Engagement in online discourse on the line in Myanmar?

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1. Introduction

This paper will examine the extent to which online state censorship on politically sensitive topics, as well as other perceptions of friends and family influenced individuals' willingness to participate in political discourse on social media in Myanmar. Qualitative research methods will form the primary data source for the research, and will be supplemented by the findings of an online survey. The fieldwork for the qualitative research was carried out in late August and September 2016 when unrest in the Rakhine State pertaining to the Rohingyas was escalating, and will underpin a large portion of the discussion of the respondents.

2. Background

Myanmar's economic and political climate has seen much change since the turn of the decade. The first openly contested elections in 25 years saw the end of the reign of the military junta, with the National Democracy League (NLD) winning 92 percent of the contested seats. The economic reforms initiated by former President Thein Sein saw the opening of markets following years of state control. The changes in the country suggested that Myanmar was on its way to becoming a capitalist liberal democracy, of which individuality and freedom of expression are thought to be key features.

Telecommunications, in particular, saw a large degree of change with the sector being opened up to external competition. The swift hike in the number of mobile owners aged 15-65– from 39 percent in 2015 to 61 percent in 2016– is testament to this. A proportion of Internet users stood at nearly 30 percent in 2016 (Zainudeen et al, 2017), above the numbers in 2017 for India and Kenya, and not far behind Cambodia (LIRNEasia, 2018). Social media use accounted for a large proportion of users' Internet experience in Myanmar. 85 percent of the country's Internet traffic was routed through Facebook in 2017 (Roache, 2017)– nineteen million Facebook accounts were created in a country of 51 million as at June 2018 (Facebook Advertising Portal, n.d.).

Despite the advances in selected fronts, Myanmar has seen its fair share of troubles in the recent past. Myanmar officially recognizes 135 ethnic groups (Oxford Burma Alliance, n.d.) many of which are subsets of the larger groups such as Bamar, Shan, Kayin and Rakhine. A number of minority groups, who predominantly live in selected segments of the country (e.g.: Kachin ethnic group in the Kachin State), have had tensions with the government. The Rohingyas, a Muslim community who resided

primarily in the Rakhine State, were not officially recognized as an ethnic minority. Many in the country believe that they are not Myanmar, but immigrants from Bangladesh, and are commonly referred to as “Bengalis” (Ibrahim, 2018). Access to social media is thought to have given a platform to incite to spread hate against the Rohingyas, fuelling the underlying sentiments of the people of the country. The United Nations Human Rights Council in its investigation on the violence in Myanmar in recent years stating that “Facebook has turned into a beast”, claiming that “the ultra-national Buddhists have their own Facebook and are inciting a lot of violence and hatred against the Rohingya and other ethnic minorities” (Human Rights Council, 2018).

Furthermore, despite the seeming push towards individual freedoms, the State’s policing of the social media is also evident. Article 66(d) of the Telecommunications Law (Pyidaungsu Hluttaw Law) (hereafter referred to as a the 2013 Telecommunications Law), which called for convictions of up to three years, a fine, or both for “extorting, coercing, restraining wrongfully, defaming, disturbing, causing undue influence or threatening to any person by using any Telecommunications Network” *(The Telecommunications Law, 2013)*, has been used to target critics of the Government. Human Rights Watch (2017) reported that individuals were imprisoned for calling the country’s then president an “idiot” and “crazy” on Facebook, as well as for mocking the country’s army on the platform. Amendments were made to the Article 66(d) in mid 2017, a week prior to the beginning of the fieldwork for this research. The changes included lowering the number of grounds to make complaints by three, reducing the prison sentence to two years, increasing the likelihood of being granted bail, and preventing third parties from making complaints (Free Expression Myanmar, 2017).

Figure 1 illustrates the numbers of criminal complaints made under the law between November 2015 and November 2017. It is worth noting that the number of complaints continued to rise after the democratically elected National League for Democracy (NLD) government’s win in the 2015 elections, and that six cases were reported in the three months following the amendment.

Figure 1: Number of criminal complaints made under Article 66(d)
Source: www.saynoto66d.net

3. Literature review

Historical accounts indicate that the State and society's attitudes towards public discourse have varied over time. This was the case in Ancient Greece. On one hand, two ancient lawgivers Zaleucus and Charondas were to have enacted a strict code of conduct concerning political speech, whereby if a citizen were to propose a revision to law, he should do so preparing to be executed if the proposed revision was not found in favour (Allen, 2010). On the other hand, accounts exist stating "the man who took no interest in the affairs of state was not a man who minded his own business, but a man who had no business being in Athens at all" (Thucydides, n.d. in Weiner, 2016). The renowned Habermas (1991) who went on to describe the public sphere through more recent historical accounts viewed it as the nexus of private and public life, allowing for rational-critical debate among the bourgeois. This line of thought that implies that such debate prevented the state from using their power illegitimately by creating checks and balances (Hauser, 1998; Mouffe, 1999).

Some like Benkler (2006) write of networks enabling a more egalitarian public sphere, allowing all citizens to become creators and primary subjects instead of consumers and passive spectators. Conversely, the views of Dahlberg (2001), who states that discourse inclusion and equality is a key condition of a public space, mirroring the writings of Harbermas (1991) who implied that the public sphere was limited to the bourgeois. He purports that the Internet can "at best support elite public sphere" given poverty, poor telecommunications infrastructures and state censorship.

The understanding of the Internet as a vehicle to further political participation has also depended largely on the specific rules and regulations underlying the individual platforms– much like the relevance of specific laws and norms in Ancient Greece. Ruiz et al (2015) who examined 15,000 comments from five newspapers identified two distinct types of communities and conversation on such spaces– they identified respectful discussions and diverse points of view on newspapers such as the New York Times, but less argumentative discourse that aligned with the perspective of the newsroom in others.

Existing literature is largely in agreement that discourse on Facebook is likely to "cut down on the mean-spirited, profane and sometimes useless responses because one's friends will also see the comments in their newsfeeds", resting on the assumption that those commenting will not be able to do so anonymously (Orr, 2011 in Santana, 2012; Semaan et al, 2014). Rowe (2015), testing this very hypothesis, compares the comments section of the same articles posted on the Washington Post website with that of the Washington Post Facebook page. The study finds that "the occurrence of uncivil communicative behaviour in reader comments is significantly more common in the website version of the Washington Post, where users are able to maintain their anonymity, compared to the Facebook version of the Washington Post, where commenters are identified with, and accountable for, their content."

This paper, based primarily off a set of qualitative research carried out during the height of the ethno-religious conflict in August and September 2018, looks to assess factors underpinning people's willingness to comment on political content in online spaces. The mechanisms used by the respondents– the use of anonymity as a tool for political participation, is also explored in the paper.

4. Methodology

Qualitative and quantitative research methods were employed for the purpose of this study– the qualitative research forms the primary basis for this paper, and is supplemented by the findings of the quantitative research.

4.1 Qualitative research

Ninety-eight respondents were interviewed, with 16 focus group discussions (FGDs), and six in-depth interviews (IDIs) being conducted.

Respondents who had been using the Internet for a year or more were recruited for the research– the rationale for the cutoff limit in terms of years of use was in order to get accounts of sufficient depth regarding user experiences.

Reports of hate speech on Facebook suggested that individuals' ethnicity, religion, political views and sexual orientation might have impacted the individuals' user experience. Hence, these were also used as screening criteria along with gender, age and socio-economic classification.

The team ensured that the groups in which the topics were discussed were kept relatively homogenous, as illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1: Sampling table for FGDs

Target area	Notes on target group	Gender	Age	SEC	Location
Ethnicity	Kachin Ethnicity	6M	35-44	A/B	Kachin
Ethnicity	Non-Kachin Ethnicity	6F	25-34	C/D/E	Kachin
Ethnicity	Rakhine Ethnicity	6M	21-42	B/C/D	Yangon
Ethnicity	Shan ethnicity	3M & 3F	19-27	B/C/D	Yangon
Gender	Women	6F	35-44	C/D/E	Yangon
Gender/Ethnicity	Women (Kachin Ethnicity)	6F	15-24	C/D/E	Kachin
Gender/Religion	Women (Muslim)	3F	22-34	C/D	Yangon
Gender/ Sexuality	LGBTI	Unspecified	15-24	A/B	Yangon
Gender/Sexuality	LGBTI	Unspecified	15-24	C/D/E	Yangon
Politics	Politically active	3M & 3F	25-34	A/B	Yangon
Politics	Politically active and pro-KIA	5M	35-46	Mixed	Kachin
Religion	Buddhist	6M	15-24	A/B	Yangon
Religion	Buddhist	6F	25-34	C/D/E	Mandalay
Religion	Muslim	6M	19-42	Mixed	Yangon
Religion	Non-Buddhist (Muslim, Christian, Hindu)	6M	35-44	C/D/E	Mandalay
Religion	Non-Buddhist (Muslim, Christian, Hindu)	6F	25-34	A/B	Yangon

The research took place in three areas of the country–Yangon Region, Mandalay region, and the Kachin State. Four FGDs, focusing on ethnicity and local politics, took place in Myitkyina in the Kachin State, which is located in the North Eastern part of Myanmar. FGDs focusing on issues on religion were conducted in Mandalay. The remaining ten took place in Yangon, the country's largest city and commercial center.

The research was carried out in late August and September 2016. This is the time period in which the unrest in the Rakhine State escalated. A mass exodus of the Rohingya community followed an attack on military posts on August 25, and burning of villages and killings of civilians (British Broadcasting Corporation, 2017). Three focus group discussions was due to take place in the Rakhine State in early

September, but security restrictions in entering the Rakhine State led to the protocols being replaced with FGDs in Yangon. Muslims and those of Rakhine ethnicity who were living in Yangon, but with relatives in the Rakhine State were interviewed in their place.

Of the six IDIs conducted, three were with respondents who had previously participated in the FGDs– IDIs were conducted in an attempt to extract information that the moderators felt they would be uneasy to share in an open discussion. The three remaining IDIs were with individuals who were deemed as local celebrities with large social media followings or “social media influencers”.

Each FGD took between one and two hours, while IDIs concluded in 45 minutes or less. The discussions took place in the local language, Myanmar. The discussions were recorded, and the discussion was translated and transcribed to English. Inductive coding methods were used to analyze the transcripts, given the exploratory nature of the research.

Kantar Public Myanmar and the Myanmar ICT for Development Organization (MIDO) conducted the fieldwork (including the recruitment of respondents and moderation). The fieldwork took place with the participation of LIRNEasia researchers at all the protocols. Informed consent was of participation was obtained from all respondents, with parental consent also being received for respondents under the age of 18.

4.2 Quantitative research

An online survey carried out in October and November 2017. The sample of Internet users was sourced from respondents of Kantar TNS Myanmar’s Connected Life Study carried out in 2015 and 2016. The phone numbers of 1,000 respondents, who had indicated that they were Internet users, were randomly selected from the samples of the 2015 and 2016 waves of the Connected Life study. An introductory SMS was sent to the selected group, after which the team made a call to explain the nature of the study and the objectives of the work.

A mobile friendly survey was designed, and the survey was truncated into two sections and sent on consecutive days to avoid survey fatigue. Each section took around 12 minutes to complete. 403 responses were received.

A series of logic checks were built into the online questionnaire and controlled via software logic, indicating that online survey respondents could not proceed to the next question if contradictory answers were given.

4.3 Limitations of the research

The findings are based on qualitative research in which purposive sampling was carried out, with the authors specifying the characteristics of the respondents that were used in the screening process. Though efforts were taken to include those of different socio-economic categories, ethnicities, religions, political views, genders, sexual orientations and age groups, the findings are not generalizable– the

recruitment of a different group with the same characteristics could yield different findings.
The results of the quantitative research too cannot be deemed to be nationally representative though the sample was drawn randomly from a nationally representative source. Non-response bias is likely to have occurred, suggesting that the responses of those who responded to the survey could have varied from those who did not respond.

5. Findings

A large volume of news was being generated on ethno-religious and political content given the timing of the research– the beginning of the mass exodus of the Rohingya community to Bangladesh. From previous research, it is known that a significant portion of those in Myanmar relies on the Internet, particularly Facebook, to get information on the news (Zainudeen et al, 2016; Cihon and Galpaya, 2017) much like in other countries (Olmstead, Mitchell and Rosenstiel, 2011).

However, this research suggests that a number of respondents made a conscious decision to be weary before engaging with the content pertaining to political discussion that they encountered, and not only for the lack of skills to be able to do so. Two main reasons for the respondents' reluctance to engage in discussion are discussed in this section. First, the pushback they'd receive from their friends and family, as discussed by Orr (2011). Though not asked specifically about political content, Figure 2 illustrates how respondents of the quantitative survey were most weary of unauthorized information gathering by friends and family.

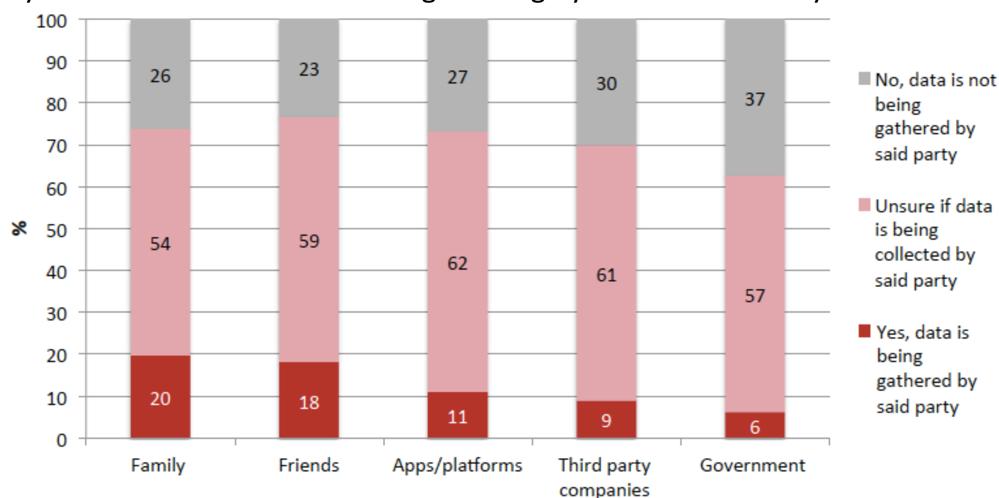

Figure 2: Perceptions of unauthorized information gathering (% of respondents)
Base: All respondents, quantitative research (n=403)

Second, they expressed their fears of being arrested by the Government if they engaged in political discussion online. The measures that were being taken to circumvent each of these concerns are then discussed.

5.1 Measures to relieve societal pressures

Concerns about getting into altercations with others online on politically sensitive content were mentioned by our respondents. These concerns were sometimes the result of clashes they had in the past, and some were based on the experiences of others. Often however, those who feared the backlash from their friends and family sought alternative means to remain active on social media in political discussions, while shielding themselves from the direct criticism from society, as spelt out by Orr (2011) in Santana (2012).

Facebook's policy states that it "is a community where everyone uses the name they go by in everyday life. This makes it so that you always know who you're connecting with". It also states that the name should appear on a list of prescribed identification documents, though nicknames that are a variation of the individuals' real names are permitted (Facebook, n.d.). However, some respondents had made deliberate efforts to use nicknames or what they called other "funny names" to avoid identification, so that they would be able to engage in political discourse. This was often paired with refraining to use photographs of themselves.

"Without showing my identity, I can engage in preventing misconceptions or state my opinions on local and international news without getting my name hurt… I can take the news without letting my identity be revealed. So, I use nicknames or other funny names with profile pictures like cartoon characters."
R15.1, Female, 38, SEC D, Owner of snack shop and part time volunteer for NGO, Yangon

"I didn't use my real photo because the people with different opinions in politics can target me and threaten me"
IDI 5, Female, 26, SEC unknown, Social influencer, Yangon

"I don't use my real name or my photo when using social media. Many people hate Rakhine and I don't want to use them. They [have given} us Haha sticker comments. When we meet one day there will be problems. I changed my name to avoid such situations."
R12.6, Male, 42, SEC C, Fish salesman, Rakhine ethnicity, Yangon

This is not to imply that this point of view, or experience was homogenous among our respondents. Some were of the view that using their real names led to people behaving more appropriately online.
"I think using your real name is important as it shows your identity. Most of the Facebook users with the real names and pictures are less likely to be fake accounts. When I am about to add someone on Facebook, I would prefer if that person has an account with real name. It would be a little bit embarrassing if someone has a funny Facebook name, which is not his or her real name. I believe people who do the right things and act appropriately online must have accounts with their real names. I provide the right information in all of those, except that I didn't put my number. By putting the right personal information, people can know that I am real not fake."
R2.2, Female, 25, SEC A, Shop owner, Yangon

However, it is important to note that the decision to include her real, identifiable name or not was in the hands of the respondent, and was not mandated by Facebook, as was suggested in their policy. Facebook's real name policy therefore, served as more of a recommendation than one that was enforced. It is not within the scope of this study to connect the incidence of hate speech to the use of inauthentic names. However, the accounts from respondents suggest that they were more free to engage in political discourse given the ability to remain anonymous to their friends and family.

Having multiple accounts was not uncommon in Myanmar– 41 percent of the respondents from the quantitative survey who used social media stated that they had more than one Facebook account (Figure 3)

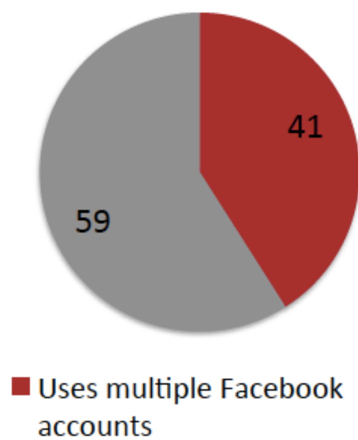

Figure 3: Use of multiple Facebook accounts
Base: All respondents using social media, quantitative research (n=381)

There were a plethora of reasons given for this, ranging from the lack of digital skills to get retrieve their login information if they were unable to access their accounts to wanting to separate their personal lives with those related to their employment. Some had one account for more personal matters, and another to engage in political discourse. For some, there were clear ethnic underpinnings that influenced their decisions.

"One time, people in the comments section [of one of my posts] got into an argument. After that, I decided to use two accounts for different purposes. One is with my Kachin name [for] my relatives and friends from the same ethnicity. The other one is with my Burmese name and it is for activities where there could be negative impact if I used my Kachin name. [This is] for political or other controversial views. Since then, I [haven't had] any problem."
R2.1, Female, 25, University student, SEC B, Kachin ethnicity, Yangon

In some cases, such as that of the male carpenter from Myitkyina (R.5.4), the ability to not divulge his identity gave relieved him from societal pressure to express his opinion on political content.

"We cannot say anything we want openly now given the current situation, even though it is free now. Online we can talk to each other about anything we want to without needing to be afraid. I have two accounts… One account does not have a profile picture. I can see news and write anything I want freely. I read news and share news."
R5.4, Male, 35, SEC B, Carpenter, Myitkyina

"I don't accept all the people who send me friend request in my official account. I don't want to be friends with people I don't know on Facebook either. However, when I want to write something such as things related to politics, it is not appropriate to write them with my account. Therefore, I post it with another account. In that account, it is fast to make friends in that account. After a while, I get more than 5000 people in my account. In my real account, I only have 500 or 600 friends. I can post whatever I want to say in that account. I can also write comments without knowing anybody. That's one account."
R8.1, Male, 44, SEC C, Merchant, Myitkyina

5.2 Measures to tackle state-led censorship

A number of respondents expressed a reluctance to engage in conversations about current affairs online. For some, the reluctance was rooted in the prevailing reports of state censorship, with many directly attributing their fears to the use of Article 66D of the Telecommunications Law to arrest critiques of the Government.

"I don't write anything bad about the Government. If I do, they can sue me using 66D."
R12.2, Male, 21, SEC C, Student, Yangon

"[My wife] told me not to post on political items and to only post about our business. She told me I would get arrested from our home [if I did]. Political things are not relevant to me. It is true that politics is everyone's concern. However, I do not get involved in business that is not mine. The main thing is for my family to have a peaceful and good life."
R10.3, Male, 35, SEC D, Shop owner, Mandalay

The degree of self-regulation exerted when engaging in political discourse varied among the group. Some, like the male student from Yangon (R12.2), spoke about refraining from critiquing the Government. The ambiguous wording of the law being used to make the arrests however, led to uncertainty about what was allowed and what was not. Hence, another group of respondents refrained from engaging in political matters altogether.

"Some people upload posts about politics…. I don't post anything related to politics because I am afraid I will be arrested with article 66D. I read those posts [whether I agree with the content of the post or not] because I want to know everything. However, I don't respond to anything because political issues are getting complex in these days and I am afraid I will have arrested without knowing why… An official in

my ward experienced this. He told us that he just shares that kind of posts because he likes those posts. He said that Article 66D was being used to sue him. I am afraid."
R9.6, Female, 29, SEC E, Teacher, Mandalay

Some respondents were also aware that there were some posts and news stories that contained factually inaccurate information. In fact, some were of the opinion that the BBC's news stories fell into this category, and gave the BBC's Facebook page a 1 star rating. However, there was also reluctance to share information that they perceived as factually correct, due to these fears of being arrested by the Government.
"My brother is young and aggressive. He writes about Rakhine issue. I warned him not to write like that because he would be arrested. I don't share nor write the comments because I fear of electronic law. I am afraid of the law. It doesn't matter if the post contains correct news otherwise, we will be followed."
R11.3, Male, 21, SEC C, Unemployed, Yangon

The repercussions of being arrested in terms of their livelihoods and social activities were thought through by some before engaging in such discussion. Others weighed the pros and cons between expressing their views, and the impact that speaking out could have on their families.
"I don't usually share posts on my wall. It is because of the law like 66D. I am afraid that I might get into trouble by sharing some content. Since I do charity work, I need to be careful. The most I would do is to joke around with my friends by commenting about politics using the secret names we gave."
R15.6, Female, 42, SEC C, Online shop owner, Yangon

6. Conclusions

The research suggests that some respondents who were Internet users in Myanmar were cautious before engaging in discourse on politically charged topics on social media.
Some individuals also suggested that they were cautious of how the content they engaged with, be it in the form of liking, sharing and posting, would reflect on them. They seemed concerned both about how these would be perceived by their family and friends, as well as other individuals on social media networks.

Despite Facebook's real name policy, there were a number of respondents who used alternative names that wouldn't make them easily identifiable to others on the platform. One may posit that the efforts taken by the respondents to retain their anonymity may have been a root cause of the excessive hate speech. However, it is evident that the use of inauthentic names allowed the respondents, who otherwise may not have engaged in discourse, to do so. Thereby this research also challenges the body of literature that suggests that the use of Facebook will necessarily lead to users becoming more accountable, and therefore becoming more measured in their speech on such platforms.

The Government's use of the vaguely worded Article 66(d) was a significant driver of the fear of many respondents. As a result, some refrained from engaging in conversations online altogether, particularly if they were being critical of the Government. Noteworthy is that unlike those who were cautious around their friends and family, many of our respondents who feared the Government felt the need to refrain from political commentary on online spaces altogether.

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