Volume 16 Issue 34
Originally issued as H4

Global Journal of human-social science: H Interdisciplinary
Volume 16 Issue 4 Version 1.0 Year 2016
Type: Double Blind Peer Reviewed International Research Journal
Publisher: Global Journals Inc. (USA)
Online ISSN: 2249-460X & Print ISSN: 0975-587X

DRAFT: Myanmar's Media Essential for Myanmar's Reforms

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GJHSS-H Classification: *FOR Code: 369999*

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I. Background

The history of journalism in Myanmar makes fascinating reading and could be instructive in assessing the country's political transition if freedom of the press takes root and prospers. Progress toward press freedom has occurred very rapidly in Myanmar since 2012, but we still see too many instances of journalists being detained and even charged over what they have published.Any comments here about the courage and political instincts of Myanmar's media, are largely based on reading English-language Myanmar media. Nevertheless, it is obviously possible to observe what Myanmar journalists are writing – even from a slight distance – and still be impressed by how valuable and reliable the best Myanmar journalism is. But, not surprisingly, there is also some Myanmar journalism which is not so impressive, as happens with journalism in any country.

Despite Myanmar's long history of government-controlled media, Myanmar society always accorded its writers great respect because they clearly sought to influence and improve attitudes to public policy. Under decades of military rule, a few "anonymous" commentators wrote opinion pieces regularly in the Myanmar media. Their courage in acting as thoughtful commentators was obvious, even if they were often writing "anonymously" under a "nom de plume". During the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC/SLORC) period (1988-2011), a small number of very professional Myanmar journalists worked as analysts for international media agencies, such as Reuters, Associated Press and the *Nihon Keizai Shimbun*. They acted as modern-day commentators, not unlike their erudite predecessors. Although only heavily veiled criticisms of the government were permitted, these were well understood by Myanmar readers. Overall, the professional benefits that the Myanmar "stringers" gained from their experience of writing for the major wires services over several years should not be overlooked, as the experience involved considerable inter-action about journalistic judgment, international media expectations, as well as the ethics of reporting about Burma/Myanmar.[1]

This did mean that Myanmar's media was not entirely isolated, and not immune from many of the media trends that developed internationally over the years. In some ways, even "routine" reporting of events and developments today by Myanmar journalists continues this tradition of independent commentary. Moreover, the practice of "citizen reporting" that developed at the time of the "Saffron Revolution" thanks to technological improvements, also continues but some of the practitioners of this style of reporting demonstrate limited understanding of some journalistic "rules", such as verifying statements and claims, and being more questioning of critics of the government. (However, obtaining government corroboration of community challenges is often still almost impossible to do.)

However, the overall Myanmar media environment until 2011 was generally complicated and certainly did not guarantee free contesting of ideas. U Pe Myint, now the Minister of Information, warned about the pitfalls of excessively cautious "self-censorship" when he attended the 2011 Myanmar Update conference at Australian National University.[2] At that time, U Pe Myint was editor-in-chief of the private weekly journal, the *People's Age*. Others, such as the former *Myanmar Times* journalist Ma Nwe Nwe Aye have pointed out the valuable role that an open media can play in countries like Myanmar in combating corruption, or in raising public awareness and protecting political integrity in other meaningful ways.[3]

The Thein Sein government's relaxation of print censorship has been a turning point, albeit a partial step, although it did not take effect until early 2012. It was never intended to be full relaxation of censorship,

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[1] In addition to Reuters, Associated Press, and the Nihon Keizai Shimbun, the international media agencies covering Burma/Myanmar regularly included Agence France Presse (AFP), Jiji Press and Kyodo News Agency from Japan, as well as eminent international broadcasters such as the BBC and VOA.

[2] See his innocently titled "The Emergence of Myanmar Weekly News Journals and their Development in Recent Years" in *Myanmar's Transition: Openings, Obstacles and Opportunities*, (ed. by Nick Cheesman, Monique Skidmore and Trevor Wilson, Singapore: Institue of Southeast Asian Studies, 2012.

[3] See her chapter on "The Role of the Media in Myanmar: Can it be a Watchdog for Corruption?" in *Myanmar's Transition,* (op. cit).

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and some other important forms of media, such as broadcast media and social media, still experience very high levels of government censorship and control. A freer media is critical to Myanmar's political transition, but arguably the time for more responsible journalism by Myanmar journalists may also have arrived. In most countries, journalists themselves are equally subject to scrutiny, but this does not seem to happen very much in Myanmar. It seems that Myanmar journalists are assumed to be correct when they report news, regardless of their experience and ability. Nowhere else in the world would such "infallibility" on the part of journalists be presumed. Since there is no formal ethical code of conduct for Myanmar journalists, can readers be sure that a Myanmar journalist is being truthful, or that in a sensitive situation a Myanmar journalist was behaving ethically?

Another phenomenon of the media in Myanmar today seems to be the willingness of local journalists to accept criticism of the government uncritically. This is probably not surprising, given the history of government control and the lack of trust that developed as a consequence, as well as the incipient nature of a freer press. Journalists working in Myanmar also may not be able readily to obtain clarification of government positions, while it is also true that law enforcement by the authorities in Myanmar is often frivolous and is pursuing another, "higher" political agenda. In this situation, greater mutual restraint by both sides in Myanmar may help nevertheless. The authorities should refrain from responding with excessive force against protesters. And journalists anywhere must exercise care about the motives behind any action they report, and remember their responsibility to verify the truth, rather than to repeat unsubstantiated information, particularly in highly sensitive areas such as national security. The decision to disclose information must be made judiciously, keeping in mind both the public interest and the reliability of sources.

In countries like Australia, a range of formal, legal protections exist which, while not always perfect, go a long way to ensuring the overall system operates fairly. For example, we have strong defamation laws to protect individual reputations (typically not used for other purposes by any government). We also have "whistle-blower protection" laws, which allow abuses of authority to be challenged without the discloser of the information being unfairly penalised. Australia also has a system of legal aid for those who would not normally be able to afford a lawyer and the costs of mounting a lawsuit, and arrangements through an independent Press Council to ensure media reporting is not mischievous, destructive or in some way unreasonable. Complaining to the Press Council would normally be a last resort, and not often used. Myanmar's decision to establish a press council may be welcome, but it will probably not be fully effective on its own. It would need to be reinforced and complemented by a strengthened legal system offering alternative forms of protection, or redress; and it would need to be allowed to operate, and seen to operate, totally independently, otherwise, no one would see it as having any real power.

In many countries, defamation laws are strong and this can directly affect the way journalists work. However, defamation laws can also be used by the authorities for other purposes, for example, to restrict political commentary, to block adverse criticism, and to thwart the emergence progressive ideas. Since defamation laws need to be used carefully and in a balanced way, wider use of such laws is not always beneficial when a media environment is in any way vulnerable to political pressures.

II. How Problematic is the Lack of Media Freedom?

Myanmar certainly does not currently have a free press, although most international commentators acknowledge that some improvements in Myanmar's media landscape have taken place in recent years. Most criticism of Myanmar's lack of press freedom emanates from the United States, where campaigns for press freedom are very vocal and can be accompanied by a politically loaded agenda (such as "promoting democracy", "eliminating drug trafficking", or "countering terrorism"). However, it remains to be seen whether or not the high media freedom standards sought by monitoring agencies in Washington or the idealistic expectations of dedicated activist groups help substantively, given the political sensitivities one sees in countries like Myanmar. The Washington-based NGO "Freedom House" gave Myanmar a "Press Freedom score" of 73 (where 100 is worst) although it scored Myanmar much better (in the 20s) in certain fields. It summarized its 2015 assessment of Myanmar as follows: "After several years of reforms and improvements, conditions for the media in Myanmar grew worse overall during 2014." In regard to the political environment in Myanmar, Freedom House commented:

"Media outlets are able to cover political news with relative freedom, addressing topics that were once considered off-limits and scrutinizing the activities of the government and legislature. However, Burmese-language state media continue to avoid topics that could lead to criticism of the government or military, and interethnic tension remains a sensitive subject, especially with respect to Buddhists and Muslims."[4]

After 2012, several observers commented on the reverses experienced in Myanmar's media

[4] See the Freedom House website: https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2015/myanmar

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freedom.[5]It was always clear that Myanmar's initial liberalization during the Thein Sein Government was confined to the print media, although this may have generated expectations of wider liberalization. But there was firm basis for thinking that liberalization would necessarily extend further at that time. Moreover, no single measure was introduced and no single policy decision taken that marked a change or reversal of the print media censorship relaxation policy. Some of these negative articles were written by writers who were not experts on Myanmar; some reports were based on previous allegations of chemical weapons production, which had already been discounted by experts; and some were published by activist organizations that were reluctant to accept that any liberalization had happened. It is also possible that some of the problematic articles, as far as the authorities were concerned, were written by less experienced journalists.

As for other outside assessments of press freedom, the activist NGO "Reporters Without Borders" ranked Myanmar a low 143 for 2016, with the comment that the government "seems to have opted for (closely) monitored freedom instead of the drastic censorship that was in effect until recently. So media that cover political subjects have a bit more freedom. The Burmese-language state media nonetheless continue to censor themselves and avoid any criticism of the government or the armed forces." (However, according to UNESCO, Myanmar has still not most ratified most of the international conventions relating to media standards.) While social media use has expanded very rapidly in Myanmar in recent years, censorship of social media by the authorities may have increased rather than easing. In social media, self-censorship continues, so it is not yet possible to say press freedom in Myanmar is improving overall as technological change proceeds.

III. Limited Capacity Building for Myanmar's Modern Media

Because of Burma's strong commitment to non-alignment after its independence in 1948, and because of its self-imposed isolation after 1962, media practitioners in Myanmar have had relatively little opportunity to be exposed directly to the operations of the "free press", as it is generally known. Myanmar journalists received comparatively little professional development training, which tended to reinforce certain cultural behaviours and perhaps strengthened their sense of independence. It is also notable that once Western sanctions were imposed on Myanmar after 1988, relatively few Myanmar journalists had the opportunity to receive training from foreign experts and foreign practitioners in journalism. Some of this training that did occur was, in effect, "training on the job", where foreign journalists had come to Myanmar to work alongside their Burmese colleagues. The best known example of this the work of the part-Australian owned "*Myanmar Times*" after 1999. Some of these foreign journalists who helped with training in journalistic skills and techniques were Australians who seemed to be both professional and dedicated instructors.

Another significant source of media training for journalists from Myanmar during the period of the military regime – that is, from 1988 – was specialist journalists' training provided overseas by international agencies which were committed to bringing democracy to Myanmar. The main international donor providing media training was the United States, which delivered this media training through (US) government and non-government channels. The US Government claims that even by 2014, training in basic media skills was provided to more than 400 Myanmar journalists.[6](USAID claims to have provided basic training for "more than 1,000"Myanmar "journalists"[7], but it hard to imagine that these people were really all working journalists.)

The leading capacity-building institution on the US Government side, was the United States' National Endowment for Democracy (NED), but substantial training was also provided by non-government organisations such as the Open Societies Foundations of George Soros. NED media training was especially targeted at ethnic groups, or women's groups, many of which were based outside Myanmar (many were in Thailand).The results of this training can be seen in the impressive amount of documentary reporting produced by ethnic media networks recording the conditions in ethnic regions and the abuses these groups suffered, mostly at the hands of the Myanmar Army. The anti-government character of this kind of reporting, compared to reporting emanating from journalists working inside Myanmar, is quite striking. NED funding for journalists can be tracked via NED Annual Reports, but OSF follows a policy of not disclosing publicly details of its specific grants. (Total US assistance to Myanmar in all fields since 2012 is more than US$500 million.)[8] NED Annual Reports also confirm the large amount of targeted technical

[5] For example, the article by Wai Moe "Burma Backslides on Freedom of the press", *Foreign Policy, 19 June 2015.* See: http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/06/19/burma-backslides-on-freedom-of-the-press/

[6] According to the State Department website, this training was to support Myanmar's democratic transition.

[7] "Overcoming Censorship to Build a Free Press in Burma",Josh Machleder, Senior Media Advisor, USAID. https://medium.com/usaid-2030/overcoming-censorship-to-build-a-free-press-in-burma-9d4770115675#.9dvkqf8l8

[8] State Department Fact Sheet, 9 August 2014.See: http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2014/230463.htm

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Japan was the only other bilateral donor which included media training in its technical assistance programs during the period of military rule, although much of the training was delivered by Japanese NGOs such as the Sasakawa Peace Foundation. A description of the Sasakawa course is available on the SPF website. According to the former Myanmar Times journalist who organised some of the Sasakawa training programs, the course were essentially practical, and would be followed by a period of working on probation at the Myanmar Times. Over the years, approximately 50-70 journalists would have been trained, most of whom continue to work as journalists. Many of the senior communications staff at UN agencies, NGOs, embassies and foreign companies got their start through these programs; others are researchers or academics; inevitably many others saw these programs as an opportunity to develop skills that could be applied across a range of sectors. (At that time, there were not many work and training opportunities open to young people.)[9]Other-wise, very little is known about the objective results of Japan's media training for journalists from Myanmar. (Japanese assistance, generally, is not renowned for its objective appraisals of what was achieved and what was not achieved.)

After 2011, under the Thein Sein Government, the intensity of international media training for Myanmar journalists increased. A few international agencies such as UNICEF, UNESCO, International Media Services, and International IDEA also provided in-country training for Myanmar journalists in specialised areas such as health, children, climate change and election reporting. Experienced Australian journalists working Myanmar applied for and received a small grant from UNESCO for further training. In early 2013 they conducted a six-week full-time program for about ten beginner/untrained journalists, who they were all subsequently offered internships in the newsroom. This was deemed "moderately successful".[10] Later, while another Sasakawa program occurred, it was judged more appropriate for such media training to take place in a formal setting, and by then new institutions were being set up in Myanmar for this purpose for the first time.Generally, the demand was for specialised training for people wishing to become journalists, rather than from people already working as journalists, who seemed to be happy "learning on the job". Nevertheless, graduates from such training courses, tended to start working as journalists and to remain in these jobs for some time. So the programs were neither wasted nor unrelated to the requirements of the work.

The Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) is one of the few government-funded foreign news agencies to have conducted media training in Myanmar, in its case for its "counterpart" Myanmar-government owned Myanmar Radio & Television (MRTV). (Voice of America also has a formal agreement with MRTV, and Japanese and Chinese state-funded agencies provide assistance to Myanmar as well.) Using its experience as a broadcaster with a clear national "mission" to help rural listeners, or young listeners, and to promote the arts, the ABC and MRTV signed a Memorandum of Understanding in 2013 under which the ABC provided specialist programming and other technical training for MRTV staff. It should be remembered that this Myanmar/Australia inter-action was not exactly collaboration between comparable organisations; the ABC has always been politically neutral in a way the MRTV could not have been.

There was no formal study course for journalists in Myanmar until the period of the Thein Sein government (2011-16).The Myanmar Journalism Institute[11] opened in Yangon in July 2014 with the International Media Support (IMS) group providing a viable organizational structure, a three-year strategic plan and input to the curriculum.[12]IMS works with media in countries affected by armed conflict, human insecurity and political transition across four continents. It has been active in Myanmar since 2006, initially supporting exile media. Between 2012-2015, with financial backing from Sweden, Norway and Denmark, IMS carried out the first phase of its media development programme in the first years of the country's democratic transition period, working closely with a broad range of partners from media to government institutions, journalist associations, and civil society groups to develop a competent, professional and independent media.

Active participation by Myanmar in ASEAN, especially as chair of ASEAN in 2014, has also influenced Myanmar's treatment of its own media. Myanmar media professionals have been exposed to quite a bit of ASEAN's media agenda, including participating in training programs and seminars since Myanmar became a full member of ASEAN in 1997. ASEAN's media arrangements – many involving tight government control – would not have been intimidating for Myanmar journalists, whose circumstances were probably better than those from the Communist countries of Vietnam, Cambodia or Laos. Peer pressure, for example under the Thein Sein government (2011-16),

[9] Communication to the author from the Myanmar Times coordinator of the Sasakawa programs.

[10] Communication to the author from the coordinator of the UNESCO programs.

[11] See its website at: https://www.mediasupport.org/roadmap-free-independent-media-sector-myanma.

[12] International Media Support is a non-profit organisation working to strengthen the capacity of media to reduce conflict, strengthen democracy and facilitate dialogue. It has its headquarters in Copenhagen.

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persuaded Myanmar's leaders to seek comparable standards to its ASEAN media counterparts, even though media freedom in some ASEAN countries is not high. As a result, Myanmar's media performance during its chairing of ASEAN was creditable, if not spectacular or bold.

IV. Conclusions

Timely and relevant media reporting is playing a key role in support of reform everywhere in Myanmar: this role include sex plaining Myanmar's political developments (which many Myanmar parties are comfortable keeping in the background); disseminating the directions of economic reforms; and mobilizing support for all social initiatives. Without this energizing role of Myanmar's media, progress would falter, reforms would flounder, change would stall. Most of Myanmar's institutions (government and non-government) cope quite well with the lack of press freedom, being long accustomed to doing so on the basis of what seem to be unwritten rules. However, controls on new media (social media and the Internet) are not as liberal, and problems sometimes occur. It remains to be seen how the new NLD Government will approach restrictions on the media, which it may be reluctant to amend when faced by communal tensions between Buddhist and others.

Myanmar's media should have a critical role to play in helping consolidate democracy, as democracy cannot be achieved by political practitioners alone, and cannot fulfil its goals in practice without full and explicit public endorsement. The enthusiasm with which Myanmar journalists have since 2012 consistently exposed sensitive issues and explained ongoing protests and problems is undoubtedly praiseworthy. In many cases, media reporting has ensured government policy has been held to account and the interests of ordinary people (such as workers, land holders and victims of discrimination) have been better protected. In many cases, of course, such media coverage has meant criticism of government policies or practices that may have caused discomfort and perhaps even anger on the part of the authorities. Much of the government sensitivity has been exaggerated, and may have been unnecessary or avoidable, but in the areas of national security (carefully defined) some tensions may be understandable.

Myanmar's media still faces some serous institutional weaknesses, but these weaknesses might be eased over time. One cause of continuing real problems for Myanmar's media seems to be the absence of adequate laws in Myanmar to protect journalists. Journalists anywhere can publish information which is embarrassing for governments, even though the journalists might be seeking to improve the scope for the people to obtain proper redress through the judicial system, and seeking to hold accountable those in the government who have violated the law, but who informally (or formally!) enjoy a measure of impunity. One thing to look forward to is other participants in Myanmar's political processes acquiring much better media skills themselves. This is already happening in many ways: a noticeable increase in use of social media by Myanmar's political decision-makers is already occurring; and a strong sense among Myanmar elites of how to maximise media impact is probably now irreversible.

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