

WORLD

This Is What Happens When Millions Of People Suddenly Get The Internet

Less than 1% of Myanmar had internet access until 2014. Now the country is getting online at an astonishing rate — but so is fake news and anti-Muslim sentiment. Sheera Frenkel finds out what happens when everyone you know joins Facebook at the same time.



Sheera Frenkel
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YANGON, Myanmar — The internet brought Donald Trump to Myanmar. Or, at least that's how Shar Ya Wai first remembers hearing about the Republican president-elect.

"One day, nobody knew him. Then, everyone did. That's what the internet is. It takes people who say crazy things and makes them famous," the 19-year-old student said.

Like most people in this country of 50 million, which only recently opened up to the outside world, Shar Ya Wai is new to the internet. And on this day, she had walked purposefully into a phone shop in central Yangon to buy her first smartphone, a simple model by China's Huawei that is popular among her friends. "Today I'll buy this phone," she said. "I guess I'll find out how crazy [the internet] really is."

It's not that she'd never seen the internet before. She'd tried to stalk ex-boyfriends through a friend's Facebook page and caught glimpses of the latest Thai pop bands on her uncle's old tablet, which he bought secondhand a year ago. But her forays into the internet have been brief and largely left her perplexed. Here was a public space where everyone seemed to have so much to say, but it was disorganized, bombastic, overwhelming. It felt like the polar opposite of the quiet, sheltered life she'd lived until recently.

"My father is a measured person. He speaks carefully and always wanted us to speak carefully too," she said, smoothing down her waist-length black hair, betraying her nerves. "I'm more energetic, like my mom. We speak a lot more, but it is nothing like what I see on the internet."

It was her father who wanted her to put off buying a phone until she was old enough to "use it safely," though she wasn't really sure what that meant. She thought he might be referring to the men who post crass and vulgar photos online. Or he might be worried about the various scammers who are increasingly targeting the nascent internet in Myanmar. She wasn't sure because no one had ever told her how to stay safe online — what to do, or say, or write.

Still, on this day in mid-July, Shar Ya Wai pushed herself out of a crowded store in central Yangon, holding the cellophane-wrapped cell phone as though it were an injured bird. Her fingers cradled the top and felt for the button that would turn it on, but then hesitated.

“Maybe I should wait until later. I should wait until I’m with my family,” she said, and then admitted, “I’m scared.”

She has reason to be afraid. For nearly five decades, Myanmar lived under military dictatorships that suppressed all forms of dissent and limited free speech, leading to US and European sanctions that largely cut off the country from the rest of the world. That changed in 2011, when the military junta was officially dissolved and a nominally civilian government was established. In 2015, in the first national election since the military eased its hold, Aung San Suu Kyi’s National League for Democracy Party was voted into power. Of the changes to hit the largely Buddhist country since then, few have been as drastic — and as rapid — as the sudden arrival of the internet to the general public. It revolutionized everything, from how people interact with one another to how they get their news, once the exclusive purview of hyper-regulated state-sanctioned media.

“People don’t talk about the normal news they see on Facebook. They talk about the crazy stuff. I never knew about Trump and then everyone was talking about him.”

Today, news sites have become so popular that print magazines called *Facebook* and *The Internet* regurgitate stories spotted online for stragglers who have not yet joined the internet revolution. Many of them feature sensational and salacious tales, cribbed from Facebook pages with a very loose definition of facts. Drinking ice-cold water while eating hot food will give you a stomach ache! Angelina Jolie has secretly adopted a Burmese baby but is keeping it locked away due to a deformity! A Thai cabinet minister is secretly dating an Olympic gymnast!

These stories, at least, do little harm. But there has also been an increase in articles that demonize the country’s minority Muslim community, with fake news claiming that vast hordes of Muslim worshippers are attacking Buddhist sites. These articles, quickly shared and amplified on social media, have correlated with a surge in anti-Muslim protests and attacks on local Muslim groups.

Violence against Myanmar's minority Muslim community has plagued the country for decades; in the last month, 70 Rohingya Muslims were killed in a wave of violence so intense that Human Rights Watch says the burned-down villages can be viewed from satellites in space. Mobilized by the sudden freedom of online platforms like Facebook, groups that once lived on the fringes of the political landscape, such as radical Buddhist anti-Muslim groups, have suddenly found supporters across the country. And, what's more, those supporters have found solidarity in extreme movements around the world, including the more radical, nationalist American groups, like the Ku Klux Klan, that have supported Trump.

If fake news had the power to influence people's minds during the US elections, in a country with a well-established mainstream media landscape, what could it do in Myanmar, with a nascent news media, only recently freed from the military's stranglehold?

"People don't talk about the normal news they see on Facebook. They talk about the crazy stuff. I never knew about Trump and then everyone was talking about him," Shar Ya Wai said. She remembered getting into a fight with one friend who suggested that a Muslim family living in his middle-class suburb should be evicted, because Trump was going to ban Muslims and that it seemed like a good idea. "My friend was saying, 'That is a good idea. We should do like America and do it here too. No more Muslims!'"

Her friend, like many in Myanmar, had gone online, discovered an extreme point of view, and then used it to reaffirm his own ideology within his country's political ecosystem. Today's internet was built for that sort of sharing. It is often the voices that shout the loudest, and tell the most outlandish stories, that are most likely to make it to the top of the News Feed — whether the news itself is real or fake. Despite debate in the US over the role that fake news played in the recent presidential elections, Facebook has maintained that it did not play a large role. Mark Zuckerberg initially argued that it was "extremely unlikely" that fake news affected the vote, although he later said he did take the issue seriously. Facebook employees who spoke to BuzzFeed News have suggested that content should be marked as verified, if it comes from trusted news sources.

Facebook's influence in Myanmar is hard to quantify, but its domination is so complete that people in Myanmar use "internet" and "Facebook" interchangeably. According to Amara Digital, a Yangon-based marketing agency, Facebook has doubled its local base in the last year to 9.7 million monthly users. That number is likely to spike again, after Facebook launched its Free Basics program, a free, streamlined version of Facebook and a handful of other sites.

There was this idea, Shar Ya Wai said, that Facebook was for saying anything you wanted.

And that's what's been happening — from extremist monks to political cartoonists. Dozens of people have been jailed for what they've written on Facebook, though human rights groups say the exact number is unknown as many arrests go unreported, especially outside the city centers, where the legal system is not as closely monitored.

For many in Myanmar, the internet and Facebook brought with it the banner of free speech and American values — but no one had told them what would happen if they tested the values of free speech under a government still feeling its way out of military control. Was it the responsibility of Facebook, or their own government, to teach them how to safely use the internet? Would Facebook protect them for what they wrote online? How do you give people the internet they crave while keeping them safe? And given how many Americans, including Trump, fell for fake news during the elections, how were people in Myanmar expected to judge what was real and what was fake?

Shar Ya Wai did, eventually, turn the phone on, after a stall next to the mobile store told her they couldn't activate the SIM card and data plan without activating the phone and dialing in to one of Myanmar's local carriers, MTN. As she left the store, her phone was on, though Facebook and other apps remained closed. "I will use Facebook. I have to ... that is the world."

She agreed to keep in touch over the next few weeks as she got used to life with the internet in her pocket.

Back in 2011, a SIM card for a mobile phone could cost upwards of \$3,000, and was available only to those with high-level government connections. A handful of internet cafés existed, most of them in the capital, but were far too expensive for the average person. Less than 0.2% of the country was online, according to the International Monetary Fund.

In the years immediately following the easing of military's rule, internet use climbed slowly. Laptops were rare and desktops rarer still. It wasn't until 2014, when the country opened its doors to international telecom companies, that the floodgates really opened. Suddenly, mobile towers were everywhere.

“In 2011, our subscribers were in the thousands. Now, we are at 35 million in a country of 50 million,” said Elaine Weidman-Grunewald, vice president of sustainability and corporate responsibility at telecoms giant Ericsson. She visited the country earlier this year to check in with a program Ericsson is running to provide internet access and tablets to 31 schools in rural Myanmar, reaching roughly 22,000 students. In many cases, the tablets were the student's first, and only, access to the internet. “The rate of mobile use in Myanmar is unbelievable. The first six months of this year, Myanmar was in the top three countries globally with new mobile subscriptions.”

The World Bank estimates that roughly 20% of Myanmar is now online, most of that in just the last two years. In comparison, internet use in the United States, where commercial providers began to offer the internet access in late 1989, took seven years to reach a point where 20% of the US was online. In India, which is one of the fastest growing internet markets in the world, internet use took off in 2000, but didn't reach 20% of the population until mid-2015.

Myanmar, said Weidman-Grunewald, was unique in that its isolation from the internet was so complete for so long, and then, just as quickly, it opened up its whole country to the whole, unfiltered internet.

Nowhere is the sudden growth as evident as in the shops underneath the golden peaks of the Sule Pagoda in downtown Yangon. Sheltered beneath the awning of the pagoda, shops that once sold stamps and watches have disappeared, replaced by storefronts crammed with mobile phones and accessories.

“This is all anybody buys,” said Mai Thu Sien, a 19-year-old salesman. He didn’t seem bothered to be squeezed onto a street bustling with other shops selling exactly the same thing. “There are many customers for phones. People buy and buy.”

For the equivalent of \$3, Mai Thu Sien sets up an email address, opens up a Facebook account in any name the customer wants, and sends them on their way. When asked whether customers choose their own email address, Mai Thu Sien looked confused. “Nobody asks, they don’t care about the email,” he said, explaining that most don’t know that creating an email address is free, and easy. “No one is using that. They have Facebook.”

If they forget their login information, or get signed out, they simply come in for a new Facebook account. Of the dozens of people interviewed by BuzzFeed News in Myanmar, all said they had more than one Facebook account. None knew about Facebook’s policy that users must use their real names.

Two days after she bought her phone, Shar Ya Wai sent a text message saying that she'd opened up an account and was adding friends.

"I only have 12 right now," she said, adding that a friend of her brother's had set up the account and that she too had no idea it was linked to email address. "Everyone is really nice. My friend put up photos of a trip together to Mandalay."

"It's not as bad as I thought," she said.



A street vendor selling mobile phone accessories in Yangon on July 17.

Minzayar Oo / BuzzFeed News

The taxi raced down a slip road to the airport and then juddered to a halt in front of a small shack with chickens pecking outside. Ashin Wirathu, a monk whose hardline anti-Muslim positions have earned him the nickname “the Burmese Bin Laden,” smiled as he rolled down his window to chat with a journalist he recognized. Wirathu — who has been imprisoned for sermons calling for the persecution of the Muslim Rohingya minority — was heading off to the airport for a vacation, but couldn’t resist one more chance to get his name in the news.

Wirathu rose to prominence as part of a group of extremist monks once known as the Association for the Protection of Race and Religion, and then the “969” movement. Today, they are called Ma Ba Tha, after their Burmese acronym. Since the end of military rule, monks have assumed an increasingly public role in the largely Buddhist country. Wirathu, and the Ma Ba Tha movement, have denied any role in the Buddhist lynch mobs, which, in recent years, have killed more than 200, and displaced more than 150,000 of the country’s Muslims, who make up roughly 4% of the total population. Civil society groups allege that the state’s security forces have fomented recent outbreaks of violence against the Rohingya. But there is no denying that Ma Ba Tha’s bashing of Muslims as “cruel and savage” is often repeated by those who want to see all Muslims expelled from Myanmar — and they admit that their anti-Muslim stance has gained its largest following through Facebook.



The controversial Buddhist monk Wirathu.

Thierry Falise / Getty Images

This week, following news that Trump's administration was being staffed with hardliners, Wirathu released a statement hailing Trump's White House as a victory in the fight against "Islamic terrorism."

"May US citizens be free from jihad. May the world be free of bloodshed," Wirathu wrote in a public statement. It was one of many Trump received from figures across the world who appeared to feel emboldened by his win.

It was not the first time Wirathu had taken to Facebook to bolster his position globally. Following his release from jail in January 2012, where he had served a seven-year prison sentence for inciting anti-Muslim pogroms in 2003, Wirathu immediately took to the platform.

"If the internet had not come to [Myanmar], not many people would know my opinion and messages like now," Wirathu told BuzzFeed News, adding that he had always written books and delivered sermons but that the "internet is a faster way to spread the messages."

His first account was small, he said, and almost immediately deleted by Facebook moderators who wrote that it violated their community standards. The second had 5,000 friends and grew so quickly he could no longer accept new requests. So he started a new page and hired two full-time employees who now update the site hourly.

"I have a Facebook account with 190,000 followers and a news Facebook page. The internet and Facebook are very useful and important to spread my messages," he said.

On the dozens of Facebook pages he runs out of a dedicated office, Wirathu has called for the boycott of Muslim businesses, and for Muslims to be expelled from Myanmar. He said he has a hard time keeping the pages open, since Facebook keeps shutting them down. He manages, nonetheless, to maintain an ever-growing online following.

“I’m glad blocking exists.”

In Yangon, tour operator Win Lo Latt said he had initially read stories of a hardline monk in the newspapers, but that his first real exposure to Wirathu was through his son’s Facebook account. “A lot of what he teaches makes sense, but the state newspaper make him seem like he is racist,” said Win Lo Latt, 54. “Muslims do a lot of damage to Burmese society. Wirathu is not afraid to say it.”

Since coming across a video of Wirathu’s teachings on Facebook, he has started following him regularly. He said he learns, “a lot of new information about how Muslims hurt the country,” and that he encourages his friends to read Wirathu’s teachings too.

Several of the posts he showed BuzzFeed News on his phone featured photographs of ISIS beheading rows of men in Iraq. The caption for the photos read “Muslim terrorists beheading Buddhists.” Another post, written by an alleged news site as an exclusive report, claimed that explosives and other bomb-making materials were being stored in mosques across Myanmar in preparation for an attack against Buddhist sites. Police in Myanmar told BuzzFeed News that no such plot had been discovered and that the report surfaces every few months to stir fear and anti-Muslim sentiment.

Myanmar has a “low media and information literacy rate,” according to an [interview](#) given by an unnamed official in the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) to the *Myanmar Times*. Often called “digital literacy,” the term measures how well people using the internet understand what they are doing, and how to stay safe online. Countries like Myanmar, which come online quickly and without many government-backed programs to teach safe internet habits — like secure passwords and not revealing personal details online — rank among the lowest in digital literacy. They are the most likely to fall for scams, hacks, and fake news.

Facebook says it's constantly thinking about ways to improve digital literacy, and that it will soon release a security awareness campaign designed specifically for Myanmar, and that it's worked with local civil liberty groups to publish a pamphlet that includes a translated and illustrated version of its community standards.

“Maintaining a safe community for people to connect and share on Facebook and in the services we offer is absolutely critical for us,” Jay Nancarrow, a spokesman for Facebook, told BuzzFeed News. “We work hard to educate people about our services, highlight tools to help them protect their accounts, and promote digital literacy. To be more effective in this work, we partner with civil society, safety partners, and governments — including many countries that are rapidly coming online. There is no ‘one size fits all’ approach that works everywhere, and we understand the importance of the relationships we build with organizations on the ground to help us shape education programs that meet people's needs in different parts of the world.”

While the company is working to increase digital literacy, it has remained silent on what their plans are to confront fake news on the platform, or how to help people spot it.

On day four of owning her new smartphone, Shar Ya Wai said she added a friend who regularly posts links to articles endorsing Wirathu's teachings, and other anti-Muslim monks. “It was really surprising because from school, I didn't know him as a person who thought about these things,” she said. “I was surprised he would post like this on Facebook.”

Since adding him as a friend, she said she has been drawn into her first Facebook fights. She didn't yet know about blocking, or muting posts, but when explained she said it made a lot of sense. “Sometimes how you know a person at school isn't how they are online,” she said. “I'm glad blocking exists.”

She wondered whether Wirathu would be arrested for what he posts online. She said she wasn't sure where the law stood, but had heard rumors that people have been jailed for their Facebook posts.

“I don't know any of them. I don't know what you can say online which will make them send you to prison,” she said.



Swe Swe Luin, whose husband was arrested earlier this year after accused of being an online satirical artist known as the Cock.

Minzayar Oo / BuzzFeed News

Swe Swe Luin knew that her husband, like many, enjoyed collecting and uploading photos to Facebook. Mostly, she said, he used it to chat with friends when he was on leave from the trawler where he worked hauling fish.

It wasn't until police came to their small home, in an impoverished suburb of Yangon next to the international airport, that she first heard that her husband might be the popular online satirical artist known only as "the Cock."

The Cock's work was widely celebrated across Myanmar, with many quietly downloading and sharing the images, despite complaints by senior government figures, who called them crass and immoral. The Cock was best known for photoshopping the heads of various military leaders onto the bodies of animals or Hollywood film stars, and then posing them in embarrassing scenarios. Swe Swe Luin remembered laughing at some of those images, never imagining they would one day be the cause of her husband's imprisonment.

"They accused him of being this person, the Cock, but we have no idea what they are talking about," said Swe Swe Luin, as she sat on the floor of their small home, gesturing to an empty space on the desk where her husband's things once stood. The police came on February 9, just after midnight. She answered the door and was startled when they asked to see her husband. They then moved through the house confiscating any electronic device.

“I had heard of the Cock before, on Facebook. I wanted to add him as a friend, but I couldn’t because he had too many friends so I just followed him,” said Swe Swe Luin. “Why would this be my husband? Wouldn’t I have known?”

In the months since, she has been able to see her husband only in court, where he is facing trial under Section 66(d) of Myanmar’s Telecommunication Law. On Facebook, government supporters have posted photos of him with other women, claiming that he has multiple wives and girlfriends in other countries.

“I feel really upset about all this, about everything they are saying about him on Facebook. Can anyone at Facebook help?” asked Swe Swe Luin. “If there was no Facebook my husband would never have been arrested, or called all these things.”

She said she once used Facebook to look at photos of cotton dresses she could re-create using her small sewing machine, and then resell locally. Now, she said, she just uses it to follow news about her husband.

“It’s like somebody created rules about the internet, but nobody told us what they were.”

Across town, Maung Saung Kha has kept up with the news of the Cock’s trial. It was less than a year ago that he was facing similar charges for a poem he wrote about tattooing the president’s face onto his genital area.

The 23-year-old poet spent six months in jail after his poem went viral on Facebook. He’s angry, he said, that many news sites mistranslated the poem as saying that he had a tattoo of the president on his penis, when what it should have read was “genital area.”

“Nobody understood the meaning of this poem,” said Maung Saung Kha, laughing nervously as he tries to find the right words in English to translate what he says was a call for the Burmese people to “wake up” to the oppression within their political system.

He never thought that a poem published on Facebook would become international news.

“Every poet publishes on Facebook, that is the only way to get people to see your work. But people aren’t interested in poetry — it is hard to shock them into reading, into understanding,” he said, when explaining why he chose the imagery he did. “I didn’t expect what happened with that poem, but I would do it again.”

After waking up one morning to headlines that a government spokesperson had taken offense at his poem, Maung Saung Kha ran away from home for a month, only to then show up at a police station and turn himself in. He had heard stories of others arrested for Facebook posts, of how the police had come in the middle of the night and terrified their families, and didn’t want to put his parents through the same thing.

Maung Saung Kha spent six months in prison while his trial was ongoing, and was found to have violated 66(d). Since his release on May 24, he has begun meeting with others arrested under the same law. He has gone to the trials for the Cock, and spoken to Swe Swe Luin about her husband’s case.

“We should be organizing ourselves, and asking parliament to get rid of these laws,” said Maung Saung Kha. “Nobody understands who is arrested and why. Or what it is that they say that crosses the line.”

“It’s like somebody created rules about the internet, but nobody told us what they were,” he said.



Poet Maung Saung Kha gives a speech about education at a church in Yangon on July 16.
Minzayar Oo / BuzzFeed News

Sometimes it might seem like people online are speaking different languages. In the US if you look at one person's Facebook feed, it reads like a rallying cry for the Democrats to regroup; look at another and it heralds Trump as the new messiah.

In Myanmar, people are often actually writing in two languages. Because the internet was so slow to come to Myanmar, developers there created their own font for the Burmese script called Zawgyi. No one is sure quite who created the script, but it emerged in the early 2000s and was, critically, free. Years later, when the Unicode Consortium, which creates a standard for languages worldwide, launched its own version of the Burmese script, it found that many in Myanmar were slow to adopt it.

"The country had just been closed for a long time, and the government, and tech community weren't getting involved in standards. People in Myanmar didn't have a lot of tech support so they just invented something they could use," said Craig Cornelius, internationalization engineer at Google. Part of what made the font popular — its ability to represent Burmese characters many different ways — is exactly what creates problems with the font today. The word "cat" can be typed with any number of different Zawgyi characters, so if you were to write the word and then try to search for it in a document or webpage, you wouldn't necessarily be able to find it again. "Zawgyi is incompatible with many programs ... If you are trying to build internet sites that you are sharing around the world, it's like the old incompatibilities that existed between Mac and Windows. Half the machines just can't read what you are writing."

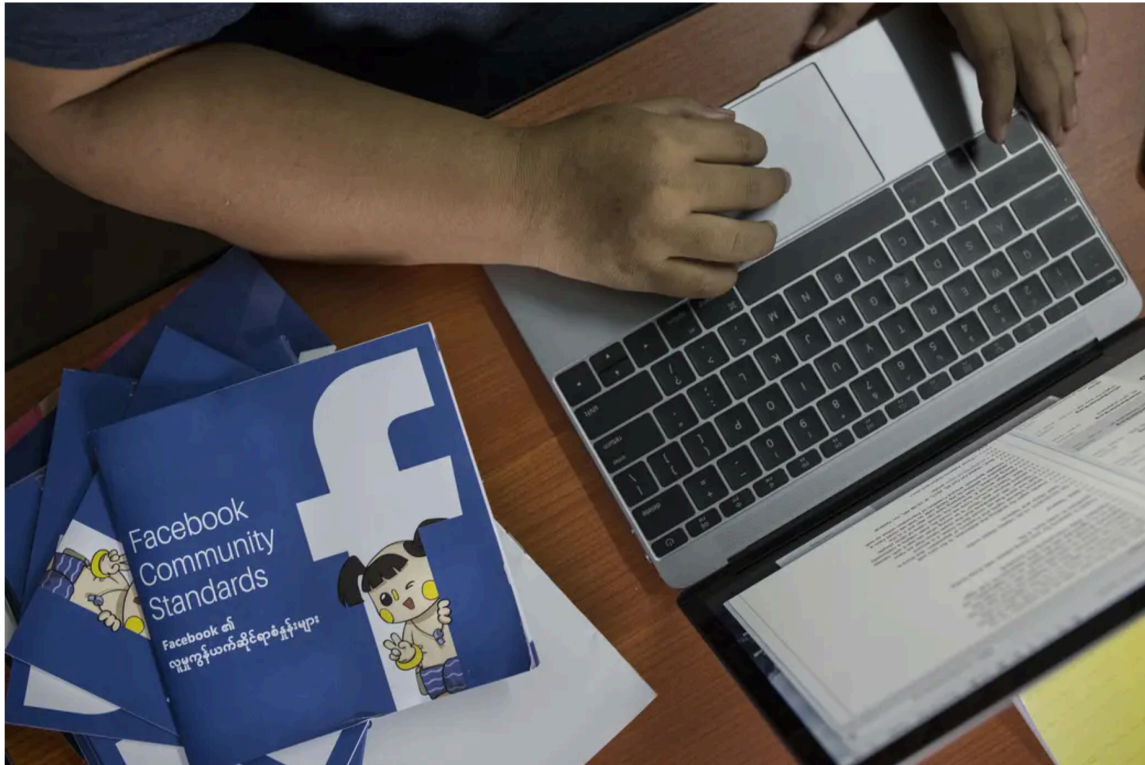
People in Myanmar love to joke about the blank squares that come up on many computers for the Zawgyi script. They look like boxes that would have been used by a military censor, in the days before the army eased its control of the country.

Aung Min Han, 30, has downloaded both fonts on his phone, but his wife's phone only supports Unicode. He joked that he has a "secret language" that he can use to hide from his wife online.

"They should make a law, that only the men use Zawgyi and only the women use Unicode and then there would be good marriages for everyone," he said. "The Burmese people speak too many languages; on the internet too, we speak too many languages. That's why we are always fighting."

His wife, who was sitting opposite him as he spoke, rolled her eyes.

"He's being stupid. The whole point of Facebook is that everyone talks to everyone the same. Soon they will force everyone to use the same language," she said. "That's when the real fighting will start!"



Copies of the Burmese translation of Facebook's Community Standards.

Minzayar Oo / BuzzFeed News

Eight days after she purchased her first smartphone, Shar Ya Wai agreed to meet for a coffee. She had taken more than 100 photos in the last week, many of them during a visit to one of Myanmar's most famous pagodas with her friends. The glimmering golden peaks of the pagoda were now in the background of her Facebook page, she said, and she'd gotten a lot of compliments.

“There is a lot more flirting on Facebook than I realized. I’ve had men from Thailand ask to be my friend and I didn’t understand, in the beginning, why they were asking,” she said. “My friends laughed and told me, ‘Of course, that is why the internet is so popular.’”

There is a lot she’s been told that she’s not sure whether to believe or not. One friend told her everything she wrote on the internet would be automatically deleted after a certain amount of time, to make room for new things on the internet (“But how often would they delete? How much space is there on the internet?”). Another friend told her that Facebook could take any of her photos and sell them or use them for other purposes, (“But why would Facebook want to sell my photos?”).

Other than Viber and Facebook, the only other app she’d used is a calendar to help her keep track of local holidays. Though her phone came with both, she hasn’t opened Google Maps or her email client. Her favorite discovery so far? The stickers she can paste into messages on Facebook.

“This is what I’ve done: I’ve talked to friends, and shared photos with friends. I got angry about what some people wrote, about articles they posted, which didn’t seem true. I found some old photos of me from school that I had never seen before that a friend posted, and that made me happy. I saw other photos, from last year, when my face looked fat and I didn’t like that so much,” she said.

When asked if she would recommend the internet to others, Shar Ya Wai hesitated.

“Yes, as long as you know it might make you angry,” she said. And with that, she showed off a new cell phone case she’d bought that features swallows flying on a soft-pink background. They’re flying, she said, which reminded of her of the birds in the pagoda. She was about to tell a story about a trip her mother took to a pagoda in a nearby city when her phone buzzed with a new message.

She grabbed the phone with both hands and started typing quickly, as though she had been doing it her whole life.



A Buddhist monk talks on his phone in Yangon, July 17.
Minnyar On / BuzzFeed News

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