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# The Janus Face of Social Media in Myanmar

The author is currently studying his Master in Development Studies at the University of Passau. His deeper interest in Myanmar aroused while traveling through the country in 2016.

New technologies always open doors for new activities and that with the greatest socio-political impact in early 21st century are the internet and social media. The Arab Spring in 2011 proved more than any other revolution before its great potential when the social media offered the people an easy way getting connected, organizing protest marches, and supporting movements. Hence, they are associated with a positive image being a 'motor for democratization,' promising freedom of speech. However, what happens if social media is used to promote racism, hatred and evil propaganda instead?

Since the last couple of years, Myanmar is in a transition phase politically as well as socially. While the internet plays a prominent role in this process, especially Facebook has on the one hand opened new possibilities for the Burmese to get informed and advance their opinions in public. On the other hand, many people have learned to distrust the traditional media, which have been censored and manipulated by the military government for decades. This is also why they think "Facebook is an official media and take it for real," as Phyu Phyu Thi, cofounder of the *Myanmar ICT for Development Organization*, states (cf. Einzenberger, 2016).

## "The Buddhist Face of Terror"

At least such a good faith in Facebook posts prepares a breeding ground for protagonists willing to spread misleading information, hate speech and rac-

ist taunts as well. In Myanmar, the most infamous man making use of modern day intermediary channels in this spirit is probably Ashin Wirathu, a radical Buddhist monk based in Masoyein Monastery in Mandalay. Due to his hatred speech and rampant statements, he has gained an international reputation being the "Burmese Bin Laden." In 2013, the *Time Magazine* eventually spent him a counterfeit on a front page, labelled "The Face of Buddhist Terror."

Wirathu spearheads an ultranationalist group called the *969 Movement*, steering campaigns against the country's Rohingya Muslim minority. Their credo is that Muslims want to build an 'Islamic state' in Myanmar, and therefore Buddhists would need to fight them. So it has happened the group handed out campaign stickers featuring the number "969." But while that number originally represents the Buddha's attributes and Buddhist peaceful virtues, here it means something different though: marking Buddhist-owned stores, taxis and houses and other businesses; Buddhists are urged to only buy in 'their own' shops.

In 2003, Wirathu had already been sentenced to twenty-five years in prison for hate speech and causing uproar with violent clashes and death, but then granted amnesty in 2010. Again there were skirmishes between Buddhists and Rohingya in June 2012 in Rakhine state, killing 200 and making over 100,000 people losing their homes (cf. Coclanis, 2013). Nowadays, many still believe that his words would instigate Burmese to violent actions. According to the international NGO *Institute for War and Peace Reporting*, while hate speech and anti-Muslim sentiments on social media in Myanmar have been increased, the social tensions grew likewise.

## The Impact of Social Media

It is no recent phenomenon that propaganda and disinformation are distributed under the appearance of 'freedom of expression' anyway. Yet the social media can do this even faster and more effectively. But how would this work out in Myanmar?

As an example, the sermons and preaches of Wirathu are videotaped and then shared via the internet. One of his most notorious ones starts with the words: "Whatever you do, do it as nationalist!". The statements in the following approve his malicious motivation, instructing the Burmese to boycott Muslims, who are "enemies of the people" – claiming they would steadily increase and become a threat to Buddhism in Myanmar – just ignoring the fact the Muslim minority makes only about four percent in

Buddhist monk  
with cellphone in  
Myanmar  
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Traditional Myanmar moving fast into modern times. Evening impression at Shwedagon Pagoda, Yangon.  
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Anyway, the core problem remains the naïve attitude of many users towards the Janus-faced character of social media – as much in developing countries like Myanmar as in Western countries like Germany. According to the *United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)*, that's a matter of "low media and information literacy rate." – But how to deal with it? It's not enough to only take Facebook and other social media players into responsibility, though it's crucial to know about their amplifying roles.

While now the web consumers are scrolling down the contents and using online apps, they are exposed to masses of information which they scan and evaluate within seconds. Any web browser interaction like viewing sites or answering to posts is tracked by algorithms running in the background. And since we are all web consumers, we must be aware that dependent on our user behavior we are steadily creating personalized contents and filter

bubbles by ourselves on behalf of these algorithms – and that this narrowed down information data are echoed back to us! So frankly speaking, we are probably victims of our own *liking* and *following*. Hence, at the least every one of us needs to use social media more mindfully, check for the news sources – and teach this awareness to others. ■

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Taung Paw Camp in Rakhine State – Burma. Retrieved from <https://www.flickr.com/photos/foreignoffice/8280608775>  
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