Pictured: Yangon residents eagerly consume the latest news from a range of newspapers one week after the National League for Democracy wins the 2015 elections.

Pictured: Journalists who bravely choose to stay and work in Myanmar at immense personal risk report from home in 2022.

Introduction to the Special Issue on Journalism: The Inside Scoop After the Coup

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Abstract

This article introduces the special issue by explaining the workshop that inspired it and the reasons for its existence. The issue features seven original articles across a broad array of genres, from personal memoir to media studies. The articles include, among other things, conceptualization of the labor of professional journalists after the 2021 coup, the interactions between foreign trainers and Burmese journalists before the 2021 coup, and what it is like surviving day by day in Insein prison as a foreign news editor facing trumped up sedition charges. The highest-level impact on the media sector, from the coup and the military's and its proxies' repression of journalists, is the reestablishment of a bifurcated inside/outside-the-country dynamic, with the long-term effects of this still to be seen.

Introduction

In this special issue we hear from Myanmar and foreign journalists and editors, a journalism trainer, freedom of expression activists, scholars of journalism, and media founders about the consequences of the 1 February 2021 military coup on Myanmar's journalism and media industries. This brief article introduces and contextualizes the seven original contributions to this special issue and finishes with some reflections on the future of Myanmar journalism.

This special issue is a product of the Myanmar Media Update workshop held by the Independent Journal of Burmese Scholarship (IJBS) on 29 March 2022 in Chiang Mai, Thailand, supported by the Regional Center for Social Science and Sustainable Development (RCSD), Chiang Mai University, and the Myanmar

Research Center (MRC), Australian National University. At the workshop, 20 participants presented in front of a generous online and in-person audience over a full day of panel discussions, and there were three screenings of short documentary films. The workshop was well attended by scholars, media practitioners, and other stakeholders, notwithstanding the challenges posed by COVID-19 regulations, which saw several attendees directed away from the workshop venue after testing positive on arrival, and security concerns, which limited promotion of the event to the wider public. Not all of the presentations at the workshop made it into this final issue, but some interested parties who could not attend the workshop submitted additional original contributions. In total, five of the seven articles in this issue were outcomes of panels at the workshop.

Hosting a workshop during the COVID-19 pandemic, and just a year after the military coup, had its challenges, but the IJBS Myanmar Media Update successfully served two important purposes. First, it provided a safe space for media practitioners joining remotely from Myanmar, and for those recently arrived in Thailand, to network and share their experiences of and perspectives on the coup and its aftermath. All the Myanmar workshop participants suggested that they had suffered from, at the very least, some form of dislocation and trauma in the year since the coup. In the worst examples, they had lost their livelihoods, homes, friends and colleagues, and were detained, tortured, and even imprisoned, just for doing their job—or for no reason at all.

Second, the workshop provided a focal point for media practitioners to meet and converse with foreign trainers, donors and organizations supporting journalism in Myanmar. The Myanmar military's immense repression of the press following the coup threw the sector into disarray at a time when it was still struggling for financial independence. Media organizations had already been trying to shift their revenue models away from international donor funding and advertisements and towards other models to remain viable in the face of digital disruption and the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic.[1] Almost

[1] For a detailed explanation of one example, see Zirulnick, 2020.

immediately after the coup, most outlets were arbitrarily banned or found themselves unable to continue operating in the increasingly inhospitable environment. After the coup, nearly all media organizations changed their products and services offered, operations, staffing, and methods, significantly affecting costs and revenues. Donor funding became paramount for many organizations' immediate survival, let alone sustainability.

Inside the Special Issue on Journalism

After political changes in the years following the promulgation of the military's 2008 Constitution and the reestablishment of civilian participation in parliamentary politics, the liberalization of the Myanmar media sector increased visibility of the military's crimes and allowed public discussion of important, long-suppressed, and long-obfuscated topics. Sensitive issues like inequality, intercommunal and ethnic conflicts, and land-grabs began to feature frequently on the front pages and broadcasts of returned exile media organizations and rapidly mushrooming new journals and newspapers.[2] Before these changes, decades of military censorship had stifled the right to information and the ability of free media to influence Burmese politics. The new, more permissive reporting environment facilitated the potential institutionalization of democracy and legitimization and entrenchment of civil society,[3] and most of the public could again consume critical news reported from their own cities and regions[4] without needing to constantly read between the lines.[5] Many challenges for journalism remained,[6] but the decade of

[2] Burrett, 2017.
[3] For a discussion of this as a 'hybrid public sphere', see Middleton & Tay Zar Myo Win, 2021.
[4] Plenty of pernicious publishing continued however, if mildly diluted (Atkinson, 2020).
[5] Allott, 1994.
[6] Myanmar Musings, 2017; 2018; 2019; 2020; 2021. For a nuanced and honest account of some of the other challenges of reporting during the decade leading up to the 2021 coup, see Eaint Thiri Thu, 2019.

2011-2021 was for many a more liberal one than what came before.

Myo Thawdar's article, the first in this special issue, takes an uncompromising look at what happened when the Myanmar military launched its 2021 coup in the midst of this changed and changing media environment, where exile media organizations had returned and taken root, a new generation of journalists had never experienced reporting under direct censorship, and media workers could expose injustice in relative safety—though still at the mercy of both the military *and* the incumbent civilian government—in real-time thanks to digital technology. The article provides examples of how in 2021 the military aimed to systematically squeeze the sector into submission through issuing decrees, amending laws, revoking licenses, raiding media offices, and intimidating, torturing and even killing journalists. Based on interviews with 17 media outlets, Myo Thawdar's comprehensive evaluation of the first year after the coup ends with recommendations to the military, as well as to international and other stakeholders, for a return to an environment where local media in Myanmar can again become sustainable.

Her damning, depressing survey of crimes against journalists displays in stark terms exactly what relationship the Myanmar military desires to have with the media, as they fight to control and benefit from the country's territory, people and resources. Not only does Myo Thawdar highlight many individual humiliations and subjugations of media workers by the military, but she also outlines the legal theater being performed by the new State Administration Council (SAC), and the laws and acts it used as excuses for its political prosecutions and outlet closures. This wide-ranging report is valuable for its steady approach to recording what has been the most difficult year for Myanmar journalists in the twenty-first century.

The next article, by media scholars Lisa Brooten and Jane Madlyn McElhone, focuses on young professional journalists and their experiences in the first 18 months after the February 2021 coup. Both authors were deeply involved in editing the 2019 book, *Myanmar Media in Transition: Legacies, Challenges and Change*, which has become the definitive long-form text on the

halting liberalizations and threats affecting the media in the decade preceding the coup.[7] In their article for this issue, Brooten and McElhone draw on discussions with several female Burmese journalists to explore the ways in which professional, independent media workers in Myanmar perform a unique type of creative labor that combines professionalism with revolution, and is entails varying degrees of precarity.

In doing so, the authors draw on comparative work from writers who discuss the experiences of journalists in other conflict-affected areas such as Syria and Afghanistan and draw distinctions in professionalism between the generation of media workers that emerged after the 1988 uprising in Burma and the younger independent media workers of the 2021 Spring Revolution. For Brooten and McElhone, new Myanmar media workers' labor in response to the coup is precarious, embodied work, carried out by members of the communities affected by conflict. This labor vitally contributes to imagining new possibilities for their country as a first step towards building a new nation. Brooten and McElhone argue that examining the embodied experiences of Myanmar media workers and their affective proximity to violence moves understandings beyond the stale notions of distance that dominate most literature on journalism and conflict.

This article is notable for its inclusive methodology—in that it was put together with five female independent media workers sharing a panel at the Myanmar Media Update workshop in 2022—and for its efforts to push forward a new conceptualization of media workers' creative labor and where that labor leads the revolution. It covers the familiar tension between journalism and activism with empathy and deep understanding of the complex context in Myanmar. The authors' enthusiasm for the need for "contextual objectivity" makes it important reading for all scholars of media work in conflict environments, and for scholars of Burmese labor.

The third article in this special issue similarly reminds readers of the difficulties faced by media workers and organizations

[7] Brooten et al., 2019.

since the coup. Kyaw Swar takes direct aim at international donor organizations and questions their disbursement practices, wondering why so many quality media outlets have struggled for financial support following the coup. It is widely known in the media community that Myanmar journalists remaining inside the country have suffered salary cuts of half or more since the coup, with some now receiving no wages at all, and Kyaw Swar's article is firmly on these journalists' side. For those who left Myanmar and were fortunate enough to maintain an income, they still had to travel overland to border areas and/or abroad—expensive and risky undertakings—with little or no support.

Kyaw Swar shares the urgency of Myo Thawdar and includes recommendations for local and international stakeholders to better support independent Myanmar news media going forward. He highlights the importance of technological support and safety and protection concerns, and he encourages more training on reporting news without bias. As a founder of an independent news agency before the coup and a former student leader and researcher, Kyaw Swar's perspective is informed by a well-rounded view of how the media intersects with civil society and can be a force towards achieving federal democracy.

In a similar vein, Hsu Htet's article drills deep into the reasons for and challenges encountered in founding a new media organization inside Myanmar following the coup. The new organization, Lu Nge Khit, is aimed at a youth audience, with podcasts, talkback and other programming, on top of regular news reporting. Hsu Htet outlines the organization's core objectives and explains the founders' determination to counter the military's disinformation and rampant misinformation in Myanmar, having grown up themselves under military rule without the internet or smartphones, when access to information was far more limited and military propaganda omnipresent.[8] While a wide-ranging recent survey claims that "most (Myanmar) netizens do

[8] Though exile media organizations did their best to compete with military and other propaganda and form an alternative public sphere in Myanmar from abroad (Labbe, 2016).

not trust or support military propaganda",[9] the longer that the current incarnation of military rule continues its propaganda and information warfare against the public, the more important alternative outlets targeting younger generations, like Lu Nge Khit, become.

An important contribution made by Hsu Htet, as a media founder struggling to run a newsroom in post-coup Myanmar, is that Facebook's policies, procedures and algorithms are almost as destructive and problematic for freedom of the press and access to information in Myanmar as the military's systematic repression. She notes the importance of Facebook for Burmese media consumers, before and after the coup, and expresses frustration that Lu Nge Khit must rely on Facebook with its vagaries. The problematic engagement, and lack of engagement, by the billion-dollar company (now under its parent company Meta) with Myanmar users and communities continues to be critically explored by media scholars,[10] though this research is usually disregarded by the gargantuan, globally influential company.[11]

Shifting perspectives to that of a Dutch foreigner involved in training, supporting and working with journalists in Myanmar after 2012, Kay Mastenbroek's article adopts a personal tone to describe how Myanmar journalists adapted to new press freedoms in the decade prior to the coup and how Western media trainers both succeeded and failed in influencing the direction of Myanmar journalism. As a media practitioner with a documentary and broadcast media background, he centers his focus on Burmese broadcast journalism, highlighting lack of competition, long isolation from evolving audio-visual norms abroad, top-down management styles and a mismatch with Anglo-Saxon methods of storytelling as significant factors in how broadcast

[9] Ryan & Tran, 2022.

[10] Recent important examples (following much analysis on the role Facebook plays in facilitating intercommunal violence and ethnic cleansing, which constituted the first round of scholarship on Facebook in Myanmar) include Bächtold, 2022; Myat The-Thitsar, 2022; Whitten-Woodring , 2020; Wittekend & Faxon, 2022.

[11] A notable exception being its half-hearted attempts to bar Myanmar military organs and proxies from engaging with the platform (Reed, 2021).

media took root in Myanmar during this time. The article also refers to the negative attitudes towards the media of the National League for Democracy government of 2016-2021 and the National Unity Government of 2021 to the present, noting that while journalism is an important tool for undermining military rule, it is equally critical for maturing democracies, in that that it monitors civilian politicians.

The next article, by a journalist in exile, is an intimate memoir of dislocation and discontent. In it, Shwe Yee Oo tells the story of how she became a journalist at the beginning of Myanmar's period of political liberalization, attending the very trainings that Kay Mastenbroek describes. After working as a journalist, an editor, and in other roles with media support organizations for over a decade, Shwe Yee Oo vigorously resisted the 2021 military coup. She details participating in protests where live gunfire and tear gas were directed at unarmed protesters. After over six months, as the military's repression increased and reporting on protests—let alone protesting—became life-threatening, Shwe Yee Oo made the difficult decision to relocate to a liberated area in Kayin State, where she could report without fear. She writes about living and working for an exile media organization there, remarking on the support provided by the Karen National Union, and local peoples' generosity, but also highlighting the challenges of working in rural and remote areas. In the end, Shwe Yee Oo reluctantly made the difficult decision to cross into Thailand illegally and work from there.

This memoir illustrates the travails of an entire generation of media workers who were pushed to emigrate following the coup, and it is the perfect companion to Myo Thawdar's opening article, which aggregates these many instances of suppression and emigration. In this single story from one media professional, we see the opportunities provided by the policies adopted under hybrid civilian-military rule from 2010 onwards, how one career in the media was facilitated and built up around them, and then how it came crashing down following the military's illegal coup in 2021. Shwe Yee Oo is resolute in her anti-coup resistance and calls on readers to never negotiate with the military, to be united in the people's revolution, and to prepare

for the nation-building challenges that will arise when the military inevitably falls.

The final article rounding out the special issue is another journalist memoir, but this time from someone who attempted to leave the country through legal and formal means, departing a flight from Yangon airport, rather than informally crossing the border overland. Danny Fenster, previously an employee of Myanmar Now and in 2021 an editor with Frontier Myanmar, writes about his experiences in Insein prison, where he was locked up for 176 days. Danny was detained in May 2021 just moments before his flight home to the United States departed and was freed only after being sentenced in a sham trial to 11 years' hard labor for sedition and unlawful association.[12]

Danny's memoir follows a stream of consciousness approach, taking in the material elements of the ward in which he was imprisoned along with the quirks of his fellow inmates, rendered in abundant prose and with an eye for detail. Danny documents his struggles with meditation and language and draws attention to the few forms of leisure in the prison, in what is a rare description of prison life in contemporary Myanmar from the perspective of a foreigner. In this way it offers rich opportunities for comparison with the many Burmese prison memoirs. It also raises questions about the relative privilege of white, non-Burmese media practitioners in Myanmar.

All the articles in this special issue are important steps towards better understanding the changes to and challenges for Myanmar journalism since the 2021 coup. With that said, this volume has some deficiencies. While the special issue encompasses perspectives from diverse gender and national backgrounds, there is a lack of focus on and voices from the important ethnic media sector, which has actively opposed the Myanmar military for decades. Further, many of the articles display a general hesitance to engage critically with dissenting voices within the revolution. This is explained, at least in part, by a widespread belief in the importance of unity against military rule, and such reticence is not unique to this volume.

[12] Myanmar Musings, 2022.

There are few encouraging signs that political reform or a lighter touch from the Myanmar military, let alone defeat through armed conflict, will occur soon. Exhausted professional and citizen journalists within the country still face huge security and logistical challenges when reporting. Challenges taking their toll on these people include constant risk of detention; torture and imprisonment; lack of resources and public trust; and difficulties working with colleagues abroad. Outside the country, exile media organizations have rebuilt and reoriented themselves and helped to form vibrant exile media communities in cities like Chiang Mai and Mae Sot, Thailand, with media-focused events, coworking spaces and even teashops. There, older generations of media workers and revolutionaries work alongside colleagues 30 years their junior, not without tension at times, but creating synergies and reenergizing ageing exile media organizations that began in the wake of the 1988 uprising. This bifurcated inside/outside dynamic appears to be becoming entrenched, contingent as it is on (lack of) political change inside Myanmar.

We hope readers find this special issue valuable, even if it fails to deliver strictly 'good news'. We would like to thank once again all the attendees at the original Myanmar Media Update workshop in 2022, the article contributors, and the RCSD in Chiang Mai and the MRC in Canberra for their enthusiastic support of IJBS and freedom of the press in Myanmar.

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