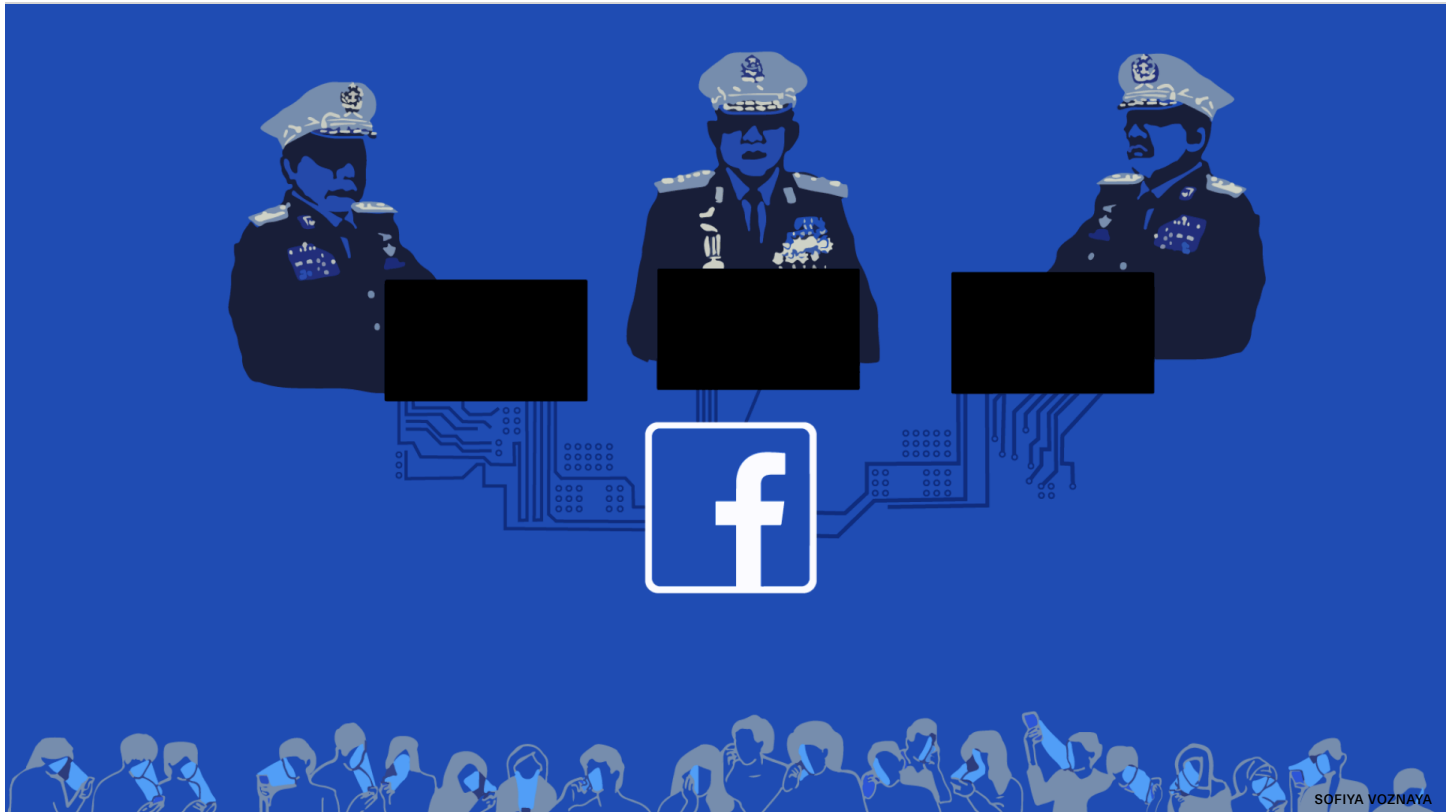




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The war for truth in Myanmar's cyberspace

A decade ago in Myanmar, a SIM card could cost as much as \$2,000. Facebook now has 18 million local users and is a parallel space for the conflict in Rakhine State

BY KAYLEIGH LONG (<https://www.codastory.com/author/kayleighlong/>)

4 JUNE, 2019  DISPATCH (<https://www.codastory.com/tag/dispatch/>)

On February 20, a stream of photos of arrived via WhatsApp. The first was of a young woman with the traditional thanakha tree bark paste carefully applied on her cheeks. She was resting her chin on her palm and smiling sweetly at the camera: the sort of photo a loved one might keep as their phone background. The photos that followed showed her dead on the floor, her left cheek shattered by a bullet, her face spattered with blood.

According to the sender, her name was Ma Ye Ye Soe, she was 19, belonged to the Rakhine Buddhist ethnic group, and lived in a village called Myin Hpu in the remote west of northern Rakhine State's Rathedaung Township. She was caught by a stray bullet, allegedly fired by Myanmar army soldiers as they sought to flush out Arakan Army (AA) insurgents. A four-year-old girl was injured, too. These details were confirmed in the local press a day later, all correct bar the fact that she was reportedly 18, not 19. The Myanmar army has since denied responsibility for the killing, pointing the finger at militants.

Rakhine State was, in 2016 and 2017, the site of ethnic cleansing and several genocidal massacres of stateless Rohingya, leaving at least 6,700 dead and causing over 700,000 to flee to neighboring Bangladesh. This has drawn a worldwide chorus of condemnation and calls for International Criminal Court referral for those responsible, tarnishing both the country's image and that of its leader, Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi.

The state has also been home to a simmering conflict between Rakhine ethnic insurgents and the Myanmar government. The exact number of combatants and civilians killed in the Tatmadaw-Arakan Army conflict is unclear, but the violence has so far displaced over 10,000 people and caused massive disruptions to the central government's ability to administer conflict-wracked parts of the state.

Pictures of Ye Ye Soe's dead body began to circulate on social media within hours of the trigger being pulled; the sense of outrage from the Rakhine community was immediate and palpable. In the past, a lack of connectivity infrastructure in Rakhine State meant such swift documentation of human rights abuses and killings of innocent civilians was not possible.

That such images can be leveraged to garner support for an ongoing conflict is not news to the Myanmar army, nor the state information apparatus: until recently, the Ministry of Information and the Directorate of Public Relations and Psychological Warfare had sought to deflect criticism of atrocities against the Rohingya in Rakhine State by blasting social media with images of dead Hindu citizens, who they alleged were massacred by Rohingya insurgents.

For every conflict that plays out on the ground in Myanmar today, there's a parallel one being waged in cyberspace, by activists, ethnic armed groups, political parties, civilian government actors — and the army itself.

A New Age of Connectivity

When monks first took to the streets in Myanmar's largest protests in decades in 2007, in a soon-to-be-crushed popular uprising dubbed the "Saffron Revolution", the world was offered a rare glimpse into a country in the grips of a heavy censorship regime imposed by a brutal military dictatorship. As the number of protestors swelled to tens of thousands, it was the most significant uprising since that of the 1988 pro-democracy movement, which was violently snuffed out and saw thousands of dissidents jailed.

One of the more iconic pieces of footage from 2007, the close-range shooting of Japanese photojournalist Kenji Nagai by a member of the security forces, was captured by citizen journalists from a footbridge. At this time, footage was smuggled out, uploaded and distributed by dissident networks.

At the time, measures for the pre-publication censorship of the media were firmly in place, restrictions on publishing licenses and broadcasting rights were a near-total state monopoly. Independent media had been branded traitors by the state, with one particularly memorable, bellicose broadcast referring to the BBC as "Assassins on Air, Sky-full of Liars".

Internet access was an expensive, pervasively filtered and heavily surveilled commodity, available only to the elite and those brave, technologically adept and patient enough to use the slow and unreliable connections available at the internet cafes that had begun to crop up in urban centres. Internet outages at times of political unrest were common.

In the late 1990s, small-scale digital activism had begun to take shape. Exiled dissidents, citizen journalists and in-country activists coordinated online, despite the restrictions in place. This was a major shift for a country where the military regime had prohibited ownership of a computer, modem, fax machine or computer network without prior Ministry approval — with penalties ranging from seven to 15 years for violations.

A decade ago in Myanmar, a SIM card could cost as much as \$2,000, with one choice of operator. Now they're \$1.50, and consumers can get high-speed 4G from any one of four networks with coverage across much of the country. In this new age of connectivity, the army which once censored the internet and press, hacked dissidents and mounted denial of service attacks on exile media outlets, has turned its hand to disinformation.

"Crushing censorship was rapidly replaced with a cacophony of social media, where agitprop could hide better and be more effectively insidious," independent analyst David Scott Mathieson told Coda.

While other social media platforms like Viber, WeChat and WhatsApp are used in the country, only Facebook enjoys total supremacy. The platform occupies a unique place in the political landscape of Myanmar with 18 million users. It is used by rebel groups and the state alike to issue communiques. In a low-resource setting where many regional government offices still use typewriters, Facebook allows the government and military to communicate directly — and, it appears, indirectly — with its citizenry.

Telecommunications data indicates Facebook accounted for as much as 80 percent of daily in-country web traffic at its peak, with most browsing of external sites taking place through the platform. When it launched, users enjoyed subsidized access to the platform under the now-discontinued Free Basics program.

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Facebook's enormous influence drew influence campaigns. In late 2018, and again in early 2019, Facebook announced it had dismantled sweeping "Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior" (CIB) campaigns directly traceable to the Myanmar military.

This first crackdown took out 18 accounts and 52 Pages in Myanmar, including those of senior military figures. Among these were 46 Pages and 12 accounts engaged in covert influence campaigns. These pages were run to appear independent, but occasionally would push the military line, undermining the government of Aung San Suu Kyi and promoting anti-Rohingya sentiment.

All told, the banned accounts (both overt and covert) had a massive reach; they were followed by almost 12 million accounts, or about two-thirds of all Facebook users in Myanmar — a country of some 51 million.

While Facebook has not elaborated on the precise extent of the reach of the covert accounts, it can be deduced to have been significant. Prior to being taken down, the two overt pages for the Commander-in-Chief, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, had a total of over 4 million followers.

A senior figure at Facebook intimately familiar with the CIB investigation said that while "black propaganda" such as this is not new, its presence on social media presents a unique challenge for those who must deal with it. The company looked for "clustering patterns of behavior that are indicative of deception".

It's not just the military that was accused of escalating rhetoric online. Hate speech on social media has been singled out by the United Nations as adding fuel to the fire.

The UN Fact Finding Mission noted that during the Rohingya crisis of 2016 and 2017, "the civilian authorities have spread false narratives; denied the Tatmadaw's wrongdoing; blocked independent investigations, including of the Fact-Finding Mission; and overseen destruction of evidence", concluding that through both act and omission, civilian authorities had "contributed to the commission of atrocity crimes".

"Aung San Suu Kyi's State Counsellor Information committee [Facebook] page was full of hysterical posts about terrorists and implying on a daily basis that the [aid agencies were] assisting [Rohingya rebels]," said Mark Farmaner of Burma Campaign UK.

The Facebook page [posted material \(https://www.facebook.com/InfomationCommittee/posts/660387290801047?_tn_=_K-R\)](https://www.facebook.com/InfomationCommittee/posts/660387290801047?_tn_=_K-R) accusing Rohingya women of claiming "FAKE RAPE", which remains on the site.

"The phone is our gun."

From targeted advertising to promote the "Leave" vote in the UK's Brexit referendum in 2016, to evidence of election-meddling in the U.S., questions have been raised around the globe about the impact of social media on democratic processes. In India, WhatsApp has been linked to a string of lynchings and deaths.

In the Philippines, coordinated Facebook and Twitter campaigns promote the agenda of President Rodrigo Duterte and his administration. <https://www.codastory.com/authoritarian-tech/philippines-facebook-conflict-duterte/> **Donate (https://checkout.fundjournalism.org/memberform?org_id=codastory&campaign=7014W0000010Ec4QAE)**

Despite explicit warnings about the rampant abuse of social media platforms, technology companies have been slow to act. In Asia, the violence in Rakhine State is perhaps the most shocking episode since the advent of social media in the country.

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In Myanmar, Facebook has faced intense criticism over its failure to act earlier on rampant hate speech, with a UN-mandated fact finding mission declaring content on the platform played a “determining role” in stirring up hatred against the Rohingya Muslim minority. The company has indicated a willingness to comply with any legal requests for preserved data, and material posted to the site may well feature as evidence in any international criminal justice proceedings.

What has played out politically, since the 2011 announcement that the military would transition to a quasi-civilian, democratically-elected parliament, has done so concurrently with what is perhaps the fastest digital rollout in human history.

Cell phone towers were erected as people began the countdown to the 2015 elections, the first credibly democratic ballot in decades. But the digital rollout has also prompted a new authoritarian crackdown. “Netizens are being jailed for writing criticism against the government, when some content in their criticism harms or discredits the authorities. Any online user could easily be charged with the Telecommunications Law, Electronic transition law and Law Protection the Privacy and Security of Citizens,” freedom of expression activist Maung Saungkha told Coda.

The allegations of atrocities in Rakhine State have also divided the country, with the post-censorship domestic media who do report on the issue coming under intense pressure — something the jailing of two Reuters journalists in December 2017 lays clear testament to. Reporters Wa Lone and Kyaw Soe Oo’s on-the-ground reporting exposed a massacre of ten Rohingya men in a village called Inn Dinn. For their part, they received a seven-year jail sentence. The pair, who received this year’s Pulitzer Prize for International Reporting, were released last month after 500 days. [Last month \(<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-48419595>\)](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-48419595), seven soldiers who were sentenced to 10 years in prison for the Inn Din village killings, were released early from prison.

In early 2019, an organization called Athan (Voice) reported that 217 people were prosecuted in 103 cases related to freedom of expression during 2018. Nine cases involved journalists.

In Myanmar, as elsewhere, the exact impact this new dynamic of disinformation, misinformation and propaganda has had on conflict situations is not yet fully understood.

“The use of fake accounts and disinformation on social media is often used to manipulate public opinion by giving the illusion of popularity or opposition to an idea. This manufacturing of consensus can result in a bandwagon effect wherein people support an idea or political power because they fear being marginalized,” said Samuel Woolley, Director at the Digital Intelligence Lab at the Institute for the Future.

“Often times this computational propaganda — the use of automation and social media in attempts to spread false information — is geared towards massively and forcedly amplifying one perspective while disproportionately dampening another,” he said.

In 2017, the Omidyar Network and the Democracy Fund, both funded by eBay founder Pierre Omidyar, released a report which highlighted the ability of social media to potentially undermine democratic institutions, citing “distinct threats for public dialogue by flooding the public square with multiple, competing realities and exacerbating the lack of agreement about what constitutes truth, facts, and evidence.”

In a state where press access has been all but stamped out, social media provides a glimpse of what's happening on the ground — for both the Rohingya and Rakhine communities. For those civilians trapped in conflict zones, technology has offered them a chance to broadcast their cry for help.

As one opposition source put it, “The phone is our gun.”

In Rakhine State, the violence continues. A [new report \(https://news.sky.com/story/myanmar-military-accused-of-new-war-crimes-in-rakhine-state-11730978\)](https://news.sky.com/story/myanmar-military-accused-of-new-war-crimes-in-rakhine-state-11730978) from Amnesty International has accused Myanmar's military of killing and injuring civilians in indiscriminate attacks in new operations. “Less than two years since the world outrage over the mass atrocities committed against the Rohingya population, the Myanmar military is again committing horrific abuses against ethnic groups in Rakhine state,” said Nicholas Bequelin, regional director for Amnesty in east and southeast Asia.

On April 21, a new snippet of footage was circulated of a heaving distended belly, with a wound about an inch wide to the lower-left of the naval. Later, a video of men in the night, lit by phone torch, digging a grave. One of the men peered into a black bin bag, and delicately removed a dead baby. The mother, a 32-year-old Rohingya woman from Sin Thay Pyin village in Buthidaung Township, had been shot in the stomach but survived.

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Kayleigh Long is a freelance journalist based in London. She worked in Myanmar between 2013 and 2018, and continues to report regularly on the country.

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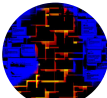
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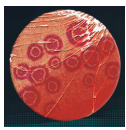


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