



Ethnic Media Study

Media habits and media representation
of ethnic minorities in Myanmar

Published in October 2020



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Executive summary

This publication presents the findings from an ethnic media study carried out by International Media Support (IMS), its partner institution Fojo Media Institute (Fojo) and Enlightened Myanmar Research Foundation (EMRef) in 2019. The study examines content produced and distributed to ethnic minorities in Mon, Kayin and Kayah and looks into the news and media habits and understandings of the same groups. It consists of two different research efforts: a content analysis and a qualitative audience study.

The content analysis found that media targeted at ethnic minorities (here represented by three ELTV contributors: Mon News Agency (MNA), Karen Information Center (KIC) and Kanthayawaddy Times) consistently involve their target groups in news coverage compared to national averages. Representatives from ethnic minorities were used as sources in eight out of 15 stories analyzed. Yet, ethnic minorities are often portrayed as victims and therefore rarely framed from an empowered position. Furthermore, the audience study showed that some minorities felt less represented by the media than others, resulting in limited trust in the media.¹

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.

Nonetheless, the audience 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. ELTV contributors and DVB were among the media most trusted by participants in the study but participants also showed a preference towards state- and military owned media as they rely on these channels to get updated information on the government's and military's position on issues. In general, television is a preferred medium for consuming news. However, among the younger generations social media (Facebook in particular) is the preferred medium. People also rely on friends and family for information, particular in areas with limited access to media outlets.

Some news consumers showcase a natural skepticism towards news and information (with many indicating that they knew of Facebook being home to "fake news" and false accounts), but limited access to reliable information makes it difficult for them to verify what they read, see or hear. Despite this natural skepticism, media literacy in general and Internet literacy in particular remain low among the ethnic minori-

ties included in this study. Combined with limited access to regularly updated information and fact-checking mechanisms, there is a risk that ethnic minorities could become easy targets for ill-intended social media campaigns.

Based on the findings, the report ends with a number of recommendations directed at both the Myanmar media industry, journalists and other content producers and 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, particularly in areas with a high concentration of ethnic minorities.

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 the study.

“Ethnic minorities
are often portrayed as
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¹ Ethnic Language TV (ELTV) is an initiative of Burma News International (BNI) and consists of a weekly TV programme co-produced by different media outlets which are all members of BNI. The programme has contributions from the participating ethnic media which are edited together into one multi-language programme transmitted from the DVB media platform.

Introduction

Less than 10 years ago, the people of Myanmar had access to very few independent sources of information. The Internet was a foreign concept to most and the thought of owning your own mobile phone seemed outlandish given the cost of both the phone itself and a SIM card that could cost up to 300 USD. In 2020, however, the picture has changed dramatically. With the abolition of prepublication censorship, media reforms and heavy investments in infrastructure, Myanmar's media landscape is diverse, and the population has access to an ever-growing number of media on a variety of platforms.

Today approximately 41 percent of the population has access to the Internet and are active social media users². Facebook is by far the most popular social media – and for many Facebook is the Internet³. While access to information is seen as a positive development, increased access to the Internet and social media platforms raise concerns about the quality of information people are presented to as well as the risk of mis- and disinformation diluting information streams. The people of Myanmar have had very few years to become familiarized with new information sources and media literacy has not been a priority in the past. The conflict in Rakhine in 2017 and 2018 showed what consequences the combination of social media and limited media literacy skills can have when disinformation on the conflict dominated Facebook feeds, spilled into the mainstream media's narratives and fueled hate against the Rohingya minority⁴.

While attention on media literacy has increased, it remains an issue in Myanmar. As an audience study conducted by IMS-Fojo in 2018⁵ showed, there are vast differences among people's access to and knowledge of reliable information sources. The study indicated that ethnic minorities and those living in rural areas were particularly disadvantaged with it came to access to information. They often have to rely on second-hand information or Facebook to get the most updated information about their local area.

In 2018, IMS-Fojo in Myanmar embarked on a new project aiming to promote Freedom of Expression, improve access to information and media diversity in Myanmar with attention to some of the country's most marginalized communities. To follow up on the activities undertaken by the project and gather rel-

evant information for media partners on their key audiences, IMS-Fojo decided to conduct a research study looking into the media habits and media understandings of ethnic minorities in Mon, Kayin and Kayah. The study followed the design of the 2018 audience study and undertook a qualitative approach to get in-depth information about media habits/repertoires, news habits and media literacy understandings. The study furthermore scrutinized content produced by IMS-Fojo's partner Ethnic Language Television (ELTV) in an effort to analyze representation of ethnic minorities and provide feedback and recommendations to journalists and editors.

Data collection was undertaken in July-September 2019 by a research team from EMReF with guidance and support from IMS-Fojo.

“There are vast differences among people's access to and knowledge of reliable information sources”

² We Are Social, 2020, Digital in Myanmar 2020

³ IMS-Fojo, 2018, “Myanmar's media from an audience perspective”

⁴ The New York Times, 2018, “A Genocide Incited on Facebook, With Posts from Myanmar's Military”, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/15/technology/myanmar-facebook-genocide.html>

⁵ IMS-Fojo, 2018, “Myanmar's media from an audience perspective”

Methodology

Two different studies have been conducted to produce this report: 1) a content analysis study analyzing productions by Ethnic Languages Televisions (ELTV) in Mon, Kayin and Kayah; and, 2) an audience study looking into the media habits of ethnic minorities in Mon, Kayin and Kayah.

Content analysis

The content study examined a total of 15 news stories (five stories from each of the three ELTV media covering Mon, Kayin and Kayah respectively) broadcasted between June and July 2019 with the intention of assessing representation and portrayal of ethnic minorities as well as framing of content. The news stories were furthermore used as case examples in the audience study's focus group discussions as a mean to analyze news understandings and media literacy levels.

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 propaganda⁶. 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 audiences⁷. For the purpose of this study a qualitative approach was selected. As IMS-Fojo wanted to better understand the representation of ethnic minorities in ELTV's content, it was necessary to look at 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.

News stories covering the three regions were collected during June and July 2019 (as not all regions are covered daily or even weekly by ELTV) from Mon News Agency (MNA); Karen Information Center (KIC); and Kanthayawaddy Times. All three news outlets are members of Burma News International (BNI). Their target audiences are ethnic groups. MNA targets Mon people, KIC Karen people, and Kanthayawaddy Times Kayah people. The three media rely primarily on online platforms to reach their target audience and broadcast in ethnic languages with Burmese subtitles. The sampling frame was kept as broad as possible with coverage of minorities being the main selection criteria.

Prior to data analysis, coding schemes were developed with deduc-

tive 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 approaches⁸ as codes were continuously finetuned and corroborated throughout the analysis.

Audience study

The audience study took a qualitative approach, relying on focus group discussions (FGD) and key informant interviews (KII) for data collection. While representability was sought in recruiting of participants for the study, it is important to emphasize that the study does not claim to provide statistically representative results reflecting the media habits and media literacy levels of the ethnic groups included in the study. The research was 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"⁹. Thus, to ensure a high level of generalizability, participants in the research were 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 users¹⁰) and that the sample was

6 Macnamara, 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 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

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

10 When it comes to media user types, the literature typically distinguishes between light, medium and heavy media users. What constitutes 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.

stratified according to location (urban/rural), gender and age. With such a sampling approach, the research strived to include several different stereotypical media consumers without having a full representative sample.

A total of four focus groups and

six key information interviews were conducted in each region. Of the 12 focus groups (consisting of 6-8 people each), six were female-only and six were male-only. The gender disaggregated groups ensured participating women were able to voice their opinions without any con-

straints 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 18 in-depth interviews, the gender distribution was 50/50 with 9 interviews with women and 9 with men.

Table 1. Overview of research participants

| Participants | Kayah | Kayin | Mon | Total |
|------------------------------|---------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|--|
| Total number of participants | 38 | 34 | 33 | 105 |
| Gender distribution | 19 Men 19 Women | 15 Men 19 Women | 17 Men 16 Women | 51 Men 54 Women |
| Age distribution | 16-29: 22 30-50: 12 Above 50: 4 | 16-29: 14 30-50: 11 Above 50: 9 | 16-29: 11 30-50: 15 Above 50: 7 | 16-29: 47 30-50: 38 Above 50: 20 |
| Ethnicities | Kayah: 34 Kayin: 3 Shan: 1 | Kayin: 26 Pa-O': 6 Bamar: 2 | Mon: 33 | Kayah: 34 Kayin: 29 Mon: 33 Pa-O': 6 Bamar: 2 Shan: 1 |

Data collection

In preparation of the study, different materials and manuals informed by IMS-Fojo's previous audience study 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.

The data collection was carried out successfully – albeit with minor challenges:

- **Language:** As the ethnic participants had held varying degrees of Burmese and literacy proficiency, all exercises requiring reading proved to be a challenge. To accommodate this challenge, the research team would assist with reading news out loud. A similar challenge occurred in Kayin state where different dialects prevented some people from understanding the news stories included in exercises. The research team would accommodate this challenge by interpreting.
- **Time:** Some age groups had difficulties in finding the necessary

time to participate in the research. For instance, in Kayah State, the researchers had to conduct FGDs and KIIs for 18-29 and 30-50 age groups at night, as they were occupied with cultivation during day-time.

- **Access:** Besides the time limitation and language limitation, the researchers also experienced some challenges in getting approval from local authorities to do research in specific areas. In Kayin and Kayah, the researchers therefore had to collect data in sub-urban areas instead of urban since the authority's approval for the study was delayed.

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 an interpreter to translate into local dialects and ethnic languages.

Findings

Content analysis

Although the sampling frame was kept intentionally broad, the 15 gathered stories touched upon similar topics: 1) stories on politics or the peace process; 2) stories on rights-based issues; 3) stories on environmental issues; 4) stories on youth; and 5) stories related to recent local events.

Sources

Contrast to what has been observed in other media content analysis studies in Myanmar¹¹, all news stories in the sample used at least one source – and 13 of the analyzed 15 stories relied on 2 or 3 sources when covering a topic. From a journalistic standpoint, it is considered good practice to have a variety of different viewpoints reflected in a story

to ensure that all sides are being heard in e.g. a conflict or on a contested matter. While the analysis shows higher diversity in the number and types of sources being used in the stories produced by ELTV compared to national averages observed previously, there is still room for improvement. Not least when it comes to the representation of women and ethnic minorities.

From a gender perspective, women were less represented among sources compared to men. Only one out of three sources were female. Compared to previous studies on gender representation in the Myanmar media, the ELTV media are, however, performing better than what is commonly observed. A 2017 IMS-Fojo study on gender in the Myanmar media¹² showed that women only represented 16 percent of the voices in the Myanmar media (and 15 percent when not accounting for stories including Aung San Su Kyi). While a higher number of women were observed in

the sample analyzed in this study, the voices of women lacked in political and peace-related news and women were underrepresented in news related to rights-based issues. They were furthermore more often portrayed as victims or in gender-stereotypical roles as compared to men.

Representation and framing of ethnic minorities

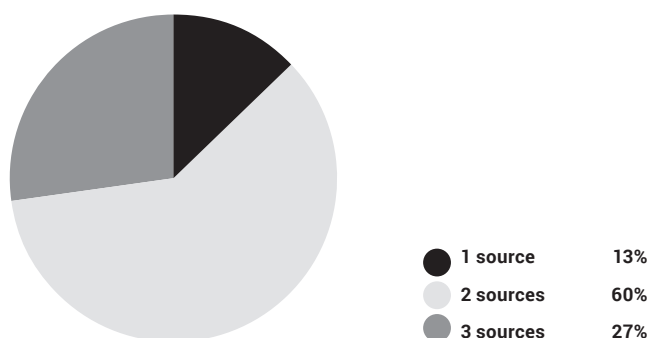
Ethnic minorities were represented in 8 out of the 15 stories included in the sample – and they accounted for more than a third of all sources.

While this finding is positive compared to what is typically observed in the Myanmar media¹³ and although ethnic minorities appear to have been able to give voices to their own causes, they were not consistently portrayed in an empowered manner. There is fine balance between providing space for minorities to be heard and ensuring that they are not portrayed in stereotypical ways that ends up victimizing them rather than empowering them. Unfortunately, the latter seems to be the case in some of the stories included in the sample.

When looking at the framing of ethnic minorities (meaning the perception of ethnic minorities viewers are left with after having seen the news story with its images, sound bites, interviews and voice overs), religious minorities are often framed as victims¹⁴. This framing was for instance observed in stories about child labor, mining and the peace process.

One explanation for the high frequency of this framing could be found in the current situation in the three states from which the sample was drawn. All three states are dealing with conflicts, rights abuse issues and a general marginalization of ethnic minorities. It is

Number of sources in ELTV news stories



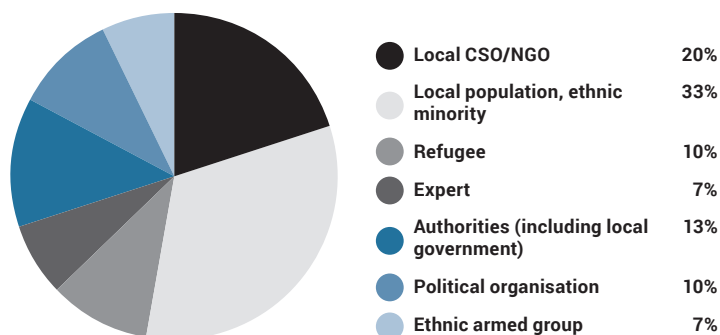
11 Such as "Conflicting coverage – insights into the media's coverage of conflicts in Myanmar" published by IMS-Fojo in 2018, <https://www.mediasupport.org/publication/conflicting-coverage-insights-into-the-medias-coverage-of-conflicts-in-myanmar/>. In this study, 55 percent of stories relied on either zero or 1 source.

12 IMS-Fojo and MWJS, 2017, "Gender in Myanmar News", https://www.mediasupport.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Myanmar_gender_fullreport_nov2017_en-1.pdf

13 See for instance "Conflicting coverage – insights into the media's coverage of conflicts in Myanmar" published by IMS-Fojo in 2018, <https://www.mediasupport.org/publication/conflicting-coverage-insights-into-the-medias-coverage-of-conflicts-in-myanmar/> where the most shocking finding was the lack of Rohingya sources in coverage of the conflict in Rakhine.

14 As several frames can appear in one news stories, the 40 percent in the circle diagram should not be seen as equivalent to 40 percent of the stories.

Types of sources in news stories



therefore probably considered an obvious choice to portray ethnic minorities as victims in these situations in an effort to raise awareness around their difficulties, they are facing.

It is, however, important to note that the second most common frame appearing in the sample is ethnic minorities as a resource. One example is a story from Mon News Agency that highlights Mon youths as a resource for local business owners while another from Karen Information Center covers an event on the values of the “Kaw” customary administration system.

Although based on a small sample, the analysis of the stories shows that the ELTV media are able to portray ethnic minorities in a fairly representative way. They are given a place to voice their opinions and present their everyday lives to a broader audience. There

is, however, room for improvement in terms of the way ethnic minorities are framed as well as with the source selection. While both women and ethnic minorities are included to a larger extent than commonly observed in the Myanmar media they are still not at level with men or authorities, resulting in them having a far less dominant voice in the public debate.

Audience Study

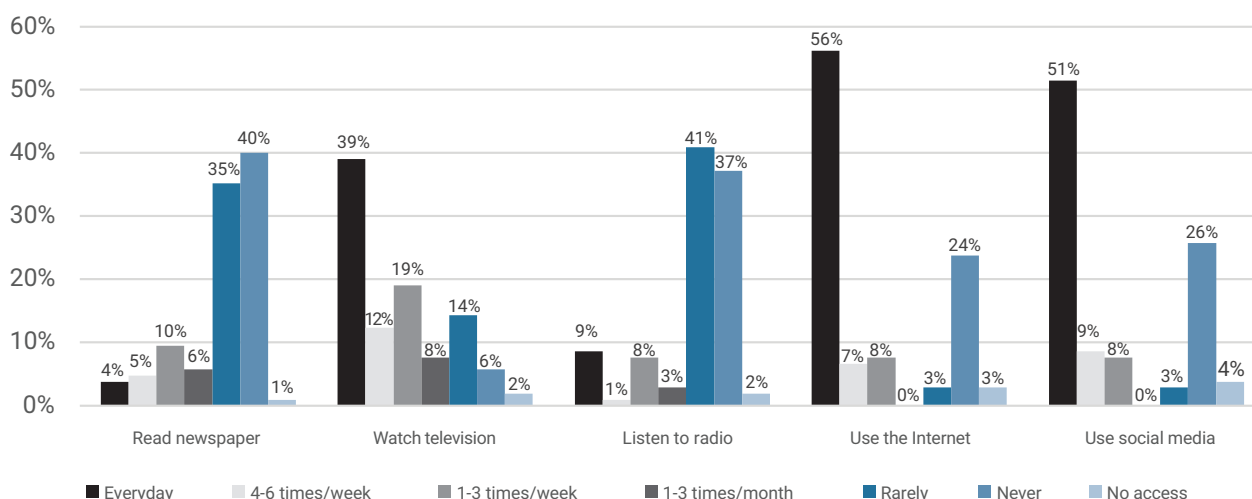
A total of 105 people participated in the audience study’s FGDs and KIIs – 51 men and 54 women. Based on careful analysis of answers, discussions and observations, a number of findings have emerged, revealing patterns of media consumption, news under-

standings and access to information among ethnic minorities in Mon, Kayin and Kayah. In the following, eight different themes displaying the most significant trends that emerged from the analysis will be presented. To respect the privacy of the research participants, everyone is anonymized in the accounts included in this report and will only be presented with gender, age and geographical location.

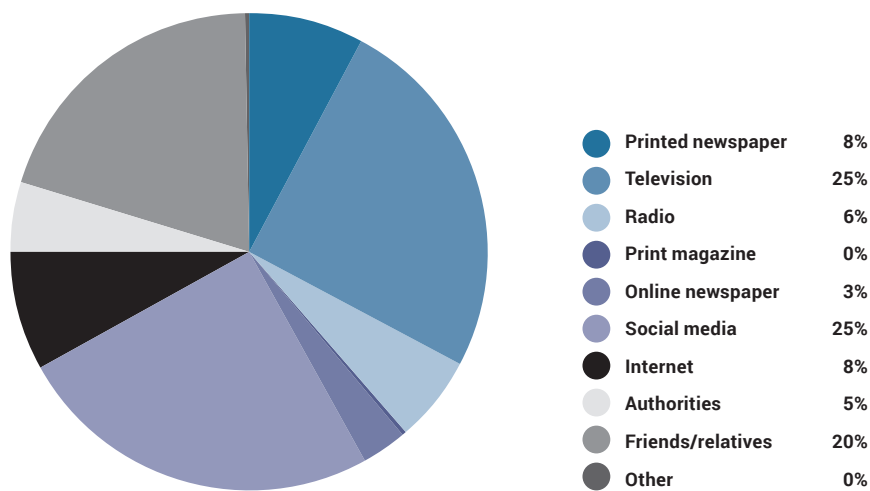
IMS-Fojo’s audience study from 2018 announced television to be the most popular medium in Myanmar and although television is popular among the ethnic minorities who participated in this study, the Internet and social media triumph over television. Almost 6 out of 10 people access the Internet every day and 5 out of 10 use social media. In comparison only 4 out of 10 watch television every day. Very few people read newspapers and listen to radio every day – which might be explained by a combination of lack of access and language barriers. Time and a tendency to prefer images were other explanations. Many respondents for instance found it time-consuming to read and living images make comprehension easier for many, particular those challenged by reading or language barriers.

As is evident from the figure below, it is also worth noting that it appears to be somewhat of a “either-or” situation when it comes to the Internet and social media. Either you access the Internet or use social media – and that on a daily basis – or you never use it.

Media usage in percentage



Preferred source for news



That is not the case with television. 7 out of 10 watch television at least once a week and less than 1 out of 10 never watch television or indicate that they have no access to television.

There are, however, variances among the different ethnicities. Among the Karen people (primarily living in Kayin state), television is the most popular medium with 3 out of 4 people watching television at least once a week and more than 5 out of 10 watching every day. In contrast, only 2 out of 10 among the Kayah (Karenni) people (primarily living in Kayah state) state that they watch television every day. When it comes to accessing the Internet, the Karen people also stands out. The group has the highest frequency of non-internet users and only 4 out of 10 state that they access the Internet on a daily basis. In comparison, almost around 6 out of 10 state that they access the Internet daily among the Kayah people and among the Mon people participating in the study.

Interestingly, the picture change somewhat when looking into preferred sources for news. Here more than 7 out of 10 people list television AND social media as one of their 3 preferred sources for news.

The category “friends and relatives” comes in at a third place (2 out of 10) and followed by printed newspapers and the Internet. Not surprisingly, there are age differences among the pref-

erences. Whereas the younger people in the study were more inclined to list social media as one of their 3 preferred sources for news, people above 50 were more inclined to list television as one of their 3 preferred sources for news.

“I prefer watching news on Television because not only I can listen but also I can see visual images.” (Man, 62, Mon State)

No noteworthy differences were spotted among women and men but again the Karen people stands out when it comes to preferred source for news. Almost 8 out of 10 list television, close to 7 out of 10 list friends and relatives and close to 6 out of 10 list social media.

“My son told me the news which was happening around my village. Sometimes, my son took the photos and showed me what happened around our places.” (Woman, 43, Kayah State)

The category “friends and relatives” also rates high among Mon people where an equal amount of people lists these as preferred sources for news. In contrast, this category is far less preferred among the Kayah (Karenni) people where less than 3 out of 10 has this among their 3 preferred sources.

Access determine media usage and information sources

The reason for the high reliance on friends and relatives among some ethnic minorities could be found in access. Not just physical or technological access to a specific medium but also economical and in terms of language.

To watch television you need access to a functioning tv-set, a satellite disc (in some cases) and electricity; to read a newspaper you need access to a sales point which in turn relies on well-functioning infrastructures for distribution; to use social media you need access to a computer or a smartphone as well as an internet connection or a 3/4/5G network; and, in all instances you need language skills to comprehend what you are listening, watching or reading.

This issue is clearly visible when looking into the media habits of ethnic minorities. While many are taught Burmese it is not their first language making it difficult for them to comprehend more complex news in Burmese. The struggles were clear during an FGD exercise where participants were asked to discuss news broadcasted on ELTV from their respective local media (Mon





Photo : EMReF

News Agency in Mon, Karen Information Center in Kayin and Kanthayawaddy Times in Kayah). While the three media intend to cater to ethnic audiences and broadcast their news in local languages with Burmese subtitles, it proved a challenge to some participants such as the Kayaw community in Kayah state and the S'gaw community in Karen state, as they speak different dialects of the local languages. Rural women were even more challenged due to general illiteracy¹⁵.

From a gender perspective, women generally have less access to media and information than men. While this was not directly observed in the results from the questionnaire passed around to participants prior to their participation in either a focus group or an

interview¹⁶, comments made during discussions and interviews show that women sometimes are hindered by their husbands or fathers in using e.g. the Internet or social media. Like a 26-year-old woman from rural Kayah says:

"My husband does not allow me to use Facebook because he is worried about me chatting with other guys. If he allows me to use Facebook, I would be using Facebook every day and everywhere."

As a consequence of limited access, many rely on others to get their news and information. The same woman who stated that her husband did not allow her to use Facebook also explained how he would share things from the platform

with her. Similar behavior was observed from other participants. Not least the older participants who due to illiteracy or lack of equipment did not have the opportunities to access news and information themselves. As mentioned above, "word of mouth" is a preferred source for news and information with people relying on both friends and family and local authorities (such as village leaders) to get updated on issues relevant to them and their local communities.

Participants explained how they typically got information during conversations in tea shops, at the local market or when meeting relatives. Facebook users would also use the messenger function as a way to share news and information in their network. Interestingly, this method seemed to be preferred over posting directly on your own or other people's walls.

"I also received some special news of BGF, KNU and my region (Karen State) from my friends. They sent it via Messenger; then I shared."
(Female, 41, Kayin State)

¹⁵ According to figures from 2016 (<http://uis.unesco.org/en/country/mm>), the literacy rate in Myanmar is 75.55 percent among people aged 15 and older. The rate is higher among those aged 15-24 (84.75) and lower among those aged 65 years and older (58.2 percent in total – and 49.2 percent when only looking at women). Among those participating in the audience study, 24 percent had reached or passed elementary or secondary level of education, 31 percent had completed high school, 14 percent had graduated with either bachelor or master's degree and 5 percent had not received any schooling.

¹⁶ Where people when asked about the use of different types of media were provided with the opportunity to indicate that they had no access to the media in question.

"If I want to know about my university's updates, I ask my friends through Messenger. And I also share with them if I have any information."
(Female, 21, Mon State)

While this sharing culture fills an information gap it does not come without risks. Word of mouth is a rather informal way to obtain news and there is therefore no guarantee of getting relevant information in due time. Furthermore, there is an overwhelming risk of unknowingly passing on mis- or disinformation – or of information getting distorted as it is passed on from person to person. All new messengers in an information chain will add filters and interpretations to the original message, potentially altering facts and vital nuances. Even a copy-paste of a piece of information from one messenger chat to another can be misinterpreted if taken out of context. However, many people among ethnic minorities often do not have a choice. Second-hand information passed on by friends and relatives is what is most accessible – and trustworthy to them.

News I can use

"When I heard the word 'news', I think about the issues which are happening here and now, and what I want to know." (Female, 35, Mon State)

Although media houses and journalists might have an ingrained understanding of what news is based on a series of "news criteria" used to sort information they receive from different sources, people's perception of news may be very different. What constitutes news for one person might not be relevant for another. Getting insights into audiences' news perception can therefore be a helpful tool to better target content, engage and grow audiences in a specific area

or among a specific subgroup.

Among the ethnic minorities included in this study, the concept of news was commonly defined as information on current events. When being more specific, people tended to place emphasis on weather (including natural disasters), conflict (including peace processes) and crime¹⁷. All of these were topics that most felt like they needed to catch up with as frequently as possible. For those living in more conflict-prone areas, news on clashes between the army and ethnic armed groups ranked higher. Similarly, for people living in areas prone to weather-related disasters (land slides and flooding), news on the development of these were also of high interest. In brief, news was considered relevant if they contained information that could impact a person's life or livelihood.

"News plays a somewhat important role in my life because some are really important to know, and some are not that important for me. We are ordinary people, struggling for our lives and this is another reason why I am not interested in all

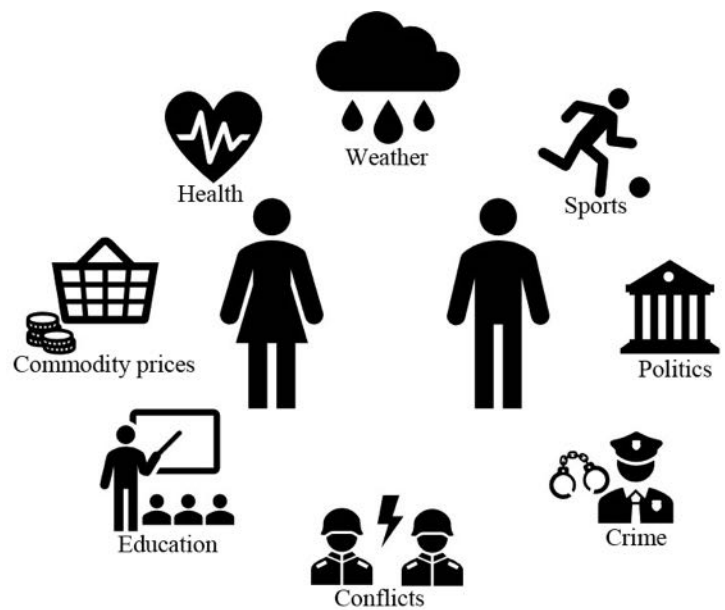


Figure 1: News preferences of women and men in Kayah, Kayin and Mon

kinds of news. I am mostly focusing on the news which are related to my region and my career [a beautician]." (Woman, 41, Rural Kayah)

From a gender perspective, men tended to indicate a higher interest in politics and sports compared to women. Women on the other hand tended to highlight news and information related to things closer to home such as education and health-related news. This mirrors the findings from the 2018 IMS-Fojo audience study where women similarly preferred topics that concerned the well-being and prospects of the family.

Differences in news preferences were also observed based on people's geographical location. Participants from the rural areas in Kayah were for instance keener on news related to migrants due to having friends and family working in Thailand while participants in Mon and Kayin followed news on drugs. At the same time, many participants felt disconnected with the rest of the country. Or as a 56-year-old woman from urban Kayah explained: "As we are living here [in Kayah], we don't need to rely so much on news and information compared to people from Yangon. In Yangon, people need to catch up every updated news and information to not miss out their opportunities."

17 During the period of data collection, many participants for instance intensely followed the so-called "Naypyidaw Victoria Rape Case" about a 3-year-old girl from Naypyidaw who allegedly was raped while attending daycare. The case sparked a national outcry as the police failed to find the culprit.

Trust requires proximity and visual evidence

As part of the audience study, IMS-Fojo wanted to look into the media repertoires of ethnic minorities. Not only to see which media these groups have access to and use on a regular basis but also to look into trust levels. IMS-Fojo’s audience study from 2018 showed that media with a physical proximity to audiences were perceived to be more trustworthy than those placed further away. We therefore wanted to see if something similar could be observed among ethnic minorities – particularly those that were considered to be the intended target groups of ELTV.

To look into these topics, participants were asked to sort a stack of cards with different news sources – including a variety of available media and more general sources such as friends, family and authorities. During the first round they were to sort the cards according to those that were most relevant to them – those they preferred to use when seek-

ing out news and information. During the second round they were asked to sort the cards according to trust – ranging from most to least trusted. While many different media outlets and sources

were discussed in the 12 focus groups, some trends were observed that provide insights into the preferences and trust levels of ethnic minorities in Kayah, Kayin and Mon state:

A female FGD in Mon State



Photo: EMReF

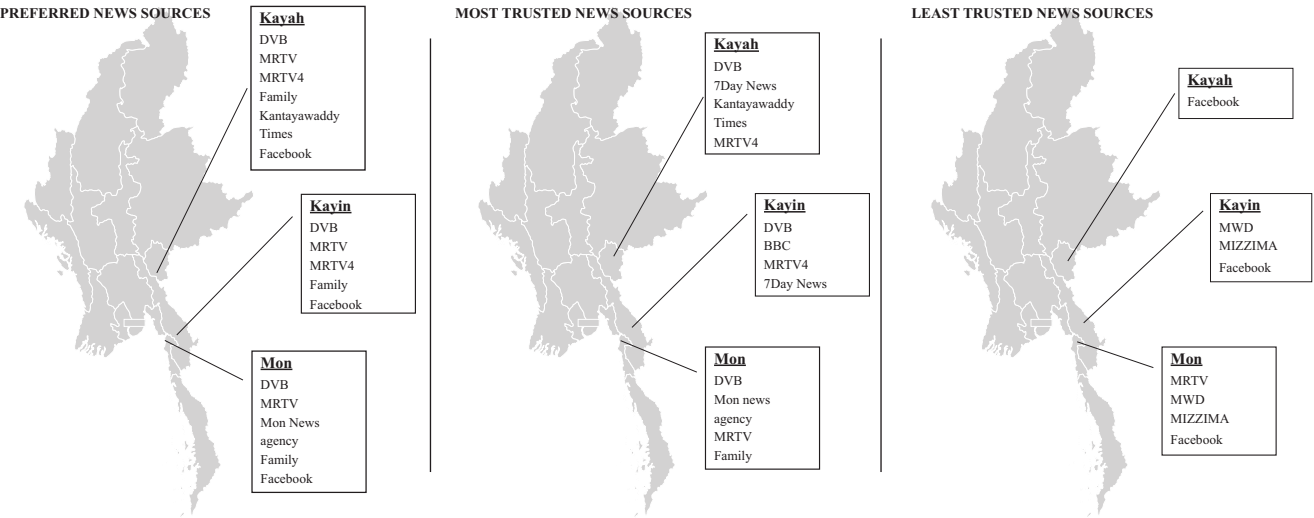


Figure 2: Overview of participant's perception of media, divided on states. Selected view, non-exhaustive. It is worth noting that MIZZIMA ended on the list of least trusted primarily because participants were not that familiar with the media.

As is evident from the presentation above, participants preferred a combination of state- and military sponsored media, independent nationwide media and local media. When explaining their preference towards state- or military sponsored media (such as MRTV), participants stated that from these sources they could get updated information about the government's or military's position on issues:

"I want to put the authorities in the column of main relevant because they have powers to do something and we need to know what they are doing." (Woman, 20, Kayah State)

"I watch MRTV to know the news of Government because they mainly report on the Government. If I want to know news on the military, I watch MWD and Sky Net's Up to Date channel which broadcast some of the Hltaw's news." (Man, 44, Mon state)

However, participants are aware of the bias on some of these channels and appear to be consuming them with attention to this. This is also apparent when discussing trust where some of the government-owned or military-owned sources ended up in the pile of least trusted media.

When it came to news in general, participants showed a strong preference for media with a local presence. Local media outlets (such as Mon News Agency in Mon; Karen Information Center in Kayin; and Kanthayawaddy Times in Kayah) were often mentioned and highlighted in discussions with par-

ticipants also emphasizing language as an important factor:

"I want to put the card of Mon News Agency in the column of main relevant because it is our local media and report the news in our language, so I think this is more relevant to us than others." (Woman, 31, Mon State)

The local media outlets were even preferred over former favorites such as RFA and BBC that might have ethnic representation but lack the proximity to their audiences.

"I think most of the news presented from RFA and BBC are only somewhat relevant because they aren't locally based media and they therefore don't know what is really happening compared to our local media [Kantayawaddy Times]." (Man, 28, Kayah State)

It is, however, important to note that not everyone was satisfied with the local media. Some ethnicities did not feel fully represented by the media. Some for instance found it difficult to understand as they spoke a different dialect than that used in the news coverage while others got almost enraged about how their ethnic group was presented in the broadcast:

"In one video, they [Karen Information Center] reported 'U or Daw' in front of the names instead of 'Saw or Naw'. I cannot accept this because you do not understand our culture if you cannot use the proper terms" (man, 47, rural Kayin).

Proper representation is a sensitive issue if trust is to be built between ethnic minorities and the media reporting on them. While the situation above regarding the correct forms of address may appear minor, it can be the determining factor in creating the necessary bond with an audience. Showing an understanding of ethnic culture becomes equal to showing the ethnic group respect.

Trust also appears to be correlated to people's perception of the media and its operations. Participants had in general more faith in the media today than what they had in the past and felt that they were able to present news with almost no bias. Some did, however, feel that the media had a tendency to pursue conflict instead of reporting objectively.

"I think some media are making exaggerations and create more conflicts. So, they should report the news as it is really happened, according to ethics." (Woman, 21, Kayah State)

Though participants did not give any specific examples of unethical reporting, they stated that they preferred to see news with balanced views from both sides in a conflict.

One media stood out particularly among the media highlighted for their good reporting. DVB has a very good reputation among the participants and is seen as very trustworthy. Not least due to their independence and history of producing solid journalism with local perspectives. The same finding was observed in IMS-Fojo's largescale audience study from 2018 where people also indicated that DVB had been a vital source of news before the political reforms in 2011-2015 where trustworthy information had been scarce. While this reason was not explicitly given by participants in this study DVB appears to have a similar position with people for instance indicating that they had started watching DVB in 2007 (during the Saf-fron Revolution).

"Showing an understanding of ethnic culture becomes equal to showing the ethnic group respect"

In contrast, some of the other favorite news media of the past (such as RFA, VOA and BBC) seem to have lost part of their connection to the ethnic minorities included in this study. Particularly due to them being operated by foreign media and thereby not fully having the local presence. As a 52-year-old man from Mon state explained:

“BBC and VOA are less accountable because they are based in foreign countries. We do not have access to information on how they analyze or censor the news.”

Trust also correlates to the channel of dissemination. Living images are far more trusted than the written word based on the idea that “if I have seen it with my own eyes it must be true”.

“I prefer to get news from television. For example, news of flooding. Here I can clearly see what is happening”. (Man, 25, Kayin State)

“If I compare Facebook posts and to news on the television, I trust television news more than Facebook because television news provides visual aids. They sometimes present CCTV video clips so that I am able to visualize more.” (Woman, 41, Kayin State)

As the latter quote indicates, Facebook is among one the least trusted sources. Not because most information here is written but because people are well aware of the amount of false information on the platform. That does, however, not prevent people from relying on Facebook as an important source of news and information.

Facebook dominates but trust is low

It is no news that Facebook has become a big player in the media market in

Myanmar. Even in this study 7 out of 10 people used Facebook and it is estimated that about 41 percent of the Burmese population are active Facebook users¹⁸. Facebook is used for communication with friends and relatives, networking and getting updated on news and information. And for many Facebook has been a true gift:

“Before Facebook arrived, we missed news because we did not have access to electricity 24 hours, and television news was broadcasted just for a few minutes. With Facebook we could access all news and information.” (Man, 19, Kayah)

“Before the arrival of Facebook, we didn’t know what was happening in the world, but now the world is becoming like a village, and we can know everything.” (Woman, 23, Mon)

Some even went as far as praising Facebook for extending their freedom of expression by providing them with a platform to let their voices be heard. Others also meant that Facebook had become an obvious tool for checks-and-balances.

“Everyone can post on Facebook easily. If someone has done something wrong, those who know truth can post about it on Facebook. As Facebook users can access the information easily, people do not dare do the wrong thing.” (Man, 22, Kayah)

Some participants did, however, raise concerns regarding Facebook and the proliferation of mis- and disinformation in Myanmar. Many mentioned Facebook being home to “fake news” or “fake profiles” – or had heard of false information being spread – but few gave specific examples or explained how they circumvented the problem. It seemed to be a common thing to state about the platform but not something that fully prevented people from actually using it.

Mis- and disinformation is also far from the only issue, people have with Face-

book. Interestingly one of the most common things mentioned was Facebook as a time-consuming platform “stealing” people’s times and preventing them from getting proper sleep or concentrating on their studies and/or work. Another common topic was the social influence of Facebook. Many recounted stories of young people eloping after having met online and problems with human trafficking. Older persons in particular did not like the influence Facebook had on young people.

“Although Facebook can give you information faster than other [sources] there are a lot of fakes [accounts and news]. And some peoples are meeting online and start dating each other. When they try to meet outside, women get in troubles (social problems).” (Man, 60, Kayah State)

When looking into people’s understanding of Facebook, it became clear that most participants did not distinguish between Facebook and the Internet. Most had little knowledge about the platform relying on the Internet to function. Furthermore, understanding of the features of the platform was equally low. Few knew what groups they were in or which pages they followed. Many did however understand the difference between a post written by an individual and a post posted by a news media – with people stating that posts by individuals should be handled with care as they contained personal bias.

This indicates that although internet literacy is relatively low among the participants of this study, they are gradually learning the potential dangers of a platform like Facebook when it comes to relying on it for news and information. However, there is still some way to go. Particularly in terms of being able to distinguish between true or false information – something that does not only requires awareness of the issue but also access to tools and sources for verification and fact-checking.

Conclusion

The population of Myanmar has in a very short period of time had to adjust their behavior to a completely new media environment. Not only did the media scene change significantly during and after the political reform period of 2011-2015, but the rapid expansion of digital technologies, access to affordable mobile phones and online platforms in Burmese revealed a completely new world to both young and old in the country. These transformations and transitions have not only been overwhelming for audiences but also for the media and journalists who have had to develop new ways of information gathering and dissemination. And everyone is still adjusting to the new media environment, one step at a time.

The purpose of this study has been to provide media and media development organizations engaging with ethnic minorities with relevant information to guide them during these transformative times, so they have a better understanding of audiences' need, behavior and skills.

The content analysis looked into the representation of ethnic minorities in

media content from three ELTV providers: Mon News Agency, Karen Information Center and Kanthayawaddy Times. The analysis showed that the three media had managed to ensure a reasonable level of representation of ethnic minorities. Ethnic minorities were represented in eight out of the 15 stories included in the sample – and they accounted for more than a third of all sources. Women were also fairly well represented compared to national averages (16 percent) but still only accounted for a third of all sources.

While representation was higher than what is commonly observed in the Myanmar media, ethnic minorities were rarely portrayed from an empowered position. Although they were provided space to give voice to their own cause, they were often victimized: a framing that is commonly chosen by journalists to highlight the needs and plight of a particular group. Furthermore, the audience study showed that not all target audiences were content with the way they were portrayed by the media. In some cases, trust in the media dwindled due to a lack of proper forms of address. This highlights the need for a

thorough understanding of target audiences if trust is to be established and a long-lasting relationship build.

The audience study showed that ethnic minorities in Mon, Kayah and Kayin are interested in news and information relevant to their everyday lives. They want accurate information about their local communities with solid documentation (preferably in the form of living images) and delivered in their own languages without delay. They are interested in topics close to home such as the weather, health, education, commodity prices, conflicts, crime and politics – as well as more entertainment-oriented news on sports, celebrities and lifestyle.

Television is a favorite source for news and information among all age groups – closely followed by social media (Facebook in particular), however mostly preferred by the younger generations. Among the Karen people and Mon people, friends and relatives are also seen as important sources for news and information. This could be due to lack of access to other sources. With limited access to television, newspapers and the Internet (often due to lack of the necessary equipment, resources and basic infrastructures), word-of-mouth becomes an important method for obtaining news and information.

In terms of trust, participants favored media with a local presence. Media such as DVB and ELTV contributors who have succeeded in reporting directly from the ethnic areas were seen as most trustworthy with participants feeling they – and their causes – were being taken seriously (albeit with some minor exceptions as mentioned above). While participants also chose to follow news from government- or military-owned media to get updated on the authorities' perspectives on issues, they had less trust in these sources. The same was observed with Facebook. Although the social media platform was listed as one of participants' preferred sources for

“Television is a favorite source for news and information among all age groups – closely followed by social media”

news, it was also seen as one of the least trustworthy. People generally showcased a high degree of skepticism towards the platform and explained how they were aware of it being home to “fake news”. However, they provided little explanation as to how they were able to identify

mis- and disinformation and the platform clearly fills a void in terms of delivering information in something close to real time. Furthermore, literacy on the Internet in general – and Facebook in particular – remains low among the ethnic minorities included in this study. Com-

bined with limited access to regularly updated information and fact-checking mechanisms, there is a risk that ethnic minorities could become easy targets for ill-intended social media campaigns.

Recommendations

IMS-Fojo hopes that the results from the ethnic media study may serve as an inspiration for media, journalists, media educations and media development organisations working in Myanmar. In an attempt to elevate the findings from both the content analysis and the audience study into practical advice, we recommend the following:

For media houses and journalists:

- Go local: Be present in the local communities (and consider hiring journalists from within the local communities) and report directly from where the action is taking place;
- Connect with audiences: Build rapport with audiences, get to know their needs and perspectives and meet them in their local communities to establish and increase trust;
- Use proper languages and respectful forms of address: Sensitivity towards languages and choice of words are necessary to show understanding and respect of ethnic culture;
- Be mindful of stereotypical frames: While it can seem logical to present ethnic minorities as victims in certain situations such a portrayal can harm the way they are perceived by others and thereby their position in society;
- Be transparent and include documentation: People have a natural

skepticism towards information they encounter and need to be convinced with facts and strong documentation, preferably in the form of living images;

- Avoid making reporting too academic or heavy for readers: Elitist reporting alienates audiences and keeps them from moving beyond the headline.

For media development organizations and learning institutions:

- Encourage people with minority backgrounds to pursue a career in journalism: more journalists with minority backgrounds will increase possibilities of better and more accurate representation of ethnic minorities;
- Ensure better access to information, not least at local level: Provide extra stimulus for media to report on ethnic minorities while still guaranteeing accurate representation;
- 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

- Establish mechanisms for fact-checking: Provide people with the necessary tools to factcheck information, also in local languages;
- 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;
- 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.

This publication presents insights into the media habits of ethnic minorities in Kayin, Kayah and Mon state in 2019. Findings show and discuss the challenges people face in accessing information and being fairly represented by the media.

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