

Myanmar's media from an audience perspective

Myanmar audience study 2018



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Executive summary

This publication presents the findings from an audience study carried out by International Media Support (IMS), its partner institution Fojo Media Institute and Enlightened Myanmar Research Foundation (EMRef) in May 2018. The report provides indications of the media habits of the population of Myanmar as well as people's understanding of news and information flows.

The study found that there is a widespread preference towards local media as people feel that these media outlets provide them with information relevant to their local communities and daily lives. Television is a preferred medium for consuming news but social media, and Facebook in particular, is catching up. A culture of sharing news and information ensures that even people without access to Facebook know of the platform and get updates through friends and family.

People's trust in media differs but with many preferring state-owned media to deliver trustworthy and reliable news and information. Some news consumers showcase a natural skepticism towards news and information, but limited access to reliable information makes it difficult for them to verify what they read, see or hear. Despite some people's ability to critically reflect on the information they encounter, the level of media literacy in Myanmar remains low with many finding it difficult to decipher media content and grasp the role and purpose of media and news.

Based on the findings, the report ends with 12 recommendations. Six are directed towards the Myanmar media industry, journalists and other content producers while the remaining six are targeted at media development organizations and learning institutions. IMS-Fojo hopes that these recommendations can serve as inspiration for the continuous development and professionalization of the media in Myanmar.

IMS-Fojo would like to express gratitude towards the men and women who participated in the study. Without their willingness to share their views and media habits, this study could not have been carried out. IMS-Fojo is equally appreciative of EMReF's professional approach and readiness to carry out an audience study in Myanmar without prior experience.

Introduction

Within the last five years, Myanmar's media landscape has undergone significant changes. Prior to 2013, prepublication censorship and the existence of very few independent media made access to reliable information difficult and for the main part people had to rely on state propaganda. Although the internet and mobile technologies had reached the country, few had access. The price of a sim card was up to 300 USD and Myanmar had one of the world's lowest mobile penetrations, just above of North Korea¹. In 2018 the picture has changed dramatically. With the abolition of prepublication censorship, new and better media reforms making it easier for independent media to operate and heavy investments in infrastructure, Myanmar's media landscape is far more diverse, and the population has access to an ever-growing number of media on a variety of platforms.

Today approximately 34 percent of the population has access to the Internet (up from 26 percent in 2017) and are active social media users². Facebook is by far the most popular social media – and for many Facebook is the Internet³. This poses some serious issues in terms of the quality of information people have access to, as well as people's ability to distinguish between reliable information and misinformation. Unfortunately, very little is known about the public's understanding of news and information flows in Myanmar, including their trust in mainstream media versus social media. The conflict in Rakhine has further highlighted the lack of knowledge of people's media habits and their ability to critically reflect on digital content, with large amounts of disinformation and hate speech dominating Facebook feeds and spilling into the mainstream media's narratives⁴.

Thus, in an effort to understand people's media repertoires as well as their level of media literacy, IMS-Fojo decided to carry out an audience study in Myanmar in 2018. It is the hope that the findings from the study may not only inform future media development efforts in Myanmar but may also help improve content production and distribution through better understanding of the audiences the Myanmar media is trying to reach and engage.

In the interest of getting in-depth information and not merely overviews of people's media habits, a qualitative approach was determined to be best suited. Furthermore, experiences from BBC Media Action show that quantitative studies on media habits in Myanmar result in poor results with participants being unwilling or hesitant to provide opinions⁵. In comparison, qualitative studies have proven much better suited in the local context. Thus, it was decided to use a combination of focus groups discussions and in-depth interviews with participants from four different states/regions: Yangon, Mandalay, Rakhine and Kachin. Whereas the in-depth interviews were designed to focus on the interviewee's media/information repertoires, news habits and media literacy level, the focus groups delved into issues of trust and discussed perceptions of media and news.

The data collection for this study was undertaken in May 2018 by a research team from EMReF with guidance and support from IMS-Fojo. A total of 168 participants took part in the study from the regions of Yangon, Mandalay, Rakhine and Kachin.

1 Myanmar Times, "Waiting for the sim card price drop", published on February 11, 2013. www.mmtimes.com/special-features/159-digital-communications/4087-waiting-for-the-sim-card-price-drop.html

2 We Are Social, Digital Yearbook 2018, published January 29, 2018 on www.wearesocial.com/blog/2018/01/global-digital-report-2018

3 New York Times, "A war of words puts Facebook at the center of Myanmar's Rohingya crisis", published on October 27, 2017. www.nytimes.com/2017/10/27/world/asia/myanmar-government-facebook-rohingya.html

4 See for instance the report "Fake news on Facebook fans the flames of hate against the Rohingya in Burma", from the Washington Post, December 8, 2017.

5 BBC Media Action, Strengthening accountability through media in Myanmar – final evaluation, published in June 2017, dataportal.bbcmmediaaction.org/site/assets/uploads/2016/07/Myanmar-Country-Report-2017.pdf

Methodology

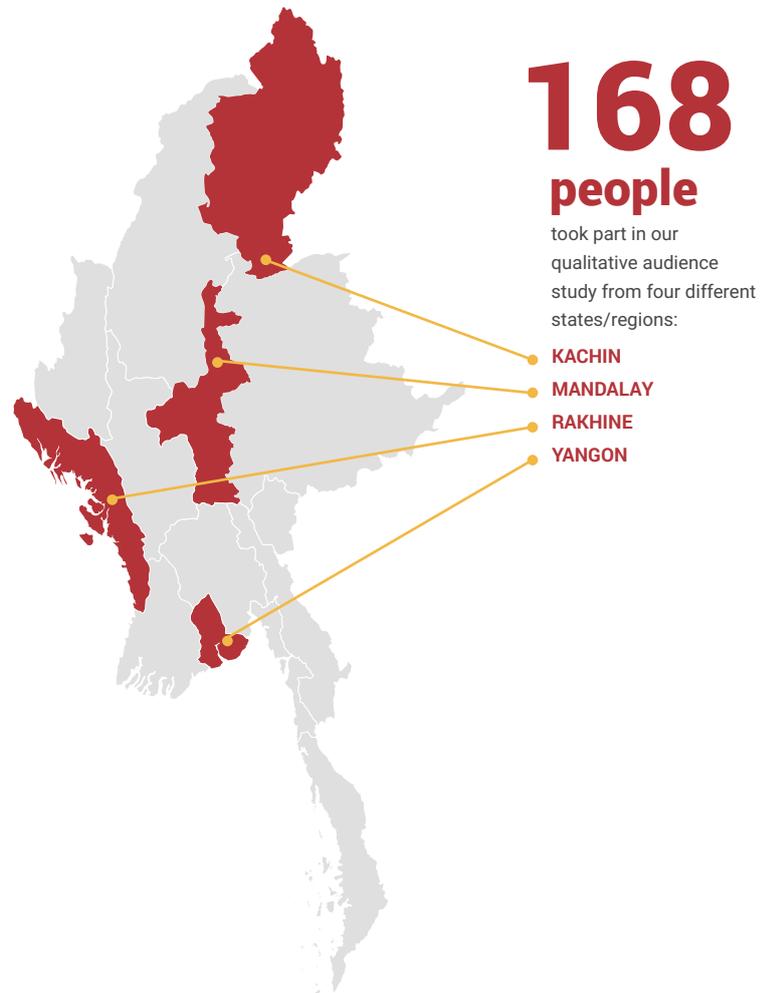
Doing an audience study with a qualitative approach naturally sets some limitations in terms of the number of participants and the representability of the study. It is therefore important to emphasize that the research effort does not claim to provide statistically representative results reflecting the media habits and media literacy levels of the entire Myanmar population. The research is designed to give indicative insights into these topics and generalize on more broad levels.

In qualitative studies, the research participants play an important role. Given that qualitative research typically focuses on fewer cases than quantitative research, cases and/or research participants are commonly selected purposefully. Whereas the logic and power of sampling in quantitative research lies in randomization and representativeness, the logic and power of purposeful sampling “lies in selecting information-rich cases for study in-depth”⁶. Thus, to ensure a high level of generalizability, participants in the research were therefore selected based on a stratified purposive sampling strategy to make sure that they reflected different media habit types (heavy, medium and light as well as social media users versus non-social media users⁷) and that the sample was stratified according to location (urban/rural), gender and age. With such a sampling approach, the research strived to include several different stereotypical media consumers in Myanmar without having a full representative sample. This provided indications of media use and media understandings across different groups in Myanmar and used to identify trends and phenomena among Myanmar media audiences.

As described in the introduction, four states/regions were selected for the research: Yangon, Mandalay, Rakhine and Kachin. Six focus groups and six in-depth interviews took place in each state/region. Of the 24 focus group discussions, 10 were female-only and 10 were male-only. The four remaining were mixed. The gender disaggregated groups ensured participating women were able to voice their opinions without any constraints due

to male presence. As focus group discussions are all about equal participation and debate, it was a natural choice to carry out the research in this way. For the 24 in-depth interviews, the gender distribution was 50/50 with 12 interviews with women and 12 with men.

In each state/region, focus groups and in-depth interviews were evenly distributed according to rural and urban locations as well as being stratified according to gender, age and other demographic parameters. Although it was not possible in all cases, most focus group discussions reflected various levels of diversity.



6 Patton, Michael Q. 1990. *Qualitative Evaluation and Research Methods*. London; New York: Sage Publications.

7 When it comes to media user types, the literature typically distinguishes between light, medium and heavy media users. What constitute a light, medium and heavy media user will depend on context and culture. As very little is known about the news and media habits of people in Myanmar, the study worked with the assumption that light media users rarely seek news and information on their own initiative, medium media users seek out news and information at least once a week and heavy media users seek out news and information on a daily basis or several times a day. The study also distinguished between social media users and non-social media users.

Table 1: Overview of research participants

	Yangon	Mandalay	Rakhine	Kachin	Total
Total number of participants	42	45	45	36	168
Gender distribution	22 men 20 women	25 men 20 women	23 men 22 women	19 men 17 women	89 men 79 women
Age distribution ^a	16-24: 16 25-34: 6 35-44: 5 45-54: 6 Above 55: 9	16-24: 8 25-34: 5 35-44: 12 45-54: 13 Above 55: 7	16-24: 19 25-34: 9 35-44: 8 45-54: 4 Above 55: 3	16-24: 7 25-34: 6 35-44: 8 45-54: 8 Above 55: 7	16-24: 50 25-34: 26 45-44: 33 45-54: 31 Above 55: 26
Ethnicities ^b	Bamar: 41 Other: 1	Bamar: 35 Other: 9	Bamar: 5 Rakhine: 40	Bamar: 1 Kachin: 32 Shan: 1 Other: 2	Bamar: 82 Kachin: 32 Shan: 1 Rakhine: 40 Other: 12

a Two persons (both in Rakhine state) declined from revealing their age.

b One person (from Mandalay) declined from revealing his/her ethnicity.

Data collection

In preparation of the study, different materials and manuals informed by similar studies and past experiences from across the globe were developed. For the focus groups, a moderator guide was developed with instructions for the moderator as well as questions and assignments for the participants. For the in-depth interviews, an interview guide was developed. The guide included instructions for the interviewer as well as questions for the interviewee. All materials were designed in a flexible way to accommodate for different levels of media literacy and media habits. Prior to data collection, the materials were translated into Burmese, the research team was trained in using the guides and a trial of both guides were undertaken.

All participants in the study were required to fill out 1) a background questionnaire with questions on demography and media habits and 2) an informed consent form. In some cases, participants chose to give oral consent instead of signing a consent form. If no consent was given, the participant was excluded from the research. The research team made sure that all participants understood the purposes of the research and informed them of the use of the collected data. All participants have been anonymized throughout this report.

Despite minor obstacles⁸, the data collection was carried out successfully. The research team reported high interests from participants and good participation in most focus groups and in-depth interviews. Focus groups typically lasted 1,5 to 2 hours and in-depth interviews took between 45 minutes to 1 hour. Focus groups and interviews were undertaken in participants' native languages – sometimes with the help of a translator translating into local dialects and ethnic languages.

For more on the methodology, please contact IMS.

⁸ Such as difficulties with getting permissions from local authorities; finding proper venues; and participants having to leave before the focus groups ended.

Findings

“News is really important. For example, everyone needs to know the weather reports and the political changes because it can impact us.”

(26-year-old woman from urban Yangon).

Careful analysis of the in-depth interviews and focus group discussions reveals patterns of media consumption, preferences and trust in Myanmar. This section lays out the findings from the study under six different themes. The themes display the most significant trends and insights that emerged from analysis of the data collected – the background questionnaire, the focus group discussions and the in-depth interviews. To respect the privacy of the research participants, everyone is anonymized in the accounts and will only be presented with gender, age and geographical location.

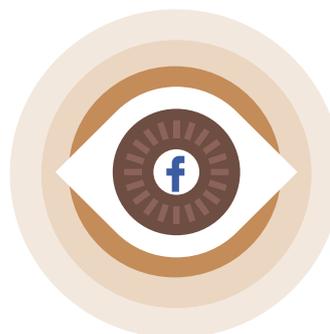


People Have Highest Trust Where Media Have A Local Presence



Sharing Is Caring

When access to reliable news is limited, news become a social engagement.



The Facebook Factor

Facebook is big. Most people get information from Facebook, either directly or second-hand.



Fact Checking Made Difficult

When people have limited access to information, fact checking becomes difficult.

TV triumphs

Television is clearly one of the most popular mediums in Myanmar. More than half of the people who participated in the study watch television every day. Women in particular seem to be favoring television over other mediums with 6 out of 10 watching television every day. The internet and radio come in second and third place with a little over a third using the internet and little below a third of the participants using radio every day. However, there are big variances depending on the age of the user. Whereas the younger participants favor the internet (about 6 out of 10 between the ages of 16 and 34 use the internet everyday), the older generations favor the radio (4 out of 10 above 44 years old listen to radio daily).

“I used to read newspapers and watch television, but I cannot read anymore as I have some problems with my eyes. [...] Radio is the main source to get information or news for me. [...] I ask my friends to confirm the news to see whether the things I have heard on the radio has also been broadcasted on the television. “

_____ (50-year-old woman from rural Mandalay). _____

As in many other countries, the use of newspapers is low compared to other media. Newspapers in Myanmar have reported drops in print circulations over the last couple of years and the findings from the audience study reflect this trend. Less than 2 out of 10 participants stated that they read a printed newspaper every day – and almost half of the participants say that they “rarely” or “never” read printed newspapers. Men, particularly those between the ages of 45 and 55, seem to consume print news to a higher degree than others. But on an overall level, printed newspapers are not a heavily consumed medium.

“I prefer to watch news on television because I have to give time to read a printed newspaper. I can watch news on television and work at the same time. So, I prefer to watch news on television.”

_____ (41-year-old man from urban Kachin). _____

Interestingly, when looking at preferred news sources, the image somewhat changes. People’s media repertoires slightly change when it comes to seeking out news and information. While television continues to be an all-time favorite, radio comes in a clear second place followed by social media (third place), the internet (fourth place), friends and relatives (fifth place), printed newspapers (sixth place) and online newspapers (seventh place). However, for many participants other past times are often preferred to news watching, as a 28-year-old woman from rural Rakhine explains:

“I can only watch TV at 7 pm when the power [electricity] is available, but mostly we watch movies at that time from DVD too. So, the news watching time is not that much.”

Issues with access

Whether or not people have access to the necessary technologies and distribution channels has, perhaps not surprisingly, a big influence on people's media habits. Television relies on tv-sets and electricity; radio relies on transmitters and electricity; online and social media rely on either computer and internet access or smartphone and 3G connections; and, printed newspapers rely on sales points and physical roads for distribution. People living in more remote areas have a much more limited palette of choices when it comes to available media. Even if they wanted to read a printed newspaper more frequently or use social media it might not be an option.

"We don't buy and read newspapers in this village. We get the news only from radio and television."
(29-years-old woman from rural Rakhine).

People therefore end up using the media that they have access to – as well as media that they know. With the media landscape having evolved so rapidly, people may not be aware of the media they actually have access to. This finding was highlighted by an exercise from the focus group discussions where participants were asked to sort cards with the names and logos of a wide variety of available media in Myanmar printed on them. The cards were to be sorted based on different questions such as preferences and trust.

Observing the exercise, it was evident that the recognition of the available media in Myanmar is low. Particularly in rural areas, people have limited knowledge of the country's media landscape and only knew a handful of the media they were presented with – despite some of them being quite local in scope and thereby within reach of the participants. In some focus groups, participants even ended up thanking the research team for introducing them to so many new media that they had never heard of.

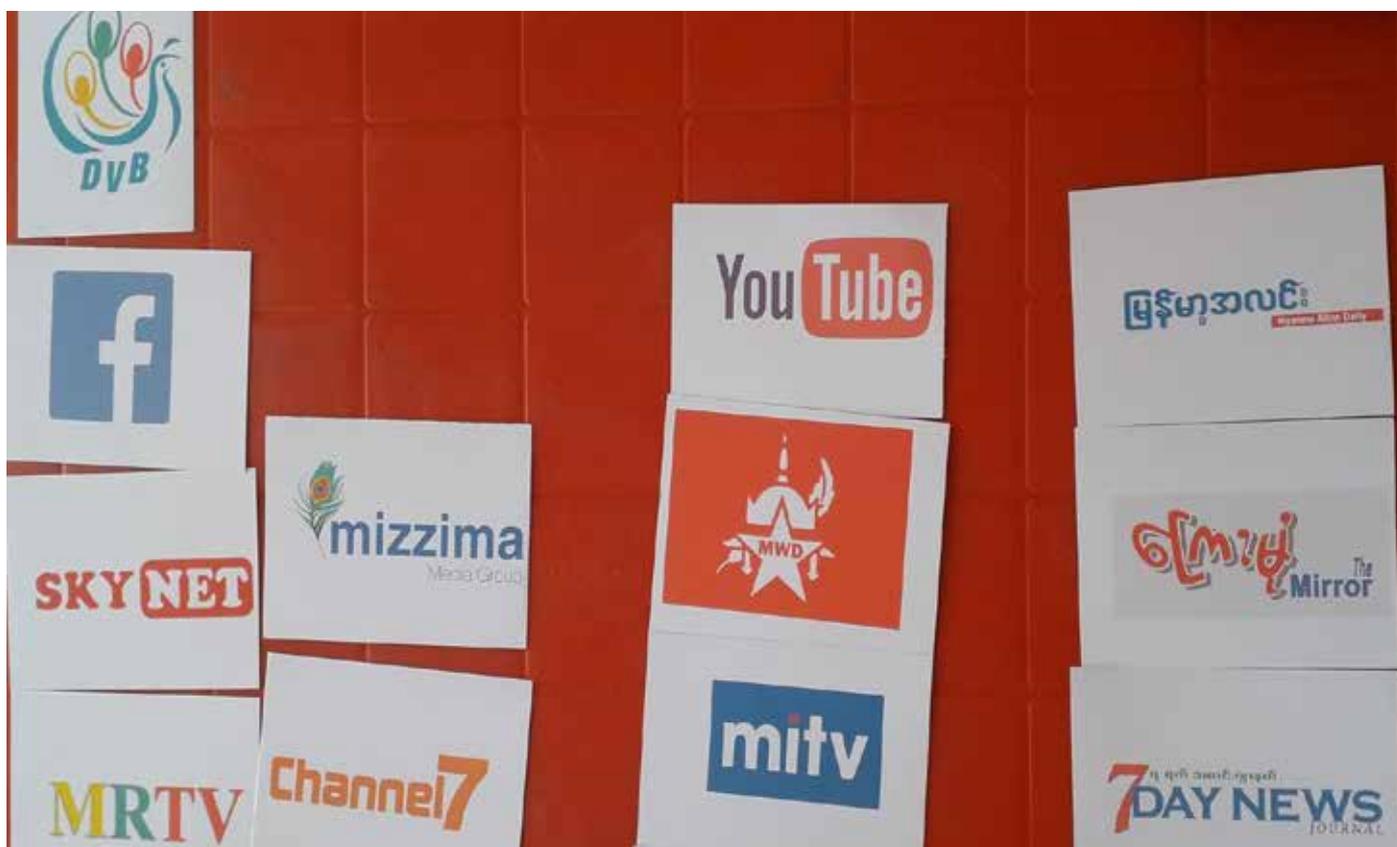


Image 1: Cards presenting different newspapers were sorted according to trust and relevance by all focus group discussions. This is from a female-only focus group in rural Rakhine. Left to right indicate relevance of media.

Sharing is caring

“Those who go to the town also share the news.”

(18-year-old woman from rural Rakhine).

With limited access to information, Myanmar people have become accustomed to sharing news and information with each other. This culture of sharing is best illustrated with an account of a scene taking place during one of the focus group discussions. The participants were asked to read three articles with the purposes of discussing them afterwards. People quietly began reading the distributed articles when the silence was suddenly broken by one of the participants. “You need to hear this,” she yelled out, addressing a group of fellow villagers standing not far from where the focus group was taking place. The news, which happened to be about education enrollment, was immediately shared. When asked about why she shared the news, she just stated, “I knew they would be interested in it. It would be important to them”.

From both the interviews and the focus group discussions, it is clear that this informal sharing culture plays a big role in the way people receive information. Some people rely almost solely on this type of secondhand information as they have either limited access to media themselves or no obvious interest in or habit of accessing information. As a 39-year-old woman from rural Yangon says when asked about her use of Facebook:

“I cannot use it as I am busy. I have to take care of my children. If I want to know something, I look at my husband’s account. I don’t have my own account.”

As other studies have also pointed out⁹, it is particularly women who are restricted in their access to information. In some cases, their husbands function as gatekeepers to the sort of news and information they receive – or they rely on the information that they can get through interaction with others e.g. at the local market.

“My husband does not allow me to use Facebook. He shares only the news he wants to tell me.”

(28-year-old woman from rural Rakhine).

Despite the positive aspects of the sharing culture, it is not without consequences. Not least in terms of the quality of information that people are exposed to. All new messengers in an information chain will add new filters and interpretations to the original message, potentially altering facts and vital nuances. Although some people appear to be aware of the way information can become tainted by word-of-mouth transmissions, most do not have any other means of obtaining information or verifying the information that they receive. For many people second hand information is all that they get.

That's news to me

What people understand to be news differs across regions and gender. What constitutes “news” is closely connected to the specific interests, problems and concerns of the individual. A highly educated young man from Yangon has different worries and interests to a poorly educated elderly woman living in an IDP-camp in Kachin, which in turn influences their distinct perception of news.

Looking at the understanding of news from a gender perspective, in comparison to men, women tend to place higher emphasis on health-related news and news about education – two topics that concern the well-being and prospects of the family. In contrast, men tend to place higher emphasis on political news and sports. Both place emphasis on the weather and the economy – with the latter being more about commodity prices than national economic concerns.

“Weather reports about cyclones and health-related news are news. I always listen to such kind of reports because a cyclone may come, and for health-related news, as my mom is suffering from paralysis.”

(28-year-old woman from urban Rakhine).

From a regional perspective, the understanding of news is closely connected to the specific challenges of the region in question. In the more conflict-prone areas such as Rakhine and Kachin, people are more concerned about the impacts of the ongoing conflicts on their daily lives. Is the conflict moving closer to them? Are any of their friends or relatives in any kind of danger? Although the ongoing conflicts of the country are also on people’s minds in other regions, they are not mentioned as frequently by the participants from Yangon and Mandalay. What is happening locally is far more important to the individual than concerns of a more national scope. In short, the sense of national identity is evidently not as strong when it comes to what news people are most interested in.

Below is an overview of the most mentioned topics associated with news by people from both the focus group discussions and in-depth interviews in the four regions.

Table 2: Overview of topics associated with news according to regions

Rakhine	Kachin	Mandalay	Yangon
Conflict (in particular concerns about the Rohingya)	Conflict/war	Weather/natural disasters	Politics
Weather	Politics	Politics	Economy
Health	Sports	Conflict/civil war	Weather
Politics	Crime	Economy	Education
	News events	Health	Culture/entertainment
		Culture/entertainment	Health

Some people are quite frank about the way that they prioritize and consume news that are relevant to their particular life. As a 36-year-old man from urban Kachin puts it:

“I do not watch the news about land grabbing in lower part of Myanmar because it is not relevant to us and not interesting as well.”

Differences between rural and urban areas can naturally also be detected in the study. In rural areas for instance, people are far more inclined to follow news about the weather. Bad weather may have serious consequences for their crops, their estates and their abilities to protect their families. In urban Yangon and urban Mandalay, people are more interested in more broad news topics related to politics and the economy as well as culture and entertainment. Particularly the younger research participants in the urban areas place emphasis on these softer news topics and are more inclined to associate stories on celebrities with news than the older participants.

In conclusion, local conditions and individual priorities highly frame the perception of news. Local news is clearly preferred over more general national news. It is difficult for people to concern themselves with events happening far from their homeland unless they see a distinct connection to their daily lives. Relevance is the news criterium most important to people when prioritizing information flows and selecting news to engage with.

Trusting is tough

With limited access to information and few news sources to choose from, people struggle with trusting the media. The findings from the focus group discussions and the in-depth interviews show that people in Myanmar have a natural skepticism towards not only the established media but also news and information coming from other sources – including friends and family.

“I don’t believe news once I hear it. If the same news comes from three news media, it is believable. Because even if I ask someone, he or she may exaggerate the news.”

(19-year-old man from rural Kachin).

Many do however highlight state-owned media as being most trustworthy and reliable. Like one man from rural Yangon puts it:

“MWD is military-owned and the MRTV is government-owned media. We trust in those media. They share the news which are possible [to believe]”

(43-year-old man from rural Yangon).

Those trusting the state-owned or military-owned media seem to believe that these media are more capable of providing accurate information because they have direct access to news and information sources. Particularly when it comes to factual topics such as official wage levels or enrollment criteria for higher education. Even those who do not fully trust the state-owned or military-owned media mention that they rely on them for these kinds of information. The more critical respondents will even say that they use these information channels to see how the state and/or military view different topics. These participants displayed strong abilities in sourcing different media for different purposes, using the different strengths of the media for their own benefit. While the state-owned media might provide them with some type of news, the independent media could provide them with another kind and the international media with yet another kind. As a heavy media user from urban Kachin explains:

“VOA, MRTV and BBC are always good. Some of them write news in both Burmese and English which is interesting to read. They are also very good sources to read. 7days and MWD seem biased in favor of the government. They write good things about the government. But DVB is a little bit different from them. [...] New Light of Myanmar writes a lot of news about the government and seems to be giving favor to the government side. I do not trust them that much, there are many lies. The news sources from The Mirror are true but it is also the military backed media¹⁰ [sic]. RVA broadcast news for only Christians.”

(61-year-old man from urban Kachin).

However, the majority of the research participants did not showcase these abilities to interpret the differences in the media they consume. Either because they did not reflect upon the media’s reliability or different media’s political allegiances, or because they did not have the luxury of access to more than a couple of different news sources.

“Seeing is believing. So, if we cannot go and check by ourselves on the ground, we should check with someone who is living there.”

(46-year-old Woman from rural Kachin).

But if they cannot see it with their own eyes or hear the incident accounted by an eyewitness then they will need to see other forms of proof. Some do however realize that you cannot trust all images. Especially when it comes to online content. But as pointed out by many research participants it can be difficult for them to verify whether a story or an image is false or not.

“Although I like information or news sourced on Facebook, I do not trust some of them because there can be fake news with fake photos. People fake them and post them on Facebook, so they cannot be trusted. [...] So, we need to think carefully before we believe them.”

(25-year-old man from rural Kachin).

Looking at trust from a regional perspective, it is again apparent that local news outlets carrying local news have a better position among the local population than the Yangon-based media. People tend to trust media that have a local presence and can report directly from the neighborhood. If they know the journalists covering their local community, trust is even higher.

“DVB is good. [...] In Myitkyina, there is a DVB reporter. When he is sick or not available, our news is missing.”

(51-year-old woman from rural Kachin)

The exercise mentioned above where the focus group participants were asked to sort cards with the names and logos of different news outlets further underlines people’s tendency to place higher trust on local media outlets or media outlets with a – for them – known local presence. As is visible from the table below which lists the media that were most frequently mentioned in each region, media with a known local presence have a clear advantage over media that are not recognized as having a local presence.

¹⁰ Although the respondent believes that The Mirror is a military-owned newspaper, it is in fact published by the Ministry of Information and therefore it would be more correct to say that it is government-owned.

Table 3: Overview of mentioned media according to regions and topics

	Rakhine	Kachin	Mandalay	Yangon
Preferred news sources	DVB Facebook YouTube Local market MNTV Channel 9 MRTV Narinjara	Myitkyina News Journal Kachin News BBC DVB 7 Days VOA MRTV Facebook	DVB MNTV MRTV The mirror VOA Facebook Padamyar FM (rural)	BBC MRTV Myanmar A Linn The Mirror Facebook
Trusted news sources	DVB (BBC) ^a Friends and family	Kachin News Myitkyina News Journal Friends and family	DVB State-owned media Eye-witnesses	State-owned media MRTV DVB (BBC) ^a
News sources with least trust	(BBC) ^a Facebook	(BBC) ^a	(BBC) ^a Facebook YouTube Myawaddy Daily ^b	(BBC) ^a Facebook

a BBC are placed in brackets throughout the table as people were somewhat conflicted about whether the media could be trusted or not. As explained in the text below, people used to consider BBC as one of the most trustworthy news outlets but BBC's recent coverage of the conflicts in country had disappointed many. They felt that BBC did not provide a correct image of the conflicts. Yet, due to the past reputation of BBC people are not ready to fully disregard the news outlet.

b Trust in Myawaddy Daily had been tainted due to a recent scandal where the newspaper misappropriated an image showing IDPs crossing a river into safety to illustrate a story with the headline "Increased number of tourists in Ngwe Saung Elephant Camp".

Yangon-based media are for many people living outside of the bigger cities not relevant news sources. People feel that these media do not present them with news or information that pertains to their daily lives and challenges and that they are often too elitist in their reporting. One media outlet did, however, seem to carry itself well among respondents across the different states. DVB was highlighted by several people in both Rakhine, Kachin and Mandalay as being very good at reporting from the local areas. In Kachin, Myitkyina News Journal and Kachin News received similar praise. People felt that they were represented fairly by these media outlets and could therefore trust them more. Proximity to events is clearly something that is being appreciated by audiences and elevates trust.

"DVB comes as soon as possible to the area to get news in a case of something happening,"

(46-year-old woman from rural Mandalay).

"We rely on DVB for news. As the news is presented with an eyewitness account, they cannot lie."

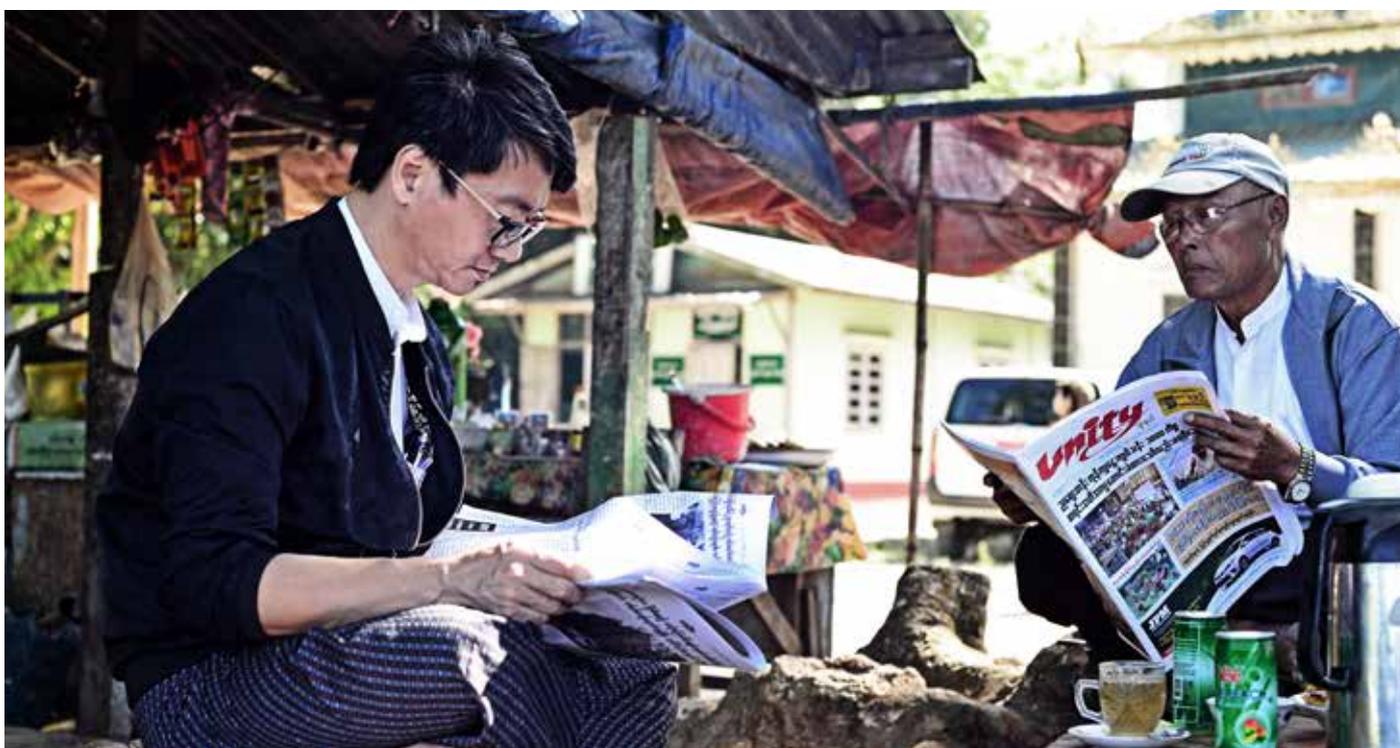
(44-year-old woman and 33-year-old woman from urban Rakhine).

Interestingly, the trust in international news outlets such as BBC, VOA and RFA seems somewhat contested – regardless of the region. Many people expressed appreciation of the reporting these outlets had done in the past under the military regime when information was scarce. However, people are not sure that they can be trusted any longer, particularly after having observed the outlets coverage of the conflict in Rakhine and the Rohingya minority. Several of the respondents explained that they did not feel that the international outlets were telling the truth or that the full story was being told in their reports.

“BBC is not reliable. They are really biased and make news as they like. They cannot reflect the truth. And their reports are always different from other channels’ reports. For example, when they reported about the death tolls in a communal conflict in Yangon, they mentioned a low number of killed Rakhine people and a much higher number of killed Muslim people.”

(63-year-old woman from urban Rakhine).

Despite the decaying trust in the international outlets, people did nonetheless still respect the media, and many continue to seek them out – albeit with greater apprehension.



The Facebook factor

“I get more knowledge as if I got a window to the world. Before, I could only watch TV and read the newspaper.”

(16-year-old woman from urban Yangon).

One of the most surprising findings from the audience study was the role and impact of Facebook. Although official figures state that only about one out of three in Myanmar are active Facebook users, most people that participated in the audience study knew of Facebook and had gotten information from Facebook in one way or another. Facebook has clearly become a big factor in Myanmar’s news and information flows and the reach of the social networking site is far bigger than the official figure of 34 percent. The sharing culture of Myanmar has ensured that information from the social networking platform is spread outside of the online realm and reaches people by word of mouth in traditional ways. As one research participant explains:

"I look at Facebook every day. I joined the GAB group [a group with information relevant for farmers] because I want to get updates on bean prices. As we cannot easily get news from outside in our village I share the price information I have with others."

(44-year-old man from rural Yangon).

One of the things that people particularly appreciate about Facebook is the platform's ability to present them with news and information at a speed that cannot be matched by any other media. They can get updates almost in real time. For people living in conflict-prone areas or regions that are likely to suffer from natural disasters it can be a matter of life and death to get accurate and up-to-date information.

"Recently, one ward caught on fire. But before the fire fighters came, the news was already posted on the Facebook."

(63-year-old woman from urban Rakhine).

People are, however, aware that they cannot necessarily fully trust the information that they get online. They know that they are sometimes misled and that some people use the platform to spread hate speech and disinformation.

"Not every post on Facebook is reliable. Some posts are biased based on personal opinions. Sometimes we can also see hate speech and rumors such as 'Muslims have too big of an influence' and 'Buddhism will disappear under the NLD government'. Sometimes, people post personal attacks. So, we need to rely on our rational thinking to judge the news."

(47-year-old man from urban Mandalay).

Some have developed their own ways of dealing with the issue and found ways to try to fact-check the information that they encounter. As a 44-year-old woman from urban Rakhine explains:

"As soon as I read a post, I don't decide whether it is true or fake. I continue reading the comments. Based on the comments, I can decide whether the post is reliable or not. Sometimes, I even chase a person's account who made comment in order to check what type of person he/she is."

But far from everyone has the capabilities to do this type of fact-checking. And despite the skepticism towards Facebook, it seems as if most people would rather rely on information from the social media than live in the dark. In the absence of better information channels, Facebook can give them the updates that they so desperately need – in addition to the other functions of the networking platform. Facebook is acknowledged to be far more than just a news and information sharing tool. For many people, the youth in particular, the main purpose of the platform is social networking and keeping track of friends and family.

Not surprisingly, the older generations seem somewhat more apprehensive of the social networking site. Not only due to the fact that the platform is being exploited by some to spread false information and induce hatred among different groups in society, but also because people are concerned about what impact the platform may have on cultural traditions and social norms. Many recounted stories of young women being seduced online and snared into sexual relationships with elderly men. This had led some to refuse their wives and/or daughters to use the platform out of fear of what could happen to them.

Regardless of these concerns, Facebook has in a very short time gotten a dominant role in Myanmar society. A role that needs to be acknowledged by not only the media but also by learning institutions and development organizations. No

other social media comes near the popularity and reach of the platform and with no other alternatives that match the immediacy of the platform, and no ways of fact-checking information, people often have to settle for what they read, see and watch on Facebook. Even with the natural skepticism seemingly present with many people, there is a clear need for media literacy efforts to enhance the understanding of online news and information consumption.



Conclusion

It is a difficult time for media in Myanmar. With rapid developments, the media and journalists operating within the industry have had to continuously adjust their approaches and positions. And the transformations and adjustments are far from over, making it difficult for the media to find the right course. However, one of the keys to success in these uncertain times are the audiences – those who should be the targets and recipients of the content produced by the media. As is evident from the audience study presented in this report, the people of Myanmar hunger for reliable information relevant to their everyday lives. They want accurate news about their local communities, presented in an easy and decipherable manner with solid documentation and delivered as quickly as possible. In short, they emphasize accuracy, proximity, transparency and immediacy.

Although the population to some extent is able to voice what they want in terms of news and information, the media literacy levels of the country remain low; particularly among people living in rural areas and among women who are often limited in their access to both the necessary technologies and media outlets. With little experience with independent media and limited access to information, people lack basic skills to critically analyze news content. A natural skepticism leads them part of the way but with few opportunities and inadequate skills to fact-check information, their inquisitiveness is often left unsatisfied and put aside. Trust in the media is low with people struggling to understand what the media may do for them. For many, the media is elitist and mainly concerns itself with Yangon-related matters leaving little space for and acknowledgement of the realities of the population living outside of the bigger cities.

Facebook has to some extent been able to fill the void and give people the ability to seek out information in something close to real time. Yet, navigating the social media is tricky and not everybody understands that it can be abused by people with ill intentions. Though official figures may state that only 34 percent of the population are active Facebook users, the reach of the platform goes far beyond number and the media has become a force to be reckoned with when looking at Myanmar's media environment – for better or for worse.

Recommendations

As described in the introduction, the purpose of the audience study went beyond merely uncovering the media habits of the people in Myanmar. Not only does IMS-Fojo hope that the study may inform future media development efforts in Myanmar, but we also believe that the findings can help improve news content production and distribution in the country. In an attempt to elevate the findings of the audience study into practical advice, this section therefore presents six recommendations for the consideration of media houses and journalists and six for the consideration of media development organizations and learning institutions.

For media houses and journalists

In short, media, journalists and other content producers are recommended to:

- Go local: Be present in the local communities and report directly from where the action is taking place;
- Connect with audiences: Build rapport with audiences and meet them in their local communities to establish and increase trust;
- Be transparent and include documentation: People have a natural skepticism towards information they encounter and need to be convinced with facts and strong documentation;
- Think in images and creative ways of story-telling, particularly on social media platforms: Images elevate trust and creative story-telling captures audiences in a competitive market;
- Avoid making reporting too academic or heavy for readers: Elitist reporting alienates readers and keeps them from moving beyond the headline;
- Consider means of distribution: Infrastructure affects news consumption and careful consideration of how content is distributed is paramount for the success and survival of a news outlet.

For media development organizations and learning institutions

With low levels of media literacy and people's limited access to information in Myanmar, media development organizations and learning institutions should, among other things, seek to:

- Establish mechanisms for fact-checking: Provide people with the necessary tools to fact-check information, particularly from online sources;
- Ensure better access to information: Better access to information will foster better informed news stories and greater possibilities for people to seek out information on their own;
- Raise people's media literacy and their abilities to find information: Production and distribution of quality content only has an impact if it reaches and engages audiences. Attention to audiences' abilities to engage with news and information flows is paramount for the success of media development efforts;
- Prioritize women and other marginalized groups: Women, ethnic minorities and people living in rural areas have lesser access to information than other groups as well as lower levels of media and digital literacy. Special attention to these groups is important to ensure that they are not left behind;
- Capacitate journalists in connecting and engaging with audiences: Assist journalists with understanding the potential that lies in engaging more actively with their audiences to enhance the quality and reach of their content;
- Promote creative storytelling, particularly on social media platforms: With increased competition for people's attention, journalists' abilities to deliver quality content in compelling ways are even more important.



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