



Shooting the Facebook Messenger (Part IV)

BY THOMAS DAVID DOWLING | JANUARY 24, 2019

Thomas Dowling *reflects on Facebook in Myanmar.*

This is last post 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.

Read Parts [I](#), [II](#) and [III](#) here.

'Move Fast, Break Things'

In the course of my research for this paper, I was surprised to learn that Facebook's motto was, until 2018, '[Move Fast, Break Things](#).' Given all that has gone on in Myanmar, in part because of how Facebook's platform was appropriated, it feels tragically poignant.

As I understand things, and as Warofka pointed out (see [Part III](#)), there were some language-script hurdles with Burmese that certainly impeded the detection of hate-speech, as well as its effective monitoring. While I acknowledge this and appreciate Facebook's admission of its various failures, it's difficult not to feel that these problems should have been anticipated before Facebook started transforming and profiting from a country such as Myanmar that has been in a state of *de facto* [civil war](#) for 70 years.

In this context, I propose that commentators spend less time discussing the digital literacy of Myanmar's netizens and start asking questions about the wisdom of Facebook's business maturity instead. In establishing their (virtual) presence, Facebook failed to do adequate research into the country they wish to exploit. If they did, Facebook might have had a fair chance of understanding the complex dynamics of the Union's distinct ethnic groups (as well as the [tensions therein](#)), the

country's linguistic range, Naypyidaw's political fragility as it entered the transitional period, the army's dominance, the rise of (Buddhist) nationalism, and thought more deeply about the impact of their liberating platform in a land that buckled under intense censorship for decades. Sure, no company could be expected to adequately prepare for so many unknowns and variables, but in hindsight, comparisons with the **British East India Company** would not be entirely unwarranted for the brazen way in which Facebook Inc. set up shop in Myanmar. Zuckerberg did not command thousands of infantry nor advanced warships, but nonetheless went to Myanmar with the same intention as the EIC: to extract resources. In the modern world, Facebook is not seeking Myanmar's traditional riches like teak, amber, jade, rubies, oil, and natural gas, but information, data, and advertising space. The 21st century does, however, ask more of its international companies and correspondingly demands greater social responsibility.

Cutting to the bone then: while Facebook has made several important changes that should be congratulated, many challenges remain, particularly, as I have argued in **Part III**, greater efforts to include other ethnic languages. If Facebook's services are indeed extended to those ethnic groups whose main language is not Burmese, it will no doubt be expensive precisely because they too, like the Bamars, could potentially use the platform for their own hate-speech and misinformation. Facebook will therefore have to hire relevant language teams to monitor non-Bamar text, images, and audio; engineer specific AI; and pay for any surplus outsourcing of services. This would make things much fairer and help to assuage Burmese/Bamar dominance.

But where should Facebook draw the line in deciding which ethnic languages to include? Would adding Shan, for example, be enough of a token effort? Should Menlo Park's teams extend linguistic accessibility to Myanmar's main groups? Or would every one of those 100 languages require representation (and in the process doubling the languages Facebook currently caters for)?

There is a risk of precedent setting here: Myanmar is not the only multiethnic, multi-linguistic country in the world. Would others not clamour for inclusion? Could Facebook reasonably deny them the right to be represented in their own tongue on their site? I think not, and to be fair, the barn door is already open: in addition to French, Facebook extended their service in France to provide their service to Bretons and Corsicans.

No doubt it would cost a small fortune to bring more linguistic inclusivity to Myanmar's extensive ethnic landscape. While Facebook may have lacked a good dose of wisdom before entering this particular Southeast Asian market, the vaults at Menlo Park are full: the company's reported net income for 2017 was **\$15.9 billion** – strikingly, the equivalent of about **25% of Myanmar's entire GDP**.

It was morally right that the UN, international actors, humanitarian groups, journalists, and others, shone the spotlight on Facebook's operations in Myanmar, most commonly over the company's role

in bellowing the hate-speech that poisonously grew on its platform and came to manifest itself as deadly violence in Rakhine State. The tragic fate of the Rohingya will likely be tied to Facebook's activities for some time. However, this work chiefly argues that while the company's part in the alleged genocide of the Rohingya is deeply disturbing, it was not intentional. In contrast, Zuckerberg's neocolonial outpost in Myanmar risks, in my view, being both conscious and responsible for something much worse than hate-speech: the *de facto* participation of the State's policy of Burmanisation through Facebook's exclusively Bamar-friendly platform. This needs to be addressed immediately by expanding the provisions for additional ethnic languages on the site.

Logging Out: Concluding Remarks

Evidently, our judgements of Facebook must be more nuanced. Zuckerberg's stratospherically globally successful company is not simply a benign conduit between people, but neither is it the KGB. And yet, Zuckerberg's Facebook has at least some capacity to play kingmaker in a country like Myanmar. Where Facebook precisely lies along the spectrum with 'social responsibility' at one end, and 'shareholder profits' at the other was patently obvious prior to 2018: it was the latter. But with the admittance of guilt, an embrace of essential social responsibilities, and the promise to do better, perhaps the next seven years will be as kind to Facebook's legacy as it will be for the users whom it serves.

And who knows, with greater cultural awareness of the myriad ethnic groups, accessed through their respective languages, Facebook might just achieve what Burmanisation has hitherto failed to do over the last 60 years: connectivity – the very mandate Zuckerberg built his empire on.

Rightly or wrongly, Burma became Myanmar. For all the controversy surrounding this change, Myanmar does at least speak to a greater inclusivity of its ethnic peoples as well as their cultures and languages. It's time that companies like Facebook understand that while their singular language may well be money, Myanmar is comprised of a vast tapestry of other languages that deserve the same, equal freedoms to use the social media platform as those who speak Burmese.

So, do I think we should shoot the (Facebook) messenger? No. But the messenger certainly needs a prod here and there to stay on task: delivering messages.



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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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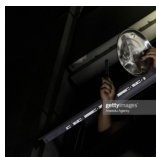
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