The Internet As A Battlefield in Post-Coup Myanmar

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The Myanmar
Project collective

Researchers'
Republic

About the authors: Mi-Kun is the pseudonym of a Burmese journalist based in Yangon who specializes in new technologies. Laure Siegel is a French correspondent for Mediapart based in Bangkok covering politics in South and Southeast Asia and a media trainer. In the wake of the February 1st coup, they co-founded The Myanmar Project Collective, a network of reporters who document the post-coup events across the country from the ground. Their curated work can be followed and supported on Visual Rebellion Myanmar, a platform where Burmese photographers, filmmakers and artists can showcase their productions about life and resistance under and against the military regime. Together they researched and wrote this feature on how the most recent political earthquake impacted the development of telecommunications and issues of cyber-security and how the Internet became a crucial battleground between the pro-military and pro-democracy sides.

About Researchers' Republic: We are a team of about a dozen researchers from across Myanmar, led by our director, May Zin Thaw, who founded the organization in 2016. Many of us have worked together for a number of years. Most of us are still based inside Myanmar, and some of us have left the country since the military coup of February 1st, 2021. Our aim is to document the situation in Myanmar, and put it in perspective, looking into the past, not just the present, and with the future in mind. We believe that almost every aspect of life has been made so much worse by the coup and the criminal and exploitative nature of the military regime. But we also believe that it is important to see that the situation was already difficult, for the people and for the environment, long before the coup. So that the democracy movement and the people of Myanmar can identify solutions today, and when democracy returns to Myanmar. That day could not come soon enough! Our work has a strong focus on northern Myanmar and the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor. It focuses particularly on issues of climate change, the environment, land rights, labor rights, business and human rights, natural resources management, drugs, health, education, conflict, displacement, and gender.

About the Project: This paper is the first in a series produced by Researchers' Republic, in collaboration with The Myanmar Project Collective. This paper falls within a broader research initiative that was made possible through financial support from the United States Institute of Peace.

DISCLAIMER: Not all prices in Myanmar Kyat (MMK) in this report have been converted into USD as the rate is so fluctuant since September 2021 that it would not paint a fair picture of the real value of goods pre-coup.

On the morning of the February 1st coup, led by Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, access to the Internet was cut nationwide in a first attempt to tame popular organizing and outrage online. The cut was temporary and, initially, it looked like the new military regime, the State Administration Council (SAC), would be relatively tolerant of dissent on the streets and social media. That changed at the end of February when the SAC cracked down. Social media became a weapon for the junta. Platforms became a means to spread military propaganda and hunt opponents. Civilians used those same platforms to expose the brutality, fundraise for the most vulnerable, and mobilize. On social media and beyond, the Internet became a battleground and the stakes of online activity became life and death.

Myanmar's Telecommunication Breakthrough

The new millennium brought with it a technological leap that made computers, mobile phones and Internet access widely available. While access to the Internet proliferated worldwide, few people in Myanmar had access to a landline. Myanmar was entering its fifth decade of isolation imposed by the military junta, which seized power in 1962. Since the early 2010s, economic liberalization reforms brought smartphones and the Internet into households, as well as double-edged societal change.

Before 2008, a year of significance in Myanmar, with Cyclone Nargis bringing death, and having a profound impact on society at large, ordinary post-paid SIM cards were officially sold at around 1,500,000 MMK (USD 1,500), a price unheard of in the rest of the world. SIM Cards and landlines in Myanmar were not only extremely expensive but also very difficult to get, resulting in long waiting lists. Some people with connections to military circles obtained SIM cards and then resold them on the black market at twice the official price to the select few who could afford it.

At the end of 2008, the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), which ruled Myanmar between 1997 and early 2011, introduced the first prepaid Global System for Mobile (GSM)/Code Division Multiple Access (CDMA) phone cards in a few City Mart shops in Yangon and Mandalay. The cards were again sold at twice the official price by most retailers, for between USD 50 and USD 250. In neighboring Southeast Asian countries, they had already been available for several years at less than USD 20, still costing the average monthly income of a manual worker in Myanmar. As they remained too expensive for most people, the government distributed some cards to registered citizens via ward offices through a "lucky draw" system. Every month, two to five cards per town were distributed by local administrations. The winners usually chose to resell them because the 2G Internet was too slow to be of any use, because they had no one to call, and because they could get 100,000 MMK for it.

In 2010, before the elections of November 7 that would pave the way for the transition of the 2010s, only 1% of the population had a mobile phone subscription. An hour's use of the Internet cost 500 MMK on average and was only available in a few computer shops in urban areas. Calls were equally costly at an estimated 540 MMK or 0.30 USD per minute. According to Freedom House, in 2013, when the population was estimated to be around 52 million, there were approximately 1 million Internet users in Myanmar.

In 2012, President Thein Sein initiated a series of economic liberalization reforms, including the end of the monopoly of state-owned Myanmar Posts and Telecommunications (MPT), giving way to foreign business and investment in the country. Two years later, Norway's Telenor and Qatari Ooredoo obtained initial licenses to start operations. Viettel, a conglomerate under the

control of Vietnam's Ministry of National Defense, obtained a 49% equity stake in Mytel, a joint venture with Myanmar National Telecom Holding Public Limited (MNTH) and Star High Public Company Limited. The latter is a subsidiary of Myanmar Economic Corporations (MEC), one of the two most important military conglomerates, now sanctioned by the USA, UK, and EU. MPT signed a joint operations agreement with Japanese corporations KDDI and Sumitomo.

According to our field research, those combined investments drove the price of SIM cards down to between 300 MMK and 1,500 MMK by 2013. Chinese-made smartphones entered the market costing between 80,000 and 1,000,000 MMK. A citizen interviewed in a polling station during the 2015 general elections explained how he reorganized his whole life thanks to this digital transformation: "Now I have a smartphone, several Facebook accounts and three SIM cards: one for my wife and family, one for work and one for my girlfriends..." In the space of a few years, mobile phone penetration rose to more than 100 per cent as many Myanmar users bought more than one SIM card, partly because of cautious privacy concerns after decades of living under brutal and intrusive state surveillance.

The additional introduction of mobile-money services lifted the whole economy by facilitating inter-state trade for small entrepreneurs, as explained in the report "Myanmar's Banking Crisis" which was circulated to media and researchers in August 2021 by the anonymous group Independent Economists of Myanmar (IEM):

> "Those services grew at a phenomenal rate and greatly expanded formal banking services. Each of those, such as Wave Money, Easy Pay, OK Dollar, M-Pitesan, MytelPay and MPT Money, is associated with at least one major bank and allows users to transfer money and, in some cases, top up airtime, pay utility bills and repay loans. Wave Money, for instance, doubled its business from USD 4.3 billion worth of transactions in 2019 to USD 8.7 billion in 2020."

But this development remained uneven across the country. In 2019, only 26% of the population had an account with a financial institution or mobile-money service provider and less than a third of the population actually enjoyed regular access to the Internet, according to the IEM report. In rural areas, only a handful of households owned and were able to use a computer. Access to Internet connectivity was far more restricted than in the main cities.

In early 2018, the National League for Democracy (NLD) government, which had taken power in April 2016, revealed plans to impose a 2% tax on the income of four mobile operators through the establishment of a Universal Service Fund (USF). The NLD government expected to use the funds to provide telecoms services to communities that remained underserved due to logistical challenges and sporadic conflicts, such as in Shan, Kayin, Kachin and Rakhine States. "While the USF aimed to reach 99% of the population by 2022, instability in ethnic states delayed network deployment. As of the fourth quarter of 2018, more than half of the uncovered population – around 1.8m people – lived in areas challenged by these disputes" noted the Oxford Business Group. In 2020/21, license fees from telecom operators were expected to generate USD 420 million, per the report provided by IEM, of mostly foreign currency.

The Return of the Darkness

Photo: Teenagers play the game 'Mobile Legend Bang Bang' in a mass protest in downtown Yangon in February 2021. On the cardboard, the message: "Short-sized MAL - D**k Face". (Photo Courtesy of Mi-Kun)

After the coup, all investments in telecommunications were put on hold, and access to the Internet became weaponized. The downfall of the Myanmar economy, and particularly of its telecommunications sector, comes at a huge cost for the junta-led state as well as the citizens.

On the day of the coup, the military council cut the Internet and banned access to telephone lines. The first overnight Internet shutdown was imposed on February 6th, 2021, the same day the first mass protests took place. By February 13th, Internet use in Myanmar dropped to 15% of its normal traffic. For more than two months, Fiber cables and Wi-Fi lines were cut from 1 p.m. to 9 a.m. to avoid live-streaming of night raids as the crackdown on protesters and opposition figures intensified rapidly. "In some places Wi-Fi hotspot boxes were totally crashed by the soldiers which makes it very difficult for residents to stay connected as most of them can't afford a fiber line at home," details a member of the People's Defense Force (PDF) during our interview.[1]

From February 4th, the military council began to disrupt Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, which, along with video-sharing app Tik Tok, are the most popular social media platforms in Myanmar. James Griffiths, author of "The Great Firewall of China" says that "the decision to ban Facebook and Twitter was not surprising but the overnight Internet shutdowns were a lot stranger. Such blocks are relatively easy to achieve, especially when the government controls ISPs (internet service providers) which in the case of a military junta we must assume they do physically even if they don't legally."

A whole new generation of digital rights activists rose after the coup, a dramatic event that prompted people to undergo crash courses in online safety. There was a 7,200% increase in the use of virtual private networks (VPNs).[2] "We have been banned from accessing most social media sites. That's why we have to use a VPN to circumvent the blacklist," explains an informant engaged in the PDF. NordVPN stated that its company received more than 10,000 requests from Myanmar for its Emergency VPN program which provides free premium access to its service "in extreme cases of censorship or online privacy violations".

Other organizations such as The Tunnel Bear and Mysterium Network rushed in to circumvent the blackout in Myanmar. This was reminiscent of the pre-2011 situation when the few people who were able to browse the Internet used proxies to access websites that were banned by the government. In the first 48 hours following the coup, some 1.4 million people across Myanmar downloaded the application Bridgefy, which allows users to send offline messages to others within a range of a few hundred meters through Bluetooth or Wi-Fi antennas. In a year, it became the favorite "protest app," from Hong Kong to Turkey and Black Lives Matter gatherings. It was quickly abandoned in Myanmar as the streets became too dangerous for large protests, and networks of activists are now scattered around the country, with some of them forced to be completely off-radar.

As of September 27th, 2021 Internet access in 25 towns and cities across five states of Myanmar was cut off. According to Htaike Htaike Aung, Internet Freedom activist working on Digital security and Public Policy: "This pattern of shutdown is concerning as it is happening particularly in areas with violent crackdowns by the military junta." Such targeted blackouts are not new, as explained by Htaike Htaike Aung in a talk on Myanmar's Digital Revolution: "During the Saffron revolution in 2007, a handful of bloggers and cyber-dissidents managed to access the Internet and worked hard to bring news of what was happening to the world. There were very few people and businesses online but after the crackdown, the very nascent Myanmar Internet was cut off for a few weeks, which was I believe one of the first politically motivated Internet shutdowns in the world."

In June 2019, at the military's request, the Ministry of Transportation and Communication, citing security concerns and public interest, ordered telecom companies to shut down Internet and data traffic services and to (re)start filtering websites. Nine townships in Rakhine and Chin states were affected by the order, after clashes between the Burmese Army and the Arakan Army (AA), anywhere from four months to more than a year.

The February 1st coup brought to Yangon, Mandalay, and the rest of the Bamar plains the experience of imposed telecommunications cuts. In early March, electricity was cut off nationwide from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. On March 17th, the Internet was shut off in Hlaing Thar Yar, the same day the SAC regime gunned down more than a hundred protesters in the Yangon working-class industrial neighborhood. Since early October, numerous townships of Northern Shan, Chin, Kachin and Kayah states as well as in Sagaing and Magway

regions were subjected to large-scale military attacks. Residents reported that they were unable to make a single phone call.

People living in border areas across China, India and Thailand, are no longer able to connect to the network of neighboring countries. Following reports of China's alleged involvement in the surveillance of the Myanmar Internet, the pro-democracy movement became very wary of Chinese-made smartphones and applications and the Chinese SIM network is not available across the border anyway. India's network is also mostly inaccessible, as users are subject to a formal registration system that requires a national ID card or passport to activate a SIM Card, which makes it also very difficult to top-up credit. AIS, Thailand's largest mobile phone operator, which is controlled by a Singapore government-owned company, offered international roaming data in Myanmar via SIM Cards which circulated on the black market for 10 times their official price in the weeks after the coup. It was then announced on April 2nd that "AIS network partners became unavailable and that any AIS SIM Card will be unable to connect local networks in Myanmar." Only people living in exile along the Thai-Myanmar border manage to make calls to Myanmar, from the top floor of their houses or on hills, at the local rate via the Telenor operator.

Cutting off telecommunications is an effective way to limit reporting and bar people from any source of independent news. The country was already grappling with serious cases of misinformation and disinformation during political and health crises, but this new war on information has the potential to lead to chaotic and irremediable consequences.

A decade after many other Southeast Asian countries, the digital revolution provided people in Myanmar with access to new technologies, business opportunities and a whole range of cultural offerings, from books and news to games and movies. Thanks to the introduction of content-sharing applications, they could tell the world what was happening in Myanmar. Families and communities living miles apart or across borders could stay in touch, and unionists and activists could build support organizations.

The Curse of a Facebook Nation

Life online came with downsides and dangers. When the Internet was finally introduced to Myanmar, it came without proper guardrails or governance. That proved devastating in a context of overall minimal education, digital literacy and sociopolitical tension.

In Myanmar, for many, Facebook is the Internet. Facebook is also the new tea shop, a place where people used to meet and chat about current events during earlier eras of dictatorship. The Melbourne Asia Review puts this in context: "Facebook's 'Free Basics' initiative in the developing world and partnerships with telecommunications providers such as Telenor helped fuel Facebook's extraordinary expansion. After its entry in 2014, Telenor offered a deal where customers could use Facebook on their mobile device without any data charges. Importantly, as Internet connectivity was expanding, the quality of connections remained poor, but in this early phase of expansion, Facebook loaded better than other platforms. Lastly, Facebook established deals with manufacturers and retailers to have their application preloaded onto Burmese mobile phones." In 2021, Facebook's user base in Myanmar amounted to approximately 28 million users, which represents half of the population, and remains a primary source of news for most. Of a hundred Internet users interviewed by the authors in September 2021, the Facebook application remained the sole use of and gate to the web for 80% of the users.

Its pervasiveness, combined with absent governance (State or corporate), unregulated and unchecked content, and algorithms that elevate the most arousing posts made Facebook a predictable weapon in the crimes committed against the Rohingya community. In a CBS documentary, whistleblower Frances Haugen denounced the responsibility of Meta (formerly Facebook) for "tearing our societies apart and causing ethnic violence around the world." For years, ultra-nationalist Buddhist monk Ashin Wirathu incited violence against Muslims, and more specifically against the Rohingya, on his pages followed by half a million people. The consequences of the viral circulation of inflammatory posts by religious and military leaders on existing tensions got very real during the ethnic cleansing campaign against the Rohingya community from October 2016 onwards. Over a million people from the Muslim community have been forced to flee to other countries. A study by the Ontario International Development Agency estimated in January 2018 that 115,000 Rohingya were beaten, 35,000 were thrown into fires by the Burmese military and local Buddhist Rakhine civilians. They also killed 24,800 people, perpetrated gang rapes and other forms of sexual violence against 18,500 women and adolescents.

Following Facebook's admission in 2018 that its platform was being used to "foment division and incite offline violence," Gambia filed an application for discovery in June 2020 with the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia. The application aimed to compel Facebook to disclose information related to the personal Facebook accounts of Myanmar officials, which the court ordered the social media giant to do in September 2021. Meta appealed the decision,

claiming that the company is working on releasing its own internal investigation. On December 8th, a U.S judge voided a previous order to Meta to hand over Facebook messages sent from government military accounts, ruling that they were private conversations and protected, even if they contain evidence of genocide. Activists are not giving up, and lawyers representing Rohingya victims of violence moved to sue Facebook for over $150 billion in December 2021: "A U.S. class-action complaint, filed in California by law firms Edelson PC and Fields PLLC, argues that the company's failures to police content and its platform's design contributed to real-world violence faced by the Rohingya community."

In the days following the coup, Sonny Swe, editor of the magazine Frontier Myanmar, warned: "What I can tell you now is that Facebook is very very poisonous. It is good to use Facebook for very peaceful demonstrations as long as people are reading 'real' news on Facebook. But then it's quite dangerous. Disinformation, misinformation and hate speech are getting more and more powerful." Facebook is at the center of a new controversy after the rights group Global Witness found that its algorithm was promoting posts in breach of its own policies that incited violence against anti-coup protesters in June 2021. In early October, youth activist Robert Minn estimated that more than 5,000 military propaganda accounts had been created on the platform since February 1st: "They set up a profile with a fake name and a picture of someone else framed by a filter in support of the National Unity Government of Myanmar (NUG). Then they start spreading fake news such as villages being burned down by PDF, without mentioning any location and which have been debunked by fact-checking." On October 7th, the SAC Ministry of Information ordered all government departments to open two accounts to spread anti-NUG military propaganda news on Facebook. Pictures leaked on Myanmar Now from the Taungoo Air Force Base showed officers' daily reports of how many 'likes,' 'comments' and 'shares' their prescribed posts gathered.

Twitter User @pyaezone[3] compiled a list of pro-military groups and explained what is happening in these groups: "The first step is to infiltrate their filter bubble is to join pro-military groups (i.e groups that have တပ်မတော် in their name – 'Tatmadaw') and like their pro-military pages. Next, add soldiers, police as well as people with Buddha images on their profiles found on those groups and pages. Facebook will then start suggesting you with similar profiles in the 'People you may know' list where 99% of whom are soldiers/policemen or far-right extremists. Another problem with the Facebook algorithm is that it shows you content from your friends or pages/groups you followed first. That means when you search for a keyword like 'Rohingya', you will only see disinformation from pro-military accounts and there will be no reliable news sources. Another subtle military psy-war tactic is to influence one's audience by posting eye-catching/sentimental content to attract more followers. Once they gain enough followers, the pro-military influencers will start feeding their followers disinformation. To sum it up, Facebook algorithms are still helping the Myanmar military spread its slander/disinformation campaigns against its people and the civilian government. From what I've seen, Facebook is doing next to nothing to safeguard the truth, democracy, and freedom".

Pressure is mounting. A sizable portion of anti-coup citizens have switched from Messenger and WhatsApp to the encrypted messaging applications Signal and Telegram because they are deemed safer than Meta. Groups such as Justice for Myanmar and Burma Campaign UK have been lobbying the US company to effectively ban pro-military accounts and kick Burmese military companies off of Facebook. On December 7th, 2021, Meta finally stated that it will "remove Pages, Groups and accounts representing military-controlled businesses". In view of the damage done, the move is belated and hundreds of pro-military propaganda pages still remain active. Activists insist that the ban must be comprehensive and applied to all military joint ventures to cut their advertisement revenues and their influence.

Shaming Campaigns and a War of Attrition

Photo: A semi-opened Mytel shop in downtown Yangon in August 2021 (Photo Courtesy of Mi-Kun)
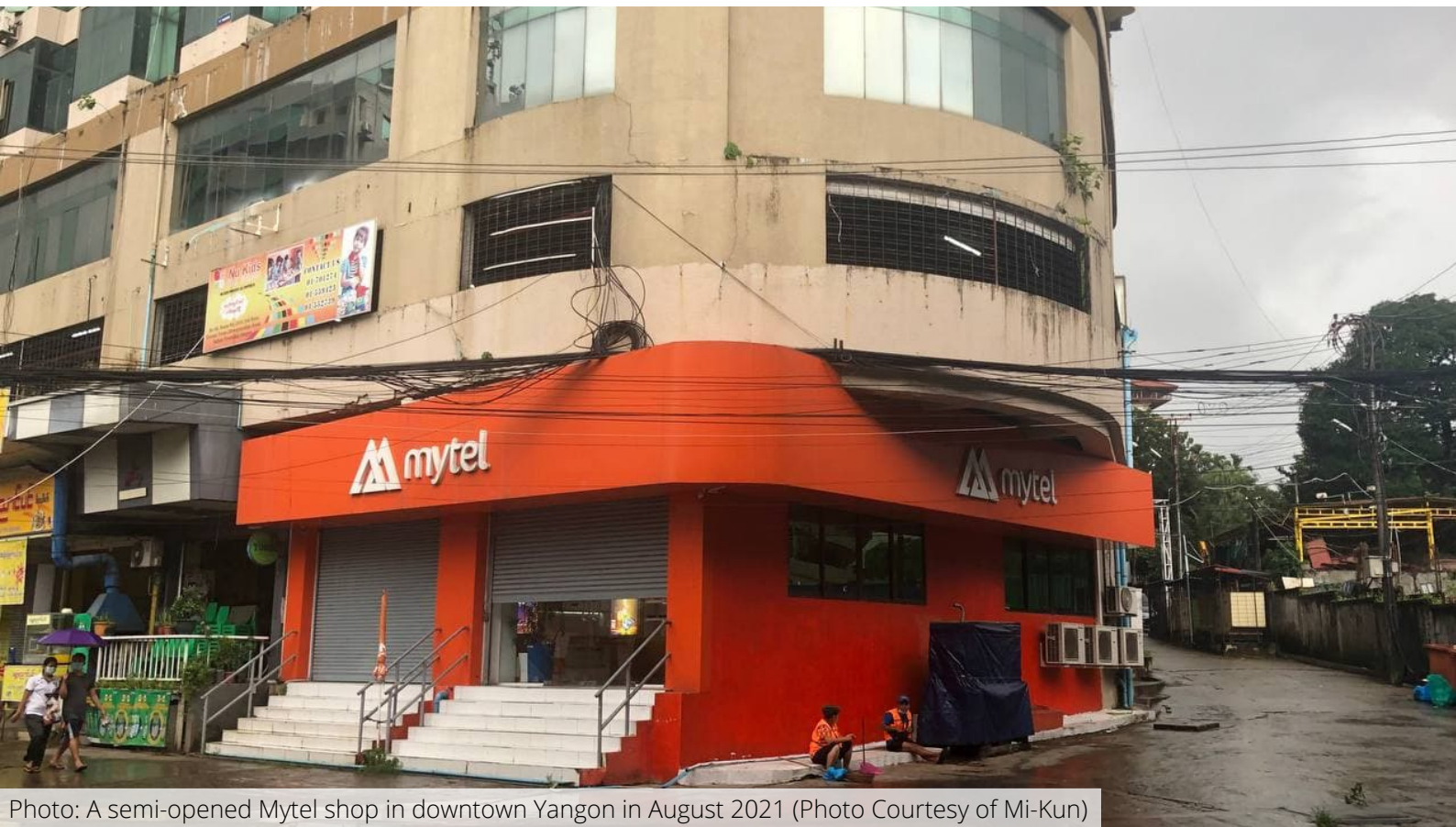
The increasingly diverse social media landscape provides citizens with numerous ways of communicating and expressing themselves, but also contributes to magnifying and displacing the problem in a relentless multi-channel online war on information.

Parallel to their daily task of signaling abusive Facebook content, pro-democracy protesters also began to focus on Tik Tok, which became the platform of choice for soldiers as it didn't initially respond to abusive and violent content. "In a video uploaded on TikTok, which gained popularity in Myanmar during the COVID-19 pandemic, a man who is appearing to be a soldier, warned his viewers to 'protest peacefully' or suffer the consequences. 'We have to shoot this. Not rubber bullets. See... real ones,' he said while pulling out a loaded magazine from his rifle," VICE News reported. The company has since vowed to pull down such videos but local informants state that they continue to spread widely.

A large number of channels promoting violence against protesters as well as 'revenge porn' have sprung up on Telegram, too. Numerous pages of 'social punishment,' which publish victims' addresses and other personal information and in some cases promoting sexual assault, multiplied after the coup. In Myanmar, 'revenge porn' on the Internet dates back to

before the coup and has never been adequately addressed. The most infamous Telegram and Facebook channels to promote social punishment are run by Han Nyein Oo. This is one of the main sources for celebrity gossip and 'yellow journalism', which reappears every three to four days despite being repeatedly taken down.

Amidst a nationwide conflict, the leaking of sexually explicit images or videos, real or fake, has become a political weapon employed by both the military junta and its opponents. Hundreds of women, from young pro-democracy activists to relatives of security officers, have been targeted by such abuse. This reflects a universal trend, as Danielle Keats Citron explains in her book "Hate Crimes in Cyberspace": "Persistent online attacks disproportionately target women and frequently include detailed fantasies of rape as well as reputation-ruining lies and sexually explicit photographs. And if dealing with a single attacker's 'revenge porn' were not enough, harassing posts that make their way onto social media sites often feed on one another, turning lone instigators into cyber-mobs." Citron also explains: "Cyber-harassment is a matter of civil rights law, and legal precedents as well as social norms of decency and civility must be leveraged to stop it." In Myanmar, however, organizations that could offer at least some advice and support to the victims are now unable to function, and people are very reluctant to act because the authorities are entirely unpredictable.

Since September, informants in Yangon have stopped paying their electricity bills as an act of resistance. In turn, the authorities intermittently turned off the whole network in some neighborhoods, cut the wires or confiscated satellite dishes. On February 1st, 2022, Myanmar people marked the one year of the coup d'Etat by staying home for a widely-followed Silent Strike. On this day, local business man Ko Aung Aung set himself on fire outside the junta-run electricity office in Kyaukpadaung Township, Mandalay Region in protest at frequent power outages, according to The Irrawaddy. He left a note with the message: "May the people have 24-hours electricity. We are not going back to 2001-2002."

One of our team researchers puts the recurring cuts into perspective: "I documented cuts in every part of the country, from Mon, Chin, Rakhine and Shan states to Tanintharyi Division, Yangon and Mandalay. Not on a daily basis and not as bad as it was in 2008-2010 but there is potential for it to go much worse. During this time and previous years, electricity was on for 8 hours and off for 8 hours, allegedly because of shortages according to the military administrations. One will have to get up in the middle of the night to pump up water for another day, wait and adjust to be able to complete the daily tasks which required electricity. It was terrible."

Smartphones and computers have become more expensive due to international trade route disruption and inflation. The rate of the MMK against the dollar shot up exponentially with the currency losing 60% of its value in the course of the month of September. Any basic smartphone now costs more than 1,000,000 MMK except for Chinese-made ones which are

still available at a price between 250 000 and 500 000 MMK. Our team researcher explains: "The boycott of Chinese products is still going on but the border trade was made very complicated and there is almost no remaining trade with other countries in the region. So combined with the inflation, it is very hard to avoid Chinese products. Despite the security concerns, there is no choice but to use Chinese mobile phones if one needs one now."

Since the military council couldn't afford the Internet shutdown, they moved to make it more expensive for civilians. This was also a way to tackle the widely popular Click2Donate campaign, which raised money for pro-democracy groups by simply installing an application and then asking people to share, search, shop or participate online. Revenues from advertisements are automatically derived and transferred to a specific fund to support the NUG or PDFs.

On December 7th, the Ministry of Transport and Communications, under the military council, ordered telecommunications companies to restrict internet speed and raise prices. As businesses' profits stumbled in Myanmar and investments slowed to a standstill, people feared the return of telecommunication darkness. An informant from southern Rakhine state explained: "I haven't been at school for one year and a half because of Covid-19 and then the coup. The only thing that kept me going and gave me a perspective for the future was my online English lessons. Now I can't even afford to buy the 1 GB of data I need to attend the course on Zoom, as it went from 1,000 to 3,000 MMK from one day to another. The cheapest I found is 2,850 MMK from the military-owned network MPT, which I would never use".

The cities offer some free Wi-Fi hotspots in hotels, cafes or airports, as well as higher incomes areas, while the countryside is once again disproportionately impacted by the turnback. The cost hike in July only targeted phone data, but then in September, at-home Wi-Fi and Fiber packages prices also shot up, at the great despair of the informant from Rakhine. "We can't install Wi-Fi because my house sits between two hills, and the lines are not there. I asked my friend who has Wi-Fi if I could come to his home to follow my lessons, but he told me that he will cancel his subscription because the line connection is poor and because he can't afford it anymore. It tripled to 75,000 MMK per month for all operators except Mytel, which kept it at 25,000 MMK for now. They want to take everything from us and force us to support their companies."

The culmination of the coup, the incessant Internet and electricity cuts, the rising poverty as well as the risks of communicating on the phone, meant a sharp downturn in profit for telecommunications operators. All Myanmar-based operators chose to suspend their investments and steadily raise the price of data packages for Internet access as an attempt to limit their losses from July. The one exception is Mytel, the joint venture between Vietnam and Myanmar military officials. Mytel even offered discounts as an attempt to keep its previous ten million customer base after being targeted by a widely followed boycott campaign.

Since the coup, Mytel has been at the center of an intense political and economic clash. "As of

August 2021, MytelPay, Easy Pay and MPT Money are on the Civil Disobedience Movement's (CDM) list of boycotted entities, along with Asian Green Development Bank, the two military-owned banks and four state-owned banks," according to IEM's "Myanmar's Banking Crisis".

The Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB) describes Mytel as "nothing but the Tatmadaw in commercial form. Representing a serious conflict of interest, tenders for the erection of towers were famously given to a company owned by Min Aung Hlaing[4]'s daughter and National Tower Development, another Singapore venture with links—through director Patrick Aung—to Burmese arms seller Aero Sofi. Mytel has also been accused of land rights abuses, including illegally developing infrastructure on ethnic Kayin land."

In March 2021, Justice for Myanmar (JFM) disclosed that "the Myanmar military may be entitled to receive over US$700 million in dividends over ten years for their share in the military-controlled mobile network operator. These astronomical profits come from the people of Myanmar who are suffering immensely under the military's tyranny. Every phone call on the Mytel network and every kilobyte of data finances the people's oppression."

The business ties between the militaries of Myanmar and Vietnam (Viettel) are a source of great worry for users. Via Mytel, Viettel and its military shareholders, Myanmar's generals have unrestricted access to money, technology, and data which can be used for surveillance. A phone shop owner in downtown Yangon interviewed in mid-August 2021 said, "During the revolution, the number of people buying Ooredoo and Telenor SIM prepaid bill cards has increased, and the number of people buying new Mytel top-up cards and SIM cards has decreased significantly. People broke, burnt and threw away their Mytel SIM cards. Users of all Mytel-related apps downgraded and wrote bad reviews on the Playstore/App Store and Mytel-related businesses were shut down after being reported as scams on Facebook." From February to April 2021, boycott efforts against Mytel have reportedly cost the network USD 24.9 million and a loss of 2 million subscribers.

Bombing Mytel and Saying Goodbye to Telenor

Passive resistance has turned into forceful resistance. Just after Mytel relaunched its business page on Facebook in early September (which has since been taken down by Meta in early December), came a wave of attacks on hundreds of its telecom towers by the PDF across the country. The majority of the bombings were in the Sagaing-Magway borderlands. "Our attacks interrupt connectivity for Mytel users, and that is one of our objectives, to damage the service and cut the military's revenue streams." explains a PDF member to DVB, who found out that "each Mytel tower has a value of between USD 200,000 and USD 300,000: a significant burden to bear for Mytel, who now face the dilemma of establishing security measures to protect some 4,488 transmission towers and 14,129 base transceiver stations."

The hostilities around one of the most crucial public military monopolies are escalating. On September 23rd, a police officer was shot dead in front of the Mytel office in Monywa, which was targeted by a bomb a week earlier. On October 18th, in Pyapon, Ayeyarwady, 30 youths were arrested after a Mytel telecom tower was bombed nearby. As conflict erupts in every corner of the country, the military council, which doesn't have enough men to provide security for all of its infrastructures, announced that landmines had been planted near some towers and is threatening anyone who approaches with being shot. In Yesagyo, Magway, Muse and Shan State, Mytel employees fell victim to mine explosions. One lost a leg after stepping on one of the mines. In Mawlamyinegyun township, villagers have been ordered to guard a Mytel tower at night or be fined 20,000 kyats.

On November 4th, Thein Aung, a former major in Myanmar's navy and Mytel's Chief Financial Officer, was shot dead while he went for a walk with his wife, who was also injured. He held leadership positions in multiple military-owned ventures, including as the general manager of the conglomerate MEC and its subsidiary Star High Company Limited. Nobody has taken responsibility for the assassination, the most notable of a junta associate since the coup. But four people accused of being part of the Yangon Defense Forces (YDF) have been arrested for the killing.

The bloody battle around Mytel runs parallel to the chaos around the Norwegian multinational Telenor, hitherto considered as the most transparent telecom provider in the country. 95% of Telenor's 187 million customers worldwide are in Asia, including 18.2 million customers in Myanmar, a third of the population.

Telenor determined that they could not operate under the pressure and governance of the junta. In July 2021, Telenor announced a plan to sell its Myanmar branch for USD 105 million to the Lebanon-based M1 Group. The company was worth an estimated USD 600 million. "There are three reasons why we think a sale is necessary: it is the safety of our employees, but also the regulatory conditions and also that there is good compliance," Telenor CEO Sigve Brekke

told Reuters. "When we wrote off the business in May, we felt we could still operate in the country, although it was challenging. But after that, it has worsened." the company added in a statement.

After seizing power, the Tatmadaw drastically ramped up online repression. It enacted legal amendments to gain access to user information and issued daily notices to mobile operators and internet service providers to blacklist certain websites and VPNs. Telenor indeed found itself in limbo. Without offering details of how and by whom the metadata of its former customers would be handled, they proceeded with a deal with M1 Group, a business which[5] has a history of working with oppressive regimes such as Sudan and Syria. M1 Group's founder is Lebanon's current Prime Minister, who is accused of significant corruption by the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists in the Pandora Papers.

In an interview in August 2021, Sutawan 'Ploy' Chanprasert, founder of Digital Reach - a non-profit organization looking at the impact of tech on freedom of expression, privacy and digital security in Southeast Asia - stated: "Selling the business to M1 Group would weaken human rights in the country, especially the right to privacy and freedom of expression. However, it should be noted that no business that respects human rights would operate easily inside of the country. Only those that comply with the junta's orders would be able to survive."

The military junta is trying to force the telecommunications providers they don't already partially own, namely Telenor and Ooredoo, to install intercept spyware, which would give them the capacity to listen directly in on calls, view text messages and emails, and track the location of users.

Myanmar Now revealed that even before the sale, Telenor Myanmar had complied with at least 200 requests from the junta-controlled Ministry of Transport and Communications over the past 12 months to provide information from its customers. This included records of calls, call locations and the last known location of specific phone numbers registered with Telenor.

To register a SIM Card, Myanmar citizens have to provide their National Registration Citizen (NRC) number, which contains a photo and other personal information. When people get arrested, most are first led to interrogation centers. There, they are forced to unlock their phone and uncover details from contacts and communications in their network to activities and locations. All this information can be exposed by unlocking one phone or account, even more so that Telenor was the favorite choice of activists.

"As Telenor exits the country, they should be more responsible. If the metadata of their users fell into the junta's hands, it is very obvious that this will make people even more vulnerable to having their rights being threatened," Ploy added.

In an interview, Matthew Mullen, founder of Article 30, a Business and Human Rights advisory, and the author of "Pathways that Changed Myanmar" (Zed Books, 2016), adds: "Telenor has

faced a lot of pushes and pulls. There have been calls for boycotts and pleas to stay. That reflects the battle for the Internet in Myanmar: people want and need the internet, and the Tatmadaw is seeking every opportunity to exploit that demand. Stakeholders knew that Telenor was in a tough spot. They didn't expect a miracle. But they did want to see Telenor attempt to do right by Myanmar's netizens. The decision to sell to M1 Group, the lack of due diligence and disclosure, none of it has indicated real concern for the risks to people."

In July 2021, the Center for Research on Multinational Corporations made a joint complaint with 474 Myanmar-based civil society organizations regarding Telenor's exit which was officially accepted by the Norwegian National Contact Point. If found in breach, Telenor runs the risk of "losing various forms of state support such as export credit insurance, innovation subsidies, public procurement contracts and international trade support".

The Institute for Human Rights and Business (IHRB) has many suggestions for Telenor to set it right, such as finding a more responsible buyer, donating any proceeds of the sale to the CDM, protecting its employees and establishing a fund to assist former customers who may be targeted by the regime using Telenor's user data. The screw is tightening in Norway as well as in Myanmar for Telenor. On October 19th, 2021, Aung Naing Oo, the military's investment minister, said that the company's foreign executives had been "requested" not to leave the country. This would be pending regulatory approval of the company's deal to sell its operations there because he wanted "to have discussions physically with some of the Telenor management."

In February 2022, leaked documents from the junta's Post and Telecommunications Department obtained by Myanmar Now show that the final owner of Telenor Myanmar will be Investcom Myanmar, a joint venture between M1 and Shwe Byain Phyu. Shwe Byain Phyu, a military-linked gems and petrol conglomerate, will be the majority owner of Investcom Myanmar.

The sale will include the transfer of personal data of Telenor Myanmar customers as a Telenor Group spokesperson stated that violating or not complying with the requests to share it with military authorities would have severe and unacceptable consequences for the company's employees in Myanmar. "I believe that there are surely other ways that would not affect the security of the employees and wouldn't expose the data of the people," a staff member argued to Myanmar Now.

Six months after the company's botched exit attempt, the price of a Telenor SIM card alone has more than doubled as it is unclear if the company will continue to supply stalls with new stocks. On January 6th, 2022, the junta levied an additional compulsory 20,000 MMMK (11.50 USD) activation fee on all SIM cards. People now have to spend 21,500 MMK to buy and activate a SIM card compared to 1,500 MMK (0.85 USD) in an official shop and 300 MMK (0.17 USD) on the black market before the coup, without the benefit of any user data protection policy regardless of the operator.
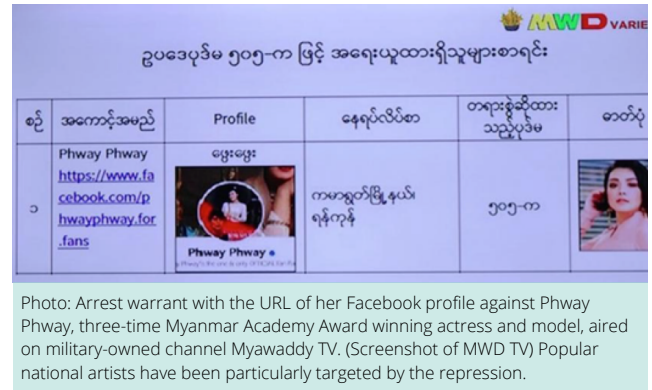
The Great Firewall of Myanmar?

With the entire telecommunications sector under the control of the junta, the illusion of safety gave way to the certainty of danger for every netizen in Myanmar.

Sutawan 'Ploy' Chanprasert, from the Digital Reach organization, is not optimistic about the near-future: "Threats against digital security are likely to be more complicated and more intense

Photo: Arrest warrant with the URL of her Facebook profile against Phway Phway, three-time Myanmar Academy Award winning actress and model, aired on military-owned channel Myawaddy TV. (Screenshot of MWD TV) Popular national artists have been particularly targeted by the repression.

following the coup. Before the coup took place, the repression focused on dissidents like journalists, human rights lawyers, and activists. While the crackdown on this group is more severe, it also expands to ordinary people, who are being stopped by the military while walking on a street or having their houses raided and forced to hand over their mobile phones and other electronic devices."

A parallel strategy seems to be to get people to accept friend requests from undercover pro-military accounts, who then screenshots their posts and forward them to military authorities.

Soe Myint, editor-in-chief of Mizzima, an independent media founded in exile in India back in 1998, confirms: "They have been trained to crackdown on technologies and they know exactly where the protestors are. They monitor social media very closely and confuse people."

In the evenings, arrest warrants are published on social media and aired on Myawaddy, the military-owned television network, against anyone who is suspected of any kind of involvement in the revolution. Most of the time, the information and so-called proof of dissent come from their Facebook accounts.

Photo: Arrests warrants with the URL of their Facebook profiles against activists or NLD members aired on military-owned channel Myawaddy TV in March 2021. (Screenshot of MWD TV)

Photo: "I cannot even tell you guys how terrible it was. I need to work to keep my family from starving but now I wonder how I am going to work. As I am completely blind if I don't wear my glasses, how can I go out without them? Dad and Mom had to restrain themselves not to cry."

For the people who have been put on the list, hiding in an undisclosed location from one day to another is the only way to escape the dark cells and torture chambers of Myanmar's notoriously brutal prisons. For example, the admin of the popular "Shitty Artwork" Facebook Page, which features cartoons about the revolution, has seen his picture and address leaked by a woman who reported him to the military. He had to change his place of stay and his appearance, condemning him to live on the run and the looming anxiety of having his cover exposed.

Following the money, has been a big part of the junta's hunting strategy. Since mid-August, some users of mobile banking, which is the main system used by people in Myanmar, have seen their accounts blocked after being linked to donations to PDF, CDM or NUG support funds. A first-hand account from the field follows: "My own WavePay account has been recently banned because I made monthly donations. There was 100,000 MMK on it but I am too scared to complain to the Call Center to retrieve them as the junta will then know who I am. It happened to a friend of mine after his account was closed, he called them so then they had his phone number, found his address and came to arrest him." Users also reported the deactivation of their SIM cards. Then they received a message saying that if they wanted it back in functioning mode, they had to provide their GPS location, current addresses and names.

On January 3rd, the Nikkei Asian Review revealed that Telenor has also agreed to sell its 51% stake in mobile payment service Wave Money to its main partner, a consortium led by Singapore-listed Yoma Strategic Holdings. The company is owned by Myanmar tycoon Serge Pun, who is also the CEO of New Yangon Development Company.

The military council has not yet completely shut down the Internet. It seems that the decision may be part of damage control, but the SAC also benefits significantly from online activity. SAC has already resorted to the most effective and easy to implement measures, such as cutting off grids and networks, stalking social media accounts and monitoring smartphones. Netizens fear that the military's surveillance apparatus could become even more inescapable.

Journalist in exile Mratt Kyaw Thu compiled a list of national companies that provide technical assistance to the military council, such as FISCA Security & Electrical Engineering Co., Ltd, Yatanarpon Pan Myanmar, Royal Pan Myanmar or Myanmar Best Security Services. Soe Myint, editor-in-chief of Mizzima, an independent media founded in exile in India back in 1998, confirms: "They have been trained to crackdown on technologies and they know exactly where the protestors are. They monitor social media very closely and confuse people."

The advocacy group JFM unveiled Ministry of Home Affairs and Ministry of Transport and Communications budgets which contain purchases of technologies by the Myanmar police force, the domestic intelligence agency and the military. These technologies were used to collect digital data, hack passwords, clone phones, track signals, gather social media intelligence, analyze photos and process and recover large amounts of data. They mostly come from companies based in the West, and particularly the United States, and were purchased

before the coup by the military and civilian-controlled branches of government. "These technologies are now all under military control and will likely be used to suppress dissent." warns the International Crisis Group (ICG) in its report "Myanmar's Virtual Battlefield." For months, activists and researchers have been lobbying foreign governments to introduce or broaden arms embargoes to cover 'dual-use' equipment, software and technologies that could be employed to suppress political opposition. It is also vital that the activities of middlemen in the private sector, who are the main facilitators of those secretive deals, are effectively monitored and submitted to a harmonised legal framework.

For Sutawan 'Ploy' Chanprasert, it is urgent to act before the SAC can implement its next plans. "As many credible news sources stated that the junta is aiming to build a gateway similar to the Great Firewall of China, threats on digital rights can get more sophisticated if it is implemented. This means that the junta's efforts on censorship and surveillance can be much more effective and coordinated as it will control the whole network traffic."

An anonymous cybersecurity expert who now lives in hiding leaves his mobile phone behind for security reasons whenever he has to go out. "I advise not to use the same SIM card for a long time if there is a lot of communication about the revolution stored on it. One should use a VPN every time one uses the Internet to access and ensure security on social media. One should be careful of which VPN to use and research who owns the application, which country it is based in and what policies of data sharing they are offering. People should think about end-to-end encryption such as provided by Telegram Secret Chat, Signal and ProtonMail for each communication." Because of its Secret Chat high-level encryption settings, the Telegram application has been largely appropriated by anti-coup forces to organize themselves and inform each other but every digital communication is now considered as potentially compromising.

A few days after the coup in February 2021, the regime drafted a Cyber Security Law, requesting Internet service providers to keep data onshore to provide it to the government on request and punishing users deemed to have spread "misinformation" or "disinformation." Myanmar's business community pushed back against its implementation. For now, conservative mindsets in the army, lobbying by powerful companies and the complexity of the Burmese language fonts, which makes it difficult for automated machines to read and sort out content in a similar fashion to the Khmer language, have limited the scale of surveillance. But SAC has made clear their desire to control a new tech-savvy rebel generation that is connected to a change-hungry world and to cut off the political resistance's sources of funding. On January 22nd, 2022, it proposed a new version of the cyber-bill which criminalizes the use of VPN, cryptocurrency and online gambling with one to three years prison.

According to our researcher on the ground, it is not fully legally implemented as of February 2022 but used as a tool to arrest people on the street if they are found with a VPN set up on their phones. Our team researcher reported a story symbolic of indiscriminate harassment from Yangon: "One woman has been arrested in the street and forced to show her phone to

soldiers, who found an application to read PDF Files on it. She has been accused of supporting the People Defense Forces and heavily fined before they let her walk off…"

Rumors of China's alleged involvement in building the equivalent of its firewall and intranet in Myanmar were widely circulated on social media. This prompted protesters to demonstrate outside the Chinese Embassy in Yangon and fueled anti-China conspiracy sentiment. The SAC is protected from any effective condemnation and action by the UN Security Council due to the veto of China and Russia, who have been the two major sources of military equipment and training for the Myanmar army since the 1980s. China denied the news as baseless rumors. But Myanmar officers do regularly attend training in those two countries, both of which have a stronghold on online dissent. The New York Times recently conducted an investigation on the Chinese police's strategies to buy fake accounts, generate content and hunt down users to manipulate social media networks like Facebook and Twitter. This technology is being increasingly purchased by authoritarian Southeast Asian governments such as Cambodia. In October 2021, Cambodia signed a new security deal with China's Public Security Ministry including the sale of surveillance tools and DNA screening equipment.

A young PDF recruit, who has left Yangon for guerilla training in an undisclosed location, said in an interview via encrypted messages, "People who are communicating with PDFs from their phone need to be even more careful than before. But now everybody is losing their privacy and is being watched."

Photo: Pictures of arrested young people from Yangon beaten in jail were aired on MWD TV on April 18th as a terror and intimidation tactic against the anti-coup movement.

Netizen Revolution:
Taking Back the Internet

Photo: A woman sets up a VPN on her smartphone (Photo Courtesy of Mi-Kun)

Despite horrendous torture and repressive strategies, Myanmar people are not giving up on gaining back their rights. Urban and rural youth, who grew up online and have an intimate knowledge of everything digital, are making the most of their inconsistent access to the Internet to organize the revolution, celebrate small victories and break the isolation.

Two months after the coup, Twitter experienced a mass surge in Myanmar users who used the platform to keep the anti-coup movement alive after it became too dangerous to take the streets. "Pro-democracy activists have employed centralized coordination tactics on Twitter since late March, bringing together thousands of users owning multiple accounts in organized hashtag campaigns. Each coordinated tweet has three main components: a date hashtag (for example, #June3Coup), an overarching hashtag (#WhatsHappeningInMyanmar, etc.), and a tactical hashtag, which are meant to cultivate international pressure," explains the DFRLab (Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab).

The hashtags change every couple of days according to the evolution of the situation, from #ASEANimposeJuntaEmbargo in June, #MyanmarNeedsO2 at the height of the Covid-19 crisis

to #Telenor_M1IsPartnerOfSAC in July and #AcceptNUG_RejectMilitary mid-October after several governments had recognized the NUG as the legit representative body of Myanmar. "Tactical hashtags act as accessible, bite-size chunks of the pro-democracy movement that fit perfectly into tweets geared towards an international audience. Before a tactical hashtag is meant to trend, these coordinators send out the hashtag itself, an explanation behind it, safety instructions on using VPNs, and tips on navigating tweeting in English. The organization of this digital campaign has constructed an accessible archive of the coup and the efforts against it," according to the DFRLab.

The posts of the "Twitter Team For Revolution" are then relayed on other platforms by a myriad of "keyboards fighters" determined to counter the regime's misinformation operations and propaganda, such as Myanmar's K-pop fandom. Every day, the Milk Tea Alliance Galleries account likes dozens of tweets and comments the same reply "museumificating" on tweets related to pro-democracy history in the Milk Tea Alliance countries and China's global influence. Those selected tweets are then gathered on an online museum to keep a collective memory of how the dramatic political events which are currently unfolding in the region happened and were reported in real-time. The Milk Tea Alliance (MTA), an online movement named after a very popular drink in the region, began in April 2020 as a pan-Asian virtual friendship between activists fighting for democracy and against the Chinese Communist Party influence on the governments of their respective countries, mainly Thailand, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Myanmar. From sharing digital protest art to translating strategic manuals to deal with tear gas and riot police, the MTA became a powerful support system for a generation who had enough of the isolation, repression and lack of political representation imposed on them by out-of-touch power-grabbing senior leaders.

Since the first week of the coup, people have been raising funds online as an attempt to make up for the lost income of hundreds of thousands of civil servants and workers on strike, refugees in IDP camps and PDF fighters. Artists Against Tyranny organized an online art auction and other collectives have started selling paintings as Non-Fungible Tokens (NFT), such as the People's Revolution Project, a coalition of Thai and Burmese artists who joined hands to support the fight for democratic representative political systems in their respective countries.

While online resources in the Burmese language were severely limited before the coup, several organizations quickly translated guidelines to document mass protests or atrocities committed by the security forces. The aim is to use this information in the International Court of Justice. WITNESS Asia-Pacific proposes a library including human rights crimes that are caught on film, live-streams and documentation during Internet shutdowns. Myanmar Witness provides a safe platform to collect evidence of human rights incidents and collaborates with the media to publish and investigate further. The Fifth Column is a Telegram channel which invites people to share any information on soldiers' movements across their neighborhoods and towns. The UN set up the Independent Investigative Mechanism on Myanmar and is asking anyone in Myanmar with evidence of orders from top commanders relating to the use of lethal force

against anti-coup protesters to contact them. In September 2017, the picture of the execution of ten Rohingya men by soldiers was used to establish in detail the unfolding of a massacre in Inn Din village. The photo also served as a base to entrap two Reuters journalists and sentence them to a year and a half in jail.

Countless national and regional publications still manage to bring news of what is happening across the country thanks to an extended network of reporters working undercover and citizens filming local events despite immense risks. The Myanmar Evictions Watch Collective continues to track and record forced evictions and violations of housing rights. Every day, the Assistance Association of Political Prisoners of Burma, a non-profit human rights organization founded in 2000 by former political prisoners living in exile on the Thai-Burma border, releases updated numbers of people arrested, sentenced, charged and killed by SAC based on insider documented reports. International Media Support (IMS), a non-profit organization working to strengthen the capacity of media, is assessing the situation of dozens of media houses inside and outside the country. The Burma Civil War Museum has the ambition to collect information about the past and current political history of Myanmar.

Activists fear that the state monopoly on communication and education enables authoritarian military leaders to perpetrate violence by dividing communities and maintaining their undue power for generations. Thus, volunteer troops of striking teachers and informaticians have reacted to the latest coup by creating a multitude of independent platforms, such as Free Online Educational Institution Myanmar, Learn Myanmar, Run Free Education or the Myanmar School App. The Spring University Myanmar offers online introductory courses in five ethnic languages, the course fees are donated to communities affected and displaced by the war.

The NUG has the ambition to create an alternative education system for all: "We want to produce new learning materials so that students can study on their own continuously, from basic to higher levels of education, including technical and vocational education. Most of these programs will be online, and our network of teachers in the field will share these lessons with their students, who will pass them on to their friends who don't have Internet or a connected device" says Dr. Sai Khaing Myo, Deputy Minister of Education of NUG, formerly the head of the Department of International Relations in Yangon University of Foreign Languages. H.H. is a mathematics teacher before being fired for taking part in the CDM. He volunteered as soon as the NUG announced the plan: "We have eleven majors to cover. Other striking teachers assist me and we work under the umbrella of the NUG. Experts from the Burmese diaspora and foreign teachers also help us to upgrade the curriculum."

As the level of Internet freedom in Myanmar is now the third-lowest in the world, after China and Iran, numerous "Digital Safety Clinics" are providing tips on how to protect one's own devices and communications against authoritarian governments and unscrupulous big tech

companies. Armies of researchers and journalists have made it their daily mission to debunk fake and false news with the clear goal of building a better society, free from manipulation, discrimination and repression. Most people have stopped reading or watching military propaganda outlets and channels.

The မသုံးနဲ့ ('Ma Thone Nae') application, which translates to 'Don't use,' lists military-owned products and services, from jewelry shops to cement, beer and hygiene products. Websites profile individuals and families who have amassed vast fortunes from their deals with the successive military juntas who controlled the country for six decades. Others disseminate photos comparing the luxurious lifestyle of high-ranking military officers with the harsh fate of the infantrymen of the Burmese army.

Several initiatives to push for defections inside the military ranks were born on social media, one of the most important being People's Soldiers initiated by Captain Nyi Thuta. The officer left his base in Naypyidaw on February 28th and became the first military officer to publicly speak out against the military coup via an interview that was streamed on Facebook. Every Sunday, the organization holds discussions with defected officers, members of the public, in-service military personnel, and prominent anti-coup figures, which generate over half a million views every week. One sergeant who defected in September said: "I had to secretly listen to these discussions on my base. And when I did, it gave me the strength to make my decision. Hearing Captain Nyi Thuta and others speak made me realize I had comrades on the other side who would support me."

Aware of those rumblings, the SAC stepped up its attempt to cut off soldiers from any outside information. The intermittent Internet shutdowns have surely undermined the opposition movement and its ability to organize large protests. The rise in data costs carries the risk of losing many allies who can't afford to use the Internet anymore. People have responded by resorting back to analog tools of communication, such as CB radios and leaflets. Run by a group of Myanmar artists and activists, the podcast Operation Hanoi Hannah is a compilation of audio stories made from sounds of gunfire, screams of people under attack and messages appealing to the humanity of security forces played on loudspeakers nearby military bases. Many media outlets continue to provide news by SMS and young activists launched a pirate Federal FM Radio which went live on April 1st, 2021 at 90.2 MHz.

As the battle for the control of the country rages on, civilians and rebel soldiers will find high- and low-tech ways to fight on.

[1] This army consisting of numerous independent cells spread across the cities and ethnic states of Myanmar was formed by the National Unity Government (NUG) on 5 May 2021 in response to the coup d'état.

[2] A virtual private network service, or VPN, provides a proxy server to bypass Internet censorship such as geo-blocking or to users who want to protect their communications against data profiling or Man-in-the-middle attacks, where the attacker secretly relays and possibly alters the communications between two parties.

[3] Twitter user's Pyae Zone's quote is used here with the author's discretion and is derived from the user's public profile, which has a following of more than 23k people. It should be noted that in the past years, Pyae Zone also tweeted controversial opinions about the Rohingya's plea for recognition of their political status as well as the mass state violence they have been subjected to. This position appears to have evolved recently, something that is true of many activists, and that is one welcome aspect of the movement that has developed in the last year. Researchers' Republic, The Myanmar Project Collective and everyone involved in the production of this report stand in solidarity with the Rohingya community.
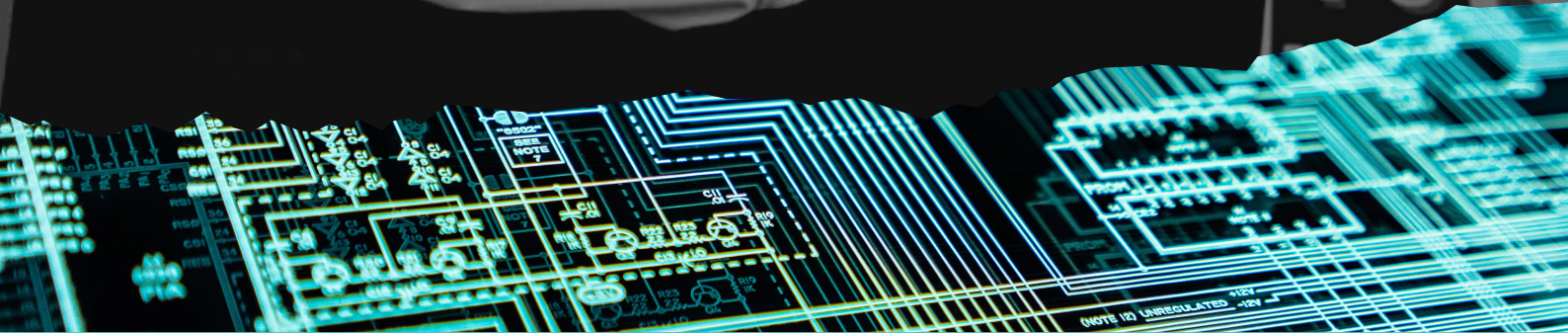
[4] Min Aung Hlaing, commander-in-chief of Defense Services since March 2011, seized power on February 1st in Nay Pyi Daw in a coup d'état. He has appointed himself chairman of the State Administration Council (SAC), the new military regime.

[5] Call-data records, or "metadata" include information on who the users contacted, the time and duration of calls, and the location of the tower or base station from which the call was transmitted.

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Project collective

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