The Impact of
the Internet on Myanmar

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In the present paper, I explore how the Internet has affected the flow of information between in and outside Myanmar (Burma). I show that there is a strong difference between the way information was presented before and after the introduction of the World Wide Web.

Within the last century, the country has been marked by political instability (Eliot, 1997; Freedom House, 2000). Particularly since its separation from British colonial rule in 1948, Burma has witnessed significant political change, violence and unrest. Since the early 1960s, Burma has essentially been an isolated state, with closed borders and a military government. However, the fall of the Berlin wall and the end of the Cold War seem to suggest that isolationism is growing less common worldwide. Importantly, meteoric advances in communications have also paralleled the fall of isolationism.

In my study, I examine two political events in Myanmar connected to student uprisings, in the hope of documenting how the Internet - as an easily researched symbol of modern communications - may be affecting the political strategies of one of the last isolated states.
Introduction

Myanmar today

Myanmar is in South East Asia and is surrounded by Bangladesh, India, China and Thailand. Prior to 1989, it was known to most of the western world as "Burma". The country covers a surface of $676,550 \text{ km}^2$. Its capital is Yangon (formerly Rangoon). Myanmar exports teak and rice, but remains isolated from the other South East Asian countries, as it faces U.S.-led sanctions for its military government's oppressive politics.

Several sources estimate Myanmar’s population somewhere between 43 and 48 million (Eliot, 1997; UNDP, *Human Development Report*, 1999). Two-thirds are Burman, while the remaining third is divided into five main minority groups, each with its own history, language and culture. The largest ethnic minorities are Shan 11%, Karen 7%, Kachin 6%, Arakanese (Rakhines) 4% and Chin 2%. However, these figures are only approximate, as the last census, that recorded ethnicity, was conducted in 1931 (Eliot, 1997).

Short History of Myanmar (Burma)

Burma achieved independence from Great Britain in 1948, following a brief Japanese occupation during World War II. Between 1948 and 1962, Burma was ruled by multiple regimes, and on the verge of civil war at the hands of rival factions. General Ne Win's military party overthrew the elected government in 1962 and ruled the country during the following 26 years.

On 8 August 1988 (8.8.88), the army opened fire on student-led pro-democracy demonstrations that had started in Yangon and then spread throughout the country, killing approximately 3,000 people. As the new governing body of the country, army leaders General Saw Maung and Brigadier General Khin Nyunt created the "State Law and Order Restoration Council" (SLORC).

In 1990, the opposition "National League of Democracy" (NLD) won 392 of the 485 parliamentary seats in Myanmar’s first free elections in three decades. The SLORC then refused to cede power and jailed hundreds of NLD members.

In 1993, a state-controlled constitutional convention drafted guidelines granting the military 25% of seats in a future parliament and formalizing its leading role in politics.

In 1995, the SLORC temporarily released the NLD leader and Nobel Peace Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi, after six years of house arrest.
In December 1996, authorities crashed student demonstrations by closing universities and detaining hundreds of people. All universities remained closed until summer 2000.

In November 1997, the SLORC reconstituted itself as the "State Peace and Development Council" (SPDC). The junta appeared to be trying to improve its international image, to attract foreign investment and to encourage an end to the U.S.-led sanctions.

According to several reports, the junta intensified its arrests and harassment of NLD members in 1998, after the party called for the parliament elected in 1990 to be convened.

In August and September 1999, authorities reportedly arrested several hundred NLD activists and other dissidents in anticipation of demonstrations on 8.8.99/9.9.99, to commemorate the bloody uprisings of 8.8.88. Inside Myanmar, the protests failed to materialize. Outside the country, Myanmar made headline news, as protesters organized demonstrations in front of several Myanmar embassies (Freedom House, 2000; Cummings, 1997).

**Means of Communications in Myanmar**

Western sources and the official Myanmar government sources disagree about the availability of televisions, fax machines and computers in Myanmar, but agree that all computer technologies are tightly controlled.

According to the United Nations *Human Development Report 1999*, there are four telephone lines and seven televisions for 1,000 people. No figures are available about fax machines and computers. According to [http://www.cnn.com](http://www.cnn.com) (24 April 2000),

"Sales of computers are growing rapidly in Myanmar's otherwise sluggish economy. The 100-member Myanmar Computer Federation estimates that there are more than 50,000 computers in this land of 48 million people [approximately 1 per 960], one of the world's poorest. But networking between those computers and the outside world is still forbidden. A 1996 law imposes a 7- to 15-year jail term for the unauthorized ownership of a modem."

In 1996, an American diplomat was arrested and later died in prison because of illegal use of a fax machine (Eliot, 1997).

**Censorship inside of Myanmar**

According to several human rights reports [1], Burma remains one of the most heavily censored [2] states in the world. The main instrument of censorship is the Printers and Publishers Registration Law of 1962, which was introduced shortly after the military took over. According to this law, all books, magazines,
periodicals, songs and films must be submitted to the Press Scrutiny Board (PSB). Books must be submitted to the PSB before printing and again afterwards to check that no changes have been made. Magazines are required to use the more risky method of submitting copies for censorship only after they have been printed. Under the 1985 Video Law, all videos must be submitted to the Video Censorship Board for pre-publication scrutiny. Working closely with the Military Intelligence Service (MIS), the PSB departments can decide on both the number of copies printed and the content of materials accepted for publication. As a consequence, rejected manuscripts and magazines appear with pages missing or words covered with silver ink. According to David Arnott, Representative of the Burma Peace Foundation, the name of Nelson Mandela has, for example, been removed or inked over in articles on world affairs since he publicly called for the release of his fellow Nobel Peace Prize laureate, Aung San Suu Kyi.

**Increasing Flow and Availability of Information**

Until recently, relatively few people in the western world knew about Myanmar's political situation. The government managed to control the flow of information between in and outside the country by restricting visas, limiting access to certain areas, etc. Seven years ago, news sources available were mainly limited to traditional newspapers, radio and television. However, with globalization and the Internet [3], new ways of communicating develop very rapidly. They change the way people act and interact. The Internet not only gives access to cyberspace, but also enables individuals to express themselves a lot more freely and globally than with traditional media. I call this new dimension "cyber empowerment" [4].

It is in the context of cyber empowerment that I investigate media in and out of Myanmar. Specifically, I seek to explore how the Internet is affecting Burma's isolationism and enhancing political change.

To do so, I analyzed 50 pieces of information [5] related to two major historical events, represented by three symbolic dates: 8 August 1988 (8.8.88), 8 August 1999 (8.8.99) and 9 September 1999 (9.9.99). On the first date, bloody riots started at the Rangoon/Yangon University and then spread throughout the country; the second date marks the 11th anniversary of these riots. The third is the date chosen by the movement of liberation of Burma to commemorate the events of the 1980s and organize new uprisings.

It appears that in the 11 years between 1988 and 1999, the Internet introduced a new dimension. It is being used by many groups to put pressure on a regime that tries very hard to keep its borders controlled and its country protected from foreign influences.
If one looks at the news sources that talk about the 8.8.88 demonstrations, one can observe two main versions about what happened: 1) several thousands of students were killed after organizing peaceful demonstrations (non-Myanmar government sources outside the country); 2) an "unruly mob" caused instability within the country (official Myanmar government version).

The number of deaths greatly differs from one source to another. Since precise statistics are not available, all figures are based on estimates. Furthermore, the Myanmar government often uses the passive tense when describing the action undertaken by the students [6].

Two major points of view are presented in media with respect to 8.8.88: 1) information produced by the government of Myanmar, 2) information published by other sources of information.

In articles about 8.8.99 and 9.9.99, one can observe similar patterns and strategies as the ones used in the articles about 8.8.88. The Myanmar government still quite often uses the passive tense. However, its articles appear to be increasingly rapid and direct replies to some of the accusations stated in pieces of information produced by Western and activist news sources.

It is interesting to note that the authors of many of the analyzed texts use strong words to describe situations and to discredit the opposite party, e.g. "destructive elements", "traitors", "who are maggots that crawl out from under the skin", "an illegitimate regime that has listened to its own propaganda for so long that it is in danger of believing it", etc. The word "propaganda" [7] is used by both the activists and the government to describe opposite action. The use of loaded
terms seems to be one of the strategies used in this type of interaction, in which arguments are presented more at an affective rather than a purely informative level.

**Similarities and differences**

A major difference between the present and the past is the availability of information. Today, it is possible to get access to online newspaper archives without having to travel around the world or having to visit special libraries. Online newspaper archives, which provide retrospective comments about 1988, offer entire archived issues for 1999. These are available for the [Bangkok Post](http://www.bangkokpost.com), [Daily Star of Bangladesh](http://www.dailystarbd.com), [China Daily](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn), [Star of Malaysia](http://www.starmalaysia.com), [www.cnn.com](http://www.cnn.com), [New York Times](http://www.nytimes.com), [BBC World Service](http://www.bbcworldservice.com) and [le Courrier International](http://www.lecourrierinternational.com). The U.S. government provides its [Human Rights report](http://www.state.gov) on the Internet. A summarized version of the [New Light of Myanmar](http://www.newlightofmyanmar.com) can be accessed through the Web site of the Myanmar mission in Geneva. Furthermore, two Myanmar government Web sites, at [http://www.myanmar-information.net/infosheet/1999](http://www.myanmar-information.net/infosheet/1999) and [http://www.myanmar.com](http://www.myanmar.com), provide explicit political answers to some of the Western accusations. And last but not least, many activist Web sites publish information about Myanmar in the cyberspace [8].

![Police and troops on guard outside Suu Kyi's house.](http://www.bbc.com)

**Figure 2: Police and troops on guard outside Suu Kyi's house.**

Source: BBC News Service

The two main differences are on one hand the availability of information, on the other hand their tone and content.

**The Internet: Basis for a Change?**

Is there more that separates 1988 and 1999 than just eleven years? In 1988, the Internet was not a commonly used means of communication. A person interested in Burma could not easily access primary sources of information in 1988, as distances were greater obstacles than in 1999.

When newspapers decide to publish an article rather than another, it might be due to agenda setting. According to Weavers (1987), agenda setting is the way
that media filters and shapes social reality through its selection and presentation
of social events and pushes media to make certain issues more salient than
others. It seems that this is the case for some South East Asian sources of
information, as some publish many articles about Myanmar, whereas others
never mention the military junta.

Since the advent of the Internet, interactions have become very fast. Within less
than 48 hours, press release follows press release. Many major newspapers
around the world follow a news story once it has been distributed by the major
news agencies and provided it fits into the newspaper's agenda. This and the fast
pace of media exchanges make conflictual communication [9] open and direct.

Regardless of their geographic location, Burmese activists living in exile use the
Internet to plead for their cause, coordinating their "cyber actions" on sites like
http://www.freeburma.org and being able, little by little, to put pressure on the
regime. The Internet enables them to coordinate ground actions, such those
done by a Geneva-based foundation called the "Burma Peace Foundation",
providing the International Labor Organization (ILO) [10] with reports obtained
through a world-wide network of cyber contacts, e-mail addresses and hundreds
of Web sites containing specific information linked to human rights issues in
Myanmar.

In each of its issues, the New Light of Myanmar publishes a section titled
"People's desires" [11]. In contrast to the section, Free Burma Coalition uses
titles such as "The Power of the People". The Internet increases self-
empowerment. Hundreds of Web sites distribute information about Burma.
Search engines such as http://www.news.yahoo.com provide relatively easily
accessible information.

Started in 1995 by a Burmese student living in exile, the cyber campaign of the
Free Burma Coalition was launched in Wisconsin. Even though Zar Ni was the
only Burmese within a radius of several hundred kilometers, he managed to
organize a coordinated "Burma Action Day" on 27 October 1995 and to stimulate
the creation of over 100 local activist groups. He and others managed to put
transnational companies under pressure to stop their foreign investment in
Burma.

http://www.freeburma.org publishes two lists, one called "The Investors in Terror:
Companies STILL doing business in Burma" [12] and a second list "Companies
which have pulled out of Burma" [13]. Today, the Coalition conducts one of the
largest Burmese human rights campaigns on the Internet, as a complement to its
more traditional means of activism and public education. A key source of
information is BurmaNet News, an online news service that broadcasts daily
testimonies and updates on the Burmese situation. Another is
http://gopher.igc.apc.org:2998/7REG-BURMA, an e-mail posting system.
According to Mike Jendrzejczyk, Director of the Washington Office of Human
Rights Watch/Asia, “The proliferation of information has put Burma higher on the U.S. policy agenda than it ever would have been otherwise,” (Far Eastern Economic Review, 28 November 1996). In an interview with Democracy News (http://www.ned.org), Zar Ni stressed that it was not some well-planned scheme that had led this campaign towards the Internet. Rather, it was simply the best alternative for Burma activists, allowing them a cost-effective way to spread their message and to respond to the needs of supporters around the globe.

"Cyberspace": a new power?

Activists communicate their thoughts in the public sphere, regardless of their status and may become "super empowered individuals" [14]. The Internet is what Meyrowitz (1985) would classify under digital media, the latter having changed the significance of space, time, and physical barriers as communication variables. There are two main differences between other electronic media and the Internet: 1) With the Internet, everyone with a modem, a computer and a telephone line can be connected and can not just receive but also produce information; 2) The Internet has not only changed the distribution of images, but also of printed documents, such as traditional newspapers. Through this new production, people change social action and interactions.

The extent that cyber power is real and not just another synthetic word in an endless stream of technological terms is evidenced by the fact that it has enhanced some changes. In a short period of time, it has exploded, reshaping the ways people interact, exchange information and keep informed. Its power also has some consequences for the Burmese government: it is increasingly afraid of that which it cannot control. Because of Myanmar's political situation and its restrictions in terms of multimedia, the Burmese opposition has organized itself on the Internet to fight for the country's freedom. Many of the reports available on the World Wide Web play a role in the development of the country's politics.

The Myanmar government now uses computers trying to make sure that activists and other undesired visitors do not obtain visas to enter the country. To address some of the pieces of information available outside of Myanmar, it also has set up several very slow, glitzy Web sites, exclusively available outside the country. However, these measures seem rather ineffective against the increasingly global pressures. In fact, as points out a recently published article in the New York Times, "the government has been unable to halt the damaging effects of cyber-campaigns by groups like the Free Burma Coalition" (New York Times 14 July 2000). This change might be the beginning of what Desmond Tutu, 1984 Nobel Peace Prize Winner predicted: "International pressure can change the situation in Burma. Tough sanctions, not constructive engagement, finally brought the release of Nelson Mandela and the dawn of a new era in my country. This is the language that must be spoken with tyrants - for, sadly, it is the only language they understand."
This pressure happens through collaboration between an external network, which is organized through digital communication and international news agencies fed by the local opposition. In this process, Aung San Suu Kyi plays a major role, as she is one of the very few if not the only local person who can stand up publicly against the government, and not be instantly jailed or killed. Her name is well known enough for her to get headline coverage outside the country. Just last month, she decided to leave her house arrest to visit NLD members a little South of Yangon. It appears that this move was not a spontaneous decision, but rather a well-planned move, which integrates the forces of international media and cyber networks. Suu instantly got headline coverage in all major western newspapers. On 4 September 2000, BBC News Service published an article according to which Kofi Annan himself expressed "his deep concern at the military administration's actions against the Burmese opposition leader and members of her National League for Democracy (NLD)."

Major social change in a country like Burma is a slow process that does not take place from one day to the next, but rather through the progression of a political climate, shaped, pressured and changed through influences that come from in and outside the country.

It would appear that the Burmese government also has realized the potential of the World Wide Web. On 31 August 2000, the International Herald Tribune published an article pointing out the changes in strategy of the Burmese government who, for the first time in history, apparently conducted an e-mail campaign, targeting as many journalists as possible to provide information about Aung San Suu Kyi’s recent problems with the government:

"Turning to the Web with the fervor of a recent convert, the Burmese government has spent the past week sending out almost daily e-mails to just about any journalist who has recently written about the country. Using language that portrays Daw Aung San Suu Kyi’s political standoff as a jolly jaunt into the countryside, the government's e-mail messages have included attached digital images of semi-nude leaders of the National League for Democracy bathing in streams or carrying supplies."

This demonstrates that the Internet triggers international changes, revolutionizing not just the transmission of information but entire government strategies. In this respect, information produced in and outside Burma illustrates an evolution, a global change in how governments and opposition movements adapt to take advantage of the new digital technologies. Other countries have undergone analogous changes: Sri Lanka, for example, has experienced similar movements in its fight against overseas supporters of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, a group waging war for an ethnic Tamil homeland in Northern Sri Lanka (Specker, 2000).
Notes


3. In 1989, Tim Berners-Lee proposed a global hypertext project, to be known as the World Wide Web or the Internet. Based on the earlier "Enquire" work, it was designed to allow people to work together by combining their knowledge in a web of hypertext documents. He wrote the first World Wide Web server, "httpd", and the first client, "WorldWideWeb" a what-you-see-is-what-you-get hypertext browser/editor, which ran in the NeXTStep environment. This work was started in October 1990, and the program "WorldWideWeb" first made available within CERN in December, and on the Internet at large in the summer of 1991.

4. It is sometimes referred to as "virtual democracy" and "cyber democracy". I have chosen "cyber empowerment", because it portrays well the impact the Internet has on each individual.

5. I define pieces of information as material/documents published thanks to sources of information, e.g. a particular newspaper, Web site, activist publication, UN or state report, etc.

6. I used the following four categories to refer to news sources: 1) Official Myanmar government news sources available outside Myanmar; 2) South East Asian perspectives; 3) "Western" perspectives and 4) Activist sources of information.

7. According to Windisch (1991), passive tenses used to describe action weaken the impact of action or even discredit the party who undertakes it.

8. The word propaganda comes from the Latin word propagatus, past participle of propagare, which signifies "to peg down" (set < propago, slip for transplanting < pro-, before +pag-, base of pangere, to fasten) (Webster's New World Dictionary, 1986).

9. Communist movements and later communist based regimes gave the word propaganda a very precise meaning:

10. "to reinforce the awareness of the opposition" (Marx) by multiplying the political revelations (Lenin). Going beyond a simple undermining of the government power in place, the Bolshevik propaganda aimed at offering an easy to understand comprehension of reality. This became even stronger
once the opposition took over the power and the revolutionary leaders used songs, cinema, monuments and theater to increase the people's approval (Christian Baylon, Xavier Mignot, 1999). With Hitler and Mussolini's fascist regimes, the term propaganda was used to describe the promotion of the nation, "insuring its existence and its dignity".

11. See the Bibliography for further details.

12. In the conflictual communication (Windisch, 1991), the author of a text discredits the ideas proposed by the opposite party and shows how his argument is better than the opposition's. The author works with a public of testimonies directly concerned by the problem discussed.


14. This section contains the following principles: 1. Oppose those relying on external elements, acting as stooges, holding negative views; 2. Oppose those trying to jeopardize stability of the State and progress of the nation; 3. Oppose foreign nations interfering in internal affairs of the State; 4. Crush all internal and external destructive elements as the common enemy.

15. Procter & Gamble, Caterpillar, InterDigital, Total, UNOCAL: Rogue Oil Company Undermines US Foreign Policy, ABN Amro (LaSalle Bank, European/American Bank), Northern Telecom, Premier Oil (UK), Mitsubishi, Marubeni, Sony and Fujitsu.


17. Term used by Friedman (1999) to describe the action of individuals acting on the Internet.
Bibliography

Publications

Theories on communication and politics


About Myanmar


**Articles and Texts**


**Newspapers**

- The *New Light of Myanmar*, issue published on 9.8.99, as well as other issues available on the Web at http://www3.itu.int/MISSIONS/Myanmar

**Web Sites**

**Myanmar Government Web sites**

- Myanmar site for the ASEAN, published in English, French, German and Japanese: http://www.myanmar.com

**South East Asian news sources**

- *Bangkok Post*, several articles published about Burma: http://www.bangkokpost.co.th
- *Daily Star of Bangladesh*: http://www.dailystarnews.com

"Western" news sources
Some pro-democracy activist Web sites

- Free Burma: http://www.freeburma.org
- Free Burma Coalition: http://www.freeburmacoalition.org
- Burma Project: http://www.soros.org/burma
- Shweinc: http://www.shweinc.com
- Burma Net: http://www.burmanet.org
- Australian Burma site: http://www.fast.net.au/rfb
- Burmanet News: http://theburmanetnews.editthispage.com
- Actions Birmanie (French): http://www.birmanie.net
- University of North Carolina: http://metalab.unc.edu/freeburma

Official U.S. Web sites

Useful addresses

- ALTSEAN Burma, Alternative ASEAN Network on Burma, c/o Forum-Asia, 109 Suthisarnwinichai Rd, Samsennok Huaykwang, Bangkok 10320, Thailand, phone +662 275 1811, fax +662 693 45 15, e-mail altsean@ksc.th.com.
- Burma Peace Foundation, 85, rue de Montbrillant, 1202 Geneva, Switzerland, phone/fax +41 22 733 20 40, e-mail darnott@iprolink.ch.
- Investor Responsibility Research Center, 1350 Connecticut Ave., NW, Suite 700, Washington, DC 20036-1701, phone +1 202 833 0700, fax +1 202 833 3555
- Suisse-Birmanie, 17, rue des Savoises, 1205 Geneva, Switzerland, phone/fax +41 22 320 51 51.
### Appendix: Important Dates and Keywords

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>Aung San Suu Kyi wins the Nobel Peace Prize.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>National League of Democracy (NLD) wins the elections, but SLORC refuses to give up its power, arguing that NLD does not have any concrete propositions to continue the stability of the country.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>Official liberation date of the NLD leader and Nobel Peace Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi held under house since 1990 given by the government.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.8.88</td>
<td>Symbolic date of the student uprisings in Myanmar in which several thousand people were killed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.8.99</td>
<td>11th anniversary of the above mentioned date.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.9.99</td>
<td>Date chosen by the opposition to organize new uprisings in Myanmar.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ASEAN</td>
<td>Alliance of South East Asian Nations.</td>
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</table>

**Agenda setting**

According to Weavers (1987), agenda setting is the fact that media filters and shapes social reality, through its selection and presentation of social events and pushes media to make certain issues more salient than others.

**Aung San Suu Kyi**


**Burma**

Name used by activists, the NLD and some official western information sources.

**Conflictual communication**

In the conflictual communication, the author of a text discredits the ideas proposed by the opposite party and shows in what his argument is better than the opposition’s one. The author works with a public of testimonies directly concerned by the problem discussed.

**Freedom of press**

Freedom of press is the liberty to print information and opinions without prior government restraint.

**Mass media**

Coulmas (1997) defines mass media as the overall mechanisms for moving information from the few to the
many. Television, newspapers, radio, cinema, posters and the Internet are mass media.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Myanmar</strong></th>
<th>Name used by the country’s government and some official western sources of information.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>New Light of Myanmar</strong></td>
<td>Only official Myanmar newspaper printed in English.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>NLD</strong></td>
<td>National League of Democracy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>World Wide Web</strong></td>
<td>In 1989, Tim Berners-Lee proposed a global hypertext project, to be known as the World Wide Web. This work was started in October 1990, and the program &quot;WorldWideWeb&quot; first made available within CERN in December, and on the Internet at large in the summer of 1991.</td>
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