"If It's on the Internet It Must Be Right": An Interview with Myanmar ICT for Development Organisation on the Use of the Internet and Social Media in Myanmar

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Myanmar ICT for Development Organization (MIDO) is a non-governmental organization in Myanmar focusing on Internet and Communication Technologies (ICTs).[1] Established in 2012, MIDO focuses on ICTs for development, Internet freedom, and Internet policy advocacy. In 2013, it organized the first Myanmar Internet Freedom Forum in Myanmar, supported by Freedom House. Phyu Phyu Thi is both co-founder and research and development manager of MIDO. She holds a master's degree in sustainable development from Chiang Mai University, Faculty of Social Sciences in Thailand, and a bachelor's degree in science from Yangon University. Her interests include technology and development, social media, diffusion of information, and behavior. Htaike Htaike Aung is co-founder and executive director of MIDO. She is working as a digital security and privacy consultant. She is also co-founder of the *Myanmar Blogger Society* and co-organizer of *BarCamp Yangon* – a user-generated conference primarily focusing on technology and the Internet which is part of a larger international network.[2]

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RAINER EINZENBERGER: *Can you please introduce your organization MIDO and its objectives and program briefly?*

HTAIKE HTAIKE AUNG: MIDO focuses on Internet and Communication Technologies (ICT) for development. We primarily focus on implementation, advocacy, and also capacity building programs. Currently, we implement an initiative that is called *Lighthouses*. These are community information centers. As part of our capacity building program, we develop curricula and trainings on digital literacy, media literacy, and trainings on digital security and privacy. As part of our advocacy work, we are also involved in research, for instance on hate speech, and additionally we work with our regional partners on baseline ICT surveys for instance. Additionally, we are doing short term research that focuses, for example, on digital security, network penetration, and mobile communication.

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1 See http://myanmarido.org/
2 See http://www.barcampyangon.org/

RAINER: *Five years ago, access to the Internet and smartphones was still extremely restricted in Myanmar. SIM cards used to cost hundreds of USD and Internet access was also unaffordable to most people, limiting Internet usage to less than 1% of the population. Yet, this has changed quite dramatically in the past five years. Now SIM cards come at a price of only a few USD and mobile Internet access is also affordable to many. Can you give us an idea about the current use of the Internet and smartphones in Myanmar?*

HTAIKE: So, for mobile coverage, if one combines all operators – Myanmar Post and Telecommunication (MPT), Oredoo, and Telenor – more than 90% of the population are now covered by mobile networks. So, technically, most people should have access now. But I want to emphasize that this is in terms of population, not the geographic coverage. This is of course different from actual usage. A recent baseline survey showed that only 39% of the population had a mobile phone and SIM card in 2015 (Galpaya, Zainudeen, & Suthaharan, 2015). According to the plan of the mobile service operators as well as the government, by 2018, more than 50% of the population will have mobile phones. The increase is very fast since the infrastructure has been rolled out very quickly. I think our mobile market is very unique since it was entirely a 'green field' with little infrastructure and very few users. Then, there were established operators from abroad (Oredoo from Qatar and Telenor from Norway) that came in. As soon as they started working, they very quickly built an infrastructure, such as radio masts for mobile phone signals. In terms of infrastructure, we are doing well and in terms of mobile usage, it is gradually growing. However, the accessibility of relevant content, applications, and people's digital literacy will still take some time.

PHYU PHYU THI: As for smartphones, we have now cheap smartphones from China; and migrant workers from Myanmar's rural areas who went abroad also send smartphones back to their families. So, poorer households are now using smartphones too. This is why the usage is already very high and we have 'leapfrogged' to the smartphone era. This situation benefits people with regard to access to the Internet. But again, digital literacy and media literacy issues are very problematic at the moment.

HTAIKE: Broadband Internet is still rarely accessible here and people mainly access the Internet through mobile phones. Compared to mobiles, the ownership of laptops or desktops is very low. Only 2% of the population access the Internet through computers.

RAINER: *Is there still a digital divide in the country? What are the differences in usage and access between regions and with regard to gender, age, and ethnic groups?*

PHYU: Regarding gender, we found in our baseline surveys that ownership of mobile phones by women is a little bit lower than by men. And we can also say that women face more barriers in using mobile phones. Furthermore, they give priority to their family members and share phones with their family members. But the Internet usage of women is still very high.

Htaike: In general, rural areas are lagging behind in terms of access with a penetration of only 27% versus 65% in the cities. Of course, when looking at some of the geographic areas that have not yet been covered, they consist of areas that are difficult to access, including ethnic areas like Chin-State, other border areas, and also some areas in Rakhine-State. So, we can assume that because of the connectivity issues there, they do not have access to the Internet.

Phyu: Recently, we also did a research on mobile connectivity. For example, in Chin-State there is only MPT available in the capital of Chin-State. In other big cities, the connection is very slow and some areas can only use the slow Internet connection in the night time. So, there is a good coverage but the speed is very slow; this is crucial for accessibility as well.

Rainer: *Myanmar is a multi-ethnic country with over one hundred different languages. How is this reflected in the digital landscape and new media?*

Htaike: It's not reflected at all! The majority of the developed content is in Burmese language. Even the development of the Unicode versions of the ethnic scripts is still ongoing.[3] Unfortunately, the ethnic scripts are not widely used by the general public. So, there is not very much multilingual content developed. Just some small fractions, maybe in Karen. We don't see that much. We still have a problem with the standardization of the Burmese script to the Unicode. This is not completely solved yet.

Rainer: *New media and social media have been playing a big role in Myanmar since mobile phones and SIM cards are now easily available and affordable and the mobile network has been expanded. How do you see the role of new media today in Myanmar? How does it change society?*

Htaike: Well, when talking about new media and social media in Myanmar, you can only talk specifically about Facebook and, previously, blogs. But blogs are not that popular anymore, so everyone is on Facebook. It is dominating everything: businesses, public, media, etc. Everything that is going online in Myanmar is on Facebook. There is a saying here, that may also apply to other countries, that "Facebook actually is the Internet". If you are not on Facebook, then, you know, you can't catch the trend or what's happening, you can't get the breaking news; it is very difficult to live without that.

Phyu: Moreover, in the rural areas a lot of people use Facebook but they don't know how to create an account. So, they ask the mobile shop staff to install it for them, and they only use it by touching the icon on the screen. So, Facebook applications and news applications are very important. People also use messaging applications like Viber and BTalk. These are very popular too. They receive news through news applications, Facebook, and Messenger. They think Facebook is like a newspaper and use it for reading the news.

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3   Unicode is an international standard for the digital coding of scripts and signs and enables people to use computers in any language.

RAINER: *Is Facebook then a challenge to the traditional offline media, print media, and TV?*

PHYU: We can say that there is a difference between rural areas and urban areas. For the cities, people are used to getting print newspapers and journals which they can read on the very day of publication. But the rural areas have to wait another day, or in some remote areas they have to wait three or four days to receive printed newspapers. By that time the news is not really up to date anymore. Facebook is instant. All the media outlets also have Facebook pages where people can read the news. Furthermore, the news applications on smartphones combine all the news from various news websites. Printed journals are not that popular anymore. When we asked questions about news in our surveys, respondents were talking about Facebook. But when we talked about TV they only used it to watch movies. It was not popular for news. TV is only for entertainment whereas Facebook and the Internet are for news.

RAINER: *In many countries, social media, in particular Facebook, has also been used as a tool by destructive political forces, in particular radical right-wing groups. In Myanmar, nationalist and radical Buddhist groups have been reportedly engaged in destructive use. How do they use new media for their agenda?*

HTAIKE: There is a big new space now that is available for people to do anything. So, there are positive usages and negative usages as well. Particularly in Myanmar, the usage of the Internet came so quickly. There is one thing that has led to this development, that is, we can say, people's perception of the Internet. Unlike in countries where people gradually got used to the Internet and learnt how to find good content, thus learning what is bad content, for Myanmar this hype went straight up and people did not have the time to reflect on what the Internet is actually about. This perception can be summarized in the phrase: "Okay, if it's on the Internet it must be right". This really is dangerous, particularly if there are people who are using the Internet for the wrong agenda and propaganda. That's how if you look a few years back, the use of online media to spread hatred and rumor was very common because of Myanmar people's perception of the Internet.

RAINER: *What can be done to tackle the problem of hate speech and negative propaganda on social media and what is MIDO already doing about it?*

PHYU: First, we are doing baseline surveys to understand the issue. And we are also undertaking an anti-hate speech campaign together with our friends from different civil society organizations. It is called *Pan Sagar* campaign (literally "flower speech") and includes the distribution of pamphlets, asking people to refrain from hate speech and more carefully consider the consequences of their actions on social media. The extremist groups use Facebook as their amplifier. The *Ma Ba Tha* (*The Patriotic Association of Myanmar*) has their own Facebook page and applications.[4] The extremist

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4   Formed in 2014, *Ma Ba Tha* is also translated as the *Association for the Protection of Race and Religion.* Some members of the group are connected to the nationalist (and radical Buddhist) 969 Movement. A prominent member, known for his anti-Muslim hate-speech, is the monk Ashin Wirathu from Mandalay.

monk Ashin Wirathu and other people have their Facebook pages and regional pages as well. So, they develop a lot of Facebook content on that issue. In our earlier study, we found that deceiving propagandist content, such as videos, songs, and photos, is additionally sent via Bluetooth to mobile phones, for instance in tea shops – without people knowing where this content comes from and who is sending it. Another thing is that Facebook news is being printed and published on public campaigns by extremists. As I said earlier, people think that Facebook is an official media and take it for real. These are the kind of scenarios we see. Apart from the anti-hate speech campaign, we also run a monitoring project. Based on our analysis, we develop a curriculum for training sessions to understand new media as well as to develop media literacy. Furthermore, we initiate dialogue sessions to discuss about what is happening around, on, and off the Internet. Additionally, we engage with media people to discuss what is happening on Facebook on a monthly basis. We've also created a Facebook page called *Real or Not* to post photos and news and to analyze them. This is what we are doing right now.

RAINER: *What are the limits to freedom of speech online? Is the government also taking action against people engaging in hate speech?*

HTAIKE: So, our government is known to be infamous in using laws to limit citizens' rights to freedom of expression. If we look at the past five years, there was this law which we know as the Electronic Transaction Law, passed in 2004, primarily regulating e-commerce, electronic transaction, and electronic signature. One particular clause in that law was very vague. That clause said that whoever commits "any act detrimental to the security of the State or prevalence of law and order or community peace and tranquility or national solidarity or national economy or national culture" by using electronic transaction technologies can be imprisoned up to 15 years.[5] Many political activists and journalists have been detained on the grounds of that clause. For example, if you use any communication tool to harass, defame, or bully someone, then you might become subject to this sort of charge.

RAINER: *So, is this law a suitable legal means to prosecute people who engage in hate speech as it explicitly sanctions hate speech?*

Wirathu has been sentenced to 25 years in prison for his speeches in 2003 by the previous military regime but was released in 2012 along with other political prisoners under President Thein Sein's amnesty.

5   "Whoever commits any of the following acts by using electronic transactions technology shall, on conviction be punished with imprisonment for a term which may extend from a minimum of 7 years to a maximum of 15 years and may also be liable to a fine . . . doing any act detrimental to the security of the State or prevalence of law and order or community peace and tranquility or national solidarity or national economy or national culture . . . receiving or sending and distributing any information relating to secrets of the security of the State or prevalence of law and order or community peace and tranquility or national solidarity or national economy or national culture . . . creating, modifying or altering of information or distributing of information created, modified or altered by electronic technology to be detrimental to the interest of or to lower the dignity of any organization or any person." (The State Peace and Development Council, 2004).

Htaike: No, during the military government it was used to oppress political activists and journalists. But now we have another law for such cases: the Telecommunications Law. There is a clause in it that says that whoever uses electronic communication to harass, cyber-bully, or defame, is liable to a prison sentence of up to five years. So, in the past years, there have been a couple of people arrested because of what they posted online on the grounds of that law.

Rainer: *What was the content of the postings?*

Htaike: Up to now, people that have been charged on the grounds of this law were people who posted things targeting the head of the military that were categorized as defamation; so basically criticism of the government.

Rainer: *Which action has been taken against radical extremists like Ashin Wirathu and the Ma Ba Ta and radical nationalist Buddhist organizations? Has there been any prosecution on the grounds of this law?*

Htaike: No, so you can see the problem with that.

Rainer: *Do you also follow the situation in your neighboring country Thailand with regards to the Computer Crime Act of 2007[6] and the increasing use of lèse-majesté legislation? What is your perspective on these developments given your own experience?*

Htaike: In Myanmar and Thailand, we have been relying on each other in the activists' scene. So, for Myanmar, up to five years ago, the activist community went to Thailand to seek refuge and to hold workshops and meetings if the case was sensitive. Many of Myanmar's NGOs that focused on supporting human rights were basically housed in Thailand, many in the border areas. But now, since Thailand's situation has changed, things have kind of reversed a bit. Just recently, we gave a training to some Thai activists who came to Myanmar to hold workshops on activism and campaigns.

Rainer: *How do politicians and political parties now use social media? Did social media play a role in the last elections and how do citizens respond to their new media presence?*

Htaike: They really use it a lot; social media are heavily relied upon, and I think overly relied upon by the politicians and the government as well. They even forgot to create their own independent websites. Even though there might be some websites, they usually contain only basic information that is not often updated. But Facebook sites are being updated regularly. Even now the President Office and spokespersons

6   The Computer Crime Act of 2007 contains several vague paragraphs regarding computer-related acts deemed detrimental to "public security and economic security" as well as acts damaging "the countries [sic] security or causing panic". This led to the persecution and imprisonment of people expressing their political opinion online, also with regard to the monarchy, which were deemed by the authorities as lèse-majesté (insulting the monarchy). Insulting the monarchy is punishable with prison terms of up to 15 years. The Computer Crime Act has been updated by the military government in 2014 and continues to violate basic civil rights according to human rights defenders ("An Unofficial Translation", 2007; Thai Netizen Network, 2015).

are using Facebook to disseminate information and everything. In their profile, we can see a mix of official declarations and also personal information, like the place where they are having dinner. There is a mix of public and private information.

PHYU: And then, during campaign periods, some of the candidates use social media very effectively, like to update on their campaign trip, or doing voter education on Facebook. If I am not wrong, only recently, one politician tried a live broadcast of a discussion over Facebook through the application Live. One group called *Open Platform* also organizes live discussions with Members of Parliament (MPs) over Facebook. There, you can watch and send questions directly to the MPs who will then answer directly. So, a lot of MPs are using social media, but they got a lot of problems, too, with people hacking their accounts or creating fake accounts.

RAINER: *This brings me directly to my next questions: There have been many cases of cyber-attacks in Europe and also the US recently. What is the situation in Myanmar?*

HTAIKE: So, concerning cyber security, we have a long history of websites being attacked for political reasons. Like, for example, around four or five years ago, there was this big cyber-attack that targeted mostly independent Burmese exile media like *Irrawaddy* and *Mizzima*. At that time, those websites were attacked and became inaccessible for weeks. So, we can say, it happened mostly due to political reasons. We also see that during some political tensions, like when there is a big controversy. For instance, concerning one of the islands that we might or might not share with Bangladesh – there were a lot of cyber-attacks on websites from Bangladesh, including some government websites. Another case of cyber-attacks related to a case in Thailand where two Burmese citizens were accused of murdering two tourists on an island. Then there were attacks on Thai websites. These were mostly politically motivated attacks. This is one thing, and for cyber security, we do have a government team, called the *Myanmar Computer Emergency Response Team* (mmCERT), but this only considers cases at top levels. What they mainly do is monitor Myanmar's Internet. But we don't see them being active that much. However, in the future, as there will be much more e-government initiatives coming up, these institutions should become much stronger and more supportive. There has been some independent research on government websites, and it was recommended by security experts to close some of the security loopholes. For now, the government does not seem to be that interested in making cyber security stronger. So, the capacity of local institutions that work on cyber security should be strengthened in the future.

PHYU: Concerning non-political things, we don't see much of these issues yet. Banking activities, for instance, are not yet happening online that much, but there might be a risk in the future.

RAINER: *You are also helping to review and consult on ICT laws. What would be your recommendation to the government regarding the ICT sector?*

HTAIKE: ICT is now becoming a cross-cutting issue, for example in the health sector, in the financial sector, and in socio-economic sectors. This should be thought of when the government is trying to introduce new laws. For example, the government just drafted a privacy law which seems entirely bizarre in the sense of privacy being defined inconsistently throughout the whole law. It also lacks data protection and online protection mechanisms that should be part of a privacy law. That's what happens when people don't think of ICT when trying to introduce new laws that are closely related to ICT.

PHYU: In addition, the government is currently preparing a hate speech law that is being drafted by the Ministry of Religious Affairs. Yet, hate speech is not only about religion but also about many other issues. It can create a lot of problems if they approve this law and use it. There needs to be more inclusiveness in the drafting process.

HTAIKE: Furthermore, the Electronic Transaction Law has not been amended much; just the prison terms have been changed but not the unclear clauses. Also, when looking at the Telecommunications Law, some clauses are very vaguely defined; that is a problem as well.

RAINER: *One last question: You mentioned on your website that your objective is also to reduce poverty through the development of information and communication technologies. How can this be achieved and can you give us some examples?*

PHYU: Now we are working on the Lighthouse information centers. The idea was to open around two hundred centers. Now, there are 62 all over the country. These centers are information centers where people can come and access information and learn how to navigate themselves online. The centers provide information about health, education, and job opportunities as well. And now we also have a 'safe Internet' education training which is a media literacy training. We set up these centers together with the mobile operator Telenor, trying to reduce the digital gap in the rural areas.

HTAIKE: Digital literacy is the key. That's why we conduct trainings and develop curricula around that issue; and the Lighthouse plays a big part in empowering rural areas, particularly in the use of ICT. In the development sector, ICT is already widely introduced. But I think that the very first step is to increase digital literacy. The second step will then be to deploy these skills.

PHYU: The costs are still a problem regarding the access to mobile communication and Internet. The three operators still charge relatively high prices which is a big barrier for a country like ours with low income levels. Since mobile phones are popular and became a kind of a lifestyle thing, the spending on Internet and mobile phones is high compared to the income levels both in rural and urban areas. I personally worry about the impact of the financial burden resulting from the costs of mobile phones and telecommunication services.

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