 2013, for example, a mob of an estimated 1,000 people rampaged through the Muslim areas 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 school (Physicians for Human Rights 2013a), more than 10,000 people displaced,¹² and 800 buildings razed (Human Rights Watch 2013a). In the days after, smaller instances of violence occurred in other areas of Myanmar (Phelan 2013). As violence seemed to be spreading to other areas beyond Meiktila, the feeling of tension in my neighbourhood was palpable. That night, questions about violence had a visceral urgency: Were there really riots in other parts of Yangon, as we had heard? Were homes being looted in the southern end of our township, at that very moment? As my neighbours and I 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 rumours of riots in the other townships were spreading, but untrue. How, though, 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 people 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’ (Schissler 2013a).

The above analysis highlights the everyday practices of collecting information and of piecing together those available sources and things said or unsaid to construct an intelligible whole. Most illustrative of this are the regular interactions at the steps of my building, with neighbours and friends selling fruit and other wares from street stands there. These conversations about quotidian topics are also exercises in sharing information and talking over the news, international and local, from sources accessed online, on the radio and in print journals, and shared, re-shared, and discussed throughout the day (Schissler 2013c). All people do this of course, but there is an important corollary to rumour as the dominant form of discourse: people

⁹ This draws upon a definition of rumour offered by Pamela Donovan, which she contrasts against legends, myths, gossip, hoaxes and conspiracy theories: see Donovan 2007.

¹⁰ See also (Leehey 2010: 27).

¹¹ This is consistent with one of the most common explanations for why rumours spread and are relied upon, though this is not the only reason: see Donovan 2007.

¹² A year later, more than 3,300 remained displaced. See Si Thu Lwin 2014.

with decades of experience using rumour to manage life and maintain community in an environment of restricted information are perhaps *more* adept at gathering such collections and producing narratives than people accustomed to living with free media and without censorship. In the context of literature produced within this milieu, Jennifer Leehey has amply illustrated the skill required to both produce and interpret texts created in light of these constrictions (Leehey 2010). Broadly applied, James Scott's concept of *metis* provides the vocabulary for identifying the practical skills and acquired intelligence inherent in such communication strategies (Scott 1998: 313).

This last recognition is important, finally, because *metis* complicates the assumption underlying explanations like those given for the July riots in Mandalay, where it was said that an untrue rumour spread on Facebook and so incensed the city that a riot spontaneously burst forth. This is an assumption about society in Myanmar as credulous to the point of gullibility and thus ripe to be misled by rumours, spread with new technologies. There are certainly people in Myanmar who fit this description, as there are in any place, but identifying existing communication practices highlights that a more careful consideration of the uses of new technologies will be necessary. On the night of violence in Meiktila, for example, my friends and I stood on our corner discussing rumours of riots in other parts of Yangon. 'Did you check on the Internet? I heard they are fighting in Mingalataungnyunt [eastern Yangon]. Is it true?' a friend had asked me. As we discussed this rumour we considered what might be happening, sifting through the information we had available; hearsay, a media report, Facebook, and then, finally, a mobile phone call to the ostensibly afflicted location (Schissler 2013a). For me, the experience drove home what it is to function in an environment of limited and unreliable information. My friends handled it with the implicit skill, *metis*, that comes from regular practice.

Developing Narratives of Muslim Threat

To say that telecommunications infrastructure will bring new forms of media and they will become widely used in Myanmar is not controversial; it is already happening, as the high profile examples of government agencies, politicians and religious leaders using Facebook demonstrate. But these illustrate social media as an alternative publishing platform for those in positions of authority, both within the state and without. The above discussion of established communication practices is important because it highlights how these new technologies are likely to be used by millions of ordinary people in Myanmar, as they engage the everyday processes of exchanging pieces of information and assembling and reassembling these into intelligible pictures of the world. If people incorporate new technologies into their everyday processes of communication and information gathering what, if anything, will change? Jeffrey and Doron emphasise this as a matter of new possibilities: 'The new tool accords the possibility of... sav[ing] money independently of a spendthrift husband, infect[ing] others with commitment to a cause, or communicat[ing] with a sweetheart without approval of the family.' It was the cumulative effect of these changed dynamics that they found to have had deep reverberations across Indian society (Jeffrey and Doron 2013: 11, 14).

When the goal is to understand the development of violence and Buddhist-Muslim antagonism, however, it will not be sufficient to search for the *effects* of new technologies, for this would presume their centrality. In his exploration of the relationship between growths in televised media and Hindu nationalism in India, Arvind Rajagopal highlights the importance of instead considering the interrelationship between possibilities attendant to new media technology

and the particularities of a given historical moment. In India, new possibilities created by growth in print media and audio-visual broadcasting did not *cause* Hindu nationalism, but neither could nationalism be understood without considering the new technology (Rajagopal 2001). In Myanmar, it can be similarly said that political contests and conflicts will unfold in light of what newly arriving technologies make possible. This could be said of most new communication technologies in most places most of the time, but exploring existing communication practices helps to highlight why it may be significant in Myanmar: new technologies likely to reshape the everyday production of narratives are arriving at precisely a moment when narratives about the country, its past, and its future are being wrenched open and contested with new force and possibility.

After more than sixty years of military rule, Myanmar is at the final stage of a seven-step 'roadmap to Discipline Flourishing Democracy,' which has featured a shift to law-making in parliament and the release of political prisoners, ceasefire negotiations with ethnic armed groups, reduction of pre-publication censorship, and the lifting of bans on public assembly, unions and political organising. These changes have been hailed as the country's 'perestroika' and a 'Burma spring' (Selth 2011; Della-Giacoma 2011), and bring with them fraught contests for power between a military that is ostensibly retreating to its barracks yet backing a ruling party, and an opposition that is both fractured and led by a national icon and Nobel prize-winner Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. In an email missive circulating among political activists in early 2014, a friend characterized this as two bulls racing towards each other on a field; I share this vision, playing out on a field being experienced in daily life as a dissolution in the markers of certainty (Lefort 1988: 19). These changes have also enabled western countries to remove or weaken economic sanctions, a process that, along with domestic economic reforms, has touched off an intensified re-engagement with global flows of capital and culture. Telecommunications infrastructure is thus both a metaphor for the country's reencounter with globalisation and part of the material process by which it is becoming possible.

The state and society in Myanmar will be experiencing a media and technology upheaval at the same time they are, with an unusual lateness, encountering the fullness of contemporary globalisation with which societies throughout the rest of the world have been contending for decades. Coca-Cola for example, oft used marker for the spread of global capital and culture (Foster 2008; Lowe 2012), ended its 60-year absence from Myanmar in 2012, leaving North Korea and Cuba as the only remaining markets in which Coke is not officially sold (Jordan 2012). This encounter is bringing long-absent investment capital and development activity. But, in a place with an established cadre of crony capitalists and a state that rationalises use of force more than it regulates, it is also opening the way for extraction of natural resources and expropriation of land that is leaving most of the country far behind.

Consideration of developing conflicts between Buddhist and Muslim communities in Myanmar must take these broader issues into account. It is not sufficient to locate inquiry exclusively in the history of relations between communities or the individual antagonisms within the hearts of people in Myanmar, just as it is not sufficient to seek out effects caused by new technologies and media. Arjun Appadurai, for example, has argued that encounter with globalisation generates a sense of social uncertainty that undergirds collectivised violence. Appadurai sought to understand the regularity of mass violence against civilians during the 1990s, identifying it as produced by the loss of national economic sovereignty inherent in the logic of globalisation, a loss that is simultaneously a challenge to the conviction that national identity will remain fixed and permanent so long as its geographic boundaries are defended. In

such contexts, exclusion and violence against minorities are not spontaneous outbursts but projects that create the ‘macabre form of certainty’ needed to restore majority identities that have been made newly vulnerable (Appadurai 2006, 5–7).

The point is not to argue that Myanmar’s reencounters with democracy or globalisation make violence inevitable. Indeed this would be too similar to those problematic interpretations of Buddhist-Muslim violence as tragic growing pain and the inevitable dark side of new freedoms, political conflict, or a weak state. Quite the opposite: ‘These account only for the characters,’ Appadurai notes. ‘We need to look elsewhere for the plot. And the plot – worldwide in its force – is a product of the justified fear that the real world game has escaped the net of state sovereignty and interstate diplomacy’ (Appadurai 2006, 43). Appadurai’s theatre metaphor is similar to one employed by Paul Brass, whose study of Hindu-Muslim violence in north India is also instructive (Brass 1997; Brass 2003). For both Brass and Appadurai, violence is a production that must be mobilised, contingent on the construction of ideological scripts of fear and antagonism. These are not ‘age old hatreds,’ though they are historically situated, but narratives that are promoted by organised political forces.

This script for fear and antagonism is evident in Myanmar. ‘Fear is not just on the side of the Muslims, but on the side of the Buddhists as well,’ Daw Aung San Suu Kyi told the BBC during an October 2013 interview. ‘There’s a perception that Muslim power, global Muslim power, is very great’ (*BBC News* 2013). She was pilloried for this interview,¹³ but her description was important for it summarised a fear that is being mobilised, and located it as both surrounding Myanmar’s borders and embodied in a domestic minority. Organised political forces calling for the protection of ‘race and religion’¹⁴ have gained increasing prominence as they have identified Islam as an existential threat to Buddhist nationhood, and Muslims within Myanmar as the vanguard. These groupings have undertaken popular national campaigns calling for the boycott of Muslim-owned businesses, passage of national laws restricting inter-faith marriage, and the restriction of citizenship for Muslims (see Nyi Nyi Kyaw, this volume). Though at times seeking to position themselves as officially non-partisan, they have nonetheless received public support from a wide array of public and political figures, government officials, the state body that oversees Myanmar’s monastic order, and some members of ethnic armed groups.

The most virulent examples of this discourse have attracted international attention, such as the rhetoric of U Wirathu, the Buddhist leader whose posts were credited with sparking the July riots in Mandalay and who a *TIME* Magazine cover story had earlier branded the ‘Face of Buddhist Terror’ (Beech 2013). But a narrative of global threat must be given certitude through circulation and interaction in everyday life. Propaganda and organised campaigning are necessary but not sufficient; they also rely on what Appadurai calls ‘little stories,’ those individual pieces of information and quotidian conflicts that are both interpreted in light of the larger script and fixed within it as the illustrations that imbue it with personalised meaning (Appadurai 2006, 91).

The relationship between narratives deployed by organised political forces and circulation in everyday life has become particularly apparent to me over the last two years, as I

¹³ David Blair of the *Telegraph* (UK), for example, called her remarks ‘deeply disturbing’ and went on to mock the idea that a Buddhist majority could fear a Muslim minority. See, Blair 2013.

¹⁴ These include the ‘969’ movement, named for Buddhist numerology; the ‘Organisation for the Protection of Race and Religion’, often referenced by its Myanmar language abbreviation ‘Ma Ba Tha;’ and a handful of nationalist youth organisations.

have spent evenings sitting on the street corners in my ward, eating, drinking rough tea or beer, and discussing a variety of issues. I have similar discussions in the neighbourhood teashops, where I sit nearly every morning, and in other regular interactions with friends and neighbours. My friends in the neighbourhood are electricians, carpenters, trishaw or van-for-hire drivers (not owners), wage labourers, seamen on container ships. Religion, politics, and history are not uncommon topics, though as the tension in the overall milieu has increased I have become more cautious about the friendly debates over Buddhist-Muslim relations in which I once participated.

In these conversations, I have noted a variety of discourses that repeat and illustrate misperceptions about Islam and fear of – and antagonism towards – Muslim communities. The first time Islam arose as a topic, a friend told me that the symbol ‘786,’ which is often displayed at Muslim-owned businesses, meant that Islam would take over the world in the 21st century, ‘because seven plus eight plus six equals twenty-one’. Such claims are repetitions of those made by nationalist leaders, which combine to envision Myanmar as the final missing link in a contiguous chain of Muslim countries that have been steadily expanding from northern Africa to Mindanao. ‘Look at Indonesia,’ I am implored to remember. ‘It used to be a Buddhist country, now it isn’t’ (Schissler 2013b). The invasion described is one of population growth, creeping in from Malaysia and Bangladesh and with Muslim men given rewards for marrying and converting Buddhist women and incentives for having large families.

‘My father is Buddhist but my mother is Christian. If my father was Muslim, this could not be,’ another friend explained as we debated the credibility of these threats. But there is a slippage between the abstract and historical and those ‘little stories’ that are personalised and local. Forced conversions are a tragedy that is described as happening to specific Buddhist women in specific places, nearby; actual Muslim families with multiple children are pointed out as proof of looming population growth. Anecdotes of revulsion at butchering during Eid al-Adha are used to demonstrate a tendency towards violence inherent in Islam, while Muslim prosperity is highlighted to illustrate ascendant Muslim dominance within Myanmar. Many Muslim families are poor, but many others are involved in aspects of the economy that are highly visible; construction companies, import-export businesses, sites of wealth which one may encounter on an everyday basis. Personal experiences of disrespect in a place of work similarly confirm individual qua collective victimisation. ‘On my ship, the Muslim seaman rudely threw away my pork curry before I had finished it,’ another friend recounted to me, an experience that would have represented an additionally powerful attack had the tanker been Muslim-owned (Schissler 2013a).

Disruptions and Possibilities

Understanding the production of Buddhist-Muslim antagonism in Myanmar will thus require seeking to discover if and how new technologies are re-shaping both the efforts of organised political forces to produce narratives of fear and antagonism and the circulation of those ‘small stories’ that repeat and illustrate them. In Myanmar, new technologies and media are only just arriving and, as such, disruptions and possibilities are only just emerging. This chapter has argued that new technologies will be actively used as a part of narrative production, as people collect and share the news and information that is used to make sense of an uncertain world. Before closing, this chapter will consider some of the ways that new technologies have already begun to be involved in narrative production in Yangon.

These closing observations are not meant to be a comprehensive explication of the ways that new technologies are or may become significant, just as the point of the preceding section was not to extrapolate conclusions regarding currents in national opinion. This chapter is, after all, drawing primarily from experiences in just one neighbourhood in one city in Myanmar. Instead, this chapter will close with examples that are sufficient to illustrate connections between those organised efforts to call forth scripts of anti-Muslim fear and antagonism, their reinforcement through repetition and illustration in everyday discourse, and potential disruptions and possibilities attendant to new technologies and media.

Telecommunications infrastructure will offer materially effective tools for gathering the constituent pieces that combine into narratives about the world. These networks will bring James Scott's distance-demolishing technologies (Scott 2009), with the potential to stretch communication across geographic space, as with the auntie who called another part of the city to confirm news about rumoured riots; she had only purchased her mobile phone a few months earlier. SMS messaging and Viber will assist with this. Social media can demolish distance as well. Some would expect communication with new technologies such as social media to be primarily phatic (Miller 2008; Leibold 2011). But much of everyday conversation is phatic, and yet important feelings and information are conveyed; the same can be said of communication with new technologies. Rumour and information gathering as *habitus* also explains why it is reasonable to anticipate that new technologies will be incorporated into these existing practices: as the residuals of those sedimented histories that combine to produce a practice persist, so should the practice.

Simultaneously, uses of new technologies will assist with the restructuring of *habitus* (Bourdieu 1995: 78). The regularity of communication on Viber and with Facebook may, for example, enable individuals to push boundaries and establish that previously verboten activities are possible without fear of sanction. My Myanmar interlocutors at the NUS cafeteria table may, then, come to be incorrect; as the necessity of plausible deniability for surviving under a capricious regime is experienced as less necessary, use of direct messaging via SMS or platforms like Viber may increase. Conversely, as these platforms are used they may assist with reducing the felt need for plausible deniability. There is a kind of exhilaration that accompanies the act of sharing when such acts were previously proscribed. This feeling can become a sense of obligation or responsibility when the information shared is a warning, such as a call for defending nation and religion against an existential threat.

To the extent that people employ new technologies for the everyday act of sharing information, these technologies may strengthen the persuasive power of the individual pieces of information that are exchanged. Information sourced from friends and family is often stamped with an implicit imprimatur of truth, whether it is rumour or whether it is news. News stories and state propaganda may still be beyond credulity, but they gain credibility when re-transmitted by friends and family. Social media can both supplement and simulate the inter-personal practice of collecting information, an online mechanism for sharing and accessing information word-of-mouth, tap-by-tap. On Facebook, one interacts with 'friends,' after all, who make comments and post links. The latest incarnation of Facebook adds to this still, by aggregating posts by 'friends' discussing the same topic. Information gains credibility through repetition (Begg, Anas, and Farinacci 1992). In real life this can take time, and time can serve as a diluent. With new technologies, repetition can happen with new reach, pace, and regularity (Osborn 2008).

New technologies also reinforce the in-built credibility of word-of-mouth information with videos, photographs, and links to other information sources. Earlier in the day after the

violence in Meiktila, for example, a friend had emailed me a Facebook link to a grainy video of men with automatic weapons and faces masked by scarves, accompanied by a Burmese-language audio track 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 conspicuous dubbing and low quality (Schissler 2013a).

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 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 neighbourhood friend told me as we had discussed the video on the corner one afternoon, motioning a punch as he spoke. Later, after anti-Muslim riots in Lashio were said to have resulted from rumours of violence against a Buddhist woman by a Muslim man, we 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 killed in Meiktila. ‘Do you want to watch it? I have it on my phone,’ he told me. ‘Everyone does’ (Schissler 2013b).

It would be easy to explain the pull my friends identified in these videos as the product of low education levels or the nascent familiarity audiences in Myanmar have with parsing multimedia 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 for all audiences, not just those in Myanmar. In my own political context in the US, for example, the moving pictures and inflammatory language of televised political attack ads help decide elections. Perhaps that is the point: Myanmar audiences will now be encountering those visual presentations of information and ideas that are powerful for audiences the world over.

The above analysis indicates that new technologies will enable information and ideas to be shared and narratives developed across distances, at greater speeds, and with new credibility and persuasive power. These possibilities are inherent in new technologies, but to focus on them exclusively is to assume a kind of false consciousness for people in Myanmar in which Buddhist-Muslim conflicts are primarily a function of ‘untrue’ information made newly available and accepted. This is, after all, the premise underlying the government’s decision to temporarily restrict access to Facebook after the Mandalay riots. But considering new technologies in light of the production of broad scripts of Muslim threat makes clear the radical insufficiency of focusing on individual little stories, because it is not their discrete presence or absence that completes or alters the script. On reflection, it is not likely that my friend felt compelled to email me and then follow up with a phone call because the grainy video he had shared was dispositive evidence of an imminent threat. It need not be; the virtual terrorist figures it presented were a synecdoche for a threat already established and located in Muslim bodies throughout Myanmar. That the faces of the figures were masked and bereft of any visual connection to the disembodied Burmese language dialogue dubbed over the video is a kind of confirmation that the particular fact of their bodies did not matter, only the threat that they signified.

I have certainly learned this during neighbourhood conversations, where early on I had to take care in contesting the veracity of individual stories. At first, this decision was a practical one: my language skills could only reach so far into a nuanced discussion of information sources. Such discussions also always risked dead-ending with reference to another source who was an eye-witness, at which point I would need to accept the story or find myself in the uncomfortable position of impugning the word of a friend or family member of a friend. Over time, however, it became clear that the individual stories were not the crux of the matter; it was their aggregate power that proved larger points about Islam and Buddhist-Muslim relations. Indeed some of the information was true, discussed on our corners and referenced on Facebook. By all accounts, a monk *was* killed in Meiktila. The video shared phone-to-phone by my friends was compelling, but it was no more untrue rumour than the news from Muslim countries that I see regularly discussed in Burmese on Facebook. Atrocities by ISIS in Syria and Iraq; abductions and murders committed by Boko Haram; violence in the Central African Republic; these are just news stories, neither falsity nor the virulent hate speech that attracts international media attention – but they nonetheless support a presentation of Islam as violent and threatening (Schissler 2014b).

Like the video of anonymous masked men, news stories about violence and Islam reinforce the larger script of Buddhism under threat. These connections are made by organised political forces and in everyday conversations but, once established, the connection no longer need be explicitly invoked. Such stories, on my Facebook newsfeed and in my ward, are merged into a sonic background in which their recurrence is significant not for their detail but for their tonal consistency. As a daily occurrence, such stories become a mnemonic recitation that confirms both the existence of the threat as perceived and, also, of the community of perceivers. Just as the terrorist figure in the video is synecdoche for threatening Muslim bodies in Myanmar, the individual who repeats the story is synecdoche for a nationalist movement qua nation that shares the same concern. Posts on social media are mnemonic insofar as, encountered in their frequency, they are a persistent reminder of the membership and vigilance of a community that shares this perception of threat, just as this is confirmed in the regular encounter with iconography of nationalist organisations or in the nodding of heads at sermons, public talks, or around the teashop table. Bystanders that encounter these mnemonics are thusly reminded not just of the plot, but of their simultaneous smallness and role within something larger.

As telecommunications infrastructure arrives, people in Myanmar will be encountering ideas and information in new ways and more often. They will be able to participate in these encounters, shaping, sharing and repeating them, and it will all be faster and reach further than ever before. *Habitus* formed out of decades of life under authoritarian rule will change. This chapter, however, helps clarify future research necessary for understanding interrelationships between new technologies and production of Buddhist-Muslim violence and antagonisms throughout Myanmar. That is, future inquiry will need to consider not just the effects of technology and media on the ways people encounter news and information, but whether and how new subjectivities – individual and collective – are emerging that would not or could not have emerged in their absence; are new media technologies significant as a matter of convenience, as James Holston has put it, or something else (Holston 2014: 899)? Even without new technologies, for example, it is possible for people in Myanmar to encounter news and information about the apocryphal threats Buddhism faces from Islam, as is made clear by the occurrence of violence in places and at times that predate the expansion of telecommunications infrastructure. But as the above discussion begins to indicate, the introduction of new technologies is entailing profound changes that matter not just for their functional effects but also

affect, imbricated in the everyday ways people in Myanmar are seeking to navigate an uncertain reencounter with globalization and democratic politics. Consideration of new possibilities attendant to telecommunications infrastructure, then, will need to look beyond simply those acts that become possible, and ask what, if anything, is changing in both the ways that people develop the narratives that organise their worlds and in the content of the narratives themselves. Technologies matter, as Hecht says; will the production of Buddhist-Muslim violence be any different?

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