

Press freedom and reporting on the government in Myanmar

Myanmar used to be one of the most secluded and isolated places in the world. Human rights watchdog organizations each year released reports with countless incidents proving Myanmar to be one of the worst states when it came to dealing with its people. Press freedom was seriously violated with many media laws in place.

Starting in March 2011, things began to change when a newly elected civilian government came to power. To much global rejoicing, the country began to open up and began to allow much more freedom for both local and international media. This is an unique opportunity for journalists to speak candidly and openly for the first time about the state of the press in Myanmar.

This change raised two questions. Is this freedom real and will it last? How do these changes affect the way journalists work in Myanmar? To answer these, I explored two research questions:

RQ1: How did journalists in Myanmar and outside of the country report on the government before the political reform?

RQ2: How do the recent change in policies affect reporting in Myanmar?

I conducted 11 in-depth interviews. One group included those who worked for local media and foreign press inside Myanmar. The other group consisted of those who worked for exiled media and international press outside of the country.

The framework for this analysis is the gatekeeping theory as defined by Shoemaker and Voss (2009). It is “the process of culling and crafting countless bits of

information to the unlimited number of messages that reach people everyday and it is the center of the media's role in the modern day.”

For 50 years before the recent positive developments, journalists in Myanmar had been operating under strict censorship from the government with a series of media laws to follow. The recent changes in the Burmese media landscape, though positive, are still in an early phase. What these journalists consider as newsworthy and their decision process might be influenced by governmental censorship or self-censorship. To this end, gatekeeping theory which addresses the media's decision in disseminating and withholding information from the public offers an insight into this process.

Background: Suppression of the media under the military rule

Aung Zaw reported in the Nieman Reports (2002) that the media in Myanmar was in a “deep coma.” The Committee to Protect Journalists in 1998 listed this Southeast Asian country as one of 10 enemies of the press together with China and Cuba. Since 2002, Myanmar was among the bottom 15 countries where freedom of expression was seriously violated (Reporters Without Borders, 2013).

The media was under tight control from the Press Scrutiny and Registration Division (PSRD), which is an agency of the Ministry of Information (Naing, 2010). The military government of Myanmar passed several acts prohibiting the country's press from publishing any content that reflect badly on the government as well as undermining the country's peace and stability. Violations of this principle would bring a sentence of up to 20 years (Committee to Protect Journalists, 1997). Taboo topics included natural disasters, plane crashes, regional conflicts as well as activities on the opposition party and

coups to overthrow the military government (Zaw, 2002; Piddhanida, 2013). Journalists' phones were tapped (Zaw, 2002) and licensing was a must for anyone who wanted to practice journalism (Reporters Without Borders, 2005).

Every week we would have to submit our pages on Thursday and Friday then on Saturday night late in the evening, we'd get our pages back from the ministry and we would put the corrections in and cut what they told us to cut and then run the paper. (Gabrielle Paluch, former editor of Myanmar Times)

Print media was strictly censored with pre-publication rule with every article having to be submitted for approval before publishing. 450 non-government newspapers, journals and magazines had to suffer from this process which could take several months (Tun, 2013; Pidd, 2013; Phanida, 2013; Naing, 2010).

While foreign correspondents did not have to go through censorship, they had to send copies of their stories to the censorship bureau. They practiced what was called self-restraint to protect themselves from the government action.

Self-restraint in the sense that for example if we want to write anything about military, I would guess and gauge is this worth the risk, how can I verify this information, what sort of proof. I have to double check and recheck before I write a story so I have a little bit of restraint because of what I wrote, I might land into trouble, I want to stay out of trouble so that I can report. We have to be very careful of what we write. (Aye Win, AP foreign correspondent)

The military regime also controlled the airwaves and used broadcasting as a propaganda tool. According to the CIA (2013), the Burmese government owned one state radio station and controlled the content of nine joint state and private radio stations. The government has ownership of two TV stations, one of which belongs to the armed forces, which also has partnerships in two other pay TV stations.

Access to the Internet was also limited with many websites being banned, including YouTube, *BBC*, *Reuters*, *The Bangkok Post*, *Straits Times*, *Radio Free Asia*, *Irrawaddy*, *Democratic Voice of Burma*. The government censored the Internet by asking service providers to install censorship equipment manufactured from China. Anti-government content was firewalled while netizens were considered “enemies of the state” (Reporters Without Borders, 2011). According to the law, no citizen was allowed to possess a fax machines or computers (Burma Wireless Telegraphy Act, 1933), posting on the Internet is regulated (Computer Science Development Law, 1996). Violations of any of those laws would result in either fines or up to 15 years in prison. Many said that the law left many doors open for interpretation and the main goal was to keep government critics from speaking up (Pidd, 2013).

Burmese journalists were never under the threat of a death penalty, however many journalists who violated the strict media law were jailed in insanity prisons with lengthy sentences (Zaw, 2002; Reporters Without Borders, 2005). In 2008, 10 journalists were put in jailed, including one who received a sentence of 19 years (Naing, 2010).

Aye Win, and her husband, Min Zaw, a foreign correspondent for the *Tokyo Shimbun*, were harassed and threatened constantly by the government. They were arrested from home at midnight for questioning. Aye Win described one event during the Saffron Revolution of the Buddhist Monks in 2007 when she heard that traumatizing knock on their home’s gate.

The roads were quiet, it’s eerie, it’s so silent, nothing, you can even hear the pen drop. And then about midnight, I shouldn’t be awake because I had been running and walking all day, I should be sleeping like a log, but I could hear a car

*on the street. "What is this car doing?" And then it clicked.
"Are they coming for us?" Normal person wouldn't think like
that. (Aye Win, AP foreign correspondent)*

Min Zaw was arrested that day for covering the monks' protests. He was sent to solitary confinement and was released 7 days after due to his health conditions.

Publishing articles that went against the government's instructions would lead to warnings, suspension or even worse, shutdown. Private newspapers were shut down because of being pro-America or reporting on events that were deemed inappropriate by the PSRD (Reporters Without Borders, 2005). This led many newspapers into carefully coding secret messages calling for freedom and overthrowing the current government into their articles. Journalists in Myanmar called this practice "sandwich reporting" (Naing, 2010).

Chit Win Maung, an editor and founder of two magazines, said that one of his magazines was banned three times for publishing articles criticizing the military government. *Ya Nan Thit*, an international affairs magazine, twice was out of circulation for six months and then again three months.

Existing alongside the repressed media in the country is the exiled media which located in the neighboring countries of Thailand, India and Bangladesh. These publications were reporting in English, Burmese and various languages. They also relied heavily on contributions from donors, mostly from Europe and America (Zaw, 2006). Three of the most prominent ones are *Irrawaddy* in Thailand, *Mizzima* in India, and the *Democratic Voice of Burma* in Norway. These outlets were not allowed to distribute their work in Myanmar and were seen by the government as "enemies" (Bottollier-Depois,

2012).

Reporting on the government as well as getting any information at all was hard work and often unrewarded. For exiled publications, it was harder for them to report on the government issues. Calls were unanswered and were required to quote from government owned media. During Nargis Cyclone in 2008, VOA Burmese service was trying to get information about the devastation that the cyclone caused to the country. However, communications were completely cut off.

Zaw (2006) highlighted that exiled media enjoyed much more freedom than their counterparts inside the country. They often published articles that were very critical of the regime with the help of reporters inside the country (Zaw, 2006). These publications attracted international attention and were also popular in Myanmar. In many cases, Burmese audience had to rely on outside news to get information on the development inside their country on certain topics. (Reporters Without Borders, 2005).

The exiled media were operating under pressure from their political associations, donors, and the country where they headquartered. According to Zaw (2006), Thailand many times asked *Irrawaddy* to change its location or shut down the office as it wanted to keep a good relationship with Myanmar. Many exiled publications were associated with opposition parties and were not critical of the opposition parties' weaknesses as well as flaws in strategies. *Irrawaddy* once was told by the party that they should wait until the "revolution is over" to publish articles that put the party under a bad light. Donors never forgot to remind them that they help fund the newspaper. *Mizzima* once was told to retract an article that was not in line with the views from its donors (Zaw, 2006).

Under the previous military regime, it was extremely difficult for foreign media to get news from inside Myanmar as well as distributing news within the country.

According to a report from Reporters Without Borders in 2005, foreign journalists from *Agence France-Presse*, *British Broadcasting Company*, and *Voice of America* were denied visas to enter the country. Journalists who gave those media interviews were harassed and their phone lines were disrupted for weeks. Foreign media were told to leave the country after the military came to power in 1964. Only two Chinese news outlets were allowed to have permanent staff working in Myanmar (AP, 2013). Foreign reporters often had to travel to the Thai or Chinese borders to get information about this isolated country (BNI, 2013).

Thiha Thwe, *NHK*'s cameraman, said on the day before Saffron Revolution in 2007, both of his phones stopped working. The same thing happened to many other journalists who worked for foreign media, which made it hard for them to communicate with their bureaus in Bangkok and elsewhere.

The government authorized which newspapers and periodicals were allowed to appear on the newsstands and often times their content was heavily guarded. Anyone found with possession of an unauthorized publications could be put in prison (Brooten, 2008). *VOA*, *BBC* and some other radio stations had to transmit signals through satellite or shortwave to reach audience in Myanmar (Central Intelligence Agency, 2013).

Myanmar today: Positive changes and unknown future

In a dramatic move in August 2012, Myanmar's Ministry of Information's Press Scrutiny and Registration Division announced its decision to abolish its 50 year

practice of pre-publication censorship for print media. This means journalists will no longer have to submit their work for approval before publication. This is the most dramatic change in a series of reforms that shows the government's ease on controlling press freedom during the last year since the political reform (Tun, 2013; Pidd, 2013; Phanida, 2013).

Things in Myanmar are the best they've been in years.

(Geoffrey Goddard, former *Myanmar Times* editor)

Myanmar removed 2,082 names from a list of banned organizations and individuals, many of whom were journalists. This allowed the return of exiled media organizations as well as the release of journalists and cyber dissidents (Reporters Without Borders, 2013).

In late 2012, the exiled media organizations set up their offices in Yangon. It took *Voice of America Burmese service* a year and a half to come back to the country. It now has a staff of six people, including a bureau chief, rotating every two years. *Radio Free Asia* has staff in Yangon, the business capital of Myanmar, and Mandalay, the second biggest city in the country. Reporters from publications such as *Mizzima*, *Irrawaddy* and *DVB* are now back, working in the country. *Mizzima*, a publication banned by the junta for publishing critical stories about the government, has offices in three most important cities in Myanmar, which are Na Pyi Taw, Yangon and Mandalay. Their reporters and support group has grown to 190 people.

Many newspapers did something they never imagined to do before such as putting pictures of Aung San Suu Kyi on front pages or quote critics of the government (Tun,

2013). Before this, local newspapers were not allowed to publish anything about Aung San Suu Kyi or her pictures (Phanida, 2013).

We now have so many newspapers. Most of the journalists can write nearly everything, no more censorship department (sic). Our press movement (sic) is more free compared to previous years. (Chit Win Maung, chief editor of Tha Ma Ga News Journal and Tet Lann Sports Journal)

The return of the private media is also a positive sign which ended the monopoly on daily news by the government newspapers (Win & Naing, 2013). Starting April 2013, daily private newspapers re-appeared in the newsstands. This was a novelty in Myanmar because many people are not old enough to know private media even existed (Win, 2013). As many as 16 private newspapers have permissions to publish daily. Four of them released their first daily on April 1, 2013 (Win & Naing, 2013).

There's been a remarkable transformation as the domestic media as the onerous censorship is not there as it was. You have a boom in the number of newspapers being published. There are probably too many newspapers right now. (Steve Herman, VOA's Southeast Asia Bureau Chief)

Also in April 2013, *NHK*, a Japan-based media group, and the *Associated Press* of the U.S. were allowed to have permanent staff working in Yangon.

There has been a huge influx of foreign reporters. There are a lot more than there used to be due to ease of restrictions and people are a lot more open to the press than they used to be. (Gabrielle Paluch, freelance reporter)

These changes together with the release of political prisoners helped Myanmar jump 18 places in the Reporters Without Borders press freedom index. For the last decade, Myanmar was always placed in the bottom 15 every year together with countries which had the worst press freedom index. In the 2013 report, Myanmar was ranked 151st,

its best position on the list ever (Reporters without Borders, 2013).

Despite the progress, lack of access and lack of transparency are still big problems under a newly open government. Stories about former generals are still hard to access, while investigation stories are mostly impossible to execute. This is particularly true for foreign media and once exiled media. Many parts of the country are still closed off to foreign media and government officials are reluctant to talk to the press. Getting a comment from government sources is still fundamentally difficult. Investigation on corruption is difficult to work on because of the lack of transparency.

Lack of transparency and of course we can't say that foreign correspondents are free to travel anywhere in the country. Much of the country is restricted and literally as recently as a few week ago foreign correspondents have been chased out of Rakhine state. The situation is better than it was a few years ago but by no means is it comparable to many other countries in the regions. (Steve Herman, VOA's Southeast Asia Bureau Chief)

A few politicians or officers, they talk to us but people in the bureaucratic chain still are not willing to talk to us. They're afraid of their status. They would lose their job or something like that. (Htun, VOA Burmese service bureau chief)

Foreign press express a sense of confusion and frustration toward the government's treatment of them.

There is tremendous frustration, puzzlement, and consternation among the foreign media especially the major news organizations based there about lack of access to government officials... Much of the country is restricted and literally as recently as a few weeks ago foreign correspondents have been chased out of Rakhine state. (Steve Herman, VOA's Southeast Asia Bureau Chief)

The recent arrests of three journalists who broke the news about a chemical

weapons factory, and one journalist who went into the Education Ministry to get information have taken a toll on local journalists as well. Most journalists now will think twice before breaking investigative or enterprise stories.

The freedom is like a kind of fruity fruit, it has been delicious but the taste has been disappearing. (Thiha Thwe, NHK's cameraman)

The arrival of more private daily newspapers was greeted with great joy, however a price war has already started. Many journalists blame cronies, financial groups who are friends of the government, for waging this war. Those financial groups are selling newspapers at half or one third the average price. Private media do not have the resources to sustain their business.

The government controls the distribution, the government has established the printing press, they have many printing press all over the country... In terms of distribution, they're [private media] far behind because they don't really have this strong network. And they don't have printing machines all over the country, and when the transportation not efficient, how can you send the daily newspapers, you know to the district that will, you know the reader can read early in the morning. By noon, the newspapers are useless. (Aye Win, AP foreign correspondent)

Over the last year, three newspapers went bankrupt, one of which is *Mizzima*, one of the exiled media organizations who just got back to the country. *Mizzima* has since partnered with a company owned by Surge Pun, a banking and real estate tycoon. With the financial support, *Mizzima* aspires to become one of the top media house in multimedia production according to its editor-in-chief Soe Myint. From an exiled newspaper which was banned and critical of the junta, *Mizzima* now has 190 staff, working in Yangon, the capital city Na Pyi Taw, and Mandalay. Aye Win expressed

concerns about the newspaper's direction.

Since it was bought by a tycoon, the business will be financially strong but we have to carefully observe that these media remain independent. (Aye Win, AP's foreign correspondent)

While *Mizzima* found a strong financial support, *Myanmar Freedom* is trying to negotiate its existence. One of Myanmar's first private daily English newspapers, *Myanmar Freedom* had to suspend publications recently. Thiha Saw, the editor in chief, has been negotiating for a strong financial partner in the price war with cronies.

Our initial business plan was to reach the 'sustainable point' in a year or so. Our initial projection for the capital we need was one million dollars in a year. I've spent almost \$850,000 in the last 10 months. At this point when the price war started and the big companies coming in, I have not any choice but to team up with a stronger company to engage in this 'cruel newspaper war'. The challenge is to get a strong partner and maintain our independent editorial policy. (Thiha Saw, Myanmar Freedom's chief editor)

One challenge for a new freedom of press is that young journalists who grew up during the military rule were not exposed to professional journalism. While college educated, they have recently graduated and do not have any professional journalism training. These budding journalists are also underexposed to the international community and norms. They often confused with appropriately challenging politicians and feeling they are disrespecting these politicians. Lacking background and context is also one challenge for these journalists. Consequently, they do not know which questions to ask to gain the proper information or to get to the heart of the matter.

Conclusion: Skepticism about the future

While the changes, recent openness, and relaxation of the government towards the media are seen as positive, skepticism is still high among journalists and media experts in Myanmar and outside.

I've never really bought into the type of "everything is fine in Burma" because, well, that's not realistic. Nowhere else in the world has a country that has been so closed off and oppressive suddenly become a beacon of democracy without a lot of heartache. (Thin Leiwin)

Veteran journalists who covered Myanmar for the last couple of decades are convinced that the government will not backtrack on the change. “They must be stupid to reverse to the old time,” said Than Lwin Htun, VOA Burmese service bureau chief.

Journalists agreed that the reason that the junta military government decided to open up the country was not that surprising. That was a “clever exit strategy” and a means to keep the families wealth permanent. There are about 100 families that control Myanmar politically and economically. The way the government was structured made it hard for those generals to transfer their wealth to their families.

I think most would agree that we are seeing a period of economic liberalization, not massive political reform. I think how the election is handled next year will be a major limitus test for what happens. (Steve Herman, VOA Southeast Asia bureau chief)

Reversing to the past is not expected, but journalists are not convinced that this government is willing to give the media full access to press freedom.

This regime still wants to control everything. There's one step forward but there's always two steps backwards... They're not reluctant to break their promises and they step on their own

words. So for me, I've watched them for four, five decades and I have very little faith in them. I don't see them as very trustworthy establishment. (Aye Win, AP foreign correspondent)

Case in point, the existence of the Press Council. The Press Council was created after the government relaxed media regulations. Initially, the government appointed the majority of its member. After criticism, the government allowed the media to select its members from media organizations across the country. Many journalists now feel the organization has no authority or influence to guarantee a free-press. The government asked the council to come up with its own new media law, while at the same time announced a printing and publishing law.

Skepticism aside, many journalists express optimism for the future of Myanmar in terms of press freedom. All of them admitted that the country is in transition and it needs time to change. Journalists agreed that the presidential elections next year will show more clearly if these changes are real and if it will last.

Limitations and Suggestions

For this analysis, I conducted 12 semi-structured in-depth interviews. Semi-structured interviews allow the discussions to flow as a conversation (Harrell and Bradley, 2009) while still covering planned areas and topics. This kind of interview can produce in-depth information (Newton, 2010), but it has certain weaknesses. My sample size was small and not inclusive. I was able to interview 12 journalists who spoke English. While these journalist have years of experience with deep understanding of Myanmar, they lack the understanding of the ethnic regions that journalists from other regions have. The ethnic journalists I met did not speak English.

Communication complications is another factor that prevented me from having the most satisfactory results. Some local journalists struggled with expressing themselves in English. I was fortunate to be in Myanmar for a week for a conference held by the East-West Center and made the connections with local journalists. However, when it was time for a formal interview, it was difficult to arrange due to their schedule and the time difference.

This research was done mainly focused on the technical side of reporting in Myanmar while it was under oppression and after the country was open to the world. There is so much about Myanmar and the country as well as the reporting culture that needs to be explored.

Ethnic tension and how journalists in Myanmar cover the clashes between Buddhist monks and Muslim minority people in the northern state of Kachine is also a worthy topic to examine. The dynamics between the majority of the Buddhists and the minority Muslims in this country is interesting. Many people in Myanmar, however educated they are, have biases against Muslims. The role of the press in conflict should be examined.

The changing role of exiled media, now that there is no exiled media anymore is another topic worth looking at. In order to come back to the country, many newspapers had to water down their coverage of the issues. Will exiled media become obsolete or not and how they can stay true to their colors are questions that future researchers may want to pursue. The international media may have their own challenges as they balance

expanded coverage and the need to be able to operate within the country. Monitoring this in Myanmar may provide good information and research topics.

References

- BNI Online. (2013). "International media go live from Myanmar". BNI Online.
- Bottollier-Depois, A.. (2013). "Exile media crafting new role from inside Myanmar". AFP.
- Burma Wireless Telegraphy Act. (1933). Accessed April 7, 2013, from <http://www.mcpt.gov.mm/mcpt/myanmar-wireless-telegraphy-act.htm>
- Central Intelligence Agency. (2013). "The World Factbook: Burma". Updated April 3, 2013, Retrieved April 12, 2013, from <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/bm.html>
- Committee to Protect Journalists. (1997). "Enemies of the Press 1997". Updated May 3, 1997, Accessed April 9, 2013 from <http://cpj.org/reports/1997/05/enemies97.php>
- Computer Science Development Law. (1996). Accessed April 7, 2013, from <https://www.myanmarisp.com/ICTnews/law10-96>
- Naing, S. Y.. (2010). "'Sandwich reporting' keeps the censors guessing". Irrawaddy. Updated August 11, 2010, Retrieved Apr 12 2013.
- Phanida (2013). "Burma removes prior censorship". Mizzima
- Pidd, H. (2013). "Burma ends advance press censorship". Guardian.
- Reporters Without Borders. (2005). "Reporters Without Borders Annual Report 2005: Burma". Updated April 19, 2013, Accessed April 20, 2013, from <http://www.refworld.org/docid/46e690d82b.html>
- Reporters Without Borders. (2011). "Internet enemies: Burma". Updated March 12, 2012, Accessed April 20, 2013, from <http://en.rsf.org/burma-burma-12-03-2012,42076.html>
- Reporters Without Borders. (2013). 2013 World press freedom index: Dashed hopes after spring. Accessed April 12, 2013, from <http://en.rsf.org/press-freedom-index-2013,1054.html>
- Tun, A. H. (2013). "Myanmar government abolishes direct censorship". Reuters

Win, A. A.. (2013). "Privately owned daily newspapers return to Myanmar". AP.

Win, Z. A. & Naing, W.. (2013). "Burma approves 16 private dailies". [Radio Free America](#).

Zaw, A. (2002). "In Burma, a repressive regime controls the press". Nieman Reports, 56(2), pp. 67.

Zaw, A. (2006). "Burmese Reporters in Exile Confront Different Risks". Nieman Reports, 60(2), pp. 23-25.

Interviews

1. Aye Aye Win and Min Zaw, Foreign Correspondent, 10/29/2014, In person, Columbia, MO, USA.
2. Than Lwin Htun, VOA Burmese service bureau chief, 4/7/2014, Skype Interview, Washington D.C., USA.
3. Steve Herman, VOA Southeast Asia bureau chief, 4/4/2014, Skype Interview, Bangkok, Thailand.
4. Aye Hnin, RFA editor, 10/19/2013, Skype, London, UK.
5. Geoffrey Goddard, Myanmar Times former editor, 9/23/2013, Skype Interview, Yangon, Myanmar.
6. Gabrielle Paluch, freelance reporter, 4/3/2014, Phone interview, Yangon, Myanmar.
7. Chit Win Maung, , 4/7/2014, Phone Interview, Yangon, Myanmar.
8. Thiha Thwe, NHK corespondent and cameraman, 4/4/2014, Phone interview, Yangon, Myanmar.
9. Thiha Saw, Myanmar Freedom chief editor, 4/8/2014, Email Interview, Yangon, Myanmar.
10. Soe Myint, Mizzima editor in chief, 4/19/2014, Email Interview, Yangon, Myanmar.
11. Thin Leiwin, Reuters corespondent, 4/11/2014, Email Interview, Jakarta, Indonesia.