The McMaster Journal of Communication
Volume 7, Issue 1
2011

A Burmese Case Study: Far From Inherent – Democracy and the Internet

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Abstract

The inability of the Junta to stop information from leaking during the 2007 Burmese Saffron revolution has been used by many as evidence of the intrinsic democratic character of the Internet, and the power of citizen journalism to create dissent. However, the issue becomes increasingly complex when framed in a more comprehensive sociological context. How can we call the Internet inherently democratic when restricted access prevents the vast majority of voices in 'developing' nations from being heard and acknowledged? The socio-economic composition of bloggers from Burma is never scrutinized: who were these bloggers and were they the average Burmese citizen? Restrictions and filtration software complicate the discussion of the assumed and inherent democratic dream of the Internet and raise questions about the role of the state. While the Internet may provide a new medium for dissent and opposition, its impact is offset when bloggers represent only a small, particular cross-section of the Burmese population, and by the conscious efforts to censor, limit and monitor user activity through state control. The Burmese Saffron revolution acts as a reminder that the world is not on an equal playing field, and that restrictions, including socio-economic barriers and state intervention, impede democratic visions of the Internet.

Keywords: democracy, Burma, Junta, Internet, government censorship, filtration, leaks and workarounds

The McMaster Journal of Communication
2011
Volume 7, Issue 1 ISSN 1710-257X

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Introduction

Filtration, regulation, and censorship are carefully crafted political processes that challenge the assumed freedoms and democratic vision of the Internet, as exemplified by the Burmese Junta during the 2007 Saffron Revolution. When fuel prices severely increased in Burma, the cost of food subsequently surged to the point where the average Burmese was spending up to seventy percent of their monthly income on food alone (Wang, 2007). The untenable inflation resulted in tensions and increasing participation in rallies in the capital city, Rangoon, throughout August and September 2007. In response to the civil disobedience and growing global attention, the authoritarian military Junta ordered a media blackout, and other restrictive controls to contain information, journalists, and the local populations. Stephan Wang (2007) reports that "[b]y the time the protests began, the SPDC [the State Peace and Development Council] had already established one of the world's most restrictive systems of information control" (4).

Despite Burma's media blackout and "violent crackdown beginning on September 26 […] [that] left up to 200 dead", Wang (2007) explains that, "citizen journalists and bloggers

continued to feed raw, graphic footage and witness accounts to the outside world via the Internet" (2). Digital activists searched cyberspace for information, while Burmese citizens shot video and shared digital files. People saw a reality that would otherwise be censored and non-existent in Western mainstream media as "the Internet gave people outside [of] Burma a peek into what was actually happening inside the country" (Chowdhury, 2008:4). Global awareness of the situation in Burma was described as facilitating a worldwide democratic struggle "through protests and demonstrations [...] Many governments issued strong statements against the regime" (Chowdhury, 2008:4).

The inability of the Junta to stop information from leaking has been used by many as evidence of the intrinsic democratic character of the Internet, and the power of citizen journalism to create dissent. However, the issue becomes increasingly complex when framed in a more comprehensive sociological context. How can we call the Internet inherently democratic when restricted access prevents the vast majority of voices in 'developing' nations from being heard and acknowledged? The socio-economic composition of bloggers from Burma is never scrutinized: who were these bloggers and were they the average Burmese citizen? The SPDC's restrictions and filtration software complicate the discussion of the assumed and inherent democratic dream of the Internet and raise questions about the role of the state. Thus, while the Internet may provide a new medium for dissent and opposition, its impact is offset when bloggers represent only a small, particular cross-section of the Burmese population, and by the conscious efforts to censor, limit and monitor user activity through state control. The 2007 Burmese Saffron revolution acts as a reminder that the world is not on an equal playing field, and that restrictions, including socio-economic barriers and state intervention, impede the democratic vision of the Internet.

Limitations and Issues of Access to the Internet

Many contemporary theorists position the electronic network as uncontainable, while ignoring the tactics employed by the modern nation state and authoritarian regimes. Assumptions about the broadly accessible system of communicative technology claim:

> [n]ew information technologies threaten sovereigns that depend on maximum political, economic, and cultural control over their peoples […] no longer can totalitarian regimes ensure themselves a safe environment by controlling the newspapers, radio and television stations because the World Wide Web remains beyond their control and manipulation" (Perrit, 1998:431).

As opposed to discussing the potential of the electronic network, Perrit (1998) makes totalizing claims that the network is disobedient and unmanageable, and implies that authoritarian regimes are not skilled or literate enough to use communication technology to their own advantage. Very little consideration is given to the strategic tactic to keep technology out of the hands of the ordinary citizen or the media savviness of authoritarian regimes. Likewise, libertarians argue, "the medium is a universal space allowing access to unfiltered flows of information", and that it "lacks established hierarchies of power" (Abbot, 2001:99). Once again, this type of analysis creates a utopian vision of the net as a "highly democratic world with no overlords or gatekeepers" (Abbot, 2001:99). Other scholars, such as Bohman (2004), Dahlgren (2000), and Van Laer and Van Aelst (2009) hold similar views about the democratic potential of Internet.

However, Burma's tactics during and prior to the Saffron Revolution demonstrate the dangers of state intervention or "gatekeeping" of the Internet (Hess, 2008). More specifically, the Junta preemptively limits the democratic capacity of the

Internet through restrictions such as restraining the technological infrastructure, price control, and extensive processing for licenses. Indeed, deficient infrastructure and price controls are used as a method to prevent the mass majority of Burmans from accessing the Internet (Best and Wade, 2005). The available technology in Burma is particularly confining, as there are only two Internet service providers (ISPs): the Ministry of Post and Telecommunications (MPT) and the semi-private Bagan Cybertech (BC) which have approximately 15,000 subscribers, respectively (OpenNet Initiative, 2005). Both ISPs use a dial-up connection, and the quality of the phone line has a connection speed of 24kbps (at best) (OpenNet Initiative, 2005). Through infrastructural shortages, the government has attempted to "immobilize and disarm the essential communication tools used by citizen journalists: cell phones and the Internet" (Wang, 2007:5). The deprived infrastructure acts as a reminder that the Internet is not immune to structural inequalities, and that there are a vast amount of voices being excluded, despite the allusion that the entire world is being connected in a free global dialogue (Madon, 2000).

Individual access to computers is made nearly impossible in Burma, which further impacts the power of an anonymous, or 'safe' network. Computers are often too expensive for most Burmese citizens and the cost of subscribing to the Internet is an expensive process. Even if one is able to subscribe, the dial-up accounts give access to the intranet, the Myanmar Internet and the state-run e-mail services (OpenNet Initiative, 2005). Thus, the government attempts to restrict the outflow of information by limiting access to the web. While the costs can be associated with the poor GDP rate of the 'developing' nation, they are also the result of a government tactic to "prevent citizens from the civil liberties and political rights that they might otherwise gain if they could afford access" (Best and Wade, 2005:19). The lack of

infrastructure and prohibitive costs prevent the vast majority of Burmese citizens from accessing the online world, which is a conscious and deliberate political strategy employed by the Junta. According to Henry Jenkins and David Thorburn (2003):

> […] the diversification of communication channels […] is politically important because it expands the range of voices that can be heard in a national debate, ensuring that no one voice can speak with unquestioned authority. Networked computing operates according to the principles fundamentally different from those of broadcast media: access, participation, reciprocity, and many-to-many rather than one-to-many communication (2).

More "channels" (or in this case, access to infrastructure) are not the simple solution to democratic practices when they are kept out of arm's reach and are highly monitored. An unadulterated, accessible network can act as a channel to promote democracy, however, these factors should not be taken for granted as universal. In regard to economic accessibility of the Internet in comparison to other communication tools, Jenkins and Thorburn (2003) write, "economic factors, for example, determined which citizens would have access to a printing press; social factors determined which citizens could exert influence at town meetings" (8). Jenkins and Thorburn (2003) assume that social factors no longer determine access, while ignoring the current class structures or state intervention that exclude low-middle (and in some cases upper-classes) in developing nations like Burma from connecting online. In contrast, Jason Abbot (2001) writes:

> […] questions must be raised about how effective the Internet can be as a vehicle for political transformation when it is clear that across Asia as a whole only a small minority

> of the population have access to it. In particular, given the stark inequalities in terms of race, gender, education and income, Internet activism is predominantly an elite pastime. One of the problems with this is that the audience of users represents a pre-selected elite that for the most part may already be sympathetic to such messages. As a consequence 'those who may benefit the most from counter hegemonic uses of the Net may be precisely those who have least access to it' (111).

The Burmese condition reflects the great inequalities of access that are structurally induced by the Junta. It is often this structural "stark inequalit[y]" that is overlooked. Thus, it is safe to assume that Internet access in places like Burma are restricted to those who can afford to go through the process and to users that are economically 'well off', 'tech-savvy', 'young', and 'urban' which radically changes how one may view the content online (Wang, 2007).

If the cost is not enough to deter potential users, the rigorous licensing process will prevent users from getting to log-on from the outset. Under a 1996 law on computer equipment, anyone possessing an unlicensed computer in Burma faces imprisonment of up to fifteen years (Lintner, 2001). Besides having to register the hardware, potential users must have a signed letter from the relevant porter warden to indicate if the individual is "politically dangerous" before granting a domestic connection (Crispin, 2007). The Junta clearly fear the range of voices potentially afforded by the Internet, and have found methods of deterring the free flow of technology. As a result of prohibited costs, technological limitations, and tedious bureaucratic process, the Burmese government is able to restrict access so that most users access the Internet from regulated and easy to monitor (or abolish) locations, such as cybercafés in Rangoon and Mandalay (OpenNet Initiative, 2005).

With approximately two hundred Internet cafés, and their popularity on the rise, these locations are highly monitored and involve intense bureaucracy (Wang, 2007). Cybercafés operate under license from the Myanmar Information Communications Technology Development Corporation (MICTDC), a "consortium of 50 local companies with the full support from the Government of the Union of Myanmar" (OpenNet Initiative, 2005:67). The cafés require that users register before ccessing the Internet, and cybercafé licenses require owners to take screen shots of user activity every five minutes and deliver CDs containing these images to the MICTDC at regular intervals. Reportedly, "the MICTDC requests the CDs only sporadically […] but such surveillance techniques nevertheless cause users to self-censor" (OpenNet Initiative, 2005:68). The licenses ban the use of tunneling software and proxies, however, the licenses or the state's filtering software have not been highly effective in this regard (OpenNet Initiative, 2005). Nonetheless, the process is difficult and tedious, which discourages the proliferation of the café model as a painless business venture, and ultimately leaves citizens without proper access. Thus, if obtaining better software is the only variable that is preventing the government from plugging the current leaks and workarounds, the idea that the Internet operates as a "universal space" with "unaltered flows of information" must be re-evaluated to include the complexities of tactile filters and censorship.

Censorship

Freedom and civil liberties are further hindered by various forms of censorship, including filtration, counter media campaigns, strict regulatory provisions, and self-censorship. In 2004, the Junta purchased filtering software, which includes encryption and filtration software, from Fortinet, a US technological company (Best and Wade, 2005). The Junta's purchase of 'spyware' "is indicative of its continued

determination to regulate Internet content, email, and other electronic communication" (Chowdhury, 2008:75). The assumption that the Junta may not be able to "ensure themselves a safe environment" over the web demonstrates the lack of consideration given to pervasive and incessant regulation. State control through filtration and regulation impede the utopian democratic vision of the Internet as filtration "prevents people from accessing information that would otherwise be available to them. It is well known that some governments use filtration to block access to politically sensitive web sites" (Kalathil and Boas in Best and Wade, 2005). Burma implements a filtering regime that imposes significant limits on material the state's citizens can access (OpenNet Initiative, 2005). During the media blackout in Burma, news sites like CNN Reuters, Radio Free Asia and OhmyNews were all blocked (Wang, 2007). In the same way other communication channels have been targeted, the Internet is susceptible to the increase of intentional control and manipulation. Benjamin Barber (2003) writes:

> […] filtering always involves mediation in some form or other, either as a consequence of democratic (consensual) or authoritative (appropriately knowledgeable criteria or via arbitrary criteria rooted in brute force (it is so because I say it is so, and I have the gun). The question is not whether or not to facilitate, mediate, and gate-keep. It is which form of facilitation, which mediation and which gatekeeper? (42)

Here, Barber (2003) distinguishes between consensual and authoritative filtration while avoiding grand sweeping statements about the "fundamental" or 'inherent' qualities of the Internet. Burma falls under the category of authoritative control that uses brute force, especially with the creation of "a special Cyber Warfare Division within its secret police force to track online criticism of the regime" (Chowdhury, 2008:76). Burmese laws are applied with physical force, which

intensifies the "cognitive tyrannies" of the regime (Tehranian, 1999). The problem thus becomes one about the responsibility, the level of, and the nature of state intervention in the realm of the net. As a result, the Internet becomes a highly political site that is far from a democratic vision but rather a place that is riddled with questions about power, consent, and dissent.

These questions are further emphasized by the Junta's media literacy capabilities, where expanding "the gaze of surveillance" and "cognitive tyrannies" can be found in the production of counter media (Tehranian, 1999). Initially, Burmese authorities 'blacked out' all local media coverage of protests and produced their own counter media that criticized detained protest leaders. Instead of creating a 'dialogical' communication stream, the counter media played with the expectations of media literacy by abusing the assumed authority of a government site like, www.myanmar.com, and by positioning their site as the only source of information (Lintner, 2001). Furthering their propagandist agenda, the Junta adapted their controls of online media to create their own form of information that would be considered legitimate. Indeed, a government website would be considered to carry more legitimate weight than say, a teenager's blog, who would normally publish non-political posts (which is likely further a result of a censorship tactic). The Junta limited the democratic capacity of the Internet by muddling online content and by creating their own content intended to be considered legitimate.

Furthermore, web content in Burma is regulated with explicit provisions that ban political content which covers the following:

> • Any writings detrimental to the interests of the Union of Myanmar [Burma] are not to be posted.

> • Any writings directly or indirectly detrimental to the current policies and secret security affairs of the government of the Union of Myanmar are not to be posted.
> • Writings related to politics are not to be posted.
> • Internet users are to inform MPT of any threat on the Internet.
> • Internet users are to obtain prior permission from the organization designated by the state to create Web pages (OpenNet Initiative, 2005:57).

These provisions deter potential political debate from occurring online. When online content is regulated and enforced by the Cyber Warfare Division, the readily available messages are distorted and painted in a particular narrow light. Thus, for the most part, the Junta stops political dissent through the networked computer system, the very system that is described as "fundamentally different" from older communication tools.

Self-censorship is also a form and consequence of censorship that allows the Junta to restrict the civil liberties of citizens. Kalathil and Boas (2003) note that self-censorship on the Internet is apparent in a number of authoritarian nations, including Burma, China, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, and Vietnam. The approach of broad-based, but relatively inconsistent filtering tends to have a "chilling" effect on expression, as citizens are kept wondering about whether they will be able to break through the filter and whether or not they are being watched (OpenNet Initiative, 2005). Many bloggers discussed the fuel hike protests with active comments and discussions, and some of the blogs have since been banned (OpenNet Initiative, 2005). The rumour that all blogs would be banned and blacklisted caused "many local bloggers to self-monitor their postings" (Wang, 2007:36).

Many established blogs had a non-political focus and turned their attention to providing news and updates, while others were strictly political (Wang, 2007). However, non-political, personal blogs were also "stalled by the Internet shutdown and the additional filtering enacted by the government" (Wang, 2007:14). Filtration expanded to include YouTube and Blogspot which were "both available (along with all search engines) at time of testing in late 2006" (Wang, 2007:14). The danger of filtering non-political and personal blogs reflects the arbitrary powers that are concentrated in the Junta. The non-political regulation also fueled self-censorship and the closure of free speech of the few privileged individuals who had access to the Internet in Burma. Therefore, coupled with restrictions of civil liberties, self-censorship further hinders the notion that the Internet is an 'unadulterated' free source of information and dissent.

Potential Versus Nature: The Politics of Workarounds

As with most forms of technology, there are workarounds and leaks in the Junta's filtering system. For enthusiasts making claims about the inherent democratic nature of the Internet, this is a source of excitement. However, workarounds and leaks reveal more about the potential of the Internet than its inherent nature. To elaborate, the bloggers who connected their information to the rest of the world were "tech savvy" enough to post anonymously or use alternative posting methods (Chowdhury, 2008). Through "trusted-contact blogging", multiple generations of Burmese were involved in the production and dissemination of information like photographs, and videos "not obtainable by traditional means to the rest of the world" (Wang, 2007:4). Through international proxy servers, proxy sites, encrypted email accounts, http tunnels and other creative workarounds, the cyber-reality in Myanmar was actually much less restricted than it first appeared (Crispin, 2007). Café attendants and customers were able to evade the government's firewall by

using foreign-hosted proxy sites or servers that allowed them to freely connect to content like critical news sources and email accounts that were otherwise blocked. One of the most popular proxy sites was the Indian based site, "Glite" which was downloaded by "tens of thousands of Internet surfers and resides on hundreds of private and public servers in Myanmar" (Crispin, 2007). While authorities managed to block three versions of Glite, the program administrator established several other unblocked versions of the site. Most importantly, Glite was designed to remain off indexed search lists and sites, giving "Internet cafés their own private and secure access and makes censor search-engine results for its site seem deceptively sparse" (Crispin, 2007). Thus, it becomes clear that the efforts and lengths one must take to discover uncovered channels safe enough for dissent speaks to the potential that the Internet holds for democracy, while simultaneously revealing the fact that the Internet is not inherently democratic. More specifically, because workarounds and leaks require high levels of technological knowledge and skill that the majority of Burmese citizens do not possess, much of the democratic potential of the Internet is left untapped. As well, if the Junta decided to enforce cyber-café owners to hand over CDs of screenshots, the prospect of tunneling, and proxy-servers would dramatically decrease or result in an increase in self-censorship.

However, the democratic potential of the Internet was also harnessed because of the ineffective filtering software used by the Junta. Wang (2007) explains that only a few of the sites were blocked by both BaganNet and MPT. In other words, filtering in Burma was not evenly applied, and "[o]f the sites found to be blocked, less than a third were blocked on both ISPs. The remaining blocked sites were blocked on one ISP or the other, but not both" (Deibert et. al, 2008:340). If the only factor that has prevented the Junta from restricting Burmese Internet users from utilizing workarounds like Glite is better software or the closing of leaks, then the Burmese face a bleak future of further restricted civil liberties.

Since the Junta were unable to close the leaks or circumvent the gaps in the filtering software, the ultimate statement was made by instituting intermittent blackouts of Internet and telephone service throughout the duration of the fuel hike protests (Wang, 2007). By doing this, the Junta effectively eliminated any possibility of continued dissent or protest regarding this period (OpenNet Initiative, 2005).

Lessons from Burma and Beyond

The case of Burma offers a lesson about the conditions and challenges of access, censorship, and filtration. The purpose of this paper was to demonstrate some of the ongoing challenges that impede the Internet from reaching its democratic potential. To simply state that the Internet is inherently democratic ignores preemptive challenges and tactics used by governments to restrict civil liberties. Such tactics are not limited to the realm of authoritarian regimes, as they can be found in various forms of government across the globe as filtering, monitoring, censorship, and self-censorship operate in varying degrees throughout the technological landscape. While technological workarounds and leaks have demonstrated the ability to convey information and stories from the interior of oppressive regimes in places like Burma, and more recently in Iran, we must ask if these will be made increasingly difficult to access as authoritarian governments attempt to close the systematic gaps in their Internet security. Questions also arise about who is able to access these innovative technologies; if only a small cross-section of the population is the sole voice being heard, the likelihood of transparent and widespread dissent is dubious at best.

Dissent is a product of free expression and speech, and the Internet, with its democratizing potential, is an ideal place for dissent to be expressed. However, the ability to dissent becomes suppressed when an authoritarian state like Burma constantly instills fear through the monitoring of Internet use and the blocking of citizens from freely accessing and

utilizing the democratic tools the Internet has to offer. Strategies used by the Burmese Junta must be incorporated into our understanding how the Internet can provide a space for democracy. If these strategies are not evaluated and considered in this discussion about the Internet, we must then in turn ask, who is the conversation about the Internet's democratic potential really for?

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