Conflicting Coverage

Insights Into The Media's Coverage Of Conflicts In Myanmar

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Executive summary

This publication presents the findings from a content analysis of conflict coverage in Myanmar in 2018. The study was carried out in May and June 2018 by International Media Support (IMS) and its partner Fojo Media Institute in Myanmar with assistance from local consultant Zarchi Oo. The report summarizes the major findings that emerged after in-depth analysis of one week of conflict coverage and provides insights into journalistic practices in Myanmar.

With the study, IMS-Fojo wanted to shed light on the coverage of conflicts in Myanmar. From an international perspective little is known about how the Myanmar media actually covers conflicts – not least the highly controversial conflict in Rakhine. Additionally, IMS-Fojo wanted to scrutinize media content in Myanmar to inform a needs assessment in preparation of future media development efforts in the country.

In brief, the study found that coverage of conflicts in Myanmar leaves a lot to be desired. Journalists rely on a limited number of sources and elite sources far removed from the conflict are preferred. Classic conflict frames emphasizing battle elements and using war rhetoric are common although the media also apply human-interest frames presenting co flicts through the people most affected by them. There are, however, big variances in the coverage of the different conflicts. The Rohingya Muslims appear to be a non-priority for the media and very little attention is given to their experiences and challenges in the coverage of the conflict in Rakhine. This stands in stark contrast to the attention given to other ethnicities affected by conflicts around Myanmar.

Based on the findings, the report ends with eight recommendations for media, journalists, learning institutions, and media development organizations in Myanmar. IMS-Fojo hopes that these recommendations can assist media and journalists in Myanmar in further refining their conflict reporting and encourage media development organizations and learning institutions to improve both working conditions for journalists covering conflicts as well as their reporting skills.

Introduction

In August 2017, Myanmar made international headlines when the conflict in Rakhine State escalated. After several months of build-up, fighting erupted once more between Rohingya militant groups and Myanmar's army[1]. The spotlight was once again on Myanmar and as the conflict worsened and severe human rights violations against the Rohingya minority by the military and security forces were uncovered[2], media coverage intensified. But there appeared to be big discrepancies between the coverage by international media and local Myanmar media. Many in Myanmar saw the international coverage of the conflict as being biased against the Buddhist majority of the country and victimizing the Rohingya minority[3]. The international community, on the other hand, struggled to understand the Myanmar people's lack of interest in the Rohingya and visiting reporters were surprised by the limited coverage of the conflict in the country[4].

The conflict in Rakhine is unfortunately not the only ongoing conflict in Myanmar. Fighting is currently taking place in Kachin State and Shan State, and several other conflicts are simmering underneath the surface. The peace processes have slowed down significantly with little trust from the ethnic armed groups in the NLD's (and Aung San Suu Kyi's) ability to act as the necessary mediator that the affected groups need to move forward and commit to democracy and peace. Although the NLD government did manage to hold the third Panglong conference in July 2018 (having postponed it four times), it was marked by controversy and disagreement with many ethnic armed groups writing it off as merely symbolic[5].

Covering conflicts and peace processes is not an easy task. Many seasoned journalists would say that conflict reporting is one of the toughest assignments a journalist can get. Not only because of the physical dangers when reporting from conflict zones, but also due to the difficulties in getting access to verifiable information and presenting an impartial picture of the conflict. The task becomes even more problematic when the journalist's own country is involved, and personal opinions and biases must be kept at bay.

To better understand how the media in Myanmar covers conflicts, IMS-Fojo decided to do an in-depth analysis of published and broadcasted content in 2018. With assistance from a local consultant 361 news stories from a selected sample of media outlets were collected over the course of one week in May and meticulously analyzed according to themes, use of sources, and dominating frames.

[1] BBC News, 2017, "Myanmar Rohingya: How a 'genocide' was investigated", *www.bbc.com/news/world-45341112.*
[2] Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Mission report of OHCHR rapid response mission to Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh 13-24 September 2017,
www.ohchr.org/documents/countries/mm/cxbmissionsummaryfindingsoctober2017.pdf
[3] Voice of America, 2017, "In Myanmar, conspiracy theories hound Rohingya crisis coverage",
www.voanews.com/a/in-myanmar-conspiracy-theories-hound-rohingya-crisis-coverage/4038339.html
[4] See for instance: Asia Media Centre, 2017, "NZ reporter in Yangon: How Myanmar media cover the Rohingya issue",
https://www.asiamediacentre.org.nz/opinion/thomas-manch-nz-reporter-view-from-yangon-myanmar/
[5] Frontier, 2018, "Controversy, progress at the third Panglong conference",
frontiermyanmar.net/en/controversy-progress-at-the-third-panglong-conference

Methodology

Content analysis is a widely recognized analytical method within media studies. Scrutinizing media content to uncover hidden messages, intentions, and motivations has been one of the field's main interests since the 1920s when the method was first introduced by Harold Lasswell to study propaganda[6]. Since then several different tools and approaches have been developed to strengthen the methodology and create transparency regarding coding and conclusions. Typically, a distinction is made between quantitative and qualitative approaches to content analysis. Whereas the quantitative approaches tackle large amounts of data in a systematized way based on predetermined codes, the qualitative approaches look at smaller samples from a more bottom-up perspective. Although more difficult in terms of ensuring scientific reliability, qualitative approaches are generally seen as better suited to scrutinize texts in-depth and form theories on likely interpretations of audiences[7].

For the purpose of this study a qualitative approach was selected. As IMS-Fojo wanted to better understand how the media in Myanmar covers conflicts, it was necessary to look at the content from several different angles and analyze the material in-depth. More specifically, it was decided to analyze the collected media content by looking at the representation of sources and the framing of stories.

Prior to data collection, a regular news week[8] was selected, a sampling frame was set and 19 different Myanmar media outlets (10 mainstream print media, two online media, two ethnic print media, two radio channels, and three television channels) were identified for scrutiny. The selection was done with a view to selecting a broad sample of both mainstream media and ethnic media – but with ethnic media being limited to Rakhine and Kachin states.

News stories were collected during the week of May 14 to 20, 2018. The sampling frame was intentionally kept broad to include both news stories on conflicts as well as news stories on events related to a conflict and stories on peace and reconciliation. However, the sampling frame was later narrowed down to only consider stories that related to one or more of the following four topics: 1) Preparations of and discussions related to the Panglong conference; 2) issues related to the conflict in Rakhine; 3) issues related to other conflicts and clashes between the military and ethnic armed groups; and 4) conflict-related protests taking place during the period.

[6]Macnamera, Jim, 2005, "Media content analysis: its uses, benefits and best practice methodology", Asia Pacific Public Relations Journal 6(1), p. 1-34.
[7]Ibid., p. 5.
[8]Meaning a week with no significant fluctuations such as scheduled elections or large events.

Table 1: Overview of media outlets included in the content analysis

Name of outlet	Medium	Ownership	Reach	No.of stories matching sampling frame
The Mirror	Print newspaper	Ministry of Information, government-owned	National	14
Myanmar Alinn	Print newspaper	Ministry of Information, government-owned	National	34
The Myawaddy	Print newspaper	Ministry of Defense, military-owned	Lower Myanmar	10
Yadanarpon Daily	Print newspaper	Ministry of Defense, military-owned	Upper Myanmar	15
Myanmar Times	Print newspaper	Private	National	16
The Herald Daily	Print newspaper	Private	National	2
The Standard Times	Print newspaper	Private	National	33
Eleven Daily	Print newspaper	Eleven Media Group, Privately owned	National	50
The Voice Daily	Print newspaper	Myanmar Partners Think Tank Group, privately owned	National	57
7Day Daily	Print newspaper	Private	National	70
Kachin News	Online newspaper	Private	No data, but 55, 354 followers on Facebook	5
Narinjara	Online newspaper	Private	No data, but 149, 718 followers on Facebook	12
Myitkyina News Journal	Print newspaper	Private	Kachin State	14
Narinjara News Journal[a]	Print newspaper	Private	Rakhine State	0
Cherry FM[b]	Radio	Private	Available in 15 states and regions	0
Bagan FM	Radio	Private	National	14
MRTV	TV-channel	Ministry of Information, government-owned	National	9
MRTV-4	TV-channel	Forever Group Co.,Ltd., privately-owned	National	3
Sky Net	TV-channel	Shwe Than Lwin Media Co.,Ltd. privately-owned	National	4

[a] *Narinjara News Journal stopped publishing their print edition in May due to financial issues and no stories were therefore collected from this journal despite it being in the original sampling.*
[b] *Cherry FM did not air any news related to conflict in the sampling period. The research team contacted the radio to enquire about their news prioritization but did not receive any answer to the absence of conflict-related news.*

A total of 361 stories matching the sampling frame was gathered during the one week of data collection – with most being published during the weekdays and fewer during the weekend.

Table 2: Overview of news stories

Date	News stories	Medium		
		Print	Broadcasting	Online
14 May 18	51	45	4	2
15 May 18	62	48	10	4
16 May 18	69	59	7	3
17 May 18	59	51	4	4
18 May 18	51	49	0	2
19 May 18	29	25	2	2
20 May 18	29	26	3	0
Weekly	11	11	0	0
Grand Total	**361**	**314**	**30**	**17**

Prior to data analysis, coding schemes were developed with deductive codes for 1) analysis of representation of sources and 2) analysis of dominating frames. However, the data was coded with a combination of deductive and inductive approaches [9] as codes were continuously finetuned and corroborated throughout the analysis.

For more on the methodology, please contact IMS.

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[9] Deductive coding is theory-based and uses predetermined codes informed by theories and hypotheses. Inductive coding has no predetermined codes but analyses the data from a bottom-up perspective. Typically, a combination of the two are used in content analysis.

Findings

Four different stories dominated the news during the week that IMS-Fojo had chosen to conduct the content analysis: 1) A meeting between the Karen National Union (KNU) and the Tatmadaw; 2) A labor dispute at the Pha-kant jade mine in Kachin State 3) protests on peace processes/negotiations and other issues; and 4) the conflict in Rakhine State. The 361 stories gathered during data collection reveal patterns in the way the media covers conflicts and conflict-related events in Myanmar. Most notable is the limited use of sources and the clear differences in the way different ethnic groups are portrayed with different framings of different conflicts as a result hereof.


Illustration: Conflict zones in Myanmar by CentreLeftRight and Aoetearoa, licensed under CC-BY-SA-4.0

Overview of stories

The news stories gathered during data collection can be divided into four groups: 1) stories on protests connected to different conflicts; 2) stories on the peace processes and different peace negotiations; 3) stories on open conflicts and the impact of conflicts; and, 4) stories on the conflict in Rakhine.

Figure 1: Distribution of gathered stories according to themes
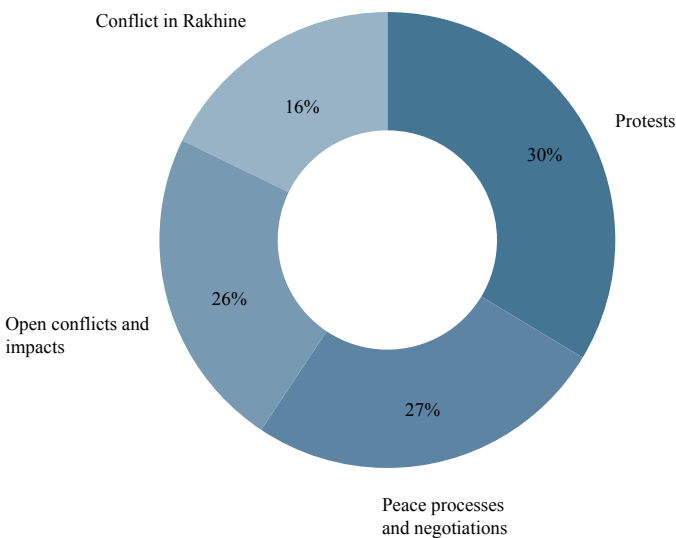
The research team chose to make a separate category for stories on Rakhine as the coverage of this conflict was overwhelming compared to that of other conflicts in the country. Most media covered stories related to the conflict in Rakhine every day during the data collection period.

Of the 361 news stories, 307 were in the form of news stories, 19 were telegram stories, 12 were editorial pieces, 11 were interviews, three were news analyses, four were press releases, two were features, two were translated articles, and one was an opinion piece.

One story, several platforms
Although we collected 361 individual stories, the data reveals a practice of circulation of news stories across platforms. Thus, the same story appears on several different platforms. Sometimes even with exactly the same presentation. For instance, both the two state-owned newspapers The Mirror and Myanmar Alinn and the two military-owned newspapers The Myawaddy and The Yadanarpone were on some occasions found to be publishing identical stories.

One example is the story of a meeting between KNU and the Myanmar military, the Tatmadaw, that took place on May 17, 2018. The meeting was part of the ongoing peace process between the Karen National Liberation Army and the Tatmadaw. The story was reported in 14 different news pieces brought by seven different media outlets. Most of them were identical with only minor changes or additions. Even the coverage by privately-owned media tends to have a wording similar to that of the government-owned or military-owned media. One could suspect that this has to do with the fact that the privately-owned media has limited access to information compared to the other media outlets and therefore has to rely on information that was brought by the government-owned or military-owned media.

Above to the left: The Mirror, May 18, 2018. Above to the right: Myanmar Alinn, May 18, 2018.

Below to the left: Myawady in English, May 18, 2018. Below to the right: Yadarnarpone, May 18, 2018.

Senior General Min Aung Hlaing holds talks with a team led by Karen National Union (KNU) Chairman Saw Mutu Sae Poe

Nay Pyi Taw May 17

Commander-in-Chief of Defence Services Senior General Min Aung Hlaing received a representative team led by Karen National Union (KNU) Chairman Saw Mutu Sae Poe at the parlour of Zeyathiri Beikman of Yangon Command Headquarters this evening.

Also present at the meeting together with the Senior General were Commander-in-Chief (Navy) Admiral Tin Aung San, Commander-in-Chief (Air) General Maung Maung Kyaw, senior military officers from the Office of the Commander-in-Chief (Army), and member of the Union Peace Dialogue Joint Committee Lt-Gen Khin Zaw Oo (Retd). The Karen National Union (KNU) Chairman was accompanied by Vice Chairman Pado Saw Kwe Htoo Win and members.

At the meeting, they discussed future processes for the peace and agreed that the Tatmadaw will understandingly suspend improvement of the Khaypu-Loimpalaw route relieving the concerns of Karen National Union (KNU), and the local ethnic people of the region will have to live and do their businesses peacefully and go elsewhere freely.

After the meeting, the Senior General and the Chairman of Karen National Union (KNU) posed for documentary photo after exchanging commemorative gifts.

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Senior General Min Aung Hlaing and party pose for documentary photo together with a representative team led by Karen National Union (KNU) Chairman Saw Mutu Sae Poe.

It is also quite common to see media referencing each other. Again, limited access to information makes it difficult for particularly privately-owned media to get information directly from primary sources, and they often have to rely on news reporting by the government-owned or military-owned media. News from ethnic regions is often first reported by the government-owned or military-owned media only to be echoed by privately-owned media the following day or days.

One example from the study is the coverage of the labor dispute in Pha-Kant. The article below was brought in Yadarnarpone and Myanmar Alinn – with the same wording – on May 14, 2018.

ဟားကန့်မြို့ နယ်၌ ကျောက်မျက်တူးဖော်ရေးကုမ္ပဏီကို
ကုမ္ပဏီဝန်ထမ်းများက မီးရှို့ ပျက်ဆီး

ဟားကန့် မေ ၁၃

ကချင်ပြည်နယ်၊ မိုးညှင်းခရိုင်
ဟားကန့်မြို့နယ် လုံးခင်းကျေးရွာ
အုပ်စု ရတနာရွှေအိတ် ကျောက်
မျက်တူးဖော်ရေးကုမ္ပဏီ၌ မေ ၁၃
ရက် ည ၇ နာရီခွဲက ကျောက်မျက်
တူးဖော်ရေးကုမ္ပဏီနှင့် ကုမ္ပဏီ
ဝန်ထမ်းများ လုပ်ခလစာညှိနှိုင်းမှု
အဆင်မပြေခြင်းကြောင့် ကုမ္ပဏီ
ဝန်ထမ်းများက ကုမ္ပဏီပိုင်ရုံးခန်း
နှင့် လူနေအဆောင်များအားမီးရှို့
ဖျက်ဆီးခဲ့ကြောင်း သိရသည်။

ဟားကန့်မြို့နယ် လုံးခင်းကျေးရွာ
အုပ်စု ဆန်ခါကျေးရွာအနီးရှိ
နိုင်ငံတော်နှင့်အကျိုးတူ ရတနာရွှေ
အိတ်ကျောက်မျက်ကုမ္ပဏီ၌ ယနေ့
မွန်းလွဲပိုင်းတွင် ကုမ္ပဏီဝန်ထမ်းများ
က ရာသီကုန်လုပ်ကွက်ပိမ်းရှိန်ကို
မေ ၁၅ ရက်တွင် ရပ်ဆိုင်းပေးလို
ကြောင်း အချိန်ပိုလုပ်ခများအား
ရပယူလိုကြောင်း တောင်းဆိုမှုများ
ပြုလုပ်ခဲ့ရာ ကုမ္ပဏီဝန်ထမ်းများနှင့်
ညှိနှိုင်းမှု အဆင်မပြေရာမှ ဆန္ဒ
ပြမှုများ ဖြစ်ပွားခဲ့ကြောင်း သိရ
သည်။

အဆိုပါ ကျောက်မျက်တူးဖော်

ရေးကုမ္ပဏီတွင် ဝန်ထမ်း ၂၅၀၀
ရှိသည့်အနက် ဝန်ထမ်း ၁၀၀၀ ခန့်
က ယနေ့ည ၇ နာရီခွဲတွင် ကုမ္ပဏီ
ရုံးခန်းနှင့် လူနေအဆောင်များအား
ခဲများဖြင့်ပစ်ပေါက်ခြင်း အကြောင်း
ဓာတ်ခြင်းများပြုလုပ်ခဲ့ရာ ကုမ္ပဏီ
လုံခြုံရေးတာဝန်ကျ နယ်မြေခံ
ရဲတပ်ဖွဲ့က သေနတ်မိုးပေါ်ထောင်
ဖောက်ရှိ ခြောက်လှန့်ခဲ့သော်
လည်း ပြန်လည်ထွက်ခွာသွားခြင်း
မရှိဘဲ ကုမ္ပဏီရုံးခန်းအပါအဝင်
လူနေအိမ်ဆောင်ငါးလုံးဘက်ဟို
တစ်စီး ဂါလန် ၂၄၀၀ဆံ့ ဆီလှောင်
တိုင်ကီခြောက်လုံးတို့အား မီးရှို့
ထွက်ပြေးခဲ့ကြကြောင်းနှင့် ဖြစ်စဉ်
တွင် ပါဝင်ပတ်သက်သူ ၂၀ ကို
ထိန်းသိမ်းထားရှိကာ မီးရှိုမ်းသတ်
နိုင်ရေးဆောင်ရွက်လျက်ရှိကြောင်း
သိရသည်။

အင်းဖြစ်ပွားရာနေရာ၌ ဟားကန့်
မြို့နယ်ရဲတပ်ဖွဲ့မှူး ယာယီရဲမှူး
သန်းဝင်းအောင် လုံးခင်းနယ်မြေ
ရဲစခန်းမှူး ဒုတိယရဲမှူးစိန်မြင့်ထွန်း
နှင့် ရဲတပ်ဖွဲ့ဝင်များက နယ်မြေ
လုံခြုံရေး ယူထားလျက်ရှိကြောင်း
သိရသည်။　　　**ဝင်းနိုင်(တချင်းမြေ)**

The Yadanarpone, 14 May, 2018

Company workers burnt down a gem mining company in Pha-kant

Pha-kant May 13
Company workers burnt down offices and housing of Yadanar Shwe Eait (Golden Jewelry Bag Company) as a consequence of a payment dispute between the Company and the workers at 7:30 pm on 13 May in Lone-Khin village, Pha-kant township of Moe-nyin District in Kachin State.

The Yadanar Shwe Eait Company is a joint-venture with the State. There was a dispute between the workers and the company staffs as the workers asked to end the working season on 15 May and receive their pay-checks.

At 7 pm, 1000 workers out of 2,500 employed by the company started throwing stones towards the offices forcing security personal to fire their guns into the air to control the crowd. However, the crowd did not comply with the order and destroyed 5 buildings, including offices, one tractor, 6 petrol tanks of 2400 gallons before they dispersed. 20 people have so far been detained for arson.

It is reported that Chief Officer Police Captain Than Win Aung (Pha-kant Tsp.), Police Lieutenant Sein Myint Tun (Lone-Khin Tsp.) and police are securing the place.

Win Naing (Kachin Land)

The following day, May 15, the same story was covered in Myanmar Alinn, Yadanarpone, the Mirror, the Voice, Eleven Daily, the Standard Times, and 7Day daily newspaper. Most of the media simply relied on the coverage from the military-owned media and few of them seemed to have tried to verify the information or include other sources. Only the Voice brought a more extensive coverage of the dispute with witness accounts from several people involved.

The practice of relying on other media's coverage of a topic poses a high risk of circular reporting and spreading of dis- and misinformation. Circular reporting[10] or false confirmation happens when a piece of information seems to be verified by several different sources that all confirm a story but in reality, it originates from only one single source. If a news story is not corroborated by different sources, there is a risk of spreading falsified or biased information. In the case mentioned above, where most of the media redistributed the original story on a labor dispute in Pha-kant carried by military-owned media apparently without subjecting its sources to any scrutiny, the media could potentially have assisted in spreading unverified rumors or biased information. When it comes to conflict reporting it is particularly important to ensure that the media does not spread any distorted, biased or false information that may cause harm or unnecessarily agitate any of the involved parties[11].

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[10]The term originates from the intelligence sector, where a piece of intelligence could look like it was verified by different sources but in reality, all sources could be tracked back to one and the same. See for instance Mark Lowenthal, 2017, "Intelligence: From secrets to policy".

[11]For more on conflict-sensitive journalism please see IMS' publication "Conflict sensitive journalism – special edition Myanmar", 2014.

News selection

Regarding the selection of news, some stories or themes seem to be prioritized over others. As mentioned above, the conflict in Rakhine received more coverage than any other conflict during the week analyzed. But this differentiation might as well be explained by the magnitude of the conflict compared to other conflicts and skirmishes. Clues on news prioritization are, however, visible when looking at the coverage of conflict-related protests.

Myanmar has developed a healthy appetite for protests and several took place around the country in the period surveyed as well as during the weekend preceding the first day of data collection[12]. Covering protests has clearly become a priority for the media with a total number of 109 news stories on conflict-related protests being published by the media surveyed during the week of May 14, 2018. Compared to coverage on the conflicts themselves (see figure 1), it could appear as if the media is more comfortable reporting on protests related to the conflicts or may use the protests as an entry point to cover a conflict. But explanations of the reliance on protests to cover conflicts by proxy could be many: Firstly, the media in general struggles getting access to the areas where conflicts take place. Secondly, it is safer for journalists to report on protests than on conflicts. At any rate, it could appear as if it is less sensitive for the media to report on protests than on the actual conflicts. Still, more scrutiny of this area is needed to better understand the media's news prioritization.

The data on conflict-related protests is, however, not only interesting in comparison with the overall coverage of conflicts. The covered protests dealt with issues such as 1) peace and reconciliation; 2) land disputes; 3) labor disputes; and, 4) the conflict in Rakhine. But as is evident in figure 2, the media showcased a particular interest in peace protests that received far more coverage than any of the other protests.

Figure 2: Distribution of coverage on conflict-related protests
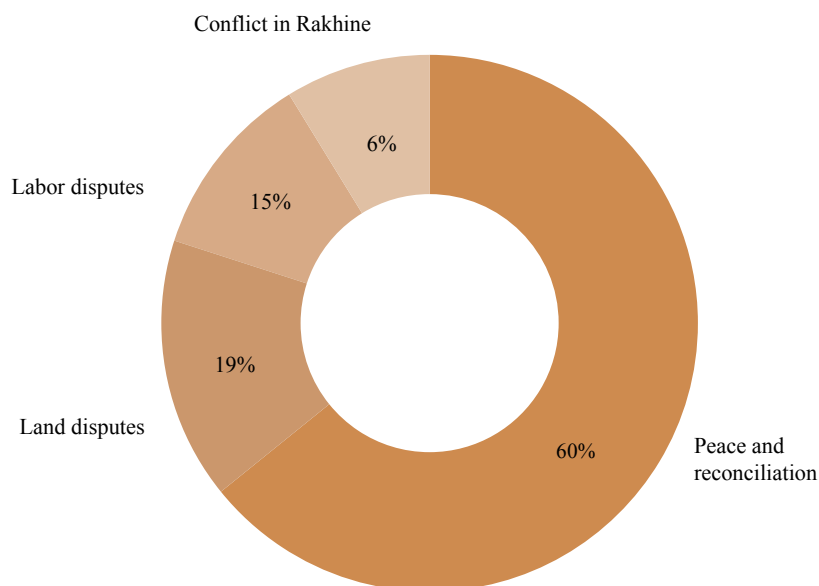
Although far more protests on peace took place during the period surveyed, one could also speculate that the topic of peace protests is less sensitive than some of the other topics. This speculation is fueled by the coverage of two protests happening simultaneously on May 12: a peace rally in Tarmwe and a land dispute protest in Thilawa. In both instances, the protests were stopped by the police. But the crackdown was far more violent in Thilawa where the police used rubber bullets against the crowds. Still, the peace rally received more coverage being covered in 28 different news pieces brought by six different media while the land dispute protests were only covered in eight different news pieces brought by six different media.

[12] It is quite common for protests to take place during the weekend when people have days off from work.

Restricted use of sources

The data shows that it is common for conflict-related stories to be based on only one or no source at all. As showed in figure 3, 81 stories (22 percent) had no sources and 119 stories (33 percent) were based on only one source.

Figure 3: Number of sources in news stories
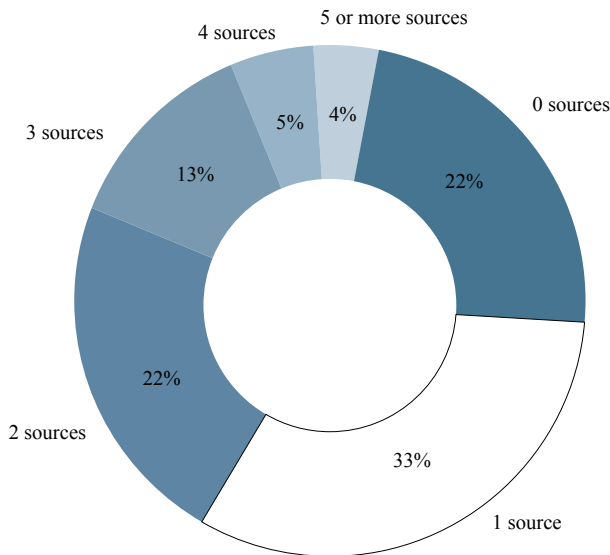
Those stories containing four or more sources were typically opinion pieces or vox pops with several different people being interviewed on the same topic. See for instance the story from The Mirror, May 14, 2018 below on a recent clearance operation by the Tatmadaw in Kachin.

Looking at the distribution of sources, the sources most frequently used are government officials, followed by military sources[13], sources from the local population, activist groups, national CSOs or NGOs, and ethnic armed groups. Senior officials from both the government and the military are clearly preferred although they are often far removed from the action. They are commonly cited by their full name and titles whereas lower level officials, those close to the action, are often anonymous.

Although the local population is often used to voice opinions and give witness accounts, very few persons directly affected by the conflict in question (such as IDPs or refugees) are represented. Oftentimes, the coverage of a conflict is removed from the actual scene

The Mirror, May 14, 2018

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[13] Including representatives from the three ministries under the Commander in Chief: The Ministry of Defense, the Ministry of Home Affairs and the Ministry of Border Affairs.

of action with little or no accounts from witnesses on the ground. One example is the coverage of the conflicts in Kachin and Shan state. During the week surveyed, an offensive by the Tatmadaw took place in Kachin, an attack of the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) in Northern Shan State, as well as bomb blasts and landmine explosions in both states. However, only two stories (brought by The Mirror and Myanmar Alinn) included accounts from local people or soldiers who had experienced the events in the two states while the remaining stories were based on released information or senior officials.

Another example is the coverage of the peace processes. Most stories concentrate on the peace negotiations from a policy level. Both the difficulties in arranging the next Panglong conference as well as the pressure from the international community to move forward with peace processes are included in the coverage, but very few stories report on the peace processes from the perspective of those involved in the conflicts and how the delayed processes are affecting them.

However, the stories on the conflict in Rakhine are characterized by the most skewed use of sources by far. The news pertaining to this conflict is, like other conflict-related stories, mostly reported with official sources from either the government or military. When local people are included as sources, only representatives of ethnic Rakhine heritage are used. No stories include perspectives from the Rohingya[14]. Instead they are referred to in passing – and mostly as "Bengali".

The name Bengali implies that the Rohingya originate from Bangladesh and therefore are immigrants to Myanmar. And the origin of the Rohingya is at the center of the conflict. Whereas the Rohingya claim to be indigenous to western Myanmar, the minority is not recognized as one of the 135 national races under the Myanmar Citizenship Law of 1982, making it almost impossible for them to achieve citizenship. Hostility towards the minority can, however, be traced further back with raids and attacks dating back to the 18th century[15]. Although the NLD prior to the 2015 elections stated that the Citizenship law should be reviewed and amended, nothing has happened so far[16] and the government seems to share the general sentiment of the majority of the population: that the Rohingya have no justified claim to citizenship and are illegal immigrants in the country.

The Myanmar media seems to mirror these sentiments. Besides being referred to as "Bengali", the minority is mostly portrayed as illegal immigrants and insurgents. Even if this is stated by a source, the claim is never challenged or in any way explained by the journalist or media responsible for the piece. Sometimes, the claims are even stronger with the Rohingya being portrayed as terrorists[17] or fast-breeding human beings[18].

Without any opportunities to voice their side of the story, the portrayal of the Rohingya is left in the hands of the quoted sources. This neglect counters all recommendations on conflict sensitive journalism. Conflict sensitive journalism implies, among other things, the correction of misperceptions between the different sides in a conflict as well as making news human by having "real people" in a story and describing how issues affect them[19].

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[14] Aside from two stories in government-owned media that brought an interview with a supposedly returned Rohingya man and family leader.

[15] Kurt Jonassohn, 1999, "Genocide and gross human rights violations in a comparative perspective", p. 262.

[16] Myanmar Times, September 8, 2017, "Review of Citizenship law spurs debate", *https://www.mmtimes.com/news/review-citizenship-law-spurs-debate.html*

[17] As in a story from Eleven Daily May 17, 2018 based on information from the Information Committee and bearing a headline that can be translated into "ARSA based in refugee camps and planning to change it into terrorist bases says the Information Committee".

[18] As in a published interview with a parliament member from the Lower House published in the Standard Times on May 18, 2018. The parliament member highlighted the danger of the fast breeding rate of the "Bengali" and urged the government to enforce the "Monogamy Law" (2014) and the "Population Control Law" (2015) before proceeding with the repatriation program.

[19] IMS, 2014, "Conflict sensitive journalism – special edition Myanmar", p. 20.

Flawed framing

A framing analysis considers the overall impression a story leaves and tries to analyze in what light the journalists or media, consciously or not, wanted the reader/listener/viewer to digest the story. Analysis of frames is typically done in two ways: deductively or inductively. Deductive framing analysis identifies frames based on a predetermined set of codes or frames whereas inductive framing analysis identifies frames by going through the sample and finding the frames through continuous analysis and corroboration. For this study, we chose to do a combination of deductive and inductive framing analysis.

The analysis revealed that conflict-related stories are predominantly framed in quite classical ways emphasizing the combat-elements of the conflict and the human suffering. The conflict frame and the human-interest frame clearly dominate coverage of conflicts in Myanmar with more than half of the stories in the sample being marked by these frames. A peace and reconciliation frame, directly or indirectly advocating for peace, comes third followed by a political frame looking at conflicts from a pure political and/or policy perspective. Among other less frequently detected frames were a frame concerned with the consequences of conflict in a broader diplomatic or international perspective as well as a frame related to the consequences of conflict on Myanmar's development and economic situation.

Conflict sensitive journalism encourages journalists to report conflicts in a different way than a classic battle between two opposing sides. Instead journalists are, among other things, encouraged to look beyond the gruesome details of the battle and focus on other affected interests; report the words of the ordinary people; and try to uncover common grounds between the opposing sides[20]. Although media in Myanmar appears as if it is doing what it can to report on conflicts from the perspective of the people affected, by utilizing human-interest frames in conflict coverage, it is not doing it consistently.

A comparison between the coverage of people affected by the conflict in Rakhine and the conflict in Kachin respectively reveals, just as with the distribution of sources, that some minorities are excluded from the narrative. The Rohingya are conspicuous in their absence from reporting on the conflict in Rakhine. Whereas IDPs and refugees from Kachin are framed as victims with stories on their suffering and day-to-day survival, the situation is very different when it comes to IDPs and refugees from the Rohingya minority. Almost no stories focus on their struggles, with the empathy instead clearly remaining with the ethnic Rakhine people and their suffering.

To the right is a side by side example of how contrasting the human-interest frame is applied with it comes to the coverage of the different conflicts and the affected minorities.

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[20] IMS, 2014, "Conflict sensitive journalism – special edition Myanmar", p. 32-33.

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The Voice, May 18, 2018

The piece from the Voice dated May 18, 2018 is one of the very few stories during the week surveyed that actually covers the conditions of the Rohingya refugees. The story is based on a UNICEF press release[21] explaining the conditions of pregnant women and newborns in the refugee camps in Cox's Bazar. Although the piece pays attention to the conditions in the camps, bias against the Rohingya can still be detected in the choice of wordings and the framing of the causes of their displacement with the attack on military outposts by militant groups in August 2017 being emphasized.

In comparison the coverage of the conflict in Kachin by Myitkyina News Journal from May 20, 2018 gives plenty of space to the conditions of people affected by the conflict. The use of images alone leaves a very different impression than does the coverage of the Rohingya refugees. The suffering is evident and heavily documented in a series of photographs concentrating in particularly on the most vulnerable.

Although the Voice should be complimented for their willingness to publish a story with attention to the conditions of the Rohingya refugees, it appears to be an isolated case – and it still leaves something to wish for. The analysis of framing confirms what was already seen in the analysis of sources: the Rohingya is a non-priority for the Myanmar media.

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Myitkyina News Journal, May 20, 2018

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[21] The original press release can be found here: *https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/more-60-rohingya-babies-born-bangladesh-refugee-camps-every-day-–unicef*

Conclusion and Recommendations

Myanmar has been marked by internal conflicts since its independence from British rule in 1948. Despite an ongoing peace process and a National Ceasefire Agreement, there is still a long way to go before the opposing parties can put their grievances to rest. But the media may help to move things in the right direction. With the right efforts and reliance on good, responsible reporting, conflicts can be reduced. Unfortunately, few media in Myanmar appear to be able to take on that responsibility. At least when it comes to providing fair coverage of all conflicts as well as the different ethnic groups involved and affected.

From the analysis of one week of conflict coverage in May 2018, this study found that the media relies on a limited number of sources to cover conflicts. Stories are often reported with a single or no sources and elite sources are preferred over people who have experienced the conflict and its consequences.

Furthermore, limited access to information forces private-owned media to rely on information brought by government-owned or military-owned media, which increases the risk of circular reporting and spreading of mis- and disinformation. Limited access to information also impacts news selection as journalists in Myanmar are often restricted from entering conflict areas (or do not have the necessary safety training nor equipment) to report from the field.

Although the media is able to cover conflicts from a human-interest point of view, this choice of framing is not consistent. There is a big difference in how the conflict in Rakhine is being covered compared to other conflicts. Particularly the coverage of the Rohingya Muslims is inadequate and unsettling. The Rohingya appear to be a non-priority for the media, and the presentation of the minority group is marked by prejudices.

Based on the findings from this study, IMS-Fojo has the following recommendations for journalists, media houses, media development organizations, and learning institutions operating in Myanmar:
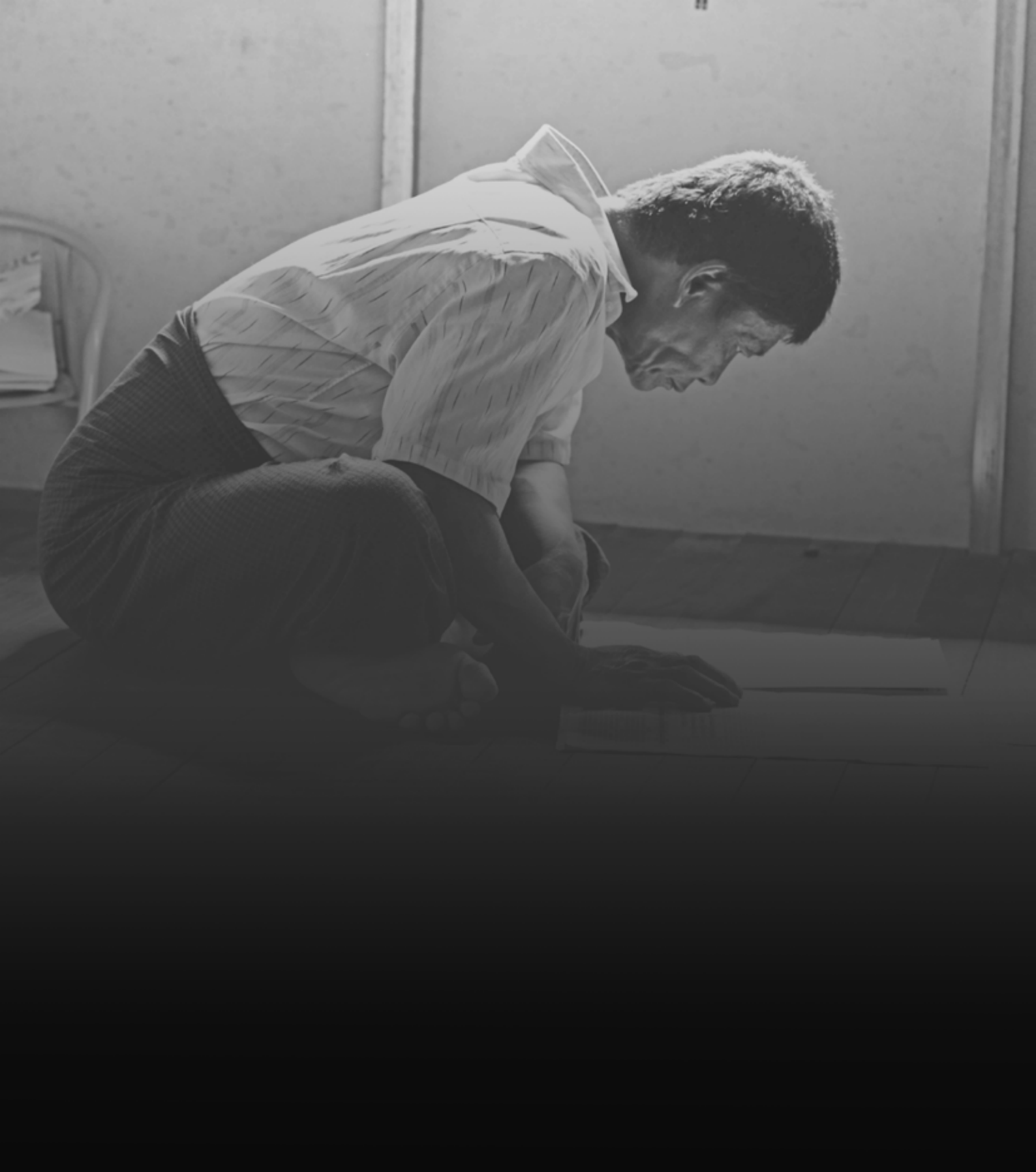
For journalists and media houses:

• **Consider use of sources:** Be critical of your selection of sources and strive to include a variety of sources involved in the conflict – including those most affected by the conflict;

• **Be aware of framing:** Think about how choice of words, images, and sources may impact the way the story will be perceived by your audience;

• **Be transparent and include documentation:** Strong documentation elevates trust from audiences and gives people the possibility to verify information;

• **Use conflict sensitive journalism when reporting on conflicts.** For more information please see IMS' handbook on conflict sensitive journalism in Myanmar[22].

For media development organizations and learning institutions:

• **Ensure better access to information:** Advocate for RTI legislation in Myanmar and for journal
ists' and media's access to information to help foster better conditions for conflict reporting;

• **Safeguard journalists:** Awareness-raising on the importance of journalists' safety as well as implementation of safety mechanisms for journalists can help ensure safer working environments for journalists covering conflicts;

• **Capacitate journalists in ethical journalism:** Assist journalists in understanding the importance of working by ethical standards to encourage quality information reaching the public;

• **Promote conflict sensitive journalism:** Conflict sensitive journalism can help reduce tensions and contribute to peace processes, but awareness-raising on the approaches is clearly needed.

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[22] The handbook can be found here: *https://www.mediasupport.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/conflict-sensitive-journalism-myanmar-2014-ims.pdf*