



# Shooting the (Facebook) Messenger (Part I)

BY THOMAS DAVID DOWLING | JANUARY 21, 2019

**Thomas Dowling** considers the impact of Facebook in Myanmar and its potency for Burmanisation.

*[Editor's Note: This post is the first part of a four-part series. Part I introduces and provides pertinent background for the topic. **Part II** considers and evaluates some of Facebook's mitigation strategies and outlines some issues that remain problematic. **Part III** argues that Facebook's exclusive preference for Burmese at the expense of all other ethnic languages runs the risk of increasing Burmanisation. **Part IV** offers some reflections and concluding remarks, ultimately arguing for a more nuanced understanding of Facebook's presence in Myanmar.]*

## New Message: Contextualising the Problem

Facebook is everywhere. And for most of its **2.27 billion users** (including myself), that's great news for communicating with friends and family 5,000 miles away, sharing photos for public adoration, as well as promoting businesses to potentially vast numbers of customers. Yet, for all this good, there is the much-discussed dark side: Facebook HQ knows where we've been—and with whom—understands our political views better than most of us know ourselves, and of course, there are all those question marks over what it actually does with our information: the **Cambridge Analytica scandal** is a case in point.

There's also the very serious criticism of Facebook over how its social media platform enabled or otherwise failed to prevent the spread of hate-speech and misinformation in Myanmar. Facebook's role in the various ethnic/State conflicts over the last few years has had at least some impact on the re-emergence of ethnic tensions and their intensification. A recent UN Fact Finding Mission (FFM) claimed the social media giant had a '**determining role**' in the spreading of hate-speech and violence; Yanghee Lee, UN Special Rapporteur to Myanmar, said Facebook had '**turned into a beast** and not what it originally intended.' Elsewhere, Timothy McLaughlin, a Myanmar-based journalist **wrote** that '[t]he riots [those that occurred in Mandalay in 2014] wouldn't have happened without Facebook.' Moreover, one of Myanmar's in-country newspapers, *The Irrawaddy*, also **broadly supports**

the sentiments above: 'Facebook has definitely played a role in Myanmar's ethnic and racial conflicts, especially in [N]orthern Rakhine State [NRS].'

Facebook's platform enabled not just hate-speech against the Rohingyas to spread, but further, in effect, helped to assemble an audience which provided both support and legitimacy for a raft of extraordinary measures against them. It was the 'disproportional' counterinsurgency offensive by the *Tatmadaw* in NRS that directly lead to more than 700,000 displaced Rohingya fleeing for Bangladesh, many of whom have described extensive human rights violations against the Defence Services (see, for example: Human Rights Watch; Fortify Rights; Amnesty International). This ongoing violence has led to extensive international criticism against the Myanmar State from a myriad of elite actors, some of whom, including the Turkish President, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and French President, Emmanuel Macron, allege that the violence amounts to genocide. Facebook itself said that '[t]he ethnic violence in Myanmar has been truly horrific.'

The extent to which Facebook's platform played a role in the propagation and inflammation of ethnic conflicts is where much of the scrutiny primarily lays.

With such a barrage of condemnation levelled against Facebook, the company finally admitted fault: we 'were slow to act.' In April, before US senators, Mark Zuckerberg, Facebook's CEO, took personal responsibility for a range of failures and apologised. While these recent *mea culpas* have been generally well-received, they come after years of missed warning signs in Rakhine State, raised alarm bells from those within the industry, and pointed reports from humanitarian organisations (such as those listed above). As a response, various actions were implemented by Facebook in an attempt to mitigate the worst consequences of the company's platform for nefarious purposes (some of which are covered in Part II).

The essential question now, of course, is this: has Facebook done enough? This is the essential question driving this work.

### Older Posts: Surveying the Intellectual Landscape

Over the last twelve months, Facebook's operations in Myanmar have attracted substantial international attention. Countless articles, reports, and op-eds in both print and online media around the world effectively established a veritable literary canon; a canon which *Tea Circle* has extensively contributed to, publishing several excellent, inquiring pieces by Ashley S. Kinseth, Francois-Guillaume Jaeck, Kyaw Sint, as well as Mish Khan and Sam Taylor. With this intellectual landscape already well-cultivated, Parts I and II of this series offer little originality, save for my own evaluations. Parts III and IV, in contrast, aspire to develop a different perspective and ask fresh questions.

A year before Myanmar's transitional government assumed power in 2011, Facebookers numbered around 120,000, according to [Huish and Balazo](#)—a statistic which reflected Myanmar's status as one of the [lowest ranking countries](#) in the world for Internet penetration. By 2016, however, [Kinseth](#) reports that 'Myanmar boasted more Facebook users than any other South Asian Country.' Simply put, Facebook's popularity had grown exponentially: the [BBC cites 18 million citizens](#); [Kinseth](#), 14 million. Even though these estimates range considerably, they nonetheless represent a significant proportion of Myanmar's population (of between 51-55 million people) and a striking rate of growth.

The move towards democracy, greater civil freedoms, [and a relaxing of various censorship controls](#) in Myanmar are frequently postulated as the cause of much of this meteoric rise, while the veritable [price-crash in both SIM cards and phones](#) should not be underestimated in accounting for such an uptick in [accessibility](#); newly purchased Smartphones also come pre-loaded with the [Facebook App](#) and [pre-liked pages](#). The [BBC](#) also points to the very practical fact that only Facebook took on the difficulties of Burmese text; Google and big portals stayed away, and in doing so helped to entrench Facebook's monopoly. As an [Editorial](#) for *Frontier Myanmar* wrote in late August: 'Facebook is so ubiquitous that it has no real rival in Myanmar; it is *the* means of reaching people. This will not be news to anyone who lives here, but it is still worth emphasising.' *FM* further adds that, '[t]he alternatives to Facebook are limited. There is no other online platform with anywhere near the level of popularity.'

In Myanmar today—and most regular observers will no doubt have become tired of hearing the phrase—[Facebook is the Internet](#). They are synonymous. Facebook users in Myanmar not only connect like the rest of us, look for [love matches](#), and [shop online](#), but they also get [most of their news from the site](#); this is true for 38% of users in 15 states and regions, according to one report cited by [Heijmans](#). A different poll in 2017, however, as noted by [Laignee Barron](#), 'found that 73% of people rely on the site for news, and by some accounts, 85% of the country's Internet traffic flows through the network.' The extensively referenced [Reuters investigation](#) succinctly stated that '[m]any saw [Facebook] as an all-in-one solution.' Facebook itself also recognises its [own supremacy](#): 'people [in Myanmar] rely on Facebook for information – more so than in almost any other country given the nascent state of the news media and the recent rapid adoption of mobile phones.'

The consequence of such rapid 'leapfrogging' was that netizens in Myanmar lacked '[Internet literacy](#),' or 'digital literacy.' This is reflected, in part, by a general lack of even the most rudimentary critical thinking of information that is then processed and internalised. This problem of 'Internet literacy' has also been recognised by the State, as this [post](#) by the *Global New Light of Myanmar* illustrates: 'What is happening daily in the world is that with improper understanding about digital literacy, fake news is spreading for personal interest and harming the interests of others.' Some companies, such as Telenor, have taken it upon themselves to [offer workshops](#) to combat this issue and raise awareness.

While the various studies bringing such knowledge about the proliferation and widespread use of Facebook in Myanmar to the attention of interested parties is useful for researchers, it's what's said—or shown—on the platform that grabs media attention, worries human rights groups, and apparently keeps **Zuckerberg up at night**.

If we assume that an estimate of 18 million Facebook users is correct (my research cites this figure most often), then this means approximately a third of the entire nation is logging in. That's quite an audience, and it's one that can be directly addressed for free via the social network. It is therefore unsurprising that Myanmar's elite and supporting actors have made use of Facebook's platform to promote and disseminate rhetoric, ideologies, and policies via posts, shares, and likes, in the form of text, images, and audio-videos.

The appropriation of Facebook Myanmar by the country's elite is identifiable through its popular use among senior figures. Commander-in-Chief Senior General Min Aung Hlaing—head of the *Tatmadaw*—had, before his deletion, nearly **three million followers**. David Scott Mathieson, a Myanmar expert and *Tea Circle* regular, described Commander-in-Chief Min Aung Hlaing as a '**slave to social media**.' Indeed, the Senior General and 17 other top military officials who lost their Facebook accounts because of their alleged roles in the counterinsurgency campaign in Rakhine state collectively enjoyed the regular eyes of some 12 million followers, totalling **two-thirds of Myanmar's Facebook users**. Patently, that's a lot of people reading, watching, listening, commenting and otherwise interacting with whatever narrative is being promoted by the army. In addition to specific accounts, 'pages' connected to the military, such as the television network *Myawady* and the *Myanmar Daily Star*, **were also removed** on the grounds that, according to Facebook's own statement: '[i]nternational experts, most recently in a report by the UN Human Rights Council-authorized Fact Finding Mission on Myanmar, have found evidence that many of these individuals and organisations committed or enabled serious human rights abuses in the country. And we want to prevent them from using our service to further inflame ethnic and religious tensions.'

Top army officers were not the only elite actors frequently logging in. State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi, once the darling of the West, has used her own account to support the army and assuage criticism of it from beyond Myanmar, most notably over her posts that down-played accusations of sexual abuses committed by the Defence Services, calling the allegations '**fake rape**.' On the few occasions she has 'spoken' on Facebook about the highly divisive and sensitive issues in the Rakhine State, she has merely compounded the woes of the Rohingya or otherwise supported the military.

As these actors are popular, elite, and imbued with the authority to speak, what they say—or do not say in the case of Aung San Suu Kyi—has the potential to reach millions via Facebook. This is a serious issue, especially when followers are told, encouraged, or inspired to acts of violence, or exposed to misinformation. Despite the power and popularity of Min Aung Hlaing and Aung San Suu Kyi, arguably it is a supporting actor who has done the most damage both to certain ethnic/Bamar

(as well as Buddhist/Muslim) relations and to Facebook's own reputation since 2012: the Mandalay abbot, Ashin Wirathu. Self-styled as the 'Bin Laden of Buddhism,' Wirathu made the [cover of Time Magazine](#) and was the primary subject in Hannah Beech's [article](#) in the same edition. Wirathu used Facebook's platform to promote, disseminate, and distribute [unsubstantiated rumours about Muslim men](#); propagate dangerous xenophobic assumptions; and made his own virulent strain of hate-speech widely available. A panoply of graphic images, reputation-hurting cartoons, posts of vitriolic sermons, and other things besides, were deployed as part of Wirathu's extensive arsenal that was designed to 'protect' a religion he declared was under threat ([Jaeck's article](#) provides some great insight and analysis of these issues that I only stretch here). Facebook, then under intense pressure, deleted his account long before the generals. Yet, the damage was done; precedents were set. Hate-speech, as Fortify Rights' [Mathew Smith said](#) 'spreads like wildfire on Facebook.' Wirathu, in response to Facebook, declared that he would use Twitter and YouTube instead.

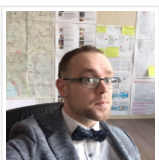
Via Facebook, claims of human rights abuses were [refuted by top military and civilian actors](#), while [misinformation](#) was promoted as truth. Facebook, in part because of its large, easily accessible audience, was often the preferred rostrum from which to announce many important Government and Defence Service updates. Not long after Myanmar began opening up in 2011, Ye Htut, then Minister of Information under the former Thein Sein Government, quickly earned the moniker "[Minister of Facebook](#)" because of the considerable time he spent on the platform sharing news and comments and attacking the administration's critics.' In the NLD era, the former [President, Htin Kyaw](#), [announced his resignation](#) via Facebook.

Facebook has very clearly been used by elite and supporting actors not just for the mandate Zuckerberg and his inner circle promote—[connecting people](#)—but for other ambitions as well. In hindsight, there are very evident reasons why Facebook should have taken more responsibility over the content it allowed on its platform given the outcome of some of the most incendiary hate-speech in Rakhine State.

Facebook is, however, making efforts to mitigate and prevent similar problems in the future, as [Part II](#) discusses.

*[Image courtesy of Thomas Dowling]*

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Thomas Dowling is a Ph.D student with the University of Leicester. His primary research interests revolve around environmental security in Myanmar (particularly in the context of human security), viewed through the prism of securitisation theory. Thomas is also well-travelled in Myanmar, and lived in Taunggyi, Shan State for a short while. Previously, Thomas earned degrees in Ancient History (BA, MA; Bristol University) and International Security Studies (MA; Leicester University). Presently, Thomas lives in Daegu, South Korea, with his wife, baby, and Jack Russell. [View all posts by Thomas David Dowling](#)

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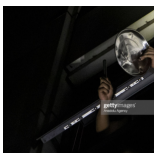
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