Web 2.0 at the Heart of Myanmar's Turmoil

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Abstract

As digitalization has transformed arguably all aspects of human existence and co-existence, it has obviously made its way into the realms of politics, diplomacy and the dynamics of emerging social tendencies on all levels – global, regional and local. This study takes a look at how Web 2.0 has affected Myanmar's public conflicts during the last two decades – and does so from the standpoint of social sciences, examining the unique nature of Burmese online development compared to other parts of the world, analyzing the interrelated nature of civil and government actions in the virtual sphere and on the streets alike. Looking at the related details of recent and partially ongoing social tragedies of Myanmar, this paper shows both how deeply Web 2.0 can infiltrate offline reality, and how obvious its limits are still in the hands of humans.

Keywords: Myanmar, Web 2.0, social networks, Facebook, Twitter, Civil Disobedience Movement, Tatmadaw, military junta, protest, Aung San Suu Kyi

At first glance it may seem an enigma, how Web 2.0 – the symbol of a hi-tech age – could prove to be a determinig factor in recent historical occurrences in Myanmar, one of the least developed countries[1] of the World,

[1] As defined by the United Nations, least developed countries (LDCs) are low-income countries that face significant challenges in their efforts to develop a sustainable and self-

where for most of the population even day-to-day functioning is a challenge. But if one looks into the specifics of the country's unique digital development pattern, it becomes logical how online tools played an indispensable role in both the interior political struggles of the pro-democracy movement, and the tragic fate of the country's Rohingya minority.

1. Introduction

On the auspicious afternoon in 2017[2], when in Naypyidaw I had the good fortune to meet Nobel peace laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, then State Counsellor[3] of Myanmar, a conference participant asked her if she was on Facebook. „*But of course, I am on Facebook…*" she replied with her usual smile, „*you know the saying: in Myanmar Facebook is the Internet!*"

That was when I realized why the SIM card salesman wanted to immediately set up my Facebook profile at the Yangon International Airport, when he was configuring my first Burmese mobile number a few days before. Even today, for the majority of the 25 million internet users in Myanmar, Facebook is the Internet.

2. The beginnings

With generations of military rule and a decades-old civil war defining the development rate of Myanmar, one may correctly assume that the age of Internet came to this part of the world with a significant delay.

The ruling military routinely witheld all „unnecessary" information from the public on classical analogue platforms anyway, so even from year 2000, when Myanmar officially received its first online connections, access was seriously limited and content was censored (Brooten, 2021).

Simple SIM cards of the sole „national" mobile network provider, MPT[4] cost 1000-2000 USD (Asher, 2021), and well before the smartphone age that didn't include any data, just calls and texts – coupled with one of the lowest network coverages of the planet. Internet access was limited to stationary PCs in select governmental offices and – this proved to be

supporting economy. Currently the UN qualifies 46 countries (including Myanmar) in this category, based on its comprehensive HDI (Human Development Index).

[2] On 21 November 2017, on the sidelines of the 13th ASEM Foreign Ministers' Meeting.

[3] The State Counsellor position was created in 2016 personally for incoming government leader Aung San Suu Kyi, as under the military-written constitution any close relative with a foreign citizenship disqualified one from being President of the country. The measure – of course – personally targeted long-time opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi, whose children hold British passports, so at the time of the democratic changes the new position was created for her with de facto Prime Minister's powers and responsibilities.

[4] Myanmar Post and Telecommunications

important later – universities. It did, however, grow, and slowly became an important source of information and platform for a new generation of young intellectuals, who had a more democratic and liberal vision of the future of the country.

3. The 2007 protests – a glimpse of the future

Despite internal challenges and almost continuous ethnic revolts, the military regime succeeded in holding political dissent on a short leash. However, beginning in February 2007, a series of protests arose in response to the growing oppression and the country's worsening economic situation. This culminated in an estimated 20 000 monks and nuns, with an additional 30 000 supporters, taking part in a protest march (Brooten, 2021) in Yangon itself.

The march resulted in a brutal military crackdown, which sparked an information campaign by the protestors' supporters – mainly driven by university students – to ensure that the world learned about what was taking place in Myanmar (Nelson, 2007), despite its controlled media and closed society.

Having no access to classical media, the Burmese began using Web 2.0 tools to publish and inform. Together with news from foreign journalists in Myanmar, information about the events was rapidly shared (Deejay, 2021). Mainstream foreign media, plus concerned individuals and groups disseminated this outgoing information, ensuring that the international community and global leaders were up-to-date of the horrors taking place.

I must once again emphasize that the Internet in 2007 was a different place compared to the 2020's. There was no TicToc and Facetime, there was MySpace and MSN Messenger. There were no smartphones in the pockets of neither the protesters, nor the authorities, there were only millennium-era stationary computers running on early Windows op systems with painstakingly slow connection in buildings possibly far from the action in the street. Still, online options grew by the day, thus Burmese and international efforts had an exponential effect on each other, while keeping the online information flowing, and continuing to rally support.

Already a wide range of Web 2.0 tools were utilized: Protesters primarily used blogs like Burma-Watch.org, Burmese Bloggers Without Borders, and many more. Wikipedia allowed readers to update real time, as information came in. Folksonomies, such as Flickr and YouTube offered social bookmarking, video and image tagging, and other utilities. Social networking support groups numbered over 500, with the largest one[5] growing from 3500 members in September 2007 to over 500 000 members

[5] The biggest such was a Facebook group named "Support the Monks' Protest in Burma".

by November 2007 (Nelson, 2007; Barnhill, 2011). Even one of the most popular online games of the time, *Second Life* staged an online support protest (Nelson, 2007) on the virtual ”*Commonwealth Island*”, central meeting place of online players.

The junta did not take these tendencies lightly. It completely shut down Internet connectivity from 29 September to 4 October, and even afterwards, it occasionally applied bandwidth caps to prevent the sharing of video and image files nationwide (Deejay, 2021; Asher, 2021). Access to all websites and blogs of opposition groups were banned, just like sites relating to human rights and pro-democracy organisations. Youth movements ironically termed the remaining network „Myanmar Wide Web” (MWW) as a nickname for the politically „harmless” portion of the World Wide Web that was still accessible from Myanmar (Nelson, 2007). Many sites containing keywords or phrases that were considered suspicious, such as "freedom", "junta", "military government", "democracy", "student movement", "8888"[6], and "human rights" were shut down, some remaining blocked for years (Barnhill, 2011). Access to Yahoo Mail, MSN Mail and Google’s Blogspot were occasionally blocked. However, Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) systems, including Skype, were still available (Brooten, 2021).

In the year 2007 the role of Web 2.0 in the support for Myanmar was significant. Mainstream global media took note of the speed at which the people reacted online, the extent of their coverage, the degree of mutual sharing of information (Nelson, 2007). It utilized their content in traditional coverage, multiplying the reach, raising awareness among world leaders and regional actors alike. Being in the pre-Arab Spring era, this occurrance was one of the first instances of Web 2.0 shaping both domestic and international attention and action.

4. Social media explosion

4.1. Opening up

With a wave of political reforms and general liberalization, the government partially opened up the telecommunications sector in 2011. By 2014 already three providers operated in Myanmar, apart from MPT, Norway’s Telenor and Qatar’s Oredoo were given permission to invest and develop[7]. The new competition radically decreased the prices, effectively giving place to an explosion in the number of users connected to the network – and with the coming of smartphones, connected to mobile net as well.

[6] 8888 is a reference to a protest movement that began on 8 August 1988.

[7] Mytel joined the trio in 2017, bringing the number of Burmese telecom service providers to four.

The sudden nature of the above process resulted in practically the whole country coming online almost at once (Asher, 2021). It was also the first time most Burmese had access to any kind of telecommunication with no previous experience in using online tools, no previous chance of developing critical digital literacy.

The benefits were all over daily life, so even though half of the population lived under or around the powerty line, and the other half was not much better off either, Internet became an everyday commodity, and the smartphone became the most precious item in one's household inventory. Access to the platforms allowed Burmese netizens to freely receive and share information, express themselves, create a sense of belonging together, and of course, allowed for greater political communication between the citizens and government. People suddenly bathed in real news, small businesses discovered networking and interactive advertising, and entertainment was guaranteed in every free minute of the users. And the overwhelming majority of this happened on Facebook.

4.2. Facebook „*to rule them all*"

There were multiple reasons why Facebook enjoys such dominance in Myanmar. Facebook's "*Free Basics*" initiative[8] in the developing world and partnerships with telecommunications providers such as Norway's Telenor helped fuel Facebook's extraordinary expansion. After its entry in 2014, Telenor offered a deal in which customers could use Facebook on their mobile device without any data charges. As internet connectivity was expanding, the quality of connections remained poor, but in these early times of expansion, Facebook loaded and refreshed faster than other platforms. And most importantly, Facebook established deals with manufacturers and retailers to have Facebook preloaded on to Burmese mobile phones (Asher, 2021). When someone bought their first smartphone and SIM card, the vendor helped them create their brand new Facebook profile, just as they would help configure the new mobile number in other parts of the world.

From less than a million Facebook users within Myanmar in 2011, by the end of 2018 there were over 21 million Facebook users (Asher, 2021), which is around 40 percent of the entire population (including the newborn and the elderly). Early 2021 estimates claimed that this number already surpassed 25 million, making the majority of the Burmese active Facebook users (Kemp, 2021).

[8] Meta's definition for the initiative is the following: Free Basics is a service that allows people to access a range of low-bandwith basic internet services for free. By providing people with access to these services for free, Free Basics addresses three barriers that prevent people from coming online: affordability, access, and awareness.

It was not uncommon that at certain times 99 percent of online data flow went through Facebook (Brooten, 2021), and in the years after the 2011 liberalization it became clear that Facebook was the only source of online information for the majority in Myanmar. Thus arose the paradoxical situation referred to by many: „In Myanmar Facebook is the Internet."

The culmination of the country's liberalization process was the partially free 2015 elections, when Aung San Suu Kyi's NLD (National League for Democracy) won and much to the surprise of the international community, actually was allowed by the Tatmadaw (the national military) to take over government in 2016 with army generals still keeping important positions. The civilian NLD-government carried out important and long-awaited reforms (Lwin, 2022), which added to the development of free speech and access to information both online and offline.

Certainly, such an explosion of social media within just a few years came with concerns as well. Some of the most prominent challenges have been misinformation, lack of transparency and problematic political ads. These issues are directly linked to the lack of the aforementioned *critical digital literacy*[9]. The quick rise of social media in Myanmar was not accompanied by efforts to develop this skill in the millions of new netizens – not from the government, nor from the Web 2.0 platforms (Kemp, 2021). Tensions in the multi-ethnic society, coupled with the military's dominance over Internet and telecommunication companies even after the democratic takeover, exposed social media companies' inability – and maybe unwillingness – to handle these problems.

5. Rohingya nightmare – in search of responsibility

In its first years on the Burmese online scene, Facebook had extremely limited capacity to monitor Burmese language posts and then failed to respond to early warnings of illiberal organising on its platform (Deejay, 2021). Political liberalization also coincided with liberalisation in freedoms of speech and association in Myanmar, therefore public debate about social issues, which had been silenced for decades by authoritarianism, sprung up again in Myanmar's print and online media. This allowed new political associations and movements to flourish, but on the other hand, uncontrolled misinformation has brought uncontrolled hate speech (McNeil, Milko, 2021), and with it actual, real-life tragedies.

There was a widespread perception amongst the majority Bamar population of a so-called "Muslim threat". The presence of Muslim majority countries in Myanmar's region, and a perceived growth in Muslim

[9] A key skill that goes beyond digital literacy to instil critical thinking skills about technology usage, including the authenticity of content, and how it is consumed and shared.

populations within Myanmar, especially among the Rohingya minority in Rakhine State, contributed to fears for ”race and religion”, and therefore the future existence of the Burmese.

There were no indications that Facebook took into consideration on any level the impact its platform could have on the social texture of Myanmar. And as the number of Facebook users grew to the dozens of millions, there were clear warnings for the company that the platform was facilitating hate speech against the Rohingya people. As early as 2013 Myanmar Deputy Minister for Information, U Ye Htut, reflected that „*Facebook spreads 'gunpowder' through the country*” through rumors and the proliferation of hate speech (Deejay, 2021). Following incidents of violence in 2014, civil groups and researchers communicated with Facebook officials a number of times, pointing to the widespread use of the platform for hate speech, especially through fake accounts. Specific examples of posts (advocating aggression and actual ethnic cleansing) on the platform were identified and presented to Facebook by civil society groups (McNeil, Milko, 2021) on multiple occasions.

Despite the criticism, by 2015 Facebook still had minimal capacity for identifying hate speech on its platform in Myanmar (either through AI language processing or through human analysts). At the time, Facebook had only two Burmese speaking colleagues dealing with many thousands of daily posts in Burmese language. This resulted in a virtually uncontrolled online environment, where any identification of hate speech had to be done by Burmese netizens themselves.

It is probably one of the great paradoxes of human history that violence against the Rohingya community in Myanmar reached a peak in 2016 and 2017, already at the time of the democratic NLD-government. Attacks by a Rohingya separatist insurgent group in Rakhine state in October 2016 led to major reprisals against Muslim communities, primarily led by the Burmese military. A year later another insurgent attack on police stations in Rakhine state led to even more widespread and violent military operations against Muslim communities which ultimately displaced more than one million people from Rakhine state to neighbouring Bangladesh. The international community – sometimes operating with simplified political messages as opposed to in-depth analysis – has put some of the blame on the new leadership of the country, struggling to understand that State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi did not have de facto control over the Tatmadaw, courtesy of the Constitution previously written by the generals themselves before the 2015 elections. She personally supported fact-finding missions and substantial investigations of crimes committed by military personnel; but had she stood up radically against the Army itself, her fragile democratic

system would have been swept away overnight[10], effectively cancelling out any democratic progress achieved through a long struggle for the first time in decades.

Anyhow, hate speech on Facebook proliferated. Propelled especially by sermons from prominent Therawada monks such as Ashin Wirathu (McNeil, Milko, 2021), Burmese language anti-Muslim sentiment spread widely online, directly resulting in many Bamar civilians actively joining the pogroms against the Rohingya; and many more supporting the Tatmadaw's brutal crimes on their online channels.

Following the Rakhine crisis in 2017, the United Nations initiated an "independent international fact-finding mission on Myanmar" (Helys, 2021), which included investigation into the role of Facebook in the crisis. The report found that „*Facebook has been a useful instrument for those seeking to spread hate*", and that its response had been „*slow and ineffective*" (Frankel, 2020). The proliferation of hate speech on Facebook in Myanmar was clearly counter to the "Zuckerberg narrative" that claimed Facebook was building "civically-minded" and "inclusive" global communities[11].

Facebook was pressed to address the issue seriously, but it mainly redirected criticism away from the platform, instead blaming local individuals, groups and culture (Frankel, 2020). In 2018, Facebook commissioned a consultancy firm to do an independent assessment of the company's human rights impact in Myanmar. Much of the report focuses on the challenges in Myanmar, on the domestic context – a lack of 'digital literacy', an undeveloped regulatory environment and cultural beliefs that reinforce discrimination – and quite simply: "bad actors" who use Facebook (Deejay, 2021). The emphasis of the assessment is not so much on the inadequate capacity to monitor Burmese language or the widespread failures of Facebook to respond to hate speech in Myanmar, but rather the behaviour of its users.

Observing the happenings from the angle of social science, we must conclude that the truth lies in between these claims. Both the inadequacies of Facebook content control, and the shortcomings of Burmese society have played an important role in creating an explosive mixture, which has contributed to the horrors suffered by over a million innocent civilians.

6. The coup d'état of 2021 and its online consequences

6.1. The military takeover

In November 2020 Aung San Suu Kyi and her governing NLD have repeated, even surpassed their landslide victory of 2015, winning 396 of the

[10] As we have come to see exactly that happening at a later date, discussed in the following chapter.

[11] More on this approach at: https://www.facebook.com/notes/3707971095882612/

476 seats in the Pyithu Hluttaw (the legislative Lower House of the Parliament). This was a huge disappointment for the Tatmadaw, as they were hoping for their proxy party, the USDP (Union Solidarity and Development Party) to be gaining ground, which it failed to achieve, winning only 33 seats.

Angered by the overwhelming and unwavering popularity of Aung San Suu Kyi, the military leadership claimed that the elections were fraudulent. After two months of uncertainty, on 1 February 2021, the day before the newly elected MPs would have taken their vows, the Tatmadaw grabbed power by force. State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi, President Win Myint, and other NLD party leaders had been arrested in an early morning raid. Numerous communications channels stopped working (Sina Media, 2021) (land lines to the capital, Naypyidaw, were interrupted, the public TV channel said it was unable to broadcast due to ”technical issues”, widespread Internet disruptions were reported beginning at dawn, and the military blocked mobile coverage throughout the country) (Pérez, 2021), and all commercial banks suspended their financial services. Later in the day, around 400 elected MPs were placed under house arrest.

Vice President Myint Swe (USDP) was declared acting President, and as he proclaimed a state of emergency, the Pyithu Hluttaw was dissolved, giving place to the State Administration Council with Army commander-in-chief General Min Aung Hlaing taking the role of its Chairman[12].

6.2. Protest on- and offline

The sudden takeover of power resulted in immediate public anger against the Tatmadaw and an outpouring of public support for Aung San Suu Kyi, who has been a symbol of hope for the people of Myanmar already under earlier military rule, through many years of house arrest. Her detention produced a wave of social media-induced protests, named after a few days as the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM).

Like with other protests in recent times, online tools have played a crucial role in the appearence and persistence of the CDM (Brooten, 2021). The movement, launched as a non-violent resistance by students and government healthcare workers refusing to show up to work, mushroomed into a nation-wide show of civic courage largely organised over the Internet. The protests have also served to highlight the crisis in the international arena, with the hope that foreign intervention could possibly change the generals' minds (Tarabay, 2021).

[12] The committee of the legally elected MPs, who fled the coup and now live in exile has declared the State Administration Committee to be a “terrorist organization”.

One of the consequences of the social media thrust was that the movement it generated was inclusive and nation-wide, as most communication on social media was in Burmese. Many observers pointed out that Burmese netizens from all social classes and geographical regions had shed their ethnic identities, struggles and prejudices to unite against the common enemy, the oppressor. This was a hugely significant development in a country characterized by ethnic enemosity previously instigated by the military's old divide-and-rule tactics.

Along the dry season, and deep into the monsoon season of 2021, despite the Internet crackdown and over 700 civilian deaths by April already, protests continued to erupt across the country.

(One must not avoid presenting all aspects of a given phenomenon. Although it does not alter the main lines of argument of this study, it needs to be said that the opposition protests have partially been tainted by groups with dishonest interests (Lwin 2022). Some of them organized themselves to malevolently gather charity money and then use that for their own gains. Some of them were criminal outcasts looking for opportunities that society provided to the protesters, like free meals, free accomodation, sometimes even free cash. And most importantly, some of them were members of violent armed groups (ethnic nationalists or maoists) seeking for violence against any official service members. Thankfully, these elements could not change the dynamics of the whole CDM, and with time their presence slowly faded to insignificance.)

Throughout the pro-democracy protests, military brutality was shared abundantly across social media. Patterns of this collective action and protest largely followed the social media playbook of the past decade. Protest actions have included strikes of different nature (flower strike, garbage strike, candle-light vigils), naming/shaming tactics, particularly of those linked to the military or those who ignorantly resumed official activities, as well as social punishment, which involved pressuring people to hold out and not to resume official duties (Deejay, 2021).

6.3. Resistance and solidarity

Many Facebook pages and groups supporting the CDM appeared, ranging from those with just a few likes to groups with more than 400,000 followers (Asher, 2021). While some of these were created in direct response to the coup, other pages, such as the *Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (Burma)*, formed by former political captives from Burma in exile, or *Justice for Myanmar*, built on pre-existing activism (Sung, 2022). And there were, of course, the many Facebook accounts of ordinary citizens, which were effectively converted into sites of protest and support.

Facebook and Twitter became key for the uploading and circulation of images and videos of protests across the country, as well as military excesses against protesters and journalists. They were also used strategically as a platform to raise international awareness to the issue, as well as to gather international support.

The platforms also served as a toolkit of information and resources to assist protesters for their personal safety. There were posts and articles about whom to contact, what to do and who to call if someone gets arrested (Pérez, 2021), how to get VPN access, best practices for social media behaviour, and even crowdfunding options.

Social media also became a ”school” for digital literacy, with more experienced users helping new arrivals to Twitter learn how to quickly navigate and use the platform, with information on how to identify fake news and misinformation, and how to avoid sharing inaccurate information.

Since the movement became increasingly broad and cut across ethnic divides, the Facebook groups and activity reflected a representative sample of society, and prominent online actors included members of civil society, youth and university students as well as the Burmese diaspora (Brooten, 2021). The increased involvement of the youth was a much welcome development, particularly for the diaspora, who took note of their courage and creativity in fighting the regime. In the early stages, pop culture, such as the three-finger salute of resistance from the movie franchise Hunger Games, was also incorporated into the protests (The Straits Times, 2021) as a powerful symbol, as were songs and dances, shared online to encourage supporters.

On Twitter, international NGOs working for Rohingya rights, journalists, diaspora and activists expressed their views using #whatshappeninginmyanmar voicing their accusations vs. the military. Journalists covering Myanmar, who lived outside the country, shared real-time information of military atrocities and highlighted the voices of locals (Sung, 2022). Importantly, they also posted images of the protests taking place in remote areas of various provinces in Myanmar, so the picture became inclusive, it didn’t limit itself to the major hubs.

Women from various backgrounds, and feminist groups on Twitter shared images of the three-finger salute with #sisters2sisters (Sung, 2022) to encourage the international community to stand up against sexual violence and exploitation of Burmese women by the military.

6.4. Twitter vs Facebook

Things ran mostly parallel in the ways that Facebook and Twitter have played their role in the CDM (Deejay, 2021). As mentioned earlier, many of the tactics and strategies used by both protesters and the regime

have followed the social media-based movements in the past, with local adaptations. While Facebook as a company has played a leading and active role in supporting the protest movement, Twitter certainly also emerged as an alternative platform to protest and gather international support to confront the military's actions.

There were, naturally, some differences as well. Twitter, as a platform, functions differently compared to Facebook with respect to user engagement. For example, by using the hashtag feature, users can locate a variety of perspectives with few formal constraints and follow the discourse from all parties, including experts, NGOs, activists, journalists and the general public (Brooten, 2021).

A key difference was the role played by Twitter in uniting the Burmese with the global community. On Facebook, netizens were connected largely with other fellow Myanmar citizens. Particularly for those belonging to the lower socio-economic groups, this had a bigger chance to result in echo chambers and perpetuation of the social media filter bubble effect (Sung, 2022).

The migration to Twitter allowed for exposure to global communities and diverse perspectives, including ideas of equality and human rights, and an understanding of the Rohingya issue from a new lens. Especially for the youth, this was an eye-opening and transformative experience, triggering feelings of remorse, unity and solidarity on a scale not witnessed before.

This new sense of solidarity reinvigorated the CDM and has given greater impetus to resistance efforts on the ground, both in cities as well as to armed protests in the country's far-flung corners (Pérez, 2021). A prominent example was the protests on 13 June 2021, where thousands of anti-junta protesters posted pictures of themselves wearing black under the #Black4Rohingya campaign. This is a huge development compared to previous years, where the majority ethnic Bamar population showed little concern for the fate of the Rohingya minority.

6.5. Blackouts and social counter-measures

Although the Tatmadaw did try everything, in the initial stages of the movement, with smartphones in the pockets of 20+ million citizens, it was impossible to suffocate the flow of information between protesters, and to the outside world (Chew, 2021; ICG, 2021).

Once could see the same phenomenon time and again, in Egypt, Hong Kong, India or Thailand: Protesters are becoming more technologically educated everywhere and find technical loopholes in government restrictions (Tarabay, 2021). During the complete blackout, the Burmese have created SMS groups, used Bluetooth-based technology, and mesh network apps like Bridgefy to keep information flowing. At times of blockages of Facebook or

other specific platforms, they started using Facebook mirror sites on the dark web or shifted to VPN options to keep their profiles running, and as showed above, jumped ship to Twitter, Whatsapp, and more recently, to Signal, for messaging (Pérez, 2021; Tarabay, 2021) in large numbers.

Possibly the most inspiring aspect of these evasion techniques was that everyone helped everyone, even complete strangers – on and offline – in finding, installing, and using these alternative means of communication. The evolution of the online situation in Myanmar showed once again that blockades can slow the efficient spread of information, but it cannot completely block communications endlessly.

7. The aftermath

7.1. When the dust settled

Although after months of turmoil the online scene of Myanmar seemed to return to normality by the end of 2021 (Htwe, 2022), it does by no means mean that the junta was giving up its efforts to maintain and strengthen its control over the Internet (Chew, 2021; Sung, 2022). The authorities lifted bans to favor their own "white-list" of organisations and corporations that could access the internet, while the rest of the country still regularly expreienced these discriminatory shutdowns. The military continued to order blockages regionally – especially where armed conflicts were still ongoing, to conceal its many killings, assaults, arrests and enforced disappearences.

The government changed important laws to further suffocate free speech online. The new Broadcasting Law criminalized any speech deemed impermissible by the authorities, and the new Cybersecurity Law allows a wide censorship of content and complete control of online platforms through registration and licensing requirements. In a move that shocked Burmese netizens, this law criminalized VPN usage, now punishable with up to 3 years imprisonment.

Finally, the government took effective steps to discourage general Internet consumption through forcing operators to increase prices significantly. This has posed practical barriers to Internet access for the average person, in the midst of an economic crisis and a pandemic, when connectivity would have been even more essential than ever. Although the numbers are growing again, the junta successfully turned a few million users away from online services – at least temporarily.

7.2. The state of play

The sad reality of the situation is that after more than 2000 Burmese citizens have been killed by the hands of the Tatmadaw and more than 11 000 are still detained for political reasons (AAPP, 2022), the wave of

protests finally ended by late 2021 (Sung, 2022; Voa, 2022). There are still sporadical signs of open resistance, but the systemic nature of the 2021 CDM is nowhere to be seen in mid-2022 (Lwin, 2022).

The hero of Myanmar's democratic movement, State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi has already been sentenced to 11 years in prison (Voa, 2022), still awaiting trial in multiple other fabricated charges that may run up the overall sentence to well over her possible lifetime.

Reacting to the human rights situation in the country, Telenor announced in early 2022 that it is selling its Myanmar branch for US$105m[13]. The sale is, however, more than problematic: The buyer, Investcom is owned in 80% by Shwe Byain Phyu, well-known proxy associate of the Tatmadaw. As a result, three of the four telecommunications providers in Myanmar are now directly controlled by the junta – including MPT and MyTel. It can also be assumed that these operators routinely activate surveillance technology within their networks, as Telenor clearly stated[14] that its departure was due to "*continued pressure*" on operators to "*activate intercept equipment and technology for the use of Myanmar authorities*".

What's more, the sale also included all existing metadata of the operator's more than 18 million subscribers. That practically means selling out almost half of Myanmar's mobile users to the military with all their online and mobile histories. One can easily consider the possible consequences of this to individual users and groups with anti-junta digital activities.

Generally speaking, today the Internet is back online, apart from minor and targeted disruptions, there are no major blackouts anymore (Htwe, 2022). As it is clear from the above, the level of censorship has not changed to the better, but at least average people can go about their online everydays with no direct harrassment. One can say, the status of Myanmar's online scene – for now – is quiet.

Conclusion

Having examined the details and circumstances of the interrelated nature of Web 2.0 and public life in Myanmar, we can conclude that a

[13] According to the company's statement of 17 March 2022, "Telenor has to leave Myanmar to be able to adhere to our own values on human rights and responsible business, and because local laws in Myanmar conflict with European laws. The security situation is extreme and deteriorating, and we must ensure that our exit does not increase the safety risk for employees".

[14] Further details about Telenor's statement at: https://www.reuters.com/world/norways-telenor-says-myanmar-unit-sale-came-after-juntas-pressure-surveillance-2021-09-15/

significant development took place during the last decade, both quantitatively and qualitatively.

In 2022 Myanmar is a connected, online country. Yes, it has been one of the last nations on the planet to get connected, and the process had its serious highs and lows, but now the goal of connectivity is achieved. The number of Internet users multiplied exponentially, granting all perks of having access to Web 2.0 tools and opportunities.

We can also see on the other hand that technological or digital solutionism[15] is a false narrative. Those, who believe that communities can be free of social or political problems through access to cutting-edge technological or digital opportunities, should take a look at Myanmar and conclude that reailty is more complex and multi-layered than that. In our case, a quasi-monopoly of Facebook on the online scene has brought very significant positive social effects, but was not without its failures (McNeil, Milko, 2021). It did fail to efficiently intervene to halt the spread of online hate speech, thus indirectly facilitating real-life violence and, in the longrun, it did fail to emerge victorious in the democratic struggles, where it has indeed taken part actively in the dynamics on the side of democracy and human rights.

Although Myanmar is a unique and specific case study, it does help the observing social scientist in drawing the general conclusion to take the plethora of Web 2.0 platforms for what it really is: a set of tools, the potential and the achievements of which only we, as individuals and societies can define and determine both through regulatory frameworks and our online behaviours; therefore the final responsibility lies with us, the users.

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