Misinformation and hate speech in Myanmar

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A monk uses his phone in Yangon, Myanmar. Creative Commons: Remko Tanis

Here's what happened when a country went from limited news to smartphones almost overnight

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It's been about 20 years since the internet entered most US households. I came of age in the late '90s alongside the internet and saw the rise, fall and evolution of AOL IM, ICQ, LimeWire, Napster, Yahoo!, Google, MySpace and Facebook. Pagers became mobile phones where eventually we could text. Then smartphones took over. The digital revolution has affected the Western world but it's had an enormous impact on the developing world, like Myanmar where their digital world began on smartphones. There was no segue from texting, they had full-on access to information — good and bad — at their fingertips.

Until 2012, it was nearly impossible to get information in to or out of Myanmar and all its news came from the state-run media. But a budding democracy and a commitment to international commerce quickly made internet access via smartphones affordable. In 2014, the people of Myanmar moved online and so did radical hate groups.

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Facebook *is* the internet

Facebook is the go-to source for news and information in Myanmar. And it's not surprising when you consider that each of the three smartphone providers in the country offer access to Facebook (via its limited and text versions Facebook Lite and Facebook Flex). These programs incentivize smartphone consumers because they deliver Facebook content using little-to-no allotted data.

Myint Kyaw, a member of the Myanmar Press Council, explained that people like Facebook because it is multidimensional: They can post and look at photos, connect with their friends, and find information. He says Facebook offers a needed source of accountability for government and business, and pointed out one of the biggest uses of the site.

"Most young people rely on their mobile phones and online for news," Kyaw said. "Middle aged and some older people also use Facebook as their news source."

Misinformation *is* hate-speech

A majority of the misinformation and disinformation in Myanmar is created by radical groups with the intent to influence public opinion on politics, women, members of the LGBT community, and most commonly, religious and ethnic minorities. Before internet access, groups like the Buddhist nationalist Ma Ba Tha — The Association to Protect Race and Religion — distributed leaflets and videos on DVDs to spread false information about the country's Muslim communities in an effort to dehumanize and frame the community in increasingly negative terms. They still use these more traditional formats, but they also took to Facebook.

Perhaps the most obvious example of how misinformation can lead to violent offline action is the two-day riots in the country's second largest city Mandalay in July 2014. Following an unsubstantiated rumor posted on Facebook that a Muslim tea shop owner raped a Buddhist employee, a mob of almost 500 people wreaked havoc on the city and incited lingering fear amongst its Muslim citizens. Two people were killed during the riot, one Buddhist and one Muslim.

Fighting hate speech

Some groups advocate for legislation to fight hate speech, but opponents argue that any censorship laws targeting hate speech could also be used to silence government opposition. This position is certainly understandable given the not-so-distant history of jailing activists who spoke out against the government.

There are a handful of projects that target hate speech while advocating for the preservation of free speech. After the 2014 Mandalay riots, Panzagar Network created the "Flower Speech" Facebook sticker project which lets users apply anti-hate speech stickers to posts. Panzagar and other civil service organizations have hosted talks and workshops around Myanmar to open dialogue around diversity and learning as a tool to fight hate and fear mongering.

One challenge to this strategy is that it is labor intensive to find hate-speech and misinformation to debunk in the Burmese language. In Burmese, words often have multiple meanings. Keyword searching can be fruitless, so hate speech must be manually monitored.

News and digital literacy

News literacy education could help the people of Myanmar navigate the rapid current of information found on Facebook.

"Social media or news literacy should be in standard education, like the high school or maybe middle school education," Kyaw said. "News literacy is for the long term. But in the short term, we should promote anti-hate speech."

The thought of training the nearly 10 million Facebook users in Myanmar how to think critically about Facebook content now that they are already surfing the social network is daunting, but it is being done. The country's only university-level news literacy course is offered at the Myanmar Institute of Theology by instructor La Wun Ye. Ye created the course in 2014 in direct response to the Mandalay Riots.

"As we have been cut off from the free flow of information world for ages," Ye said, "this kind of sudden exposure can traumatize and victimize many of our people. So I decided to run this course."

Ye attended the 2014 The Institute for News Literacy Fellows in Asia, an annual workshop for educators in Asia on how to teach news literacy co-hosted by FirstDraft News academic partner the University of Hong Kong's Journalism and Media Studies Center along with Stony Brook University's Center for News Literacy. She applied the curriculum to the unique information challenges in Myanmar. So far, 50 students have completed the course that is offered every semester.

Myanmar ICT for Development Organization (MIDO) started in 2012 as an advocate for quality, affordable, and equal digital access for everyone in Myanmar. MIDO also partners with other civil service organizations to monitor and raise awareness about hate speech online and offers "Safe Online Space" trainings on news literacy, internet and mobile 101, building peace through online activities, and using Facebook responsibly. Phyu Phyu, a program director at MIDO, said the organization will publish much-needed "Social Media Verification Guidelines" in Burmese later this year.

Samantha Stanley is a master's student of journalism at Hong Kong University.

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