

Pictured: Journalists work from their new shelter in Kayin State, 2021, after fleeing Yangon.



How Independent News Media Struggles to Survive

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Abstract

Independent media in Myanmar benefited from ten years of relative press freedom until the 2021 military coup. After the coup, these media agencies did their best to report on protest movements as oppression quickly increased, with the Myanmar military targeting, detaining, torturing and killing journalists. Many media agencies and workers have now left the country or moved to other areas of Myanmar free from military control in order to continue operating. This article discusses some of the difficulties independent news media now encounter in reporting, including how international support for these media organizations is insufficient to mitigate the huge safety and security challenges journalists face in Myanmar and abroad. It concludes with a list of recommendations for international media support organizations.

Introduction

After the 1 February 2021 military coup, people's interest in independent news media increased, as they were eager to seek out the truth about what was happening. At the same time, the military sought to oppress independent news media agencies in earnest, using several methods. In the first month after the coup, most journalists who were detained by authorities—while simply trying to report the news—were released within 24 hours of their detention. But in March 2021, the military began pressing charges against the journalists they detained. On 5 March 2021, the military raided the office of the Myanmar Now media organization and revoked its license to publish, along with the licenses of Mizzima, 7 Day, the Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB), and Khit Thit Media. At the time of writing, nearly two

years after the 2021 coup, the total number of media organization licenses the military has arbitrarily revoked sits at 12.

The military has detained no less than 115 journalists throughout the country, and approximately 40 of them remain imprisoned. Since 2021, the military has killed no fewer than four journalists and photographers. Myanmar's ranking in the Press Freedom Index has fallen three years in a row and now stands at 176th place among 180 countries. The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) has announced that Myanmar is now the second-worst country in the world by its metrics, with the military having detained and imprisoned so many journalists throughout 2021 and 2022. A small number of journalists have been released from prison after serving their sentences. The military offered to release about 6,000 prisoners throughout the country on the 17 October 2022 as an amnesty in commemoration of National Victory Day, but there were only a few journalists among those released.

In the early days of the coup, journalists throughout Myanmar were able to report at protests while wearing press helmets. However, the security situation has deteriorated so much that currently it is impossible for a journalist to even disclose their job to another person. Most journalists now work 'underground' due to their profession becoming a basis for the military and its supporters to detain or kill them. Most news media agencies have by now either moved to territories controlled by ethnic armed organizations, out of control of the Myanmar military, or have relocated to neighboring countries.

Difficulties Reporting Authentic News

It is no secret that independent news media agencies face overwhelming challenges reporting news following the coup, such as obtaining and verifying information, financial and technological difficulties in running the news agencies, and challenges related to journalists' security and protection. Most news agencies are now completely unable to gather news in-person on the ground, and they mostly rely on citizen journalists (CJs) to gather news

and information, which is difficult to authenticate and verify. News agencies now compete with each other to break news online using information, photos, and videos sent in by audience informants and agency CJs.

CJs have in many cases replaced conventional journalists on the ground, leading to many news agencies that stand with the people struggling to abide by primary journalistic principles such as impartiality. While some CJs want to systematically study and pursue journalism as a career, many see their work as revolutionary in spirit, aiming to expose and report on the atrocities committed by the military as they occur; access to such information has become a necessity in the revolution since the coup. CJs who live on the ground in Myanmar are provided with only short training courses but are heavily relied upon to gather information. The quality of their reporting is a concern, and it is questionable whether it is possible to report without bias in such extreme circumstances. Because CJs are risking their lives and facing security risks in gathering news as a part of the revolution, it is difficult to entirely adhere to the ideal that ‘journalists cannot be activists’.

That challenge becomes a barrier in revealing the entire truth, as mentioned above. Some news agencies have declared themselves as revolution-news agencies, and they report news swiftly, often with questionable verification processes. Most news agencies turn a blind eye to human rights violations by revolutionary forces, the killing of civilians by People’s Defense Forces based on false information, and war crimes committed by armed groups opposing the Myanmar military. It is possible that agencies do not report these types of events because, although they are true, the public could criticize them and turn against them for it. While some busy news agencies face this kind of difficulty, there are other outlets that struggle to operate at all.

The Reality of International Support of the News Media

Since the coup, news media agencies have had absolutely no income from advertisements, and therefore have had to rely completely on funding and support from other sources, such as international organizations. Myanmar news agencies had to undergo emergency relocations to the Thailand–Myanmar border and China–Myanmar border areas, which funding from the international community was instrumental in supporting. However, international funding for news agencies is affected by gaps in donor organizations' systems and methods of selection. Some news media outlets do not receive any funding at all, or they receive only a small sum of money, for their work trying to report authentic, unbiased news.

There is an abundance of funds for major news agencies such as DVB, Mizzima, Myanmar Now, Irrawaddy and Frontier Myanmar; international donor organizations also prioritize select organizations such as Burma News International (BNI), an umbrella organization for local news agencies. The above media agencies have the luxury to choose which organizations they will be funded by and did not seem to have significant financial problems following the coup, even when transitioning their base of operations abroad to a location outside of Myanmar.

On the other hand, there are numerous news agencies which have been reporting accurate and authentic news since the coup, and gaining public trust, although there is still a huge gap in audience numbers and organizational size when compared to major news agencies. These outlets include a lot of local news agencies which are not a part of BNI, as well as others that receive very little funding from the international community and are struggling as the days pass. These agencies covering news and reporting accurately in real-time receive no support, raising questions about donor organizations' selection processes. The systems and selection criteria used by international donor and fund management organizations to choose media

recipients of financial support are not transparent. There have been accusations against these organizations about the selection processes involved. Some claim that only those agencies with close relationships to them are selected; as the proverb says, *“Only when you know the person, can you see that they are just”*.

It is difficult for organizations to refute such accusations with blanket statements or claims that they are unfounded.

It is not clear which criteria are used by donor organizations when selecting which outlets to provide financial support to. Is it audience reach, news quality, type of content, project management skills, donor compliance capacity, or other standards? On top of contending with these existential funding issues, news agencies also face risks every day simply trying to report the news in any way they can.

Safety and Security Challenges of News Media

When the military initiated its brutal oppression of the media, most agencies' staff and offices had to move to the Thailand–Myanmar and China–Myanmar borders for safety and security reasons. Those who fled to the Thailand–Myanmar border then had to move again, this time into Thailand, due to the intense advancement of the military. In the process of doing so, some news agencies received timely funding, but there were many journalists who did not receive funding early enough, leading them to take risks and live in unsafe circumstances. They faced problems such as not understanding the laws in Thailand, language difficulties, inadequate temporary accommodation, and the financial demands associated with arriving in Thailand illegally.

At the time of writing, some active news agencies who report in accordance with quality standards are still struggling to pay their staff an adequate salary. Some still face difficulties in finding accommodation and covering the costs of official residency cards or visas for staff members. Although this article cannot exhaustively list how many news agencies are in this

position, the abovementioned difficulties are real challenges faced by many.

The news agencies that relocated to the China–Myanmar border faced different kinds of challenges. Some were restricted from reporting about the organization controlling the territory they lived in for security reasons, and some were even threatened. Journalists experienced military artillery attacks and air strikes in person, and some journalists lost their lives in these indiscriminate attacks.

Journalists still working underground in-country are at constant risk of being detained by the military, and they lack adequate safety and security training and technological support. There are few news agencies able to provide sufficient protection for their journalists. For example, only a few of the many journalists arrested and charged by the military were lucky enough to receive lawyers, salaries or stipends, or have their visitation costs covered, during their imprisonment, let alone other support. Insufficient accommodation and safehouses for targeted journalists, lack of equipment and training on how to reduce the risk of arrest when recording videos and photos, and lack of protection mechanisms in place for journalist arrests are some of the security difficulties Myanmar journalists experience on a daily basis as they struggle to report in high-risk situations.

Policy Recommendations for Supporting Independent News Media

Based on the realities described above, the following is a list of policy recommendations for local and international stakeholders:

- Prioritize capacity building training on newsroom management during crisis periods.
- Encourage putting CJ protection mechanisms in place in every news agency as CJs are crucial and heavily relied upon at this time.

- Ensure news media actually practice their safety and security policies in order to receive funding.
- Provide technology support to journalists in areas where internet is not available so that they are able to send information safely and securely.
- Allocate a percentage of the funding provided to each news agency to safety and protection concerns.
- Monitor the use of funds provided to news agencies and prioritize transparency.
- Assist news agencies and journalists who meet the requirements for obtaining visas, residency cards, healthcare, and basic humanitarian support; these are necessities when based abroad or in border areas.
- Provide more financial support to the local news agencies that are trusted by the public.
- Encourage news agencies based in border areas where ethnic armed groups have control to report news more independently.

Conclusion

Myanmar recently enjoyed the taste of democracy. For the decade leading up to the 2021 coup, people had the opportunity to access unbiased information reported by independent news agencies in real-time. After the coup, there was a decline in every sector of the country, including news media. Independent and unbiased news agencies are doing everything in their power to survive under a military dictatorship that oppresses them. No matter what kind of difficulties the news media sector faces, it continues to be vital in highlighting the difficult lives of people in Myanmar and plays a crucial role in building federal democracy.

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