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Myanmar Media in Transition



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Myanmar Media in Transition

Legacies, Challenges and Change

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The image on this book's cover is entitled "Twilight", and was created by *Myanmar Media in Transition* contributor Eaint Thiri Thu. As she explains, twilight is the period between daylight and night, before sunrise or sunset, transitioning us to the light or the dark. Myanmar's freedom of expression is at its twilight, between darkness and light, hope and despair. Is this twilight leading us to the sunset or the sunrise? To create this image, Eaint Thiri Thu asked Myanmar journalists, poets, writers, activists, photographers and filmmakers of diverse ages, genders, religions and ethnicities the following question: "What would you say if you had to describe the freedom of expression and media freedom situation during the current transition period in a word or a sentence?" The right side of the face is open, offering the answers to this question. The left side remains dark, and the eye closed to represent the things they were not able to share.

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Contributors and Editors

Editors

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Jane Madlyn McElhone is a Canadian-British consultant currently living in Myanmar. She has extensive experience supporting and building the capacity of media outlets and journalists in closed and transitional societies, and has collaborated on media projects around the world, including working in Myanmar, Afghanistan and Timor-Leste. Her areas of expertise include journalism, media development, philanthropy, human rights, migration, research in the fields of media and free expression, and strategic project development and evaluation.

Jane has documented the media and media development sector in Myanmar, including in the ethnic states, and has authored reports on free expression, media capture, ethnic media, media development, and media and peacebuilding. Previously she worked for the Open Society Foundations and for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. Jane has a Master of Science in Migration, Mobility and Development from SOAS and is a member of International Media Development Advisors (www.imdadvisers.com).

Gayathry Venkiteswaran worked on advocacy and capacity building related to media reforms and press freedom in Southeast Asia in her capacity as Executive Director of the Bangkok-based Southeast Asian Press Alliance (SEAPA) from 2010 to 2015, with Myanmar being a key focus for the organization since 2007. She is Assistant Professor at the University of Nottingham Malaysia Campus, where she is also a PhD candidate. Her academic research focuses on media reforms and the role of civil society in Indonesia and Myanmar. She has a wide network of contacts from the media and civil society inside and outside of Myanmar. She received her undergraduate degree in Mass Communication from the University of Science Malaysia and a Master of Arts (International Relations) from the Australian National University. She has published papers and reports on media freedom and reforms in Southeast Asia, freedom of expression and the internet in Asia, and gender and surveillance.

Contributors

Eaint Thiri Thu is a Fulbright scholar doing a Master of Human Rights degree at the Humphrey School of Public Affairs and the College of Liberal Arts, University of Minnesota (2017–19). She previously worked for six years as a researcher and media fixer in Myanmar, including numerous research trips to Rakhine State. In December 2016 she conducted fieldwork on the ways Rakhine Buddhists, Rohingya Muslims and Kaman Muslims access and share information, and the role information, social media and rumours play in creating and solving the conflict.

Susan Banki researches the political, institutional and legal contexts that explain the roots of and solutions to international human rights violations. In particular, she is interested in the ways that questions of sovereignty, citizenship/membership and humanitarian principles have shaped our understanding of and reactions to various transnational phenomena, such as the international human rights regime, international migration and the provision of international aid. Susan's focus is on the Asia-Pacific region, where she has conducted extensive field research in Thailand, Nepal, Bangladesh and Japan on refugee/migrant protection, statelessness and border control. Her current project, *Refugee Activism and Social Movements: The Transformation of Homeland Politics*, funded by the Australian Research Council, investigates the phenomenon of exiled dissidents and homeland activists in countries of the Global South.

Kamran Emad was based in Myanmar from 2013 to 2015, most recently focusing on the human rights impacts of ICT sector growth at the Myanmar Centre for Responsible Business in Yangon. During his time in Myanmar, mobile phone penetration increased from zero to over fifty per cent, while the cost of SIM cards fell from \$150 to under \$2. Kamran is currently an analyst at T-Mobile US, based in the Seattle area.

Jane M. Ferguson is a Senior Lecturer in Anthropology and Southeast Asian History in the School of Culture, History and Language at the Australian National University. She is currently Editor of the *Journal of Burma Studies*. She has conducted fieldwork in ethnic Shan communities as well as among Bamar in urban Myanmar. Her range of research and publications include work on ethno-nationalism, land laws, popular music, cinema and aviation.

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Lawi Weng is a Mon journalist renowned for his conflict reporting. He has worked for *The Irrawaddy* for nine years, including five years in exile in Thailand, where he reported on rights abuses in the conflict-ridden ethnic areas. After he moved back home in 2013 he began covering anti-Muslim religious conflict and often travelled to Rakhine State to cover the plight of the Rohingya. In 2017 Lawi Weng and two of his colleagues were accused of unlawful association and were imprisoned for two months in northern Shan State. The charges against them were dropped in September of that year.

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Heather MacLachlan earned a doctorate in ethnomusicology from Cornell University in 2009. She is Associate Professor in the Department of Music at the University of Dayton in Dayton, Ohio and served as Visiting Professor of the Humanities at Parami Institute in Yangon, Myanmar in 2018. She is the author of *Burma's Pop Music Industry: Creators, Distributors, Censors* (2011) and has written scholarly articles on music making among Burmese refugees in the United States. Dr MacLachlan has also published articles on other topics, including American country music, music pedagogy, and identity formation. She speaks English, French and Burmese and has taught in each of these languages at various times.

Ma Thida is an award-winning writer and free expression advocate. She was the founding president of the PEN Myanmar Centre (2013–16) and is currently the coordinator of its Writers in Prison programme. She lectures globally on democracy and human rights and is a member of the PEN International board. Sentenced to twenty years in prison in 1993 for her pro-democracy writing, Ma Thida was released in 1999 due to political pressure. She was awarded the PEN/Barbara Goldsmith Freedom to Write Award in 1995 and has published several books, including *Prisoner of Conscience – My Steps through Insein*.

Erin McAuliffe was an MA student at the University of Washington's Jackson School of International Studies at the time of writing. She was also a Cybersecurity Policy Fellow in the Jackson School's International

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Mon Mon Myat is an independent writer, journalist and producer and the founder and former Executive-Director of the Myanmar Human Rights, Human Dignity International Film Festival. Her documentary film *The Floating Tomatoes* won second prize in the reportage category at the 2010 ASEAN Festival of Photos in Vietnam. Her later films include *Transparency or Accountability in Practice* and *An Old Man's Homesickness*. Mon Mon Myat is currently doing her PhD in Peacebuilding Studies at Payap University in Chiang Mai, Thailand.

Myint Kyaw joined the *Myanma Dana* business magazine as a reporter in 2003. He covered business, social and other stories. Myint Kyaw founded Myitmakha Media Group with May Thingyan Hein in 2008. Two years later, he established another news group, Yangon Press International (YPI), with other journalist colleagues. Taking advantage of the government's media relaxation policy, YPI was the first uncensored online news agency in Myanmar. He is a secretary of the Myanmar Journalist Network and Myanmar Press Council. He works as a journalism advisor at Internews, Myanmar and as a media trainer and consultant.

Nai Nai was born and raised in Yangon, Myanmar. She is currently a Regional Coordinator with the Sweden-based Fojo Media Institute, primarily responsible for the Southeast Asian Media Training Network (SEAMTN), which conducts capacity building with six media training institutes in Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam. Prior to joining Fojo she worked with the Bangkok-based Southeast Asian Press Alliance (SEAPA), which advocates for greater media freedom in the region. She spent eleven years as the SEAPA fellowship coordinator. Before joining SEAPA, she worked as a TV and radio journalist. She earned her master's degree in education from Assumption University in Bangkok. Her passion is to learn, share and empower people on issues related to gender, leadership and ethnic diversity.

Sarah Oh is a researcher based in Silicon Valley. She has worked at the intersection of digital media, development, social change and tech for more than ten years. From 2014 to 2016 she lived in Myanmar, where she worked with entrepreneurs, civic leaders and international tech companies during the country's political transition. Sarah earned her bachelor's degree in political science with honours from Northwestern University and has been a Visiting Scholar at The Center for Information Technology Research in the Interest of Society and the Banatao Institute at the University of California.

Thin Lei Win was born and raised in Yangon, Myanmar's former capital, before leaving the country for further education. Bouts of closures of schools and universities by the junta forced many young students out of Myanmar in the late 1980s and 1990s. Thin studied in Singapore and the United Kingdom, and caught the journalism bug early on, much to the initial consternation of her parents and relatives, who were aware of the Myanmar junta's hostility towards journalists. She now has more than fifteen years' experience as a journalist, including as a correspondent with the Thomson Reuters Foundation (TRF), the non-profit arm of Thomson Reuters, the world's biggest news and information provider, where she has worked since 2008. In 2015 she returned home to establish and lead Myanmar Now, an award-winning bilingual news agency supported by TRF. She is also the co-founder of The Kite Tales, a website dedicated to chronicling the lives, histories and memories of ordinary people across Myanmar. She currently works as a food security correspondent for TRF.

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Yin Yadanar Thein is the co-founder and Director of the national human rights organization, Free Expression Myanmar (FEM). Prior to co-founding FEM, Yin was the country manager for the free expression INGO Article 19, and before that a women's rights activist. Yin has worked in Myanmar, London, Geneva and within ASEAN on a range of human rights issues, especially on media law reform, the right to information, protest, hate speech, gender rights, and digital rights. Yin specializes in gender-based censorship in all its forms, and has since 2012 advocated with the Myanmar government and national and international stakeholders on the importance of adopting international standards for the country's news media laws, Assembly Law, Telecommunications Law, bills on public service media, right to information, and hate speech. Yin has spent time working in Myanmar's IDP camps in Rakhine State and working with the UN special mechanisms in Geneva. Yin previously worked as a magazine editor at a time when pre-publication censorship was still in place.

Burma or Myanmar? A Note on Terminology

In editing a collection such as this one, we are faced with the issue of what to call the country: Burma or Myanmar, or both? Using which criteria? This issue has long been contentious, and any discussion of the transition period must in some way address the concerns that continue to be raised about the country's name and how it should be historically referenced.

The country became the Union of Burma upon its independence from the British in 1948. Shortly following the massive and violently suppressed uprisings of 1988, the military regime, the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), enacted the 1989 Adaptation of Expressions Law, changing the name of the country to the Union of Myanmar and many place names to reflect their Burmese-language pronunciation rather than the anglicized spellings prescribed by British colonial authorities. Rangoon, for example, became Yangon. Although the SLORC argued that the switch to Myanmar was more inclusive of ethnic minority groups, the name change was met with stiff resistance by opposition activists pushing for democratic change, who argued that it was made by an illegitimate, unelected regime without the people's approval through a national referendum. Many of those who sympathized with the opposition felt the name Burma was more inclusive than Myanmar. As a result, the use of one name over the other was, and remains for some, an indication of one's political position with respect to the military regime (Rogers 2012). The reaction of ethnic minority groups in the country has been mixed, but many feel that both names lack a sense of inclusion because they refer to the country's dominant ethnic group (Dittmer 2014).

International news outlets and governments around the world have taken different positions on this issue. The name change was recognized during military rule by the United Nations and by the governments of Japan and France, for example, but was not recognized by the United States, United Kingdom, Australia or Canada, which continued to refer to the country as Burma. The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) also referred to the country as Burma during the period of military rule, which they argued was due to the familiarity of the name rather than politically motivated (BBC 2007). The policy of the U.S. National Public Radio (NPR) network was to use Myanmar but to then reference the fact that the country was once called Burma (Memmott 2011). Even guidebooks have taken different positions. The Lonely Planet guidebook used the name Myanmar during military rule, while Rough Guides did not publish a guidebook out of support for the opposition movement's call for a tourism boycott (BBC 2007).

Academics and advocates have taken differing stances. Some authors use the two names interchangeably, some use Burma, some use Myanmar, and some choose to follow "the European Union's catch-all solution: 'Myanmar/Burma'" (Dittmer 2014, p. 2). Others have chosen to use Myanmar — as well as other changed place names — from 1989 onwards, while using Burma for the period when the country was called by that name (Cheesman, Skidmore and Wilson 2012). International human rights groups — like Human Rights Watch, the Burma Campaign UK and Altsean-Burma — continue to use Burma. The participatory rights-based policy research and advocacy organization Progressive Voice notes that it generally uses Myanmar in acknowledgement of the fact that most people in the country use this term. It adds, however, that "the deception of inclusiveness and the historical process of coercion by the former State Peace and Development Council military regime into usage of 'Myanmar' rather than 'Burma' without the consent of the people is recognized and not forgotten. Thus, under certain circumstances, 'Burma' is used" (Progressive Voice 2018).

Inside the country, both terms are widely used, and several sources note that Myanmar is the more formal, literary term, while Burma is the term used more often in informal, everyday speech (BBC 2007). During the transition period starting in 2010, the name Myanmar has become much more common among those who may in the past have

been unwilling or unsure which to use, and debate on this issue has cooled. Several non-governmental organizations and media outlets that were in exile or worked along the borders with Thailand and that used Burma in their titles have either changed their names in order to operate in the country or have registered themselves using their popular acronyms to get around the official requirement to use the name Myanmar. The names of cities, states and regions have also changed in many cases, both in casual conversations and written form; their names and their spelling can thus be inconsistent.

In *Myanmar Media in Transition*, we have chosen to use Myanmar for the period following the elections in 2010, and Burma for the period prior to this, except when replicating the usage in direct quotations or summaries of work by others. In these latter cases, we will remain consistent with the terminology used in the original work.

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