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POLITICAL DISCOURSE AROUND
PLURALISM AND DIVERSITY ON
FACEBOOK: MYANMAR
SOCIAL MEDIA MONITORING REPORT

POLITICAL DISCOURSE AROUND PLURALISM AND DIVERSITY ON FACEBOOK: MYANMAR SOCIAL MEDIA MONITORING REPORT

Pilot Analysis November 2019 - January 2020

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report is based on a pilot analysis of a series of social media monitoring reports and represents a small snapshot of the Facebook ecosystem in Myanmar. It provides an initial analysis of how political information and discourse travels across the platform, who the main actors are and how they engage with their audiences.

- Major media in Myanmar have tapped into Facebook as a way to disseminate information and successfully use the platform to reach and engage their users.

- "Junk" news sites, gossip and celebrity pages also generate significant user engagement with political content, which could be problematic, in particular ahead of the country's forthcoming elections.

- Nationalist narratives were the most dominant topic during the period analysed, compared to issues related to social harmony, elections or civil rights. These are most often found in thematic Facebook pages that share content about issues related to national security and internal conflicts.

- Social media discourse around the case against Myanmar at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) shows that the Government's Facebook pages played an important role in disseminating news about the State Counsellor and the Myanmar case, echoed by National League for Democracy (NLD) pages that tend to share the same content at the same time.

- Civil society organisations (CSOs) are not playing an active role or using the platform to share their statements and views.

- The monitoring team identified a number of Facebook pages spreading divisive narratives, and to a small degree presenting disinformation about the Government and State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi.[1]

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1   For more details on divisive narratives and disinformation in social media see https://bit.ly/36xYtJx

BACKGROUND

The effects of social media on political discourse are broader than its role in enabling political debates during elections. Social media can contribute to polarising society by spreading disinformation and hate speech. Globally, actors have used paid advertising or inauthentic accounts to push narratives beyond the dissemination of authentic discourse, with the potential of shaping public opinion through artificial means.[2] Past uses of social media to manipulate voters' perceptions are indicators of the potential harm that the use of the technology can cause in society.

Social media platforms have a mixed record in combating illegal content and disinformation. They give different levels of attention depending on the importance of a country for their business. Organised groups in different countries have worked to have their voices heard in advocating for political and pluralist causes and discussions, but often when it comes to matters of national attention, those using manipulation and inauthentic coordinated behaviour have a greater success in winning public attention.

In Myanmar, Facebook is by far the most popular social media platform, with 20 million users followed by Instagram with only 640,000 users.[3] Facebook is widely used not only for entertainment and social communication but also for research and self-improvement, to the extent that in Myanmar Facebook is the "de facto Google" search engine as users search for information.[4] Such is the dominance of the platform in the country that for most users in Myanmar, Facebook *is* the internet.
A survey conducted by the People's Alliance for Credible Elections (PACE), a local CSO, found that Facebook was the third most used source of information after television and radio.[5] At the same time, the population appears to be aware of the risk that Facebook can pose: among Myanmar institutions, Facebook inspired the lowest level of confidence, with 37% of those interviewed answering that they had "no confidence" as opposed to only 18% that showed confidence in the social network.[6]

In 2020, Myanmar is scheduled to hold its second general elections since the establishment of a semi-civilian government in 2011, in what is seen as another milestone towards the demo-cratic development of the country. During the crisis in Myanmar's Rakhine state in 2017, Facebook failed to suppress hate speech being spread on its platform. An independent investigation of the UN Human Rights Council found that the role of social media was significant in this case.

This report complements ongoing efforts to track hate speech and combat disinformation in Myanmar, shedding light on how the platform is used for political and social discussions. Following findings from previous research, in particular Phandeeyar's Digital Culture 2019 Report, this report aims to capture how the platform is used to frame predominant political narratives.[7]

The report is produced as part of the project "Vision 2030: Supporting voices for Pluralism" implemented by DRI in partnership with GIZ. The project aims to contribute to the ongoing debate on how pluralism can be protected in Myanmar, both online and offline. Two more publications will follow this initial report in 2020. The report will be used as a basis for work with civil society, political parties and other stakeholders and as a contribution to discussions on how the online environment can be turned into a more plural and open space for discussions.

Democracy Reporting International (DRI) has been working on and analysing the impact of social media on democratic discourse and elections for the past two years, looking at phenomena in Tunisia[8], Libya[9], Pakistan[10], Sri Lanka[11], Ukraine[12], as well as several European Union (EU) countries. Funded by the EU, DRI has developed a methodology[13] for social media monitoring and is currently working on a toolkit aimed at helping civil society organisations (CSOs) around the world to expand their methodologies and data analysis skills to inform their social media monitoring work.

2   For Facebook's definition of "inauthentic behaviour" see: https://bit.ly/3d9R7hR

3   Simon Kemp, *Digital 2020:Myanmar*, February 2020, available at: bit.ly/2TjWQd4

4   Thant Sin Oo & Ye Min Thant, *Exploring Digital and Mobile Cultures in Myanmar,* Phandeeyar 2019, available at: bit.ly/2ThhXwn

5   Win Nyi Nyi Zaw& Khin Nyein Cha, *Citizen's Political Preferences for 2020*, People's Alliance for Credible Elections 2019, available at: bit.ly/2LFuxS5

6   ibid.

7   Thant Sin Oo & Ye Min Thant, *Exploring Digital and Mobile Cultures in Myanmar*, Phandeeyar 2019, available at: bit.ly/2ThhXwn

8   Democracy Reporting International, *Monitoring Tunisia's election campaigns on social media — what the watchdog did not see,* December 2019, available at: bit.ly/2WFYdVp

9   Democracy Reporting International, *Monitoring Libya's Public Discourse Online*, 2019, available at: bit.ly/3bAAVoc

10   Democracy Reporting International, *Social Media and Democracy in Pakistan*, March 2019, available at: bit.ly/2zKLRST

11   Democracy Reporting International, *Social Media Analysis - What Facebook tells us about Social Cohesion in Sri Lanka*, February 2019, available at: bit.ly/3dWe87P

12   Democracy Reporting International, *How Ukraine's Leading Presidential Candidates run respectable and dodgy Facebook pages in parallel*, July 2019, available at: bit.ly/2ZfLSsW

13   Democracy Reporting International, *Guide for Civil Society on Monitoring Social Media During Elections*, 2019, available at: bit.ly/2ZfLSsW

METHODOLOGY

The initial monitoring exercise aimed to take a broad view of political-related discussions in the country, so that all relevant discussions could be monitored. Over the past months, DRI partnered with local CSOs (ATHAN and Myanmar Fifth Estate) to define the monitoring set up of the project. The initial step was to define the key areas that the monitoring should cover, considering discussions in Myanmar related directly or indirectly to **pluralism, social cohesion, nationalism, and religious and ethnic minorities**.

Specific Boolean Keywords related to the above concepts were then identified by scanning social media discourse, and identifying the main words used in discussion, trying to balance words with positive, negative and neutral connotations.[14] Four groups of issues were defined that translate the concepts above into the monitoring framework: **nationalism**, **social harmony**, **election processes and disinformation**, and **discrimination**. Each topic had on average five keywords, which were refined after an initial pilot sampling and data review.

CrowdTangle (CT), a Facebook-owned tool for social media analysis, was used to collect the data through the selected keywords. CT provides data from public Facebook pages and Facebook groups – it does not present data from private users or the comments of users on such pages or groups. This tool allowed the research team to collect data from posts, accessing their content (text, video, photos, links) as well as all relevant related data (engagement measured in number of likes, comments, shares, and other reactions such as love, laugh, sad, anger and surprise).

For the initial overview of topics, CT's historical data function was used to retrieve the last six months of posts by Facebook pages or groups that mentioned any of the keywords. After reviewing the initial data, the keywords were refined, in particular as no standard terms for key issues such as pluralism or diversity exist and a variety of terms were used. In addition, several of the keywords used in the pilot round proved too general (such as tolerance or diversity) and therefore returned posts that were irrelevant. The set of keywords was therefore refined to either drop certain keywords or adapt them to capture relevant political discussions. Finally, the results were disaggregated by each topic of interest.

For the initial monitoring, a total of 33,994 posts from groups and pages, between 1 November 2019 and 31 January 2020 were analysed. The following sections will elaborate on the further steps taken to analyse the voices on social media, and more methodological notes can be found in Annex 1.

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14   In a Boolean search, keywords are combined by the operators AND, OR and NOT to narrow or broaden the search (you do not have to enter them in capitals). See: https://bit.ly/3c3dW5f

MAPPING THE DISCUSSIONS

ANALYSIS OF ONLINE DISCOURSE BASED ON CATEGORIES AND KEYWORD SEARCH

Based on the filtered keywords, the monitoring set up was divided in four different broader categories to help understand which topics were gaining more attention on social media, tracking the political discourse around pluralism. These categories were used as a way to identify the main issues with regards to pluralism and diversity in Myanmar.

Given the planned general election in late 2020, topics closely related to the election process and disinformation, nationalism and national security, and discriminatory laws were defined as priority topics to be monitored. Since there is an expectation that hate speech will be spread to increase polarisation and possibly to target cultural, religious, and minority groups during the general election, "social harmony" was also chosen as one of the categories. The number of daily posts were divided across the broader categories of "Discriminatory Laws", "Election Process and Disinformation", "Nationalism and National Security" and "Social Harmony". The terms releated to each of the categories can be found in Annex 2.

The **Election process and Disinformation** category aims to capture narratives around the 2020 elections, including efforts to discredit the fairness of the election process, spread disinformation about electoral stakeholders or to discredit individual electoral stakeholders. The failed attempt of the National League for Democracy (NLD) to reform the 2008 Constitution will likely be part of the upcoming electoral debates. On the one hand, the main opposition party has challenged the NLD's views on reducing the role of the military in politics. On the other hand, ethnic parties are dissatisfied with the lack of attention to federalism in the amendments the NLD had proposed. The previous use of social media by actors that see pluralism as a threat to national integrity suggests that ethnic and religious polarisation will influence the political discussions online during the election campaign.

Under the **Nationalism and National Security** category, nationalist narratives are assessed. This includes an analysis of the securitisation of domestic politics and the use of nationalist narratives that portray ethnic and cultural diversity as a threat to the integrity of the state.

Keywords under the **Discriminatory Laws** and **Social Harmony** categories aimed at capturing posts and debates around the legal-institutional discrimination of ethnic nationalities and religious minorities in Myanmar, including identifying sources of hate speech and derogatory language.

WHICH TOPIC GENERATED MOST POSTS?

Posts with keywords in the **Nationalism and National Security** category saw a steady increase from November onwards, pushed by the discussions around the case at the International Court of Justice (ICJ), through which The Gambia opened a complaint against Myanmar on behalf of the Organization of the Islamic States (OIC) over human rights violations committed in Rakhine State against the Rohingya minority.

Among the top ten most popular posts within Nationalism and National Security, we found one identical post that appeared five times, posted across different Facebook Groups.[15] The post discussed the arguments at the ICJ hearing and urged Myanmar's people to be united, celebrating Aung San Suu Kyi's "victory" at the ICJ.[16] The post also suggested that Russia and China would veto any resolution on enforcement if a case made its way to the UN Security Council.

Other posts in this category contained references to "Bengali" and "terrorists." One post, by the page "Forever Green" – supporting the USDP – generated a deluge of commentary when it wrote that "there is no Rohingya ethnic category in the 135 indigenous ethnic groups of Myanmar."[17] Another page, "Pyi Sit Gyi," which mostly posts Myanmar military news and news about combat between the Myanmar military and ethnic armed organisations, argued that "there are efforts to add another ethnicity to the country and the government does not pay attention to the (Bengali) case, they just care about getting power in 2020 and there are lots of illegal migrants in the country. It should be fear of the lost of race," though the post generated less than 100 interactions.[18] The page appears to be related to a network of pages that supports the military and the Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, as the page is followed by other pages with a similar focus on military matters.

15   A tendency for Facebook users in Myanmar to copy and paste posts in addition to sharing them has previously been observed. See BSR, *Human Rights and Impact Assessment. Facebook in Myanmar*, 2018, p.14, available at: bit.ly/2ZdU1On
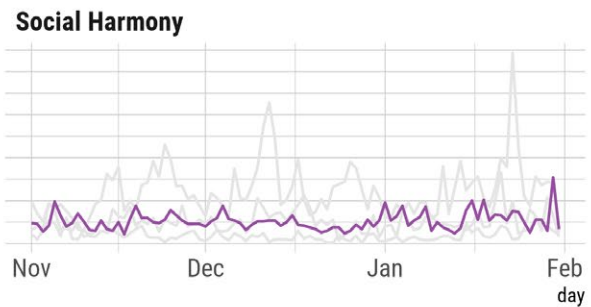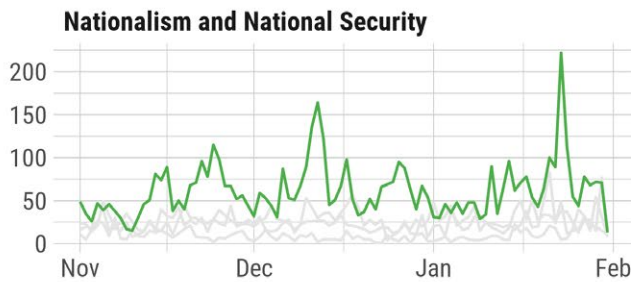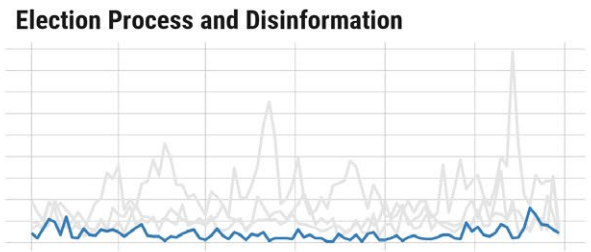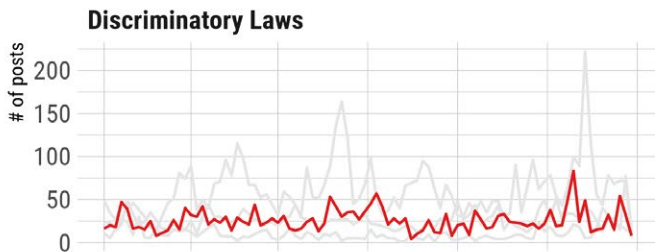
16   Facebook: bit.ly/2LBZlDb

17   Facebook: bit.ly/2X01Ggk

18   Facebook: bit.ly/2LFhfot

DAILY NUMBER OF FACEBOOK POSTS FOR EACH TOPIC

A total of 11,411 posts retrieved between 1 Nov 2019 - 31 Jan 2020

A post mentioning that the Commander in Chief (of the Myanmar military) reacted to Turkey's threat that they could wipe out Myanmar from the map within 10 minutes, received 2,000 likes and 869 shares.

This post is a news item about a violent clash between the Myanmar Army and the Arakan Army and it generated 1,300 likes and 93 shares.

## WHAT TYPES OF POSTS ATTRACTED THE MOST ENGAGEMENT?

In order to understand what kind of posts generate more traction, the data was analysed to see how users react to the different types of content on Facebook such as updates on a group or page status line or sharing of links, photos and videos.[19]

The results were different for the Facebook *pages* and for the Facebook *groups* in the sample.

Photos and videos generated more than half of interactions for all topics on Facebook pages. Only in the topic of Nationalism and National Security did posts with links garner a more substantial portion of interactions (examples of these posts were discussed above). Links often are links to other Facebook posts as well as links to external domains (other websites, news sites, etc).

Facebook groups in the sample, however, showed a very different trend: photos shared in groups attract the majority of shares and interactions made by users. Images ranged from screenshots of other posts to banner pictures.

**Percentage of interactions for each post type and topic (Groups)**
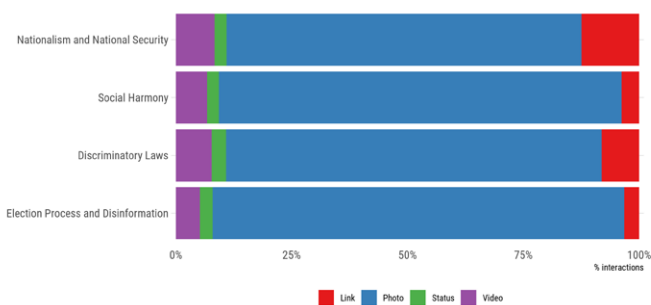
WHO GENERATES MOST INTERACTIONS?

Overall, posts from major media outlets were among those that generated the most interactions for all topics, with a little more than half of the top posts based on user interactions coming from the Facebook pages of RFA Burmese, BBC Burmese, and 7Day TV. Media posts with video and photos performed the best, having the most interactions and making up the top 10 posts for each topic.

When sharing external links, we see a predominance of major media outlets (RFA Burmese, 7Day Online TV, BBC News Burmese, etc.) shaping public debate, but pages owned by government officials or institutions and other non-governmental organisations also participate in it, albeit generating much less interaction. When it comes to government institutions, the State Counsellor's official Facebook pages generated most total interactions. The other government officials who generated most reactions are Ye Lwin, Mayor of Mandalay City and Minister of Mandalay Regional Development Affairs as well as Phyo Min Thein, Chief Minister of Yangon Region.

Percentage of interactions for each post type and topic (Pages)
Videos and images account for more than half of all interactions
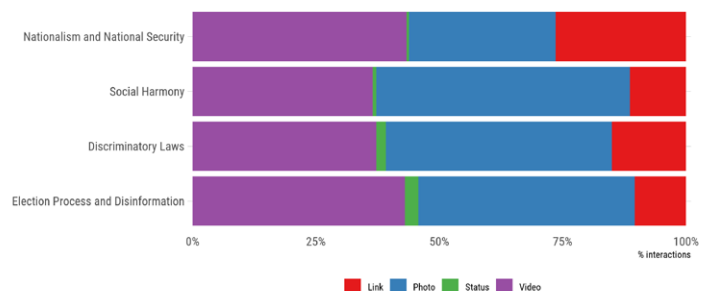
As seen in other contexts analysed by DRI, pages without clear affiliation but with strong political leaning are often present in the public debate, especially in contexts where elections will soon be held.[20] In the present sample, unofficial media pages and false media portals participating in the public debate were identified. These pages and junk domains will be analysed later in this report.

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19   User engagement (re-shares, likes/reactions and comments) provides important in-formation about how posts travel within Facebook as it shows which kind of content tends to be spread more widely.

20   Democracy Reporting International, Guide for Civil Society on *Monitoring Social Media During Elections, 2019*, available at: bit.ly/2ZfLSsW

CASE STUDY: THE ICJ TRIAL: WIDESPREAD SUPPORT AT HOME, CRITICISMS ABROAD

Given the increased activity of the Nationalism and National Security category driven by debates around the ICJ trial and sustained by the narratives identified in the top posts, the analysis around the case was narrowed down in order to identify how the discussions were taking place online. This allowed for the identification of patterns of behaviour, analysing users' reaction to the discussions as well as attempts to manipulate the public debate.

HOW DID THE SOCIAL MEDIA DISCOURSE ON THE ICJ EVOLVE?

To further understand the narratives around this discussion, CrowdTangle's search function was used to retrieve all Facebook posts containing the term "ICJ" from 1 November 2019 to the end of January 2020. A language filter was then applied to retain only posts in the Burmese language and posts from pages and groups were disaggregated. Posts from pages tend to indicate how information is shared, since the owners of the pages curate the content themselves. In most cases they are media pages covering the ICJ event, but a significant number are pages that imitate media pages, or others such as celebrity pages that are used to share political content. Groups, on the other hand, show how information is discussed by their members and can be a good indicator of overall public interest in a given topic.

The data showed widespread online support of Aung San Suu Kyi on the occasion of her presence at the ICJ. Rallies in Yangon and other towns around the country were organised by the NLD pushing for support of its leader, defending Myanmar in The Hague, with the slogan "We stand with Daw Aung San Suu Kyi", a hashtag widely used in the sample analysed. The case generated a heated discussion on social media, coming from both traditional media outlets and alternative media channels.

The data points to two peaks of discussion around the issue on Facebook groups and pages: on the appearance in court by Aung San Suu Kyi on **10 December** and on the occasion of the ICJ ruling requiring the government of Aung San Suu Kyi to respect the requirements of the 1948 genocide convention on **23 January**. Groups publish more content than pages generally because multiple people are contributing at a time and there is often no moderation. This is in line with trends across Facebook globally. Groups will be further analysed in the future reports of this project.

The reaction of users towards Burmese content portraying the appearance of Aung San Suu Kyi in The Hague was overwhelmingly positive, with high numbers of "love" reactions on posts portraying her positively, while few negative reactions ("angry" or "sad") or criticisms of groups or pages' posts were found.[21]

Criticism against Aung San Suu Kyi and the assumed role of the army in human rights violations were highly present in the international coverage on posts written in English, but such criticisms did not resonate in the discussions on social media in the country. The contrast between internal and external discussions on the topic was clear in the data analysed, as no widespread criticism about the role of Myanmar's military in the crisis was identified in Burmese language discussions.

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21   Phandeeyar found that positive engagements often "unintentionally extend the reach of most inflammatory and dangerous content", in particular the reaction "ha ha" (Phandeeyar 2019 op. cit.) In future reports we will thus focus on reactions to post in greater detail, analysing reactions achieved by post content.

HOW DID PEOPLE REACT TO THESE POSTS?

Myanmar's netizens reacted positively to ASSK's defense at the ICJ

Reactions were much more muted, however, during the ICJ's ruling

reaction: angry · haha · love · sad · thankful · wow
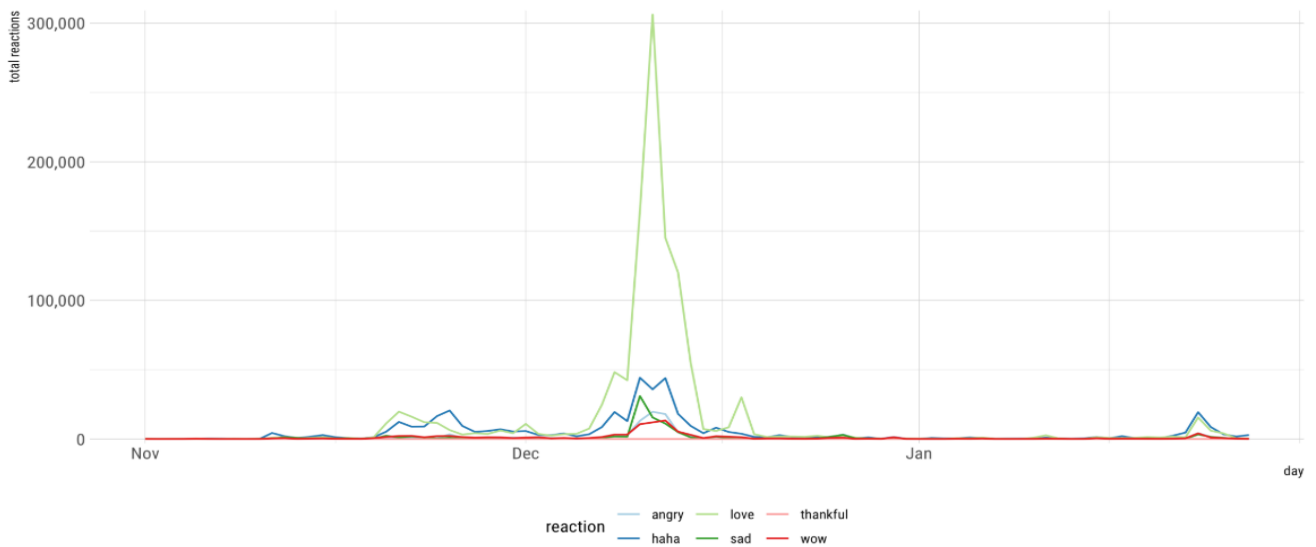
WHICH IS THE VOLUME OF POSTS OVER TIME?

Daily number of Facebook posts mentioning the 'ICJ' in groups and pages

A total of 63,763 unique posts retrieved from over 5000 accounts since 1 Nov 2019

account type
— Groups
— Pages
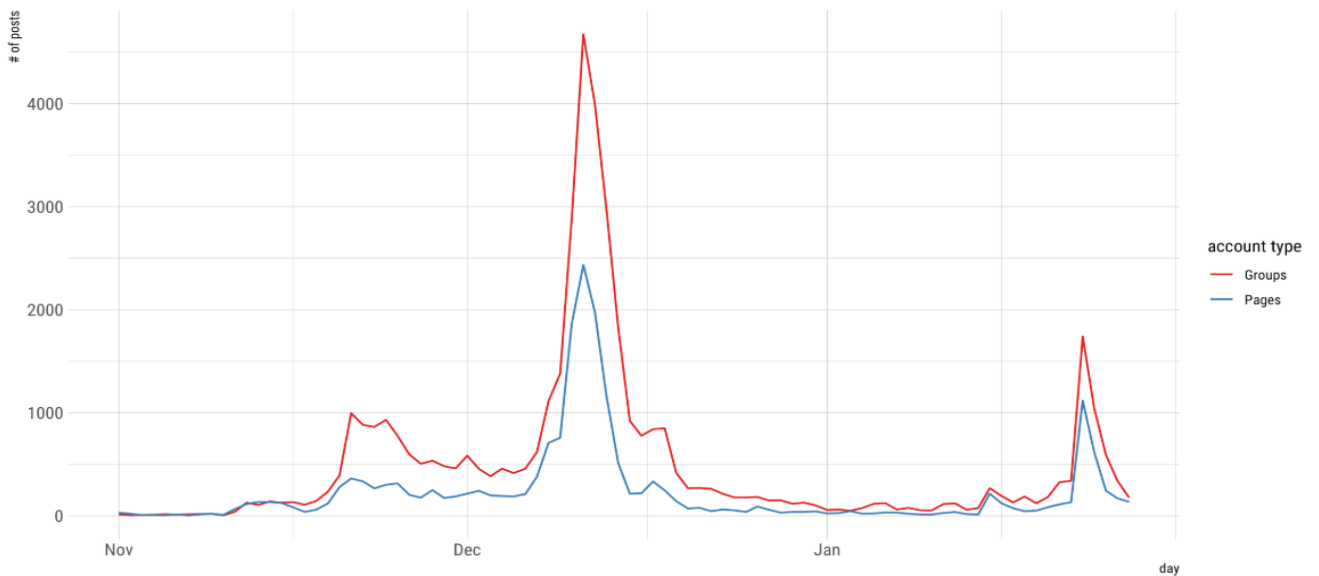
CSOS WELCOME THE ICJ CASE AND CONDEMN HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS, BUT ACHIEVE LITTLE ENGAGEMENT ONLINE

In January 2020, a group of 103 civil society organisations in Myanmar issued a joint statement welcoming the ICJ case and condemning Myanmar's military.[22] The statement came from a broad coalition of groups, ranging from human rights organisations to women's rights groups and climate activists, the majority of which were community-based, many of them working towards the rights of ethnic nationalities.

In order to understand the general reach and impact of these voices online, the accounts of those 61 groups which had a presence on Facebook were collected, and all the most recent Facebook accounts that had shared any of these groups' posts were retrieved, regardless of whether the post referenced the ICJ case (since only two organisations shared a Facebook post that referenced the ICJ case).

Using this method, 2,790 posts were retrieved from accounts that shared content linking back to one of the 61 organisations. It was found that 321 accounts shared content by these CSOs. Such accounts ranged from large media organisations to other civil society organisations, and generated 196,428 interactions between 2018 and 30 January 2020.

The packed circle graph below shows the 61 CSOs with Facebook pages. Each circle represents one page whose size is equal to the total interactions its posts generated, and labels for all organisations that had more than 3,600 interactions.

Only the Union of Karenni State Youth (UKSY) published the ICJ statement on their Facebook page, which boasts over 28,000 followers. However, that post only generated 88 interactions, even with such a large following. The other CSOs' Facebook pages referred to the ICJ case, but they did not share their statement supporting it; even so, none of these posts managed to get more than 100 interactions. The vast majority of organisations were of ethnic backgrounds and not Burmese.

Below we provide an overview of the top ten organisations by total interactions for all posts that were shared from their pages.

Top 10 Accounts	Total interactions
Kayan New Generation Youth - KNGY	19,066
Karen Human Rights Group	16,125
Union of Karenni State Youth - UKSY	13,535
Kalyana Mitta Development Foundation ကလျာဏမိတ္တ ဖွံ့ဖြိုးရေး ဖောင်ဒေးရှင်း�	9,946
Karen Environmental and Social Action Network (KESAN)	9,658
Network Activities Group	8,267
Mon Women's Organisation MWO	7,929
Karen Women's Organisation - KWO	7,702
အသံ - Athan	7,348
SYNERGY_Social harmony organisation	6,332

22   " (…) Currently Myanmar is facing cases under the United Nations International Court of Justice (ICJ) and International Criminal Court (ICC) according to international justice mechanisms, as the atrocities committed using political power and military might are not being addressed through internal justice mechanisms. We welcome and accept these cases as steps to protect the people of Myanmar and aid us in achieving democracy, rights and justice. (…)" See: Burma Campaign, Position of Civil Society Organizations on the case against Myanmar by the International Court of Justice regarding the potential indication of provisional measures to prevent genocide, January 2020, available at: bit.ly/2Xaw0Fl

Out of 61 CSOs with Facebook pages, only 19 have a relevant reach, with more than 3,600 interactions in the months analysed. The vast majority of CSOs do not reach a significant audience, and therefore hardly make their voices heard in the online debate. Nevertheless, data retrieved about the groups' general reach on social media showed that some of their posts had been shared by major media and a diverse set of social, environmental, and human rights activists.[1]

To refine future assessments, the project is currently holding qualitative interviews with some CSOs (CSOs working on civil and political rights, CSO statement partners) to understand if they use the platform but in different ways, for example with individual CSO leaders using their personal Facebook account to participate on Facebook's political debates. This could require complementing the analysis with a qualitative assessment of comments or public posts from their private pages, which is challenging as CrowdTangle does not provide access to automated private or comment data.
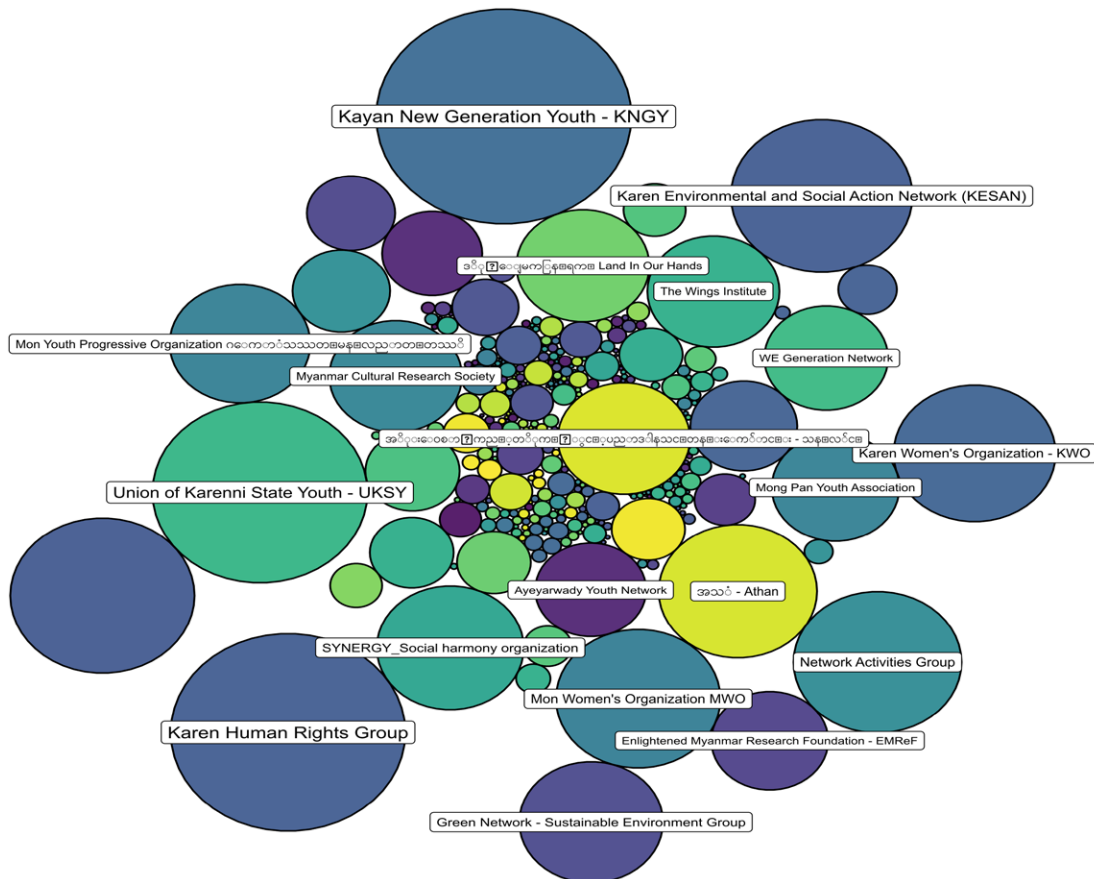
1   "Currently Myanmar is facing cases under the (ICJ) and International Criminal Court (ICC) according to international justice mechanisms, as the atrocities committed using political power and military might are not being addressed through internal justice mechanisms. We welcome and accept these cases as steps to protect the people of Myanmar and aid us in achieving democracy, rights and justice.
We understand very clearly that the ICJ case against Myanmar is directed toward those responsible for using political power and military might, and not to the people of Myanmar
See: Burma Campaign, *Position of Civil Society Organizations on the case against Myanmar by the International Court of Justice regarding the potential indication of provisional measures to prevent genocide*, January 2020, available at: bit.ly/2Xaw0Fl

HOW THE DISCUSSION IS BEING SHAPED

Discussions on social media tend to be dominated by media outlets and more often than not, with some presence of junk pages (domains pretending to be a media page, or websites falsely presenting themselves as authoritative resource about an issue/topic). To better understand how media play a role in shaping social media discourse all the links shared by Facebook pages and groups discussing the case were retrieved 1,048 unique domains that were referenced within 63,374 posts were extracted. The vast majority of links shared (82%) link to content shared by other Facebook pages, groups, or accounts. Junk pages also ranked among the top ten most shared pieces of content, such as Mmtopnews.com or everytimesstory.com, alongside more known outlets like the Burmese Voice of America, RFA, and the Democratic Voice of Burma. YouTube links were used to share mainstream broadcasts and Rohingya-focused news, which posted clips of the ICJ hearing.

Domain	Occurrences
facebook.com	50416
burmese.voanews.com	623
youtube.com	319
burmese.dvb.no	211
theesaychin.com	201
mmtopnews.com	191
rfa.org	189
everytimestory.com	181
mcntv.biz	175

With few exceptions, Facebook-only content contained posts by media or Myanmar officials. The network graph below outlines which pages were shared the most within the data. The size of the circles in the graph corresponds to the total number of times content from those pages were shared; larger circles mean that content from that specific page was shared more often. Major media – such as 7Day, BBC Burmese, RFA, and Eleven Broadcasting – were among some of the most shared, probably because they were some of the most active accounts in our data.

We also found clusters of accounts comprised of NLD support groups and government officials that amplified the content of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (mofamyanmar) and shared content from the State Counsellor's page (state.counsellor), for example posts regarding the ICJ case. Facebook Groups that supported Aung San Suu Kyi or the NLD – such as NLD ထောက်ခံ အမေစုချစ်သူများ (သီးသန့်) (Those Who Support NLD and Love Mother Su (Exclusively)), Online NLD, and အမေစုကို ချစ်ကြသူများသာ (သီးသန့်) ေ (Who Loves Mother Su (Exclusively)) – primarily shared the State Counsellor page's posts, and 32 different "Township Information Committee" Facebook pages shared them as well. The NLD and its supporters used Facebook to disseminate information about the arguments Aung San Suu Kyi would make in The Hague and defend Myanmar against accusations of genocide. Such sharing behaviour was not observed on USDP pages and indeed, there were very few USDP pages generally among the data, though the political party also has a strong support base online.

As the *Figure 1* shows, the Township Information Committees' Facebook pages were sharing the same posts at the same time, with an understandable peak during the appearance of Aung San Suu Kyi at the court in The Hague.

As the pages of the USDP and other political parties did not appear significantly in the data, in future reports it could be worth considering mapping the pages and networks of political parties to better understand electoral campaigning online.
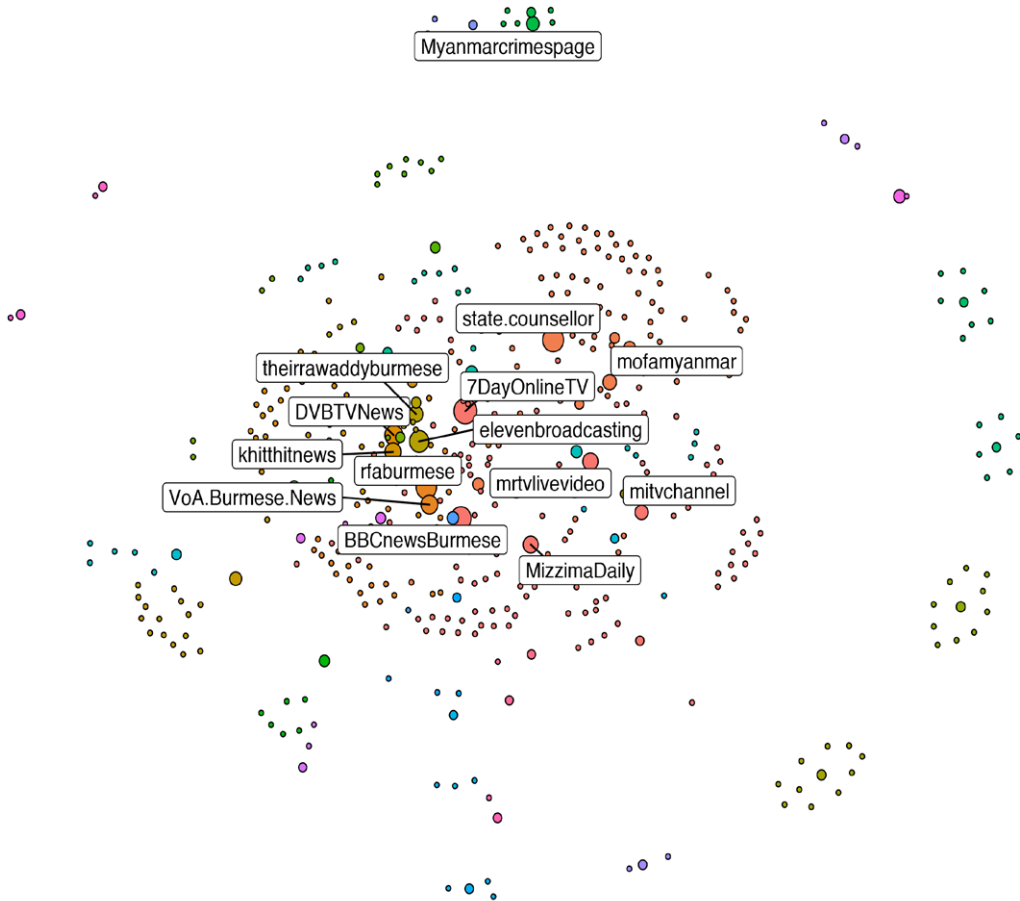
Fig. 1

NLD Information Committee Pages sharing posts by the State Counselor

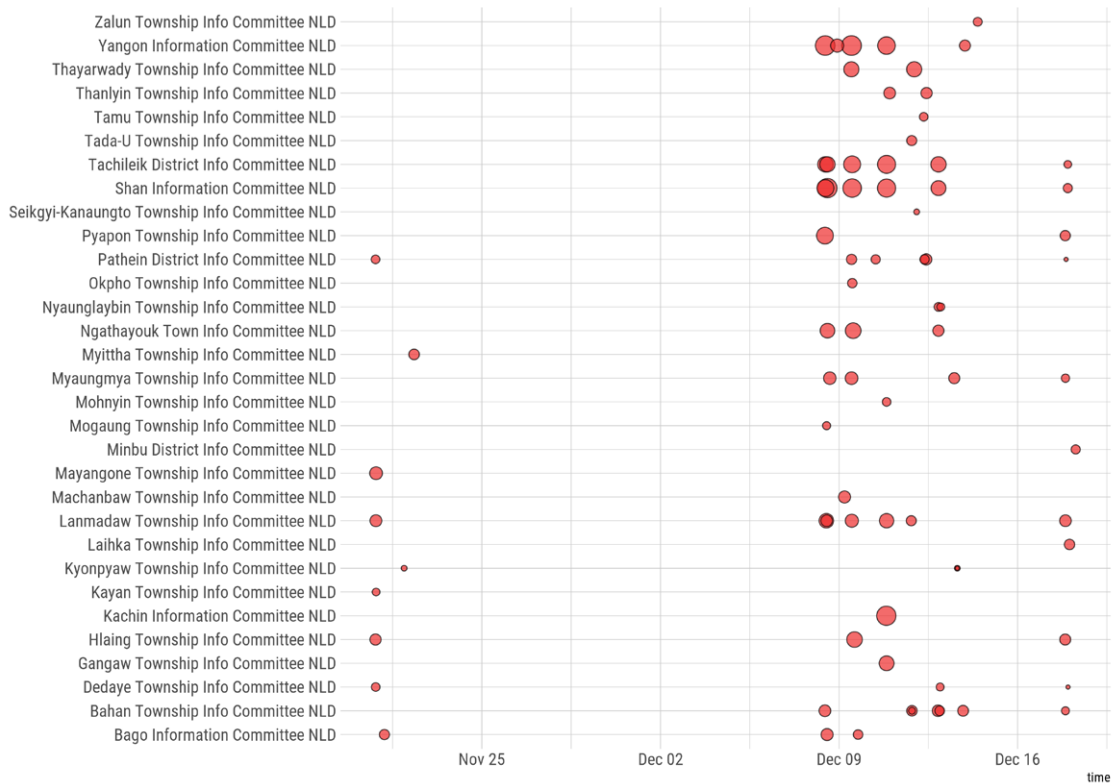Pages tended to share posts at around the same time. Size of dots correspond to total interactions.

Fig. 2

COMPETING NARRATIVES RELATED TO THE ICJ CASE

The analysis uncovered only small clusters of opposing narratives between users who supported The Gambia's case at the ICJ and those who opposed it. This manifested mainly in public Facebook groups, where users can post and engage with content, such as links to news articles, videos, and photos.

One group in particular was noted where users exchanged inflammatory posts over the ICJ case and the Rohingya in Myanmar generally. Created in 2017, the group, "**International Court of Justice**," states that its objective is "to get the whole world under one good justice system." The group boasts 7,836 members, but has no official affiliation with the ICJ. During the monitoring period numerous posts referenced both "sides" of the ICJ case – showing competing narratives to blame the Rohingya.

First, posts that accuse the Rohingya of "manufacturing" genocide and attempting to "frame" Myanmar's military were observed. One of the first pieces of disinformation to emerge from the Rohingya crisis were rumours and photos alleging that people in Rohingya villages were setting fire to their own homes – these allegations were echoed on the personal Facebook page of Zaw Htay, a spokesperson for the State Counsellor, as well as a major media in Myanmar.[23] [24]

Open source reporting,[25] however, later claimed that these allegations were false; the post below – and many like it – attempted to discredit reporting that showed the military and government officials using Hindu villagers to pose as Rohingya "burning their own homes."

Post about the Government's Spokesperson U Zaw Htay Twitter post.

Other posts adopted a common refrain used by those who support Myanmar's military and nationalists, claiming that the Rohingya are not a recognised ethnicity and therefore "do not exist in Myanmar." These posts echo a wide-spread discussion within Myanmar society and illustrate how Facebook is being used as a platform to spread antagonising views.

23   Twitter: bit.ly/3bER0Jl and Annie Gowen & Max Bearak, *Fake news on Facebook fans the flames of hate against the Rohingya in Burma*, Washington Post, 8 December 2017, available at: wapo.st/2TfyVL0

24   Twitter: bit.ly/2Lzp9Qq

25   Rachael Krishna, *These Pictures Show That Rohingya Muslims Weren't Actually Setting Their Own Houses On Fire*, BuzzFeed News, September 2017, available at: bit.ly/3bDVqAt

At the same time, there were posts in support of the Rohingya and the case at the ICJ, with posts such as "justice for Rohingya!" and others arguing that the Myanmar military had also abused the rights of other ethnic minorities in Myanmar. These posts, however, were answered by comments denying the existence of the Rohingya in Myanmar or telling them to "go back," as well as calling Rohingya "pests."

Misinformation surfaced only occasionally and within a subset of accounts in the data collected. One prominent narrative is that the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) is interfering in Myanmar's political and electoral affairs. These narratives emerged from Facebook groups such as အစုံတင်ကြမည် (Will Post Everything), မြန်ပြည်ချစ် (Love Myanmar Country), ဗဟုသုတ နှင့် သတင်းပေါင်းစုံ ဗ (Knowledge and General News), လှိုင်သာယာ မြို့နယ် သတင်းများ လှ (HlaingTharyar Township News), andမြန်မာ နိုင်ငံရေး ဘက်မလိုက် သတင်း ဟစ်တိုင် (Myanmar Politics Unbiased News).

NOTABLE STORIES INCLUDED:

• Aung San Suu Kyi as a "CIA spy" and Dr. Aye Maung, a prominent Rakhine politician, as an "CIA informer"

• A plot by the "CIA," "MI6," or "Arab OIC assassins" to target government leaders, in response to news that the government planned to purchase six bullet-proof vehicles

• The NLD as a "Muslim government" for ordering the closure of monasteries built without permission and responsive to "the orders of the CIA"

• Urging people not to vote for the NLD because voter tabulation systems were allegedly awarded to US companies and the CIA will be able to access and potentially manipulate military votes

• Such posts are problematic because they encourage voters to boycott the election and spread misinformation, increasing uncertainty about the integrity of the electoral process. These posts came from what appear to be authentic accounts, but which resemble propaganda efforts used elsewhere to depress voter enthusiasm.

IDENTIFYING COORDINATED BEHAVIOUR ON FACEBOOK

As a second step, a curated list of "junk" domains was merged with the project's database of shared links and 738 posts were found to contain links to these unofficial sites.[26] While this is still a small number compared to credible media outlets, it shows that some debates can be influenced by unreliable media sources – especially when they have a coordinated strategy to share links via several pages and groups. Junk news sites often publish content to users who are looking for entertainment – this is an aspect that the project will continue to monitor in particular as elections approach. One of the most popular posts in this set contained a link to an article about a celebrity, Smile, who travelled to The Hague to support Aung San Suu Kyi during the ICJ case.[27] The post was shared 454 times and received around 10,000 likes.

Other popular posts included another celebrity, Zenn Kyi, urging "netizens" to curb inflammatory comments about race on international media posts related to the ICJ, which generated some 6,700 shares and 14,000 likes.[28]

In order to further understand if and how these sites were playing a role in online political discourse, the sharing patterns were analysed, with the aim of identifying who shared links to those unreliable domains and when. Digging deeper in the list of junk domains, all Facebook posts by pages that shared links to these sites were retrieved and analysed for their dissemination patterns. 88,487 posts contained links to these domains and by examining the relationship between pages and the domains they shared, it was possible to construct a network graph that shows which pages tended to share the same domains. It is important to note that most of such pages share entertainment, gossip or celebrity content, with unreliable political content in some of their posts; therefore, not all of the 88,487 posts are political. This is a common strategy used by pages willing to share false information and was previously observed in countries like Sri Lanka.[29]

26   The list of junk sites was curated by Myanmar Fifth Estate, based on research on websites spreading low quality/junk news in the Burmese language. The Myanmar Press Council's Facebook site also includes a list of unregistered media sites: bit.ly/3fZbbFf. For further details, see Myanmar's Media Law, available at: bit.ly/3dVLQKz

27   Facebook: bit.ly/3bESjlf

28   Facebook: bit.ly/3fZbDmV

29   Sanjana Hattotuwa, *Digital Blooms: Social Media and Violence in Sri Lanka*, 2018, available at: bit.ly/2ZcuiWq

The network graph in the figure below shows a sample of these pages, represented as circles, clustered tightly together because they share links to the same sites. The pages sharing these domains often do not state that they are associated with the domains they are dedicated to sharing (for example, by listing the site in the *About* section of the page, or identifying as a news page). More often than not, the pages also appear to mislead people "about the identity, purpose, or origin of the entity that they represent," in violation of Facebook's policy on inauthentic behaviour.[30] For example, pages with names like "Ha Ha Fans," "Feeling Heart," and "Guitar Crazy," are intended to only share content of domains like bahuthutagabar.net or bahuthutagabar.com.

Network of Myanmar Facebook Pages sharing the same junk domains

Pages are clustered by the domains they have a tendency to share.
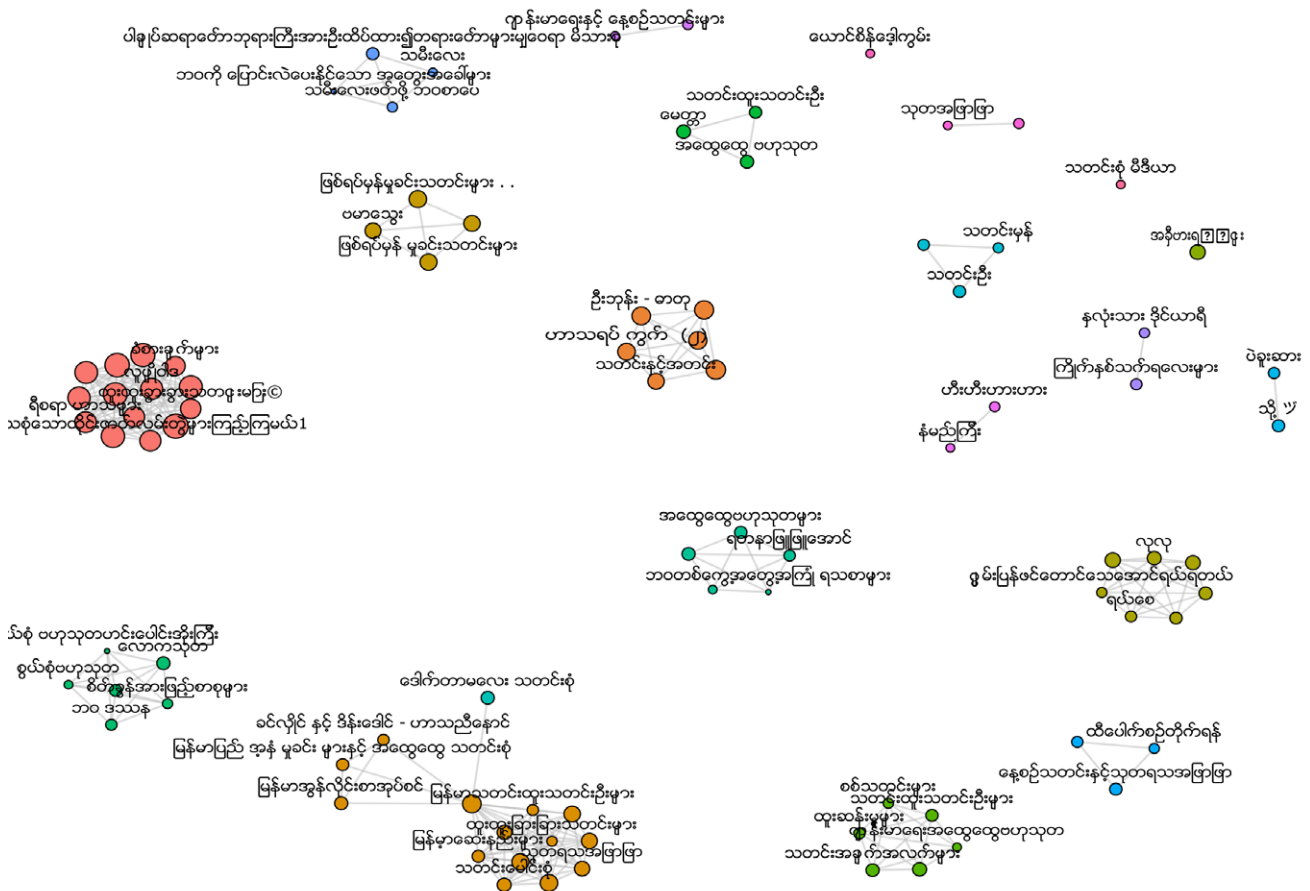
No junk news domain contained information specifying the owner of the domain or other contact information. Websites using the domain names also contained no contact information about the owners or staff managing or working for the "media" sites.

30   Facebook, 20. *Inauthentic Behavior, 2020,* available at: bit.ly/3cl8rdz

In addition, network activity over time shows how these pages coordinate the sharing of junk domains. In the figure below, the y-axis are pages (labels removed for readability), whereas the x-axis shows time, with circles marking when each page shared content from the specific domain. This figure shows how many times the same link has been shared by the different pages listed in this graphic. In it, we can see how different pages are posting the same links at the same time, in the period analysed, indicating coordinated behaviour.

In practice, coordinated behaviour is not necessarily problematic if the pages who share the content are identified as such, to provide clarity and transparency for readers who consume that information. However, many of them operate under names like "Daily memes", "Cele News 7", "Like Emoji Share," and are unclear about their purpose, sharing political content without any accountability. By sharing in a coordinated manner, such pages reach more audiences than they would otherwise reach organically, exposing more social media users to their content. The images below show two different political stories shared by one of these domains. We can see that the same pages share different political content from a given junk domain, indicating that they are acting in a coordinated manner to achieve more visibility.

Virtually the same pages share different political stories of a given domain. Whenever they share the same content, they do so at the same time. (FIG.3)

In the news piece above, the same link of the website "everytimestory.com" was originally posted on 9 December virtually at the same time, at 7:06 and 7:07 PM, by different pages in this network.

PAGES SHARING POLITICAL STORY #1

ျူမနှာသဲခြိခ်ငွ၀းဝေကာ ၄၀းမားစုစုညွ၀းဖွဲ 489,643	💬	Nov 30, 2019	63	⬚
Cele News 7 128,101	💬	Nov 30, 2019	52	⬚
HaHa-Monywa Funny Group 296,259	💬	Nov 30, 2019	40	⬚
ျူမနှာသဲစ္၄ စုစုညွ၀းတၟ ကွျ၄ခ၄း 196,357	💬	Nov 30, 2019	39	⬚
Mr . HA HA 210,236	💬	Nov 30, 2019	24	⬚
Like Emoji and Share 571,411	💬	Nov 30, 2019	17	⬚
Lovely Làdÿ 189,228	💬	Nov 30, 2019	17	⬚
၀ဲမပနၟ၀းခ် 214,705	💬	Nov 30, 2019	6	⬚
Daily Memes 1,604,190	💬	Nov 30, 2019	5	⬚

Fig. 3

PAGES SHARING POLITICAL STORY #2

Music Crazy 573,243	💬	Dec 16, 2019	16	⬚
Mr . HA HA 210,299	💬	Dec 16, 2019	8	⬚
ျူမနှာသဲခြိခ်ငွ၀းဝေကာ ၄၀းမားစုစုညွ၀းဖွဲ 489,680	💬	Dec 16, 2019	7	⬚
၀ဲမပနၟ၀းခ် 214,486	💬	Dec 16, 2019	7	⬚
Daily Memes 1,603,278	💬	Dec 16, 2019	6	⬚
ျူမနှာသဲစ္၄ စုစုညွ၀းတၟ ကွျ၄ခ၄း 196,642	💬	Dec 16, 2019	6	⬚
Cele News 7 129,079	💬	Dec 16, 2019	3	⬚
FOOD Channel 116,048	💬	Dec 16, 2019	1	⬚
Like Emoji and Share 571,148	💬	Dec 16, 2019	1	⬚

31 The pages/group names appear with mistakes in Burmese fonts but could not be corrected as the pages were taken down by facebook.

Fig. 4

PAGES TARGETING THE NLD AND SHARING DOCTORED MEDIA

We also identified a small network of inauthentic pages posting "news articles" and videos, directly attacking the NLD and Aung San Suu Kyi. The pages, called "Hero who loved the country," "Good son who loved the country," and "Those who love the country," share similar iconography and post news clippings from "Radio Free Myanmar," an organisation that purports to be based in Maryland and Washington D.C. "Radio Free Myanmar" shares a similar colour scheme and icon appearance with "Radio Free Asia" in an apparent attempt to mislead audiences about the page's authenticity. The actors behind "Radio Free Myanmar" also created short videos made to look like news clips, with voice overs reading fabricated articles. Some "articles" have also been posted in English, though many grammatical errors suggest that the writer is not a native speaker.

The pages have posted content opposing ethnic armed groups, the NLD, and the US, while promoting the military and former General Than Shwe. More recently, the pages have used covid-19 to attack the NLD and spread misleading information about their policy proposals. There is no information available about who set up and manages the pages, which were created between August and November 2019.

Radio Free Myanmar

လွတ်လပ်တဲ့ မြန်မာ့အသံ

RFM

COVID-19ကြောင့်လူစုလူဝေး မလုပ်ရဆိုသောညွှန်ကြားချက်တွင် NLD နှင့်မွစ္စလင်များမပါဝင်သလား ဟုမေးနေကြပြီ

RFM : Maryland 27-3-2020

ကမ္ဘာ့ကပ်ရောဂါကူးစက်မြန်ရောဂါကြောင့် လူစုလူဝေးမလုပ်ရန်ညွှန်ကြားချက်ကြောင့် မြန်မာနိုင်ငံတွင် ဗုဒ္ဓဘာသာဆိုင်ရာပွဲလမ်းများ အပါအဝင် စိန်ရတုတပ်မတော်နေ့အခမ်းအနား ကိုပင်ရွှေ့ဆိုင်းထားခဲ့သော်လည်း ကရင်ပြည် နယ်တွင် 27-3-2020 နေ့ကမွစ္စလင်များထောင် နှင့်ချီ၍ ပလီတက်ခဲ့ကြသလို NLD အမတ်များ ကလည်းကျောက်ဆည်တွင်းအခမ်းအနားပြုလုပ် ခဲ့ကြ၍ ၄င်းတို့သည်ညွှန်ကြားချက်တွင်မပါ ဝင်ဘူးလားဟု ဒေသခံများကစိုးရိမ်စိတ်ဖြင့်မေစ မြန်းပြောဆိုနေကြကြောင်း RFM ကသတင်းရရှိ သည်။

Kyaw Zin Win (Chief Editor)
Radio Free Myanmar.

Sample "news clipping" shared by RFA:
"As the government bans the public gathering, the Buddhist events and the Army day celebration were postponed, but in 27-3-2020, thousands of muslims attended Mosques in Kayin State and NLD PMs held the events in Kyaukse town. So, the locals asked with worry whether NLD and Muslim were not included in the ban."

PRELIMINARY CONCLUSIONS AND NEXT STEPS

This report proposes a way to analyse public debate on Facebook in Myanmar, coming from a broad perspective and focusing on political discussions that generated the most debates in the period analysed. From it, we can conclude that:

- The chosen methodology based on boolean keyword searches and a thematic case study provides a snapshot on how political discourse travels Facebook in Myanmar, which can be further refined to deepen the analysis.

- The search criteria captured posts from the pages of major media in Myanmar, which often post at a higher frequency than smaller, less influential accounts. It is proposed to exclude these pages in the next monitoring period and instead to coordinate with media monitoring organisations to cover media posts.

- Conspiratorial and junk news sites and pages shaping online public discourse were identified. Such sources pose a risk to how opinions are formed online, and with general elections taking place in 2020, their popularity may grow; the narratives they spread could become more influential in the months to come, with the potential to influence voters.

- NLD township committee pages, in particular, showed a high level of coordination in sharing content from the pages of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the State Counsellor. Similar sharing behaviour was not observed on USDP pages and indeed, very few USDP pages generally appeared in the data, despite the party's strong support base online. The project might consider mapping the pages and networks of political parties to better understand electoral campaigning online.

- Civil society groups that made public statements about the ICJ case and military did not share those views prominently on social media, therefore not participating or shaping the discussions online. The lack of participation of local CSOs on social media can have different reasons. This may be due to the fear of online harassment, lack of a social media strategy or fear of retaliation. Such aspects will be better understood through a qualitative survey, which was initiated in April 2020, with the aim of unveiling the obstacles to a more pluralistic participation online to inform future monitoring.

- A small network of pages exhibiting similar iconography and ostensibly posing as a media outlet based in the United States was identified. The outlet's logos bear resemblance to Radio Free Asia and the pages have produced short video clips purporting to be a broadcast run from both Washington D.C. and Maryland. However, the pages do not appear legitimate and consistently post anti-NLD content, as well as content criticising Aung San Suu Kyi. These pages could be engaging in coordinated inauthentic behaviour.

ANNEX 1: KEYWORDS IN EACH CATEGORY

NATIONALISM AND NATIONAL SECURITY

Commander-in-chief	ကာချုပ်, မအလ ကာပု
Army OR Tatmadaw	စစ်တပ်, တပ်မတော်
ICC	အိုင်စီစီ
ICJ	အိုင်စီဂျေ
burma nationalist	ဗမာ အမျိုးသားရေး ဝါဒ
Kala	အပွနား
Insurgents	သောင်းကျန်းသူ, သောင်းကြမ်းသူ
ARSA	အာဆာ
AA	အေအေ
Civic Nationalism	အမျိုးသားရေးဝါဒ

SOCIAL HARMONY

Supremacy	လူမျိုးကြီး
Brotherhood / Mixed Blood	သွေးချင်း, သွေးနော
Kalar	ကုလား
Chinese	ပေါက်ဖော်
Race / Ethnic Names	တိုင်းရင်းသား, လူမျိုးနာမည်

ELECTION PROCESS AND DISINFORMATION

USDP	ကြံ့ဖွတ်
NLD	နီပေါ
UEC	ရွေးကော်
Voter list	မဲစာရင်း
Military Voting Station	တပ်တွင်းမဲရုံ, တပ်မဲရုံ
Ethnic Parties	တိုင်းရင်းသားပါတီ
candidates	ကိုယ်စားလယ်လောင်း, အမတ်

DISCRIMINATORY LAWS

citizen and citizenship	နိုင်ငံသား
race and religion	အမျိုးဘာသာ
Mabatha	မဘသ
Bengali / Rohinya	ခိုးဝင်
Monogamy	တစ်လင်တစ်မယား

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