



Understanding media audiences in post-coup Myanmar

“News is life and death to us”

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Colophon

“News is life and death to us” – Understanding media audiences in post-coup Myanmar

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IMS is a non-profit organisation working to support local media in countries affected by armed conflict, human insecurity and political transition.

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Contents

4 Executive summary

5 Introduction

6 Methodology

8 Findings

From legacy media to online media
The conflict is everywhere
Access denied
High trust in local and verified media
Social media is a key new source
Media literacy on the rise

22 Conclusion and recommendations

Recommendations for the media
Recommendations for donors and media development organisations

Executive summary

This publication presents the findings from an audience study carried out by International Media Support (IMS) and Nyan Corridor in June-August 2022. The report provides insights into the media habits of the population of Myanmar following the 2021-military coup as well as people's news concepts, trust levels and media literacy levels. Due to difficulties with data collection in the current situation, the conclusions of the study apply mainly to the subset of the population that can be said to be in opposition of the military coup.

The study found that the 2021 military coup has significantly altered the media environment of the country, causing audiences to change their habits and understandings of both media and news. The military's crackdown on independent media has made it far more difficult for people to access independent news and information and many struggle to navigate in the polarised society that is also reflected in the media landscape. The conflict is on everyone's mind and people actively seek out information to stay updated and make informed decisions for themselves and their families. Mainstream media outlets such as Mizzima and DVB are seen as trusted sources of information where content is produced based on ethical principles, but they are unfortunately not always able of providing needed information from a hyperlocal level. In these cases, audiences rely on local media or online community media (eg. Facebook groups for specific local areas) for information.

There is no doubt that social media plays a vital role in Myanmar. Compared to the findings from an audience research study, IMS conducted in 2018, where television was the preferred medium for news and information, most Burmese today rely on social media. Facebook is by far the most used platform, but people are beginning to be more vary as to how they use Facebook and leave traces of their whereabouts and political opinions. People may fear that liking, commenting or sharing news from non-military media can have consequences for their safety and security. People are in general far more conscious about their media usage and digital habits and take extra measures to protect themselves and their online identity. For instance, by using VPN servers when accessing social media and news sites or leaving their smart phones at home when leaving the house to avoid it being scrutinized by authorities. Media literacy levels also appear to have been elevated with people checking sources and fact-checking information they encounter online. This is a positive development in a country that until recently saw very low levels of media literacy and understanding of dis/misinformation on social media.

Based on the findings, the report ends with 11 recommendations directed towards both the Myanmar media and the organisations and institutions that supports the media. IMS hopes that these recommendations can serve as inspiration for the continuous support to sustain independent media in a post-coup Myanmar and ensure that the population continue to have access to relevant and reliable news and information.

IMS 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 is equally appreciative of Nyan Corridor's professional approach and readiness to carry out an audience study in Myanmar despite the many obstacles that doing research in a conflict situation entail.

Introduction

When the military seized control of Myanmar on 1 February 2021 and declared a year-long state of emergency, the country was sent back to military rule after almost 10 years of democratic transition. In a matter of hours, the coup dramatically changed the situation of civil society and independent media and halted all ongoing development efforts in the country.

In recent years, Myanmar has gone through historic changes and taken important steps in its transition towards democratic governance. A new Constitution was adopted in 2008 and in 2015, Myanmar held its first openly national election in 25 years. Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy (NLD) won landslide victories in both the 2015 and 2020 General Elections and although everything was far from perfect, the country was continuing its transition towards democracy with the population experiencing greater respect for human rights, increased access to relevant and reliable information and better possibilities for freedom of speech. Also, within the areas of access to information and freedom of expression, Myanmar has taken great steps forward. New and better laws, a more liberalized media market, technological advancements with rapid spread of digital platforms, an independent press council, unions and increasing professionalization of the journalistic field have contributed significantly to the advancement of the media industry. While there were still many unresolved issues, audiences enjoyed greater access to independent information with a wide variety of independent media and platforms to choose from.

Yet all of this changed with the coup, where the military immediately took over the government media channels, shut off and deregistered numerous independent media outlets and blocked access to social media platforms. Even when people found a work-around for this, the military found ways to block or limit data access on mobile and fixed line networks to control people's access to information. Satellite dishes were ordered removed, further reducing access to information for Myanmar citizens. During the past two years, media offices have been raided and more than 175 journalists have been arrested, of which at least 62 are still in custody, and a total of 42 journalists were convicted in 2022 alone¹. A substantial number of journalists have gone into hiding and many media houses have suspended operations, scaled down operations significantly or started working underground. This has resulted in significant changes to people's abilities to access news and information, most likely forcing them to rely upon personal networks and contacts or, alternatively, fall back upon the military and state media to get information on what is happening. In a time of crisis, people need access to relevant and reliable information to keep themselves informed about what is going on in their communities and how to best make decisions affecting themselves and their families. Otherwise, they are left with rumours and hearsay to inform their decision-making. We are, in other words, finding ourselves in a completely new situation compared to just two years ago – with media having to find or create ways to produce and distribute news and information and audiences having to rely on different methods to access information and inform themselves about the ever-changing situation in the country.

Against this backdrop, IMS (International Media Support) decided to undertake an audience research project to understand changes in media audience patterns following the coup and following up on a previous audience research project (conducted in 20182). The research provides insights into people's media habits and preferences, trust and media literacy levels. In the post-coup environment, it looks into where and how the public gets its information; what the public may deem to be relevant and trustworthy media sources and news content; and how the public evaluate content from different sources, including social media.

The data collection and the preliminary analysis for this study were undertaken in June and July 2022 by a research team organised by Nyan Corridor research foundation with guidance and support from IMS. A total of 223 respondents took part in the study from six states/regions (Karen, Rakhine, Shan, Yangon, Tanintharyi and Sagaing). These regions were chosen as they represented various conflict scenarios in Myanmar as well as being home to a mix of Myanmar ethnicities.

¹ Reporting ASEAN, 2023, "Two years after the coup: Myanmar journalists go underground, but soldier on", <https://www.reportingasean.net/two-years-after-the-coup-myanmar-journalists-go-underground-but-soldier-on/>

Methodology

The 2022 media audience study was designed to give indicative insights into media audiences' habits and preferences in a challenging political and social environment. With such purposes and given the difficult circumstances, it was decided to conduct the study using a qualitative approach to get rich, in-depth information.

Taking a qualitative approach to an audience study naturally sets some limitations in terms of the number of participants and how representative the study is. It is therefore important to emphasise that the research is not claiming to provide statistically representative results reflecting the media habits and media literacy levels of the entire Myanmar population. The research was designed to give indicative insights into these topics and generalise on broader levels. To ensure a high level of generalisability, participants in the research were selected based on a stratified, purposive sampling strategy to make sure that they reflected different media user types (e.g., heavy internet users vs. non or light internet users), age groups, ethnicities, gender identities and geographical locations.

With such a sampling approach, the research strived to include several different stereotypical media consumers in Myanmar without having a full representative sample. This provided indications of media use and media understandings across different groups in Myanmar and was used to identify trends and phenomena among Myanmar media audiences.

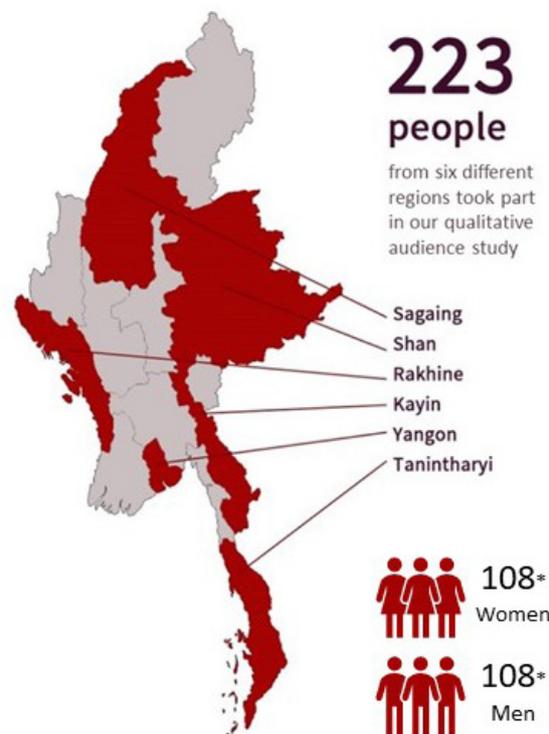


Figure 1: Overview of participants according to region and gender. *108 participants identified as women, 108 participants identified as men, six participants identified as other and one declined to reply.

²IMS, 2018, "Myanmar's media from an audience perspective", [Myanmar's media from an audience perspective | IMS \(mediasupport.org\)](https://www.imsmediasupport.org/)

Participants in the study were sampled from six different states/regions: Karen, Rakhine, Shan, Yangon, Tanintharyi and Sagaing. The six states/regions were chosen to provide insights from various places around the country with representation from several ethnic minorities covering Bamar, Mon, Karen, Chin, Kachin, Rakhine and other minorities such as PaO, Danu, Inn Thar, Ta'ang, Ahkar, Kami, Dainet, Rohingya and some who identified as mixed ethnicity. The Bamar majority represents 33 percent of the sample while the rest are from ethnic minorities.

The choice of states/regions were also made with consideration to the ongoing conflict. Whereas Sagaing has been experiencing intense and continuous armed conflicts between the military and the anti-coup armed resistant groups, generally called PDF (People's Defence Forces), other regions have seen less fighting. It was deemed important to include aspects from different conflict zones to get a broader perspective on the population's media habits in the current situation.

Table 1: Overview of research participants

	Kayin	Shan	Rakhine	Taninthary	Sagaing	Yangon
Total number of participants	35	35	40	36	37	40
Gender distribution	19 Men 15 Women 1 Other	17 Men 18 Women 0 Other	21 Men 18 Women 1 Other	14 Men 20 Women 2 Other	18 Men 19 Women 0 Other	19 Men 18 Women 2 Other 1 Unknown
Age distribution	18-30: 14 31-50: 16 51+: 5	18-30: 12 31-50: 17 51+: 6	18-30: 19 31-50: 15 51+: 6	18-30: 21 31-50: 10 51+: 5	18-30: 13 31-50: 18 51+: 6	18-30: 13 31-50: 20 51+: 7
Ethnicity	Karen: 22 Mon: 3 Burma: 5 Other: 5	InThar: 9 Danu: 4 PaO: 4 Burma: 5 Kayan: 3 Kachin: 2 Arkhar: 3 Other: 5	Rakhine: 24 Mro: 3 Dinet: 2 Chin: 2 Other: 7 Unknown: 2	Dawei: 17 Burma: 13 Other: 6	Burma: 24 Chin: 10 Other: 3	Burma: 26 Chin: 8 Karen: 2 Other: 4
Urban Rural	Urban: 20 Rural: 15	Urban: 21 Rural: 14	Urban: 20 Rural: 20	Urban: 16 Rural: 20	Urban: 23 Rural: 14	Urban: 25 Rural: 15

In the original research design, data was to be collected using a combination of background questionnaires, focus group discussions and in-depth interviews. However, due to security reasons and privacy protection of research participants, it was decided to drop the focus on group discussions and instead interview participants individually while also asking them to complete a background questionnaire.

Two different interview guides were developed for the purpose. Both had the same 39 core questions while the longer one had an additionally 12 questions. The interviewers operated with both and used the long version when it was possible.

The two guides were developed due to the instability of mobile connections and internet connections in Myanmar, and it was therefore deemed necessary to have a shorter version in case of connection issues. While both interview guides covered key topics such as access to information and security challenges, media habits, news consumption, news and information preferences, trust in media and engagement with content, the longer questionnaire included follow-up questions, especially on media habits, social media usage and media literacy. The short version of the interview guide took approximately 25-30 minutes while the longer one took 45-90 minutes. Individual interviews ended up being carried out with 233 respondents in total through phone calls, Messenger or Zoom calls.

Conducting qualitative research in a post-coup environment proved to be a big challenge in terms of security for both researchers, interviewers and interviewees. Establishing trust was paramount to have an honest conversation. To ensure the most optimal conditions, Nyan Corridor worked with trained researchers of different ethnic backgrounds as well as local organisations that could reach out to communities in Tanintharyi, Shan and Karen in a conflict-sensitive and respectful manner. All researchers and interviewers received intensive training in the methodology and basic audience research, organised by Nyan Corridor and IMS, prior to data collection.

Due to the way in which participants were recruited to the study and the sensitivities of the topics being discussed in the interviews, in all probabilities most research participants find themselves among the groups in Myanmar that in varying degrees oppose the coup and the military. The coup has fostered an even deeper polarization in Myanmar where people have been forced to choose sides. This polarization existed even before the coup as the military and its supporters always have constituted somewhat of a society within the society with its own institutions, social groups and even media outlets. However, whereas it for instance prior to the coup would not have been a problem for a nonmilitary supporter to tune in to a military-owned television channel, today the situation is, as is also evident from this study, very different. While IMS and Nyan Corridor would have loved to tap into the pro-military groups in Myanmar to better understand their perceptions of the media and their media habits, this has likely not been possible given the current situation. Yet, the study still provides valuable insights into the post-coup media landscape in Myanmar and the difficulties with which people struggle to obtain information and keep themselves informed.

Findings

“News is what we can learn about what’s happening and about what are more than normal situations.”
(25-year-old woman from urban Rakhine).

Careful analysis of the in-depth interviews and focus group discussions reveals patterns of media consumption, preferences and trust in Myanmar following the 2021 military coup. This section lays out the findings from the study under five different themes. The themes display the most significant trends and insights that emerged from analysis of the data collected through the background questionnaire and the in-depth interviews. To respect the privacy of the research participants, everyone is anonymised in the accounts and will only be presented through gender, age and geographical location.

Throughout the report, results from the 2022 study will be juxtaposed to the results from the 2018 study to give examples as to how the military coup and digital transformations have influenced audience preference among the subset of the population opposing the military coup. A lot has clearly changed during the four-year period that has impacted people’s media usage and media literacy levels.

From legacy media to online media

In 2018, television was the most popular medium among the Myanmar population. More than half of participants in IMS' 2018 audience study indicated that they watched television every day. Women in particular seemed to be favoring television over other mediums with 6 out of 10 watching television every day. While television remains a popular medium, people are more inclined to use the internet and social media. In the 2022 study, a little more than 7 out of 10 respondents state that they use the internet every day. In contrast only about 3 out of 10 people indicate that they watch television every day.

While this finding should be interpreted in light of the current situation where many of the most popular television stations have lost their license and abilities to broadcast their content, leaving only the military-controlled television stations, it is however fair to say that internet usage has taken a big leap within the past 4 years.

When it comes to other legacy media like newspapers and radio, the trend of decreasing interest observed in the 2018 study appears to be continuing. Less than 2 out of 10 participants stated in 2018 that they read a printed newspaper every day – and almost half of the participants said that they “rarely” or “never” read printed newspapers. When it came to the radio, a little less than a third of the participants listened to the radio. In the 2022 study, the number of participants reading a newspaper every day has drastically dropped to 1 out of 100 people while less than one in 10 listens to radio on a daily basis. While there is a statistical uncertainty due to the number of participants in the study, it is indisputable that particularly printed newspapers have become less relevant as audiences have migrated to online platforms for news and information. Again, the situation following the coup may also have played a significant role, as people will have less access to printed newspapers that are typically only distributed in major cities across Myanmar.

This digital transformation can also be observed in the type of devices the participants have access to.

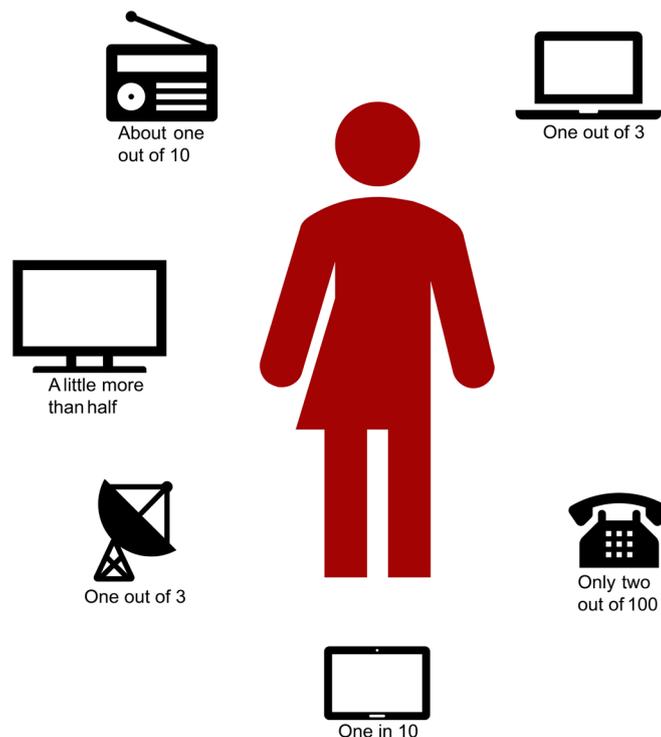


Figure 2: Overview of access to a selection of devices.

As is visible from figure 2, more than nine out of 10 participants in the 2022 study indicated that they had access to a smartphone and one out of three had access to a computer. A little more than half had access to a television and only one out of 10 had access to a radio. The rapid transitioning to usage of the internet and smartphones in Myanmar during the past decade is in itself fascinating – particularly when considering that internet penetration in the country in 2011 was estimated to well below one percent³. But as will also become apparent in this report, this dependency on the internet and social media also positions people in a state of vulnerability when access to the internet is cut and people are left in an information darkness.

The conflict is everywhere

Disruption can change many things in terms of audiences' preferences and behaviours. In Myanmar, the coup has clearly influenced people's perception of news – their so-called news concepts. While participants in IMS' 2018 audience study listed a variety of news topics and themes when asked to reflect upon what news were to them, the 2022 study shows how the conflict has coloured people's perception of news significantly. Respondents across all regions included in the study to a large extent associate news with the current conflict and the uncertain political situation.

Particularly in areas heavily affected by conflict, such as the region of Sagaing, news has gotten a new significance. While all six regions included in the study has been affected by the conflict and the military's severe crackdown on protests and armed resistance, the region of Sagaing has been particularly hard hit. About one third of the respondents from Sagaing reported having been forced to relocate due to the fighting between the military and the resistance. For them any type of news is of crucial importance to find secure locations and routes. Or as a 25-year-old man from rural Sagaing puts it: "News is a matter of life and death to us. It helps us to escape and survive."

Many respondents from different regions made this connection between news and safety and security. With the conflict raging, people are in dire need of updated and verified information about the situation in their local community to make informed decisions about themselves and their families – and the military's targeted shutdowns of the internet have only made that need more pertinent.

"I want to say that news is equal to one's safety. Through news, one can know what to prepare if something happens."
(49-year-old man from urban Rakhine)

While most are interested in what is happening in their local area, participants in the study also indicate a need to know what is happening in their hometowns and villages. As families have been split and people have spread across the country, updates from friends and family members are increasingly sought by participants in the study. A 76-year-old man from urban Yangon explains: "As I had to move due to security reasons, news for me is updates from my family about the situation in my hometown. I would also consider information about fights, interrogations and politics as news."

When asking more specifically about news topics, it again becomes apparent that the current situation is on everybody's mind. While "politics" as a broad topic is most commonly ranked highly when asking about participants' interests in audience research, it is clear that "politics" in the current situation in Myanmar is more important than usual. While the topic "politics" was widely mentioned by respondents in the 2018 study – particularly among men – it is outperforming all other topics by a landslide in the 2022 study.

³Datareportal, *Digital in Myanmar 2011*, <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2011-myanmar>



Figure 3: The five most popular news topics among participants, prompted.

Figure 3 shows the five most popular news topics among the respondents in the 2022 study. More than half of respondents said that they were “very interested” in politics. In contrast, the topic “sports” came out at the bottom with more than a third of all respondents saying that they were not at all interested in sports. Interestingly, the topic “sports” were one of the most preferred news topics among men in the 2018 study. However, with the country currently finding itself in the midst of what can best be described as a civil war, sports are probably not something people find themselves thinking much about.

Another interesting observation is the lack of differences between the news interests of women and the news interests of men in the 2022 study. Typically, women tend to prefer news closer to home (health, education) whereas men will be more inclined to follow news that relates to society more broadly (international politics, economy). While this classical division was observed in the 2018 study, it was less apparent in the 2022 study. Again, the conflict situation might be an obvious reason with most audiences being interested to follow the situation as it unfolds and keep themselves informed about the latest developments. However, variations were observed when looking at news interest by topics geographically.



Figure 4: The most popular news topics according to region.

As figure 4 shows, in the regions with less fighting, other topics have also gained ground and once again become part of audiences' news preferences. Another interesting finding that emerged from the interviews was increasing fatigue of conflict-related news. Such a development is often observed in prolonged conflicts as people settle into a new sort of normalcy and attempt to live their lives despite of the situation the country finds itself in. While there remains a strong interest in news related to the conflict some audiences have begun to seek other types of news. As a 24-year-old woman from rural Tanintharyi puts it: "Lately, I rarely want to read political news. I am craving news on education, health and work". It can also simply become too much for people to surround themselves with stories about the grave situation the country finds itself in and a news fatigue sets in. A 52-year-old woman from urban Sagaing explains it quite plainly: "We are seeing bad news every day and I am really just fed up with that. I have even stopped reading news on Facebook and just want to listen to music or watch some television series".

Access denied

One of the biggest impacts on the public's media habits has been the limitations in accessing the media. Already in the early hours of the military coup on February 1, 2021, the military went to great lengths to control the population's access to information. Military personnel took control over the nationwide television channels and turned off the internet while the tanks rolled into the bigger cities. In the weeks and months that followed, critical media outlets and journalists lost their licenses to operate and broadcast frequencies was revoked for the major networks. When popular broadcast media moved to transmission via satellite, satellite too became a target by the military – particularly when it observed how popular they were becoming and how the independent media were thereby able to circumvent their evictions from the national media markets and still serve local populations.

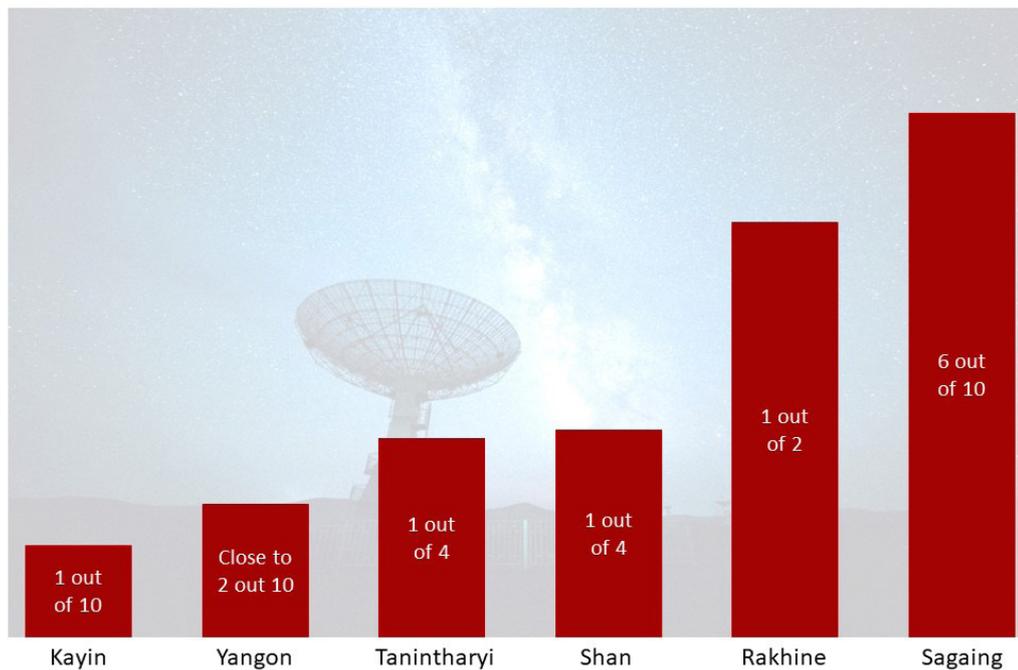


Figure 5: Use of satellite dishes among participants according to region.

Despite the military's campaign against them, satellite dishes are still used broadly as a means to access news and information – not least in the regions of Rakhine and Sagaing as is evident from figure 4.

The internet cuts and subsequently ban of social media platforms have, however, had the biggest consequences for people. The military has strategically used their power over digital infrastructures to control the population's abilities to access and share information in an attempt to contain information and keep people in the dark about the military's activities. Perhaps not surprisingly, the regions with intense fighting have experienced this the most. A 24-year-old woman from recounts: "Internet connections have been cut on/off since the third month of 2021 and sometimes the internet speed is limited to 2G and even with that speed, the connection is only accessible around midnight."

The ban of popular social media has also been a mayor nuisance to people. However, many quickly found ways to work around the bans by using VPNs (Virtual Private Networks) or – in the case of the more tech-savvy urban population – using international roaming mobile sim cards.

"After the coup, news became less accessible because Facebook was banned. Now, if I want to access the news, I always have to use VPN." (32-year-old man from urban Karen)

Using VPNs, does however renders a security risk for the users as the military has begun to strike down hard on people with VPN apps on their mobile phones. Simply having a VPN on a phone is seen as an act of rebellion. A new draft cyber security law even proposes to make it illegal to use VPNs in Myanmar. That has caused some to simply stop using VPNs out of fear of any potential consequences. A 29-year-old woman from rural Sagaing explains: "There were some cases after the coup where people were jailed for 2-3 years when they [the military] found out that they had been using VPNs. So, I uninstall Facebook, VPN and all social apps before I travel."

⁴ A VPN is a service that protects a user's internet connection and privacy online. It creates an encrypted tunnel for data transmissions between the user's device and the servers he/she tries to connect to. It also makes it possible to bypass blockages on national networks by linking users up to networks in other territories.

But it is not just accessing the internet and social media that is causing issues with access to information. Affordability and technical skills are also posing a hindrance. At the beginning of 2022, the military for instance pressured telecom companies to increase usage prices in an attempt to dampen the public's use of the internet and social media. Furthermore, far from everyone in Myanmar has the necessary level of digital literacy to circumvent the various bans and obstacles – and protect themselves from any sort of surveillance by the military.

As a consequence of the various bans and shutdowns, people have had to find other ways of accessing news and sharing information. As was also visible in the 2018 study, Myanmar has a strong culture of sharing news and information fostered by the years under the military regime where information was scarce. Today, people are relying on phones and messaging apps to convey important information to friends and family. Telephone chains are set to work to keep people informed about secure routes out of villages and places to seek shelter – particularly in regions with heavy fighting like Sagaing: “If I want to know what is going on, I just phone and ask. I will call someone in the nearby villages of where the SAC has initiated fighting and ask about SAC.” (29-year-old woman from rural Sagaing)

However, audiences often rely on more than one source of information – just to be on the safe side. A 33-year-old woman from rural Sagaing explains: “First, I will make a call to someone because this is apparently the quickest way to get access to the news. Then, I go to a place where I can access the internet and check the news on internet. The news is broadcasted late on satellite television unlike on the internet where the news is posted promptly.”

High trust in local and verified media

The coup caused big disruptions in the Myanmar media environment and one-and-a-half year after the coup, when the data for the study was collected, the consequences of the drastic changes are showing in audiences' media preferences. Some of the most preferred and trusted news media that were mentioned in the study in 2018 are no longer as high up on the list. Instead, new media has taken their place and become the places to go for news and information. In some cases, though, people have little to choose from – and the places they go are not necessarily the places that they would prefer to get their news from.



*People in Myanmar to a large degree rely on their mobile phones to access news and information.
(Photo by Santosh Kri/SOPA Images/LightRocket via Getty Images)*

⁴Human Rights Watch, 2022, “Myanmar: Scrap Draconian Cybersecurity Bill”,
<https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/02/15/myanmar-scrap-draconian-cybersecurity-bill>

⁵Aljazeera, February 11, 2022, “Myanmar’s internet gets pricier for dissenters, apolitical alike”,
<https://www.aljazeera.com/economy/2022/2/11/myanmars-internet-gets-pricier-for-dissenters-apolitical-alike>

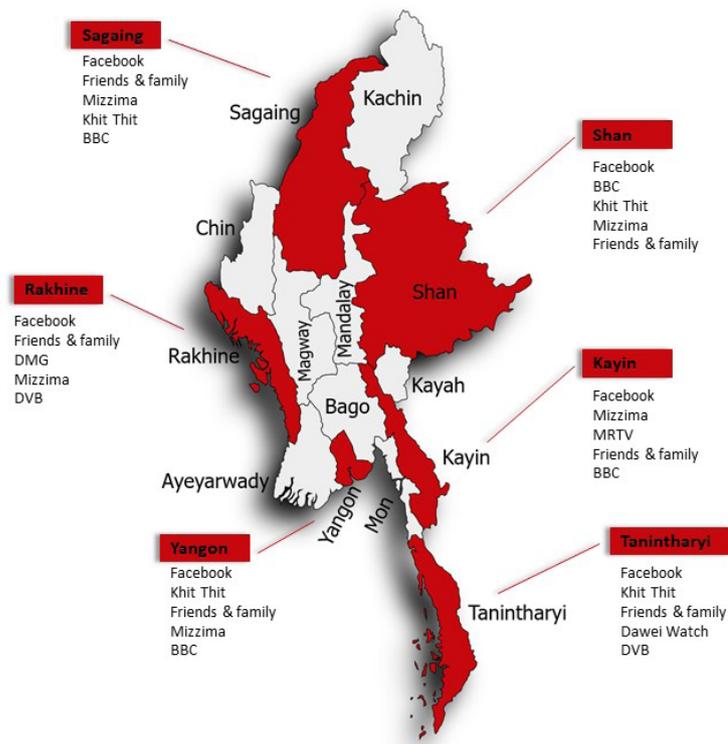


Figure 6: Top five preferred sources for news by region.

As is evident from figure 6, Facebook is (regardless of its own perception as mainly being a platform for social engagement) seen as the number one preferred source for news in all states. Friends and family also appear among the top five sources of news in all regions which corresponds with the sharing culture in Myanmar and the natural tendency to trust those close to you more than external sources. When it comes to media outlets, the biggest change compared to the 2018 study is Mizzima. Whereas Mizzima had a much lower brand recognition in the 2018 study, it is the media that is most frequently mentioned when respondents are asked to mention any media houses they can think of without assistance. Mizzima has since the coup drastically changed their operations and upscaled on news. The media was also one of the first to set up operations in hiding and being vocal about the important role of media in Myanmar. This together with their continued coverage of the conflict has gained them a strong position within the Myanmar media environment.



Mizzima is one of the media that has been forced to move into exile and now operate from an unknown secure location. Here is a still from a promotion video they made to explain about the situation for journalists and media in Myanmar (Photo: Screenshot from Mizzima TV [<https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=980234399388279>])

Another observation is the positioning of local media outlets in the top lists. One of the main conclusions from the 2018 study was the strong correlation between audiences' trust in a media and local presence of the media. This seems also to be the case in 2022. People crave news with local angles and perspectives. As a 45-year-old man from urban Rakhine says: "When it comes to news, we get the best information through our local media, like Narinjara and DMG." Another man from Shan agrees: "I usually watch local news agency. Mae Khong news agency and Tar Chi Late new agencies are reliable sources. They post local news and post updated news pretty fast." (38-year-old man from rural Shan).

Ethnic media have in particular become relevant in the current situation and has also been able to report in real time on social media for local audiences. Many participants in the study therefore recounted following these media on Facebook – even if they were not necessarily their preferred sources of news. Even in Yangon an awakening has happened in terms of the ethnic areas of the country – causing some people to gain an interest in news from these regions. A 44-year-old woman from urban Yangon explains: "Today, I tend to watch ethnic news media much more. It was like I used to ignore what was happening with ethnic people and what was happening in their areas. But they want us to know what is happening with them as they also live in the same country as us. So, I watch the news channel from Sagaing."

Usage of a media does however not necessarily correspond with trust. The coup and the following armed conflicts and polarisation in the country has had a clear impact on audiences' trust in the Myanmar media. A significant number of participants explained that they did not trust the media anymore: "There is no news agency that I trust because they write news without following media ethics. I have even lost trust in the media I used to trust." (Respondent without gender identification from urban Tanintharyi)

Trust in the state-owned and military-controlled media has in particularly gone down. While trust in these media was also rather low in the 2018 study, there is not almost no one who will even admit to consuming these media⁷:

"It is only after the coup that I have learned who is right and who is wrong. I don't dare to trust all the news agencies and unfollowed them. Now, I don't trust MRTV, MWD and A Lin Tan anymore because they only present false information." (31-year-old woman from rural Karen.)

Table 2. The ten most trustworthy and ten most untrustworthy media in comparison as mentioned by participants in the study

Trustworthy media	Untrustworthy media
Mizzima	MRTV
DVB	Myawaddy
BBC Burmese	MRTV-4
Khit Thit	Eleven
RFA	New Light of Myanmar
VOA	Khit Thit
Myanmar Now	BBC Burmese
Irrawaddy	VOA
MRTV	Irrawaddy
KIC	Popular News

⁷*It should however be noted, that due to the sampling approach for this study, this might not reflect the entire Myanmar population as the more pro-military groups in society will probably be of a different opinion.*

As is evident from table 2, Mizzima and DVB comes out at top when participants are asked to list the media they trust in the most - followed by BBC Burmese. For some it is a matter of tradition while others have been influenced by the ways in which the media have been covering the coup and following conflicts.

"I have been watching DVB, Mizzima, Irrawaddy and BBC news agencies since before the coup. They have been popular news agencies and they broadcast the actual situation of the people on the ground. Moreover, they also make people think more after watching their news." (A man from urban Tanintharyi.)

"I mostly watch Mizzima, Khit Thit and BBC Burmese. They are less biased, and you will know that if you go look at the past. Then you will know that they mostly post reliable news." (25-year-old man from urban Kayin.)

"DVB and Mizzima do not report false news. These news agencies rarely have to apologise for their mistakes. Other news agencies are not like that." (48-year-old man from rural Rakhine.)

Some audiences vest their trust on international media as they believe that they due to the level of media freedom in their countries of origin will ensure higher standards in their reporting on Myanmar and report the truth. This was also something that was observed in the 2018 study where in particular the past played a strong role as respondents remembered these media (such as BBC, VOA and RFA) playing a crucial role during the military regime in providing people with solid information about the situation in Myanmar:

"BBC, VOA and RFA can be trusted because they are based in foreign countries, where the press is free. If news agencies in Myanmar reported openly like them, they would sometimes get arrested. That's why the true news is not really reported here in Myanmar." (31-year-old woman from urban Shan.)

"I didn't use to watch Mizzima and Myanmar Now. Before, I also thought that BBC and RFA were bad. After the coup, I have come to understand that these media say what is really happening on the ground and report the real time situation. I don't watch TV channels like MWD and MRTV anymore." (25-year-old urban woman from Yangon.)

Unsurprisingly given the people who participated in the study, in all six studied regions, participants indicate trusting the state/military media the least. Respondents from Sagaing and Tanintharyi are among those most vocal about their dislike of these media outlets. Private media that have chosen to align themselves with the military or agreed to follow the media directives from the Ministry of Information are also seen with contempt. This also applies to media that in the past was seen as being trustworthy independent media.

"The most untrustworthy media are MRTV, MWD, People Media and Voice of Myanmar. They make me really angry because MRTV and MWD are now under SAC's control, and they only broadcast false news. As for Voice of Myanmar, they lift the military's balls [slang for supporting the military]. My trust in Eleven Media has also declined. They do not present people's sentiments, but they only report the news that is not related to politics and never show the brutality of the SAC. I am not sure how a well-known media like Eleven came under the control of the SAC." (31-year-old man from urban Sagaing.)

“I don’t trust these media any more as MRTV and MWD always report that PDF (People Defence Forces) are the ones who set the fire [on the villages] although they [the military forces] are actually the ones who did this. This is unbelievable and doesn’t make sense.” (22-year-old man from rural Rakhine)

In some areas, the findings show that social pressure within local communities also results in audiences avoiding accessing news from state-run media altogether. Watching state media, which is under the control of the military, can mean that a person will be perceived as a military sympathizer. In the post-coup polarised society this can be a dangerous label.

As is evident from the lists in table 2, there are also some media that are seen as being controversial. One such example is Khit Thit – an online media outlet that has become very popular following the coup, particularly on social media. While some respondents appreciate Khit Thit’s quick updates on Facebook, others feel like Khit Thit is going in the wrong direction and not presenting the news in an objective manner. Again, this can be a sensitive topic as Khit Thit is known to support the resistance, and critique of such a media outlet could result in people believing that the critic is pro-military.

“Khit Thit is quite fast in news updates on what’s happening on the ground situation. I just learned the case of bomb explosion in front of Myung Palae school on 7 July when Khit Thit posted promptly about it.” (A man from urban Taninthayi.)

“I think the media like BBC Burmese is not bias, but I feel Khit Thit is sometimes overquoted.”(32-year-old man from urban Yangon.)



People in Myanmar have during the coup been very active on social media and various campaigns have been run on social media platform to inform about the situation inside Myanmar and the atrocities committed by the Myanmar military. (Photo by Peerapon Boonyakiat/SOPA Images/LightRocket via Getty Images)

Based on the interviews it is clear that trust in today's landscape very much corresponds with the media's ability to present verified information. In a conflict situation, people cannot afford to place their trust in media that do not present the news in a timely and truthful manner. If they are to make informed and potentially lifesaving decisions, they need factchecked information:

"I hope news agencies post news after fact-check. There are differences between news and ground situations and news is not true. I really wish that reliable news should be accessible to the public because the news agencies are not working properly."
(59-year-old man from rural Sagaing.)

But trust is easily lost and hard to regain. And with the increasingly polarised society, the Myanmar media need to walk a fine balance and ensure that they have their facts in place and a proper understanding of the situation on the ground before publishing a news story.

Social media is a key news source

In the 2018 audience study, we concluded that Facebook had become a dominant player in the Myanmar media environment and that despite how the platform might perceive itself, it was considered a news source among the population in Myanmar. This positioning of the platform is still evident. Even though people in Myanmar today have a much more nuanced understanding of what the internet is (the myth of Burmese believing that Facebook is the internet is no longer true), they still rely heavily on the platform. But new platforms have also risen in popularity and audiences' social media usage is today determined by the type of content they are looking for.



Figure 7: Top five most popular social media platforms among participants in the study.

As is visible from figure 7, participants in the study also listed YouTube, Viber, Telegram and Instagram among their preferred platforms. This finding corresponds with figures from other studies on social media usage in Myanmar, although other studies also indicate a high adoption of TikTok. While TikTok was mentioned among participants in the study, it was not mentioned as frequently as the social media platforms listed in figure 7.

The coup has also had an impact on usage of social media in Myanmar. In all regions, respondents explained how they had changed their social media habits following the coup. Not least the use of Facebook as the military from the very beginning went after the platform and banned it from Myanmar IP addresses. Furthermore, Facebook has also posed a security risk for those actively opposing the military coup as the military has used material from people's social media feeds to build legal cases against them. There have also been several cases of people experiencing a version of doxing on Facebook where other Facebook users apparently have got together to ban them from the platform by using Facebook's reporting mechanism. A 30-year-old woman from urban Rakhine recounts: "I don't feel safe using Facebook. That's why, I am very careful using it. My Facebook account has already been locked 2-3 times. Thus, it is inconvenient to use. I think it could be probably because someone has reported me. Sometimes, I even feel like I am being abused on social media. Lately, I don't really want to use Facebook anymore because occasionally, some people even come and criticize me face to face on what I posted on it..."

The military has also begun to confiscate people's phones at checkpoints and going through their social media accounts, making people even more conscious about what they post – and whether to bring their mobile phones with them when leaving their homes.

“I used to use Facebook before. But lately, both because of many check points and as my current job requires me to go around the wards, I have uninstalled Facebook due to concerns over my job and security. Instead, I access the news from YouTube and Telegram.” (45-year-old man from rural Yangon.)

Regardless of these changes in audiences’ social media habits, the platforms continue to be extremely popular and a key source of information – even if the information is less trusted and more disputed.

Media literacy on the rise

One of the key findings that have emerged from analysis of the 233 interviews is the significant change in people’s understanding of the media – and social media in particular. People’s general awareness of the pitfalls of social media, the military’s propaganda efforts and disinformation strategies have drastically improved. The need to protect oneself and keep on top of the situation in the country has driven people to become more knowledgeable about online security risks and the dangers of social media. As such, respondents seem much more conscious about their online activities and have learned new skills to for instance fact-check information.

“We are not secure. We are under surveillance through our phones in our country. Many have been arrested because they have been tracked through their phones. For example, posting about the [resistance] movement on Facebook and writing about political issues. Through telecommunication towers, people can be arrested in hours.” (A man from rural Tanintharyi.)



It is not only the Myanmar population that actively use social media. Authorities – from individual soldiers and generals to official offices and ministries – are also active on the platforms and social media to spread propaganda and intimidate the population.

(Photo by Getty Images/Getty Images)

"In the early period of the coup, I posted about 20 posts a day on Facebook. Now, I have to delete them, and I don't share information that is not safe for my security. Sometimes I log off my Facebook profile and I have also created a fake Facebook account. I activate the fake account when I go outside." (25-year-old woman from urban Yangon.)

But it is not just on social media that audiences have become more sceptical. Even before the coup, people were aware of how authorities would try to influence public debate through the media. And those who had lived during the years of the military regime knew very well how controlled the information ecosystem used to be when the military was last in power. With the polarisation of the Myanmar society following the coup, the scepticism has grown with the public being acutely aware of which side a media finds itself on. However, being aware of the polluted information environment does not necessarily equals being able to tell the truth. Even the independent media outlets sometimes misstep and fail to have their facts straight, and rumours have a tendency to run wild when major events occur. All of this has created an uncertain atmosphere where people struggle to know what to believe. As a 37-year-old man from rural Yangon explains:

"Today it is hard to get good information, but it is also hard to know if the news is true – even when I go around and ask people. Now, I feel like we have increasing fear that hinders our ability to think straight." (37-year-old man from rural Yangon.)

The problem is that audiences do not know where to go with their scepticism and need for factchecking information. Only a few participants in the study are aware about the various factchecking media and pages that actually do exist in Myanmar – and how to efficiently use them:

"I have heard of fact-checking organisations, but I have never tried them", (28-year-old woman from urban Sagaing.)

Instead, people have come up with their own methods to factcheck information. One of the most common fact-checking methods is reading comments under stories and posts:

"Rather than fact-checking whether the news is true or false, I normally read the comments under the post." (25-year-old man from urban Yangon.)

Another common method is checking with friends or acquaintances through phone calls. This method is mostly used by those who are in high conflict-affected areas.

I know there are fact-checking groups, but I rarely take a look at them. Normally, I check with my friends, and I ask persons involved directly." (29-year-old female from urban Rakhine.)

People in ethnic areas also check the news with local leaders' or local influencers who post on Facebook or other social media.

"I know there is a factcheck programme named Tway tway pi mha yone ('Think well before you believe') by Mizzima. There is also regular factchecking on Mratt's channel." ⁸ (28-year-old woman from urban Sagaing.)

"When it comes to my state [Karen], I read and check the news I find with Saw Albert Cho [a younger generation political analyst based in Karen State]." (24-year-old man from urban Karen.)

Some people also take immediate action against false news by writing comments under the new post on Facebook:

"If I know the news is false, I write a comment. I would point out if the news can be reliable or is there enough prove to trust. If not, I would tell the poster to delete it." (22-year-old man from rural Sagaing.)

These activities are testament to a significant change. In the 2018 study only a handful of respondents gave factchecking any thoughts – and people even struggled to understand the meaning of it as concept. But the Covid-19 pandemic and the 2021 military coup have pushed people into needing to care about concepts such as disinformation and factchecking. They simply cannot afford not to.

Conclusion and recommendations

The military coup has significantly changed the Myanmar media landscape and thereby also audiences' use of the media. As is evident from the findings in this study, audiences have been forced to change their media habits. Limited access to the internet, military take-overs or forced closures of popular national media and the relocation of trusted independent media to exile locations have disrupted the media markets of Myanmar, shifted power balances, and created a new landscape that both the population and the media must adjust to.

Accessing state-run, military-owned or pro-military media is viewed with great contempt among those in opposition to the military coup. The risk of being viewed as a military supporter has discouraged people from even turning on the television out of fear what neighbours would think of them and the social stigmatization that would likely follow. However, in some cases, people have no choice but to use these sources of news as they are the only ones still available in their local area – particularly where there is limited access to the internet. The media that is most trusted are the ones that have been able to uphold good reporting standards while also covering the conflict from both national and local angles. Local news outlets catering to audiences in ethnic areas are often mentioned by respondents in the study. The same goes for national media that due to their network of local reporters or citizen journalists have been good at reporting from local level. Finally, there is a renewed respect for international media outlets such as BBC, VOA and RFA that respondents also remember from the days during the military regime and associate with good journalism.

Whereas audiences prior to the coup had broad interests when it came to news, they are today mainly looking for news and information related to the conflict. News is life and death to us, as one of the respondents in the study said. However, a new normalcy of sorts has begun to set in. Two years into the coup, some are beginning to return to life – maybe not as they knew it before the coup but at least something similar to that. People have to earn a living; children have to go to school and life moves on. The conflict is still very much present in Myanmar, but other things are beginning to also be important to people again.

Getting access to news and information is one of the biggest challenges in post-coup Myanmar. The illegalisation of independent media, continuous haphazardly shutdown of the internet and blocking of social media has made it increasingly difficult for people to get hold of crucial information to inform themselves and their loved ones. Social media therefore has become one of the most important sources of information as news is updated here in real time. Yet, as was explained by participants in the study, people use social media with great hesitance as they have become aware about how platforms such as Facebook and TikTok can be used for propaganda purposes.

As such it is safe to conclude, that the coup has forced people in Myanmar to become much more media and digital literate than what has previously been observed in the country. The population has experienced first-hand how social media can be misused and particularly how the military has attempted to influence public opinion and take control of the narrative. People, particularly those opposing the military coup, therefore go to great lengths – when possible – to factcheck information and some even use the factcheck tools made available by organisations such as Mizzima, Red Flag and Burma Monitor. This leap in media literacy levels has of course come out of a great need following the coup as access to verified and trustworthy information has become much more restricted.

The 2021 military coup has forever altered the media environment in Myanmar. It has pushed digital transformations and altered audiences' perceptions and use of the media. It is clear from the study that media plays a significant role in people's life and that they are ever more aware of its importance now that it is a scarcity. It is the hope of IMS that the findings from this study can serve as both a reminder of the importance of supporting independent media in Myanmar and as an inspiration for future media development projects in and outside of the country. In an attempt of elevating the findings of the 2022 audience study, the report concludes with 11 recommendations to the Myanmar media and those working to support them:

⁸ Facebook's page of Mratt Kyaw Thu, a Rakhine ethnic man with a media background, who regularly post news and he is more well-known after the military coup.

Recommendations for the media

- **Go local:** Connect with audiences and meet their information needs by covering things at a local level. Audiences prefer content with a local angle.
- **Verify everything:** Trust is hard earned and easily lost – and audiences are unforgiving. Thorough journalistic practices, factchecking and objective reporting are the ways forward to earn and maintain audiences' trust.
- **Spread factchecking:** Invest in factchecking and factcheck journalism. People struggle to distinguish true from false in the current environment. Assist them with everything from tools and tips to in-depth reporting on the matter.
- **Broaden topics:** While the conflict is the most important topic for people, it is also important that the news is not only about the conflict. People increasingly want to see coverage of other topics relevant to their everyday lives.
- **Be creative:** People struggle to get access to independent media content. New and creative ways to get the content out to audiences should be discussed and piloted.
- **Counter the increasing polarisation in Myanmar:** Remember the complexities in the country and strive to serve the population as a whole. Seek to build bridges between the opposing groups in society instead of deepening the trenches.

Recommendations for donors and media development organisations

- Continue to support independent media, including offering safety and protection mechanisms for those risking their lives to cover the situation in the country.
- Invest in media literacy efforts and projects/organisations that strive to counter disinformation and hate speech in the country. This includes efforts that strengthen newsrooms' abilities to counter disinformation and hate speech – and cover the topics as newsworthy.
- Do not forget women, gender minorities and ethnic minorities. Women, ethnic minorities and people living in rural areas have less 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.
- Assist the media with innovative solutions to bypass hindrances and get their content out to the people – particular in hard-to-reach areas of the country. This also includes new approaches to journalism and content creation/distribution as people continue to migrate to online platforms for news and information. Although radio is not a popular media there could be good reason in looking into audio media to get broader reach and bypass literacy barriers.
- Advocate for freedom of expression and access to information in Myanmar through diplomatic channels, including advocacy efforts targeted at the tech companies to keep them accountable for their actions and make them understand their role in ensuring that people have access to relevant and reliable information in all corners of the country.

The military coup in Myanmar on 1 February 2021 has significantly altered the country's media landscape and thereby also audiences' use of the media. In this report, IMS presents findings from a qualitative audience study conducted in 2022. It shows how people in Myanmar has been forced to change their media habits and struggle to get access to reliable news and information. It outlines the main challenges for people as well as their coping strategies and gives insights into the current preferences and trust levels. Finally, it presents recommendations to the media and the media development community on ways forward to ensure that the Burmese population can access relevant and reliable news.

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