Burmese Media in Transition

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This article offers an assessment of media and their role in the ongoing political transition in Myanmar, and an overview of lessons learned from other countries undergoing transition. It demonstrates how media function in this process as active agents of stability, restraint, change, or all three, and assesses how Myanmar's experiences reinforce or challenge common assumptions about democratic transition. The discussion draws from interviews over many years with journalists, editors, advocacy groups, and policy makers and participant observation in media offices and at media-related events. The research examines the origins of the recent changes, the importance of history, the role of civil society—including ethnic and formerly exile media—and issues of political economy and media diversity.

Keywords: Burma, Myanmar, media reform, transition, journalism, democratization, media policy, ethnic media, media diversity

On July 4, 2013, journalists in Myanmar[1] were shaken by the unexpected introduction and same-day, unanimous approval of the Ministry of Information's (MoI's) new Printers and Publishers Enterprise Act by the lower house of parliament. Just that morning, Kyaw Min Swe, the secretary of the recently formed interim Myanmar Press Council (MPC), had explained to me in detail the council's efforts, in five meetings (three with senior officials from the Ministry of Information), to suggest changes to the draft bill, which he expected would be introduced before long to parliament. Despite his role as chief editor of a monthly magazine, a weekly, and *The Voice*, one of the top-selling papers in the newly opened daily newspaper market, Kyaw Min Swe, like other editors and journalists, had not anticipated these events. Journalists decried the newly approved draft as an affront to free speech that ignored the many changes suggested by Myanmar journalist groups and the MPC. As another Myanmar Press Council member told me, the MoI's unwillingness to incorporate the agreed-upon changes was a breach of the gentleman's agreement between its officials and journalists.

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[1] The country's name has been controversial. It was changed to the Union of Myanmar in 1989 by the military dictatorship without a referendum, an action contested by the political opposition. Since the changes that began in 2010, the name has become less of an issue. I will use both, preferring Burma when I refer to events prior to 2010, and Myanmar when discussing the more recent situation.

That same week, *Dawei Watch*, a regional online newspaper from Tanintharyi in southern Myanmar, published a story on the struggles of local residents against the Italian-Thai company IDT, which was involved in the development of the Dawei deep sea port and a related road across Burma to Thailand. The story described how these villagers, displaced by the clearing for the roadway, believed that the compensation promised by IDT for their land was too low, so several of them refused to accept it. On six separate occasions, they went to the company's office to discuss the issue. IDT did not respond, so one local resident filed a complaint against the company with the township police. After the publication of this story by *Dawei Watch*, IDT called for an emergency meeting with local residents and agreed to better compensation (Thu Rein Hlaing, personal communication, July 11, 2013).

A year later, in early July 2014, special branch police in Yangon began visiting private media offices, including the *The Voice, Myanmar Post, People Era Weekly, The Irrawaddy, Democracy Today*, and the now-defunct *Unity Weekly.* Staff members describe being interrogated about their funding and financial operations. This was not the first time *The Irrawaddy* had been visited by authorities, but *Irrawaddy* Burmese editor, Yeni, nevertheless found himself explaining "Media Industries 101" to the officers, such as what an editorial policy is and the role of independent media (personal communication, July 7, 2014). The officers insisted that their invitation to speak with their boss was not in any way meant as a threat. Yet, as Yeni told me, "even if it is not a threat, it is a kind of political pressure, and just kind of a warning to [let us] know they are unhappy" (personal communication, July 7, 2014).

A week or so after these visits, in the Yangon offices of *Mizzima*, the formerly exile media outlet, I marvel at the changes since I had visited the office two years earlier. At that time, its founding editors had just rented the office, a vast expanse of carpet with one small desk and a phone that rang incessantly. *Mizzima* has been the most eager of the exile media to return and engage with the government and investors, and today its offices sprawl across the entire floor of the condominium. It now produces two websites (Burmese and English language), a daily Burmese language newspaper, an English language business weekly, weekly business and sports programs, and ethnic and women's programming. It also offers a daily SMS headline news service. It has a newsroom staff of more than 160, with more than 200 in the entire organization (Soe Myint, personal communication, July 10, 2014).

As Soe Myint, *Mizzima* founder and editor-in-chief, talks about the challenges of moving and expanding his business inside the country, he tells me he has just received a telephone call about the verdict in the trial of the four journalists and the chief executive officer of *Unity Journal.* The five had been arrested January 2014 for criminal trespass and violating the State Secrets Act after reporting allegations that the Burmese military was building a chemical weapons facility. They have just been sentenced to 10 years in prison with hard labor. The next day, *Mizzima* and other papers run a black front cover. Journalists protest. International press freedom groups decry the decision. As of this writing in mid-2015, the men remain incarcerated, although their sentence has been reduced to seven years with hard labor after an appeal. They plan to appeal again.

These developments offer a glimpse of the complex and rapidly shifting media landscape in Myanmar, undergoing a much-lauded transition from military dictatorship—although to what eventual outcome remains to be seen. I offer here a snapshot of the transition in progress and an overview of

lessons learned from countries undergoing transition that will hopefully be of use to scholars and policy makers. I will focus on those aspects of the transition that affect media—in particular the neoliberal nature of Myanmar's reforms; the role of the military, the government, and journalists in the reform process; and the importance of both history and resistance. The empirical basis for this discussion includes interviews and other conversations with journalists, editors, advocacy groups, and policy makers as well as visits to offices and attendance at media-related events during periodic research visits to the country and its border with Thailand since 1999. This includes trips to Myanmar in July 2012, 2013, and 2014, years of great change.

Recent Changes

The years immediately following problematic elections in 2010 saw the release of political prisoners, including journalists and bloggers; the closing of the censorship body, the Press Scrutiny and Registration Division; an end to the blocking of international and Burmese exile news websites; a decrease in surveillance and harassment of journalists; increasing freedom to write on formerly taboo subjects; permission to establish independent journalist organizations; the establishment of the interim Myanmar Press Council to improve the situation for journalists and draft new media laws; permission for the publication of private daily newspapers; invitations to exile media to return and open offices in the country; and licenses for ethnic language media after decades of prohibiting these languages from being taught in schools or used in private media.

The market is adjusting to a number of new weeklies and monthlies as well as new private daily papers, many of which closed within the first year or two of operation. Exile media groups are returning to the country. Broadcasting remains in the control of the government, but a new broadcast law and public-service media law are nearing completion. As of this writing in mid-2015, the bylaws are nearly completed for the Printers and Publishers Enterprise Act. In June, the Ministry of Information released the bylaws for the media law, including details on the right to information, the process for electing the Myanmar Press Council, the remediation process for disputes handled through the MPC, and how media outlets can obtain permission to cover protests and armed conflict.[2] All these changes have hastened what was previously slow, clandestine work to support and democratize the Burmese media under the nose of the military dictatorship and from exile.

Despite all the positive developments, intimidation, arrests, and attacks on journalists have continued since the *Unity* case, which sent a chill and reports of increasing self-censorship through the journalism community. Since early 2015, there have been especially several alarming events, including the arrest of at least 11 journalists and the disturbing killing of another. In October 2014, five staff members of the *Bi-Midday Sun* newspaper were each sentenced to two years imprisonment under the Penal Code, which prohibits offences against the state or "public tranquility," after their paper published claims that opposition leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, and ethnic leaders had been elected as an interim government. Also in October, freelance journalist Aung Kyaw Naing was shot and killed in military custody

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[2] Both of these laws, however, have been critiqued by media freedom advocacy organizations (Article 19, 2014).

under suspicious circumstances, shocking the journalist community; his body was later exhumed, and, although evidence of torture was found, no one has been held to account for his murder. In March 2015, the editor-in-chief and a senior reporter from the *Myanmar Post Weekly* were arrested and sentenced to two months imprisonment each under the Penal Code for allegedly misquoting an interview with a military officer. In June, U Kyaw Soe, a former military official now with the Ministry of Information, initiated a criminal prosecution against 17 senior members of the *Daily Eleven* editorial staff for allegedly reporting illegally on an earlier defamation suit. U Kyaw Soe also has an earlier case pending against five senior *Eleven* staff members for defaming the MoI itself. The targeting of so many staff at once seems aimed at shutting down critical media outlets.

Although media no longer face direct, prepublication censorship, what will trigger government charges of a threat to national security and public welfare remains unclear, although criticism of the military is widely recognized as taboo, as is reporting on communal and ethnic conflict. The use of libel and defamation suits has increased significantly; they are often filed by officials, ministries, or other state bodies not yet willing to make use of the Myanmar Press Council as an arbitrator between media and those with complaints. Concerns are now being voiced about possible restrictions on press freedom during elections scheduled for November 2015. All these developments call into question the much-lauded "transition" and its impact on media.

Burmese Media

Burma's media were strictly regulated and heavily censored during the military era, with the exception of a short period during uprisings in 1988, when the people ruled the streets. The regime controlled all daily newspapers and broadcasting, either directly or indirectly through private concessions. All other publications had to be approved through the Press Scrutiny and Registration Division. The first private weekly and monthly journals on nonpolitical topics were permitted in 1990, and the first news journals in 2000; this sector strengthened considerably over the years, pushing for greater media freedom from inside the country. Also important were the international satellite broadcasters, the British Broadcasting Corporation, Voice of America, and Radio Free Asia Burmese services. Although not independent from (foreign) government funding and influence, they performed a vital service, especially during the years of heavy censorship.

A significant influence in the changing media scene are the exile or formerly exile media, mostly founded after the massive uprisings of 1988, in which the army opened fire on hundreds of thousands of unarmed students, civilians, and civil servants protesting military rule and economic mismanagement. Thousands were killed, and many fled to the country's border areas, where they formed new alliances with the ethnic minority groups fighting the regime. Ethnic armed groups were already producing small-scale media—primarily print publications and guerilla radio—and student activists were able to tap into foreign funding in the post-1988 political climate and establish print publications such as *The Irrawaddy* and *Mizzima*, the broadcaster *Democratic Voice of Burma* (DVB), and a myriad of smaller ventures (Brooten, 2004). These groups eventually became the mainstream, ethnically "unmarked" exile media and were generally better funded and more professional than the ethnic media, eventually moving online and expanding into various forms of multimedia production.

Ethnic media also continued to grow, with early print publications such as the *Shan Herald Agency for News*, *Kwe Ka Lu* (a Karen newspaper), and *Sanong Taing* (a Mon publication) later adding an online presence and increasing their networking. When massive protests dubbed the "Saffron Revolution" broke out in 2007, and the military again responded with deadly force, the exile media published images and stories smuggled out of the country by journalists inside. The important work accomplished by both internal and exile media during decades of military rule remains underappreciated (Brooten, 2013a, 2013b; Pidduck, 2012), but it continues to be a key influence in the ongoing cultural transformation as these groups move back inside.

Initially Myanmar's private media feared these newly returned competitors would significantly affect the market, because their foreign funding means they do not need to compete similarly (several still complain about this). Also, on their return, a few senior formerly exiled journalists were engaged by the Ministry of Information and other government departments as consultants, frustrating some who saw the regime's formerly staunch critics become cozy with the same generals in civilian clothes. But those initial tensions seem to have subsided as these groups reintegrate, protest alongside their colleagues for change, and struggle with the same, if not greater, concerns about their long-term sustainability, since many believe their funding may be cut after the 2015 elections.

The introduction of cell phones and the Internet into Burma has shifted the media landscape, and despite the currently low Internet penetration rate (estimated to be between 1% and 3% of the population), new telecommunications firms and the government have pledged to rapidly increase broadband access and mobile penetration. Although the government used to block foreign news and other websites, since the recent changes it has been more relaxed. Journalists now use the Internet to report, network, and lobby for greater press freedom, and most news organizations have an online presence. Many government ministers, celebrities, journalists, and various public figures now have their own Facebook pages, where comments and discussions at times become sources for mainstream media news.

A proliferation of hate speech in Myanmar in both social media and mainstream media has caused concern, especially after the Buddhist-Muslim violence that broke out in June 2012 and that has continued sporadically since, causing at least 280 deaths and displacing more than 180,000. This conflict has a long and complex history beyond the scope of this article, but in the postregime era, the demonization of Muslim Rohingyas by state-run and some private media reflects the "us-versus-them" rhetoric of the Buddhist nationalist monks. These media have also criticized the formerly exile media and international media for coverage they argue is biased toward the Rohingya. Facebook has been much worse, having become a forum for racial slurs, insults, and incitements to violence, provoking concerned discussion in the print and broadcast media.

Tussles continue in the development of media legislation. In March 2014, after compromises and changes in both laws, the MoI-drafted Printers and Publishers Enterprise Act and the Myanmar Press Council–drafted News Media Law were passed by parliament. Critics dislike that the printers and publishers law does not recognize or protect the right to freedom of expression or press freedom and that the MoI retains the power to unilaterally grant, withhold, or revoke publishing licenses (Article 19, 2014). As MPC member U Thiha Saw explained, "we are not totally happy about both laws, but to a certain extent

we are quite satisfied that we built in some major changes" (personal communication, July 6, 2014). In July 2015, the MoI finalized bylaws for the media law that promise journalists greater access to information but also provide authorities with means of controlling reporting on contentious issues. At the time of this writing, both the broadcasting law and the public-service media law have been halted, pending further review. Concerns include a proposed Broadcast Council comprised of six ministries, including the Ministry of Defense and the Ministry of the Interior (Toe Zaw Latt, personal communication, July 11, 2014). Also, the government's draft public-service media law specifically names the state-run daily newspapers and broadcast outlets as the future public-service media rather than laying out criteria and allowing interested parties to apply. A related concern is the government's control over infrastructure, such as the broadcast outlets, and national distribution networks and discounts for newsprint and ink. Also, state-run media employ civil servants paid with tax dollars and yet compete in the same market as the private media with no such salary subsidization. For all these reasons, critics argue, the government should disengage from media work entirely.

Visions for media in Myanmar vary among the different stakeholders in the reform process. Journalists push for freedom to report freely without fear, many taking risks by protesting publicly. Ethnic media journalists struggle for recognition and ways to express the concerns of their people, both in media content and in decision-making bodies. The ethnic media consortium Burma News International, for example, has had to lobby on its own behalf for inclusion in several large media development conferences held in recent years, and it continues to lobby for ethnic media representation on the press council and other official bodies. These journalists would like to see an inclusive, diverse media, including public-service and community media.

The military has made clear its interest in limiting media debate on sensitive topics. Despite promises to be more forthcoming with the press and an increase in press updates, the military provides little usable information for journalists and rarely offers contact information for follow-up. In May 2015, the military threatened media with lawsuits if they printed or aired statements by the blacklisted Kokang rebels. Criticism of the military is dangerous, as demonstrated by the June 2015 case in which news photographers in parliament showed a military lawmaker voting on behalf of absent colleagues. In response, journalists were first denied access to lower house parliamentary chambers, then to the upper house, and informed by then speaker Shwe Mann that the request to block access came from the military (Zaw, 2015). The denial of access was announced just hours after the MoI jointly celebrated World Press Freedom Day with UNESCO in Yangon.

The official line, expressed through Information Minister U Ye Htut, is that the government is committed to media diversity, as evidenced by the draft of the broadcast law that includes provisions for private, public, and community media; the commitment to transform state-run media into public-service media, whose content will include ethnic issues and ethnic programming; and provisions in the draft public-service media law to provide financial and technical support for ethnic media. These are significant commitments if they can be successfully operationalized into practical bylaws and enforced. However, as already mentioned, the government is expecting that the state-run media alone will be transformed into public-service media, despite the fact that ethnic media groups and DVB-TV have also expressed interest.

It is also clear that the military retains significant influence over parliament and its relationship with journalists, which needs to change if the transition is to bring more than window dressing.

Political Transitions and Media

The term *transition* has a contested history. Its reference to political regime change or a period of major state reforms dates to the 1970s, just before the start of what Samuel Huntington dubbed democracy's "third wave." The field of study called "transitology" emerged as the dominant approach to understanding this third wave, with the foundational assumption that societies in transition are moving from dictatorship toward democracy (Carothers, 2002; Sparks, 2010). This approach ignores various contested meanings of democracy and implicitly takes North American and Western European democracies, including their media structures and journalistic practices, as universal templates. As Sparks (2010) puts it, "In general . . . the progress of media in post-dictatorial societies is measured as being the extent to which the local press and broadcasting approximate to (highly idealized) versions of the *New York Times* and the British Broadcasting Corporation" (p. 7). An influential 2002 article by Thomas Carothers calls for an end to the transition paradigm, pointing out, among other things, how few of the third wave countries had actually become democratic. He and others have since tried to classify the various patterns and outcomes among these countries, emphasizing the need for context sensitivity. Nevertheless, the term *transition* continues to be used, especially given the color revolutions in the former Soviet Union in the early 2000s and the Arab Spring, albeit with more sensitivity to these critiques and the wide variety of outcomes possible for any given political transition.

The state is key in any transition process, and a weak state unable to enforce the rule of law is as dangerous to a democratic transition and media freedom as a strong, authoritarian state. Freedom of speech and expression are widely acknowledged as vital to a democratic polity and arguably "a better indicator of regional democratization than elections" (Obydenkova, 2008, p. 226). Yet a weak state breeds self-censorship as impunity increases—as in the Philippines, which is widely assumed to have one of the freest media systems in Southeast Asia, yet historically among the countries with the highest rates of killings of journalists worldwide. A strong state, on the other hand, is likely to suppress public expressions of opposition, often using national security as justification.

The most common framing of media conceptualizes them (usually implicitly) primarily as tools for information transmission, prioritizes professionalism and objective reporting, and defines independence in relation to the state, with no discussion of independence from commercial interests. Yet community media or media accessible to the community also play a significant *relational*, *transformative* role, creating symbolic space where identities are negotiated, constructed, and contested (Rodriguez, 2001, 2011). Scholars and policy makers alike need to pay more attention to these other important roles played by media, especially in areas of conflict. Recognizing media's relational, transformative roles makes clear the need for community access to the means to communicate with others, and not just receive information. This is vital in multicultural countries in transition, especially those experiencing conflict.

McCargo (2012) argues that comparative media systems models based on conditions in Europe and North America do not help explain the situation in the countries of the global South, or they require so

many exceptions as to be unhelpful. He also challenges the notion that most media can be understood as business ventures when so many media in Pacific Asia are in fact not making money or are losing money. He urges us not to think in terms of models, but to recognize media's roles as active agents in the processes of change and to think about *processes* and structures that promote and constrain media agency. He lays out three key roles media play at times of crisis and change: They act as *agents of stability* (often through development journalism), *agents of restraint* (providing checks and balances on government), or *agents of change* (helping to shape change). Media can play one or all three roles, even simultaneously. As long as we avoid becoming media-centric, this is an especially useful lens with which to explore media's role in transition.

Media and Transition in Myanmar

Myanmar's transition is widely described as top-down and is primarily driven by the dominant neoliberal development model shared by global governance organizations, financial institutions, major donor agencies, and governments whose donations give them sway with policy makers. The Myanmar government's reforms were arguably jump-started by the chafing dominance of China over the country's economic development in recent years and the generals' need to placate Western concerns to counterbalance China's influence. The reforms coincided with the Obama administration's pivot toward the Asia Pacific region as Southeast Asia's strategic importance has increased in recent years. Especially given elections slated for November 2015 and challenges from the opposition National League for Democracy, the current government of former military officers must continue to convince foreign allies, donors, and its own people of its commitment to the democratization process. One way to do this is to conflate neoliberal economic development with democratization, including in the media sector. Foreign investment is flowing into Myanmar, even as activists continue to critique such problems as violent responses to peaceful protests, fighting between the military and ethnic minority peoples, ongoing repression against the Muslim Rohingya in Rakhine state, land grabbing and environmental degradation, and crackdowns on media.

The previous regime established the concept of "disciplined" or "guided" democracy, which remains central to the current government's discourse. Whereas some scholars and policy makers focus on a narrow procedural definition of democracy-as-elections, others define democracy more broadly, "to include state accountability through other mechanisms, especially through a watchdog role performed by civic organizations and media" (Wells & Kyaw Thu Aung, 2014, p. 76). Wells and Kyaw Thu Aung maintain that this is Burma's grassroots community-level understanding of democracy as well. Advocates of this approach (including most of those I interviewed) conceptualize transition as requiring not just new laws and policies but cultural change.

The remainder of this article focuses on how the transition in Myanmar affects—and, in turn, is affected by—media, how this compares to the experiences of other countries in transition, and how the lessons learned might aid decision makers. I begin by focusing on the origins of the recent changes.

Who Is Driving the Change?

Commentators have described Burma's contested 2010 elections and changes since as "top-down" (International Crisis Group, 2012; "Myanmar's Startling Changes," 2012; Nemoto, 2014), and, although many reforms have indeed been initiated by former military leaders, the situation is complex, involving bottom-up and external pressures as well. The reforms are largely neoliberal in nature, directed by the Myanmar government, foreign governments, and international organizations. Changes in media laws and policies have been driven by the Ministry of Information in consultation with UNESCO, other foreign experts, and various media development organizations. The Myanmar Press Council has also been central in the development of media laws and lobbying for improvements in government-drafted laws, although, as noted, it has been marginalized at various points in the process. The grassroots and nongovernmental sectors have had some influence, but the state unsurprisingly prioritizes and publicizes friendly organizations in alliance with its goals, and media and scholarship tend to focus on the state and its officers, with much less attention paid to civil society organizations, minorities, women's groups, students, and other local agents. I concur with Wells and Kyaw Thu Aung (2014) that the top-down argument is too simplistic because it disregards the development of grassroots groups and networks—including media—both inside and outside the country since 1988 (Brooten, 2013a, 2013b; Pidduck, 2012; South, 2004).

In Indonesia, although the *reformasi* movement was triggered by student-led protests in 1998, the reforms after the fall of Suharto, as in Myanmar, were understood to be an elite-led, top-down process that occurred while a hardline faction was still very strong and determined to prevent significant reforms (Abdulbaki, 2008). This dispelled certain assumptions about democratic transitions, including that development and a public, democratic culture are necessary preconditions to democracy (Abdulbaki, 2008). Indonesia's experiences provide evidence that elite-driven reform, democratization processes, and democratic culture can develop simultaneously, especially given the decreasing influence of Indonesia's military in politics and the economy (Mietzner, 2011). Myanmar could head down a similar path if the military's influence can be similarly reduced, but policy makers and funders must recognize and support independent and diverse media if democratic values are to take hold and remain strong enough to counter the weight of Burma's history.

Path Dependency, or the Importance of History

In early 2013, journalist and trainer Ye Naing Moe was asked to lead a workshop for 47 Myanmar government spokespersons from more than 33 ministries on how to deal with the media. He was invited by then deputy information minister, U Ye Htut, and "what he said was, just change the way they think about media. You have three days," Ye Naing Moe recalled, laughing. So he took on the challenge, and found himself confronted on the first day with a room full of grim government spokespeople. "When I started my class . . . somebody stood up and said, simply, 'we don't trust you guys'" (personal communication, July 26, 2013).

Patterns of behavior reinforced over time often dictate the relationship between media and politics, contributing to a process of path dependency in which the characteristics of the previous ruling

order get reproduced in the design and implementation of new institutions. Especially in countries where the media have been dependent on the state and behavioral norms have long been formalized and bureaucratized, reformers must help undo entrenched relationships and develop new ones. A significant challenge for many journalists is their inability to get information from both the public and lower-level government officials whose mind-sets, they say, remain stuck in the era of censorship and information control. Many are only willing to speak if their supervisors permit them to do so, and then preferably with state-run media, long considered allies. And then there is the audience and its expectations. Ye Naing Moe explains that, for many Burmese, "Journalism has to take sides. Which side? Their side. . . . I think because of our history. . . . The media were very political, anti-British, nationalistic . . . [and] when the politicians came out of the prisons they became editors" (personal communication, July 26, 2013).

This desire for good-versus-evil reporting is a manifestation of "enemy imaging" or creating an "us versus them" to create unity; this is standard practice in authoritarian behavior, and in the role of media in the post-antiregime era, where there is a need for a new enemy (Rogerson, 1997). Several scholars argue that press freedom can have a negative impact if it is not matched with tolerance for disagreement and a willingness to curb hate speech, sexism, racism, or otherwise harmful speech (O'Neill, 1998; Voltmer, 2013). Unfortunately, the abolition of censorship often results in racists and nationalist extremists demanding freedom of expression to spread their hateful views (Voltmer, 2013). The proliferation of hate speech against the Muslim Rohingya in both social media and mainstream media is an example of this kind of enemy imaging.

Path Dependency and Resistance

Discussions of path dependency tend to focus on the state and its officers and miss authoritarianism's inherent resistance, perhaps because it is often hidden or subtle enough to be easily missed. Just as authoritarian patterns reemerge during transition periods, so, too, do patterns of resistance. The push for change in Burma began well before 2010, as writers and journalists have resisted censorship and tried to widen their scope for expression since the start of military rule. Many local media, especially ethnic media, consider their work to include educating local communities about major issues and challenging the culture of silence so people will speak out on their own behalf. "We have to teach sometimes, we have to organize," *Tanintharyi Weekly* editor Myo Aung explains (personal communication, July 18, 2013). Burma News International secretary Khin Maung Shwe reiterated: "We have to build up the trust between civil society and media. In Burmese culture, mostly the people are afraid of the media . . . they don't want to speak out" (personal communication, July 21, 2013). Myo Aung emphasizes to local people, "You have the right to [speak] . . . the country has already changed. . . . If you are right, the police cannot punish you." Media are clearly agents of change here, working to develop relationships, promote participants' agency, and transform the culture of fear, as Rodriguez (2001, 2011) has so carefully documented in other contexts.

In 2012, when both the chief minister of the Tanintharyi region and local police asked the staff of the online *Dawei Watch* and its sister print weekly, *Tanintharyi Weekly*, not to cover controversial issues, the editors declined the request. Editor Thu Rein Hlaing told them, "This is not your right to tell us not to write this story. We got this information, so let me know if this is true or not" (personal communication,

July 11, 2013). When the chief minister complained, Thu Rein Hlaing explained that they would include local government responses if they were able to get them, but this has proven difficult. When the police request that they not publish a particular story, such as the one about local army staff illegally importing black market cars from Thailand, these local media compile the evidence necessary to fend off any blowback from local officials. In this latter case, they were able to get registration numbers of the black market cars, without which they would not have published the story. This strategy demonstrates media's role as agents of restraint, holding the government to account, not through top-down procedural reforms but via bottom-up cultural changes that challenge local officials, audiences, and the culture of secrecy and fear.

Importance of Civil Society

Civil society is a contested notion that needs more subtle theorizing in the Burmese context, because the concept has been misused by some to promote "'free' market, liberalization and commodification as the ultimate solution for all economic and political ills" (Zarni, 2012, p. 291) rather than genuine social justice. Yet there are as many different types of civil society organizations as there are types of media, and those engaging in effective grassroots efforts make vital contributions to democratization. In Ghana, for example, civil society organizations were key to the consolidation of democracy, providing opportunities for marginalized groups to promote and protect their values, influencing public opinion and public policy, and performing a watchdog function to ensure that democratic processes developed transparently (Arthur, 2010).

There is an emerging, vibrant, and increasingly complex civil society sector in Myanmar, ranging from small, grassroots groups to large, intergovernmental agencies. Especially after Cyclone Nargis slammed into Burma in May 2008, and given the much-criticized inept and callous state response, networks of community-based organizations grew stronger out of necessity, expanding their space and preventing the government from maintaining precyclone restrictions (Wells & Kyaw Thu Aung, 2014). Some of these groups have been working with media to push for changes and government transparency. Civil society networks, including journalists' networks, have begun directly intervening in policy making by contributing recommendations to President Thein Sein and to the speakers and other members of the lower and upper houses of parliament (Wells & Kyaw Thu Aung, 2014). All this bodes well for efforts to change the culture of fear and complacency.

The case of Iran demonstrates why strengthening media as part of a broader civil society network is so important. After the election of Mohammad Khatami as president in 1997, reformers relied heavily on the media as a means of stimulating public discourse, ignoring other key building blocks of civil society. The leading opposition paper, *Jameah*, appealed to the millions who had voted for Khatami and reform and led to the mushrooming of other such papers, but their rise threatened the clerical establishment. In response, the clerics simply shut them down, demonstrating how an almost exclusively media-focused strategy is insufficient in the absence of grassroots networks and strong political parties (Abdo, 2003).

Influence of the (Formerly) Exile and Ethnic Media

Pluralistic media often develop faster in countries with a tradition of *samizdat* or alternative media, in part because these media challenge authoritarian ways of approaching information and disagreements. The existence of exile media differentiates Burma from many other countries, because exiled journalists had more than two decades to attend trainings, rub shoulders with foreign journalists, and become familiar with global journalistic standards—opportunities rarely available for journalists inside. One of the few full-time journalism trainers in the country during the early transition period, Ye Naing Moe, believes that this is why the formerly exile media's coverage of Burma's sectarian violence is better balanced than other Burmese media (personal communication, July 26, 2013).

Networks play an important role in spreading ideas, and those at the boundaries of a group tend to act as a bridge between in-group and out-group communication, thereby enabling social change (Voltmer, 2013). While the formerly exile media help to bridge the newly returned exile and internal communities, ethnic media play a vital role in bridging the country's ethnic divide. Thus far, the disparities between the mainstream exile and ethnic media remain consistent as these groups move inside, although the country's history of ethnic conflict reinforces why scholars and policy makers must also include the existence and health of ethnic media organizations in their support for and assessment of the overall media landscape in Myanmar. It remains to be seen how ethnic issues and ethnic media will be incorporated into the changing media landscape. One group working to improve the profile and reach of ethnic media is the consortium of 12 ethnic media groups, Burma News International, established in Thailand in 2003 and now based in Yangon (Brooten, 2013a). Former secretary of Burma News International, Khin Maung Shwe, finds that the writing of stringers for Yangon-based media "is not really focused on the ethnic perspective . . . [whereas] the ethnic media understand their people" (personal communication, July 21, 2013). Yet regional and ethnic media's importance for local communities, for the diversification of media, and for informing national political debates is largely ignored. As Khin Maung Shwe asks, "Where do the natural resources come from? On the self-determination and political issues, who rules? The rural areas . . . everything is happening there. But the news does not come out. It is nonsense" (personal communication, July 21, 2013).

Diversity Versus Urban-centric Media

Media diversity, although vital, is both geographically and ethnically challenging. Ghana's transition, for example, reinforced the concentration of media in urban areas, making it difficult for rural people to express their concerns and resulting in an overemphasis on the concerns of socioeconomic elites, the inability to raise independent funding, and thus dependence on political patrons (Arthur, 2010). Critics and regional journalists refer to the Manila-centric nature of the Philippine media as "Imperial Manila," a phenomenon that has arguably exacerbated the Muslim insurgency in the south. There is a strong need in multicultural states with a history of ethnic conflict, especially during periods of transition, for independent media in local languages to bring both literate and illiterate rural peoples into the political discussion (Arthur, 2010). This is definitely the case in Myanmar.

Much of what transpires in rural areas goes unnoticed by Myanmar and international media. Although visitors to Yangon no longer see the armed guards and barbed-wire barricades that surrounded government buildings prior to the capital's move to Naypidaw in 2005 or experience the culture of fear and surveillance, this is still apparent in many smaller towns and rural areas, especially in areas hosting mega-development projects. While a few fledging regional and ethnic media are doing important work, the majority of Myanmar media and media development assistance is focused on Yangon and Mandalay, and people in rural areas have little access to national media. Even when they do, the stringers working for Yangon-based media usually cannot capture the complexities of local stories the way a local paper can, regional journalists argue, in part because they rely on official sources and do not adequately address the concerns of common people. Ethnic and regional journalists express frustrations about how Yangon-based media pay attention to their areas or issues only if there are big stories such as cease-fire negotiations, sectarian violence, or meetings between leaders. As *Tanintharyi Weekly* editor Myo Aung explains, desk editors in Yangon do not know the area and therefore cannot guide the (largely untrained) local journalists very well (personal communication, July 18, 2013).

Political Economy and the Media

A significant concern in any transition is the military's ties to the economy, often through military-connected businesspeople or cronies. In Indonesia, the military's dense ties to business threatened the consolidation of democracy by preventing the government from demanding accountability and needed reforms (Abdulbaki, 2008), until a decree in 2010 ordered military businesses to be taken over by the state (Mietzner, 2011). In Taiwan, government control over broadcasting was maintained in large part due to the government's role in the enormous business empires that privatized media, despite large financial losses (Milton, 2001). In Burma, the junta began privatizing state-owned businesses in anticipation of the 2010 elections by passing their control into the hands of senior generals and their cronies (Mietzner, 2011).

The centralization of power that characterizes authoritarian rule is often seen later in the development of a few strong media conglomerates with intimate relations with the military and political elite (Voltmer, 2013)—a pattern Myanmar is following. The popular *7 Day Journal*, for example, is owned by the son of former foreign minister Win Aung; *The Messenger Journal* is owned by the son of the chair of the powerful Union Election Commission; and the daughter of ex-lieutenant general Khin Maung Than owns the *Hot News Journal* (Ko Htwe & Williams, 2014). MRTV4 is a joint venture between the Ministry of Information and the privately owned Forever Group, whose chief executive officer, Win Maw, is reportedly close to the former minister of information, Kyaw San. SkyNet is a direct-to-home satellite service owned by Shwe Than Lwin Company, whose chairman, Kyaw Win, is reportedly close to the president and has strong ties to the military. Burmese tycoon Tay Za, whose father was a lieutenant colonel and worked for the Ministry of Industry, is a powerful owner in the telecommunications industry. The country's Internet infrastructure has largely been controlled by Redlink, which is owned by the son of Thura Shwe Mann, a former junta member and, until a recent shakeup, speaker of the lower house of parliament. Myanmar's current media landscape is characterized by "big media ownership concentrated among a small coterie of people from the former regime or those closely connected to it" (Ko Htwe & Williams, 2014, para. 10).

Many of these companies exemplify the worrying global trend of conglomeration, wherein powerful business interests or families control both media and nonmedia holdings, often using their media to promote their other interests and creating significant conflicts of interest generally invisible to consumers and audiences. This is a worldwide phenomenon, true for countries in transition as well as wealthy nations with ostensibly free media systems. Examples include U.S. conglomerates with connections to arms manufacturing, as well as media and retired military officials who become media "analysts" with undisclosed ties to defense contractors and weapons manufacturers benefiting financially from war (Fang, 2014). This severely limits people's understanding of what is being done in their names and why. In Myanmar, many conglomerates already own media. Shwe Than Lwin Company, in addition to its flagship SkyNet, also has interests in mining, construction, agriculture, cigarettes, soft drinks, and beer. The huge conglomerate Serge Pun & Associates, formerly a major shareholder of *Mizzima*, includes some 40 business enterprises with wide-ranging interests in financial services, manufacturing, technology, construction, real estate, the automotive industry, and health care. Tay Za's Htoo Group is one of the country's biggest conglomerates, with interests in telecommunications as well as aviation, hotels, banking, heavy machinery, agriculture, timber, gems, and lucrative import licenses.

Another key concern in any transition is balancing commercial interests with media's public-service responsibility. For many countries in Eastern Europe, rapid changes led to a hypercommercialized environment that does not meet people's information needs and lacks a commitment to public-service media. Chalaby (1998) finds two dimensions of the public sphere were particularly important in the East European countries in transition: the notion of empowerment and the development of a rational discourse, the need for which is "acute" during a period of change (p. 74). Commercial media practices can be detrimental to both through "depoliticization, emotionalism and sensationalism within the popular press and the information gap the market creates between social classes" (Chalaby, 1998, p. 81). Although commercial media target those niche markets and interest groups with expendable income, they have little incentive to present the views or concerns of impoverished minorities. Public-service media have such a mandate.

This is especially important, because it is becoming increasingly difficult to operate in Myanmar's national media market without a big business partner. Senior editor and MPC member U Thiha Saw described his experience running the first independent English language daily in the country in 50 years, *Myanmar Freedom*. The initial plan was to secure enough funding for at least a year, and after that reach a point of sustainability. "But the landscape changed a lot in the first year; many big companies have come in," he explained. The environment became "much more complicated and much more like a big money game," so he suspended the publication to talk with potential investors (personal communication, July 6, 2014). When we spoke, *Myanmar Freedom* was about to become part of Myanmar Consolidated Media Company, owned by U Thein Htun, with interests in soft drinks and banking, and publisher of the *Myanmar Times* Burmese and English weeklies. "It's a big deal for us," U Thiha Saw told me, "but for this rich guy, it's a . . . nothing. . . . So it's sort of like a takeover" (personal communication July 6, 2014).

Some consider economics and ownership the key issues to address in order to diversity and democratize media. They argue that the different cases of regime change during the last 30 years have one thing in common: They all experienced "(re) integration into the world market and, concomitantly,

increasing marketization of the economies themselves" (Sparks, 2010, p. 12). Price (2009) questions whether the efforts of media reformers in individual countries during the decade of post-Soviet transition in Central and Eastern Europe were as influential or significant as pressures by foreign investors for legal frameworks supporting their investments. Sparks (2010) notes that, despite vast differences between China and South Africa, in both, "market entry has often involved very close links between media owners and politicians, particularly in broadcasting" (p. 13). This is an issue to remain vigilant about, since the smaller, independent media in Myanmar are already having a hard time staying afloat.

Moving Forward, Widening the Lens

It is useful to conceptualize media as agents of stability, restraint, change, or all three. As agents of stability for the militarized status quo, Burmese media engage in several behaviors, such as self-censorship, or enemy-imaging, promoting hate speech that justifies continued military involvement. As agents of restraint, media call for transparency and hold government accountable. As agents of change, Myanmar media push the envelope in various ways, raising normally off-limits topics, urging people to speak out and officials to share information, and at times openly protesting problematic laws and policies. Yet some of the biggest challenges to diverse and accessible media in Myanmar are rapid commercialization, concentration of ownership, and the conflicts of interest that arise when media belong to large, multisector business conglomerates with ties to the military and elites. Such relationships constrain media agency and diversity, both geographic and ethnic, despite government promises for diverse and independent media.

The debates around media development reveal the different visions of media held by various stakeholders. Journalists are pushing for freedom to report freely in an environment of security and transparency. The government, through the Ministry of Information, envisions itself as a benign paternal figure, enlisting UNESCO and other foreign experts in the process of transforming its state-run media into public-service media, and guiding journalists in a process of disciplined democracy. And the military remains wary of media freedom, working to curtail content as it sees fit to protect national security.

Although analyzing the behaviors of the state is important, a sole focus on the actions of the state and its officers severely limits our understanding of the new forms that resistance takes as countries open up. Scholars and policy makers must avoid perspectives that marginalize (or unnecessarily glorify, for that matter) nongovernmental sectors, especially civil society organizations and other grassroots groups, including media, as agents of change. Widening our lens to identify the patterns of resistance that emerge in the transition period can help pinpoint opportunities to nurture and protect grassroots initiatives and support democratic change. This means seeking the opinions of more than the normal cadre of leaders and politicians in the parliament, the Ministry of Information, and even the Myanmar Press Council, and moving outside the Yangon/Mandalay bubble to understand the country's complex media landscape. We have also seen from other countries that media should be understood as a component of a larger civil society sector, and that to preserve and promote diversity, media must be conceptualized as public-service rather than solely commercial ventures.

Indonesia's example demonstrates that just because a transition is top-down does not negate the bottom-up pressures for change, and that democratic development can occur, especially if the influence of the military in politics and the economy also decreases over time. This is an obstacle in Myanmar's case, at least in the immediate future. But there already exists an active and forward-looking crew of reformers—including journalists—who are buoyed and emboldened by recent changes. Those journalists working in the field, especially ethnic minority journalists, need to have a stronger voice in the decision-making processes regarding media rather than remaining merely recipients of outside experts' advice. Incorporating the views of these reformers and committing to a diversified media landscape that promotes the communication rights of marginalized groups will go a long way toward promoting peace and democratic change.

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