



Development, digitalization and disinformation in Myanmar

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Key points

- As was demonstrated at the 2019 Stockholm Internet Forum organized by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida), information and communications technologies (ICT) play an integral role in development cooperation today.
- Internet freedom has been in decline for a number of years as more states use surveillance technology to monitor and control the activities of their citizens online.
- The plight of the Rohingya population in Myanmar is the only example thus far of a social media company, Facebook, being accused by the United Nations of having played a part in genocide.
- Myanmar's proximity to and dependence on China led then- President Thein Sein to initiate liberalizing reforms in 2011 aimed at decreasing China's economic dominance by opening up the market to the West. This liberalization process sparked one of the world's fastest digital transformations.
- A combination of domestic factors, commercial interests and the lack of an international regulatory framework helped give the Facebook version of the internet a monopoly and exposed the Myanmar digital space to authoritarian influences.
- As liberal democracies struggle to maintain a free, open and secure internet, and private sector social media companies fail to curb hate speech on their platforms, many states in transition are starting to look at alternative internet models for regulating and controlling the internet domain.
- Two distinct internet models have emerged for handling the complexity of the internet environment: the Western liberal version, dominated by US private sector companies; and the Chinese version, dominated by Chinese state-owned enterprises.
- International development assistance can play an important role in strengthening digital capabilities in countries undergoing transition but these initiatives must carefully assess how ICT and social media platforms might exacerbate offline conflicts.



A shrinking democratic online space

The theme of the 2019 Stockholm Internet Forum, organized by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) on 16–17 May, was the shrinking democratic space online and its repercussions for sustainable development. Over 500 delegates from around the world participated in conversations about how sophisticated technologies and social media platforms are being used to curb freedom of speech online.

The forum raised several important questions pertaining to the current debate on the role of information and communications technologies (ICT) in development. The global increase in authoritarian laws aimed at restricting internet freedom and new or sophisticated technologies used to monitor content and control user behaviour online, dominated the debate. The international community was criticized for failing to prevent authoritarian regimes from curtailing online rights.

The Director General of Sida, Carin Jämtin, suggested that closer collaboration was needed between development agencies and the private sector. Representatives from Google and Facebook argued that they were playing their part in mitigating the effects of harmful content online. Many activists shared stories about how social media platforms and telecommunications service providers had deleted or blocked regime-critical content, thereby calling into question the democratic claims of privately-owned technology companies.

Overall, the forum made clear that online challenges to freedom of expression and mobility are a global problem that developing and developed countries must face up to together. A strong multi-

stakeholder initiative to safeguard a free, open and secure internet with universal access is long overdue.

The case of Myanmar is a cautionary tale. The digital transition in Myanmar and the use and misuse of social media can provide important lessons for international development donors such as Sweden, which engage with the ICT sector on development projects, and for the wider debate on internet freedom, regulation and technology in the context of conflict-affected societies. It is particularly important to understand the sensitive contexts in which social media can instigate conflict and how development cooperation can work to mitigate such risks.

This policy brief looks at several dimensions of the digital transition in Myanmar. First, it identifies the domestic factors that empowered social media platforms. Second, it examines the commercial interests and technologies that helped a private sector social media platform grow and achieve monopoly status. Third, it analyses the influence of international politics, which paved the way for digital authoritarianism. It concludes with a broader discussion on the use of ICT in development in the light of the new fragmented digital landscape and by offering a set of policy recommendations for international donors, such as Sida, engaged in ICT for development in Myanmar.



Why Myanmar?

Many conflict-ridden countries are struggling to handle the challenges posed by a digital transition. One of the most serious of these is the risk that old or new conflicts might escalate online through the use of hate speech and influencer campaigns, and then spill over into the offline sphere. However, it is only in Myanmar thus far that a United Nations fact-finding mission has concluded that a social media platform played a determining role in bringing about genocide. It is telling that when Marc Zuckerberg, the Chief Executive Officer of Facebook, testified in front of the US Congress in 2018, he had to answer questions pertaining to one of the largest data breach scandals in the history of the United States, and to Facebook's role in the genocide of the Rohingya minority in Myanmar. The global dominance of social media platforms has placed private sector companies at the centre of domestic politics and of conflicts.

Private sector social media and telecommunications companies entered

Myanmar at a time that coincided with extensive liberalization and reform, and one of the world's fastest digitalization process. Global commercial interests in the ICT sector faced few legal restrictions but Facebook soon became the only version of the internet to which most users in Myanmar had access. The internet in Myanmar is Facebook and few users venture beyond the application.

Expectations were high, not least among the European Union (EU) and the United States, that the reforms initiated by a quasi-elected Myanmar government in 2011 would bring about democratization. The election in 2015 made the recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize, Aung San Suu Kyi, de facto head of government. This was proof enough for many international development agencies that a democratic transition from below was taking place and that ICT could be used to speed up this process.

Such sentiments are reflected in the Swedish *Strategy for Development Cooperation with Myanmar, 2018–2022*, which states that an "independent professional media and a free, open and secure internet have an important role to play, both as goals in themselves and as platforms for asserting other rights". In a 2018 assessment by the Swedish Expert Group for Aid Studies, Myanmar was singled out as the largest recipient of Swedish ICT-related aid.



Bicycle rickshaw in Yangon, Myanmar.
Credit: Sarah Schulman

Understanding the Myanmar transition and the commercialization of cyberspace

To fully grasp why the digital transformation in Myanmar led to a wider distribution of hate speech on social media platforms, it is essential to understand the nature of the political transition itself. After decades of formal censorship, oppression and strict surveillance, the military regime in Myanmar initiated sweeping reforms in 2010 in order to re-engage with the global market. In 2011 a quasi-elected government led by President Thein Sein, a former general, invited foreign telecommunications companies to enter the market and two companies, one of which was Norwegian Telenor, were given licences to invest in information networks and infrastructure. Cheap 3G Chinese smartphones with an internet connection began to flood the Myanmar market. From being one of the least connected countries in the world in 2010, by 2018 90 percent of

the population was living within range of 3G/4G network coverage, making Myanmar one of the fastest digital transformations in modern time and the third-fastest growing mobile phone market in the world. The proportion of the mobile phone owning population that owns a smartphone is higher in Myanmar than in the United States, and more than 90 percent of all phones on the market are smartphones. In 2017 the telecommunications sector received more than 47 percent of total foreign direct investment (FDI). When pre-publication censorship was lifted in 2012, political content and the websites of exile news media became accessible to a wider audience.

By the time of the November 2015 election, a considerable number of Burmese who had been educated outside the country had returned to set up tech start-ups and educational technology organizations. The opening up of the telecommunications sector had created new markets aimed at people with access to mobile phones and social media. Initiatives such as homemade robotics labs, machine learning technologies and coding-for-kids groups began to spring up, primarily in Yangon. When bus routes were radically reconfigured overnight, a local transportation chatbot was up and running within a few hours to help the 2 million Yangonites navigate the new routes. Local initiatives such as the *Open Hluttaw* project provided online contact information for all parliamentarians to encourage citizen participation in politics.

There were high expectations both domestically and internationally that educational apps and technology could help leapfrog the neglected school system and bring the majority rural population out of poverty. Many assumed that encouraging participation in online platforms would help speed the transition from authoritarian to



more democratic rule. Civil society and minority organizations were quick to mobilize on social media platforms. International development agencies invested in localized apps to promote transparency, provide instructions on how to vote in the 2015 general election and connect farmers with knowledge apps on various aspects of agriculture. There was a strong belief among international development cooperation agencies that democratization was happening, and the ICT revolution was seen by many as evidence of such a process.

However, the 2011 reforms enacted by Thein Sein were not a democratization process driven from below by pro-democracy forces. On the contrary, the transition had been planned out carefully by the military, the *Tatmadaw*, with one of the primary aims being to decrease Myanmar's economic dependence on China. Crucially, the constitution adopted in 2008 cemented the role of the military as "the guardian of the nation". Despite the change in government following the 2015 election, little or no civilian oversight has been allowed of military institutions and budgets, or its operations conducted in Rakhine state and other regions, such as Kachin and Shan states. Under the constitution, 25 percent of the seats in parliament are reserved for military representatives. In addition, a military presence persists in the financial sphere, as well as the media and ICT sectors. Many of the privately-owned publications, broadcasting companies and radio stations are still associated directly or indirectly with high-ranking members of the military.

The military regime had already been concerned about the impact of information technology in the mid-1990s, and had placed severe restrictions on internet services. In the mid-2000s the regime was using surveillance and filtering tools in its

two internet service providers. During the 2007 Saffron Revolution, internet access was shut down to prevent media coverage. In June 2019, the government ordered all mobile phone operators to stop mobile internet traffic in several townships in Rakhine and Chin states.

Protracted conflicts between the centre and Myanmar's borderlands date back to pre-colonial times but British colonial rule exacerbated the divide by using ethnic armed groups to suppress the national aspirations of the Bamar majority group, to which Aung San Suu Kyi belongs. Minorities have been suppressed throughout the decades of Myanmar military rule, not least through the banning of ethnic languages, censorship and restricting the means of communication.

Civil and *Uncivil* Society and Social Media

There is a growing literature that has started to examine the potential for public spheres and social movements to develop on social networking sites. Contrary to many assumptions, digital media and social networking platforms have a tendency to increase fragmentation and few studies have concluded that politicians' use of social media as a communication channel improves dialogue with the public. On the contrary, research on Southeast Asia has suggested that political elites quickly adapt to move established divide-and-rule strategies online, particularly when it comes to exploiting existing ethnic and racial tensions.

Hence, when the liberalization process began in Myanmar in 2011 it benefited *uncivil* as much as civil society. In addition, these uncivil elements have been amplified by algorithms that seek to personalize the user experience online. Facebook caters content according to preferences, which has proved an efficient way to socialize large



anti-democratic movements. Because of its reach, personalized content and filtering mechanisms can cause far more dramatic polarization on social media and messaging platforms than elsewhere. Such polarization can result in what is often referred to as echo chambers or filter bubbles. Echo chambers are an online phenomenon where subgroups come together to reinforce their existing views and opinions. Filter bubbles create similar intellectual isolation, but are caused by algorithms and personalized services online.

The misuse of social media in Myanmar was noticed early on by local civil society activists. Already in 2012, following a series of deadly clashes between Rakhine Buddhists and Rohingya Muslims in Rakhine State, local activists were warning that Facebook was being used to mobilize mobs and spread rumours and hate online. To combat such tendencies, leading bloggers such as Nay Phone Latt founded the Pan Zagar movement, or “flower speech”, in 2014 to promote responsible use of the internet. One initiative was to launch Facebook stickers with “Speak Pan Zagar” messages.



A sticker from the Facebook sticker pack “Pan Zagar”. The text reads “Peace, ok?”

A Buddhist ultranationalist movement was also able to gain traction and expand through social media. It has targeted Muslim Rohingyas in northern Rakhine State as well as the broader Muslim population, which makes up about 5 percent of the total population. The ultranationalist movement has tapped into a larger global discourse on terrorism and conspiracies, and has spread images and videos about the Islamic State (IS) group, accusing Myanmar Muslims of belonging to the terrorist network. In 2014, a post on Facebook by the Buddhist ultranationalist monk U Wirathu about an alleged rape in Mandalay resulted in violent rioting that left two people dead.

Neither the Myanmar military nor the democratically elected government led by State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi has offered a convincing counter-narrative to these ultranationalist sentiments. On the contrary, officials have since cracked down on regime-critical Facebook posts using defamation charges, while U Wirathu, who is known for his inflammatory speeches, has been left relatively untouched.

Deteriorating freedom of speech

In 2015, a report by PEN America warned that digital freedoms and rights were on the decline in Myanmar. A Telecommunications Law of 2013 has been used extensively by military and government officials to curtail the activities of journalists and online activists. The most controversial element of the law, Section 66(d), provides for up to three years imprisonment for “extorting, coercing, restraining wrongfully, defaming, disturbing, causing undue influence or threatening any person using a telecommunications network”. Several Facebook users who have criticized or ridiculed the civilian government have been indicted. One of the more notorious cases involved Chaw Sandi Htun who was



sentenced to six months in jail for a Facebook post comparing the colour of Aung San Suu Kyi's htamein (traditional skirt) with the green of the country's military uniforms.

In 2016 and again in 2017, Rohingya Muslim militants affiliated with the newly established Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) attacked military posts in Rakhine State. The Myanmar military responded with an aggressive offensive operation, which resulted in hundreds of villages being burned and tens of thousands of rapes being recorded. An estimated 700,000 people fled to Bangladesh, which led the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Zeid Ra'ad al-Hussein, to call it a "textbook example of ethnic cleansing". Buddhist ultranationalist groups, the Myanmar military and government officials used Facebook and its Messenger application to spread false news and counter-narratives in order to discredit reports of human rights transgressions.

In 2017, the United Nations established an independent international fact-finding mission on Myanmar to assess allegations of human rights violations by the Myanmar military and security forces. The report concluded that Facebook had played a determining role in amplifying propaganda and hate campaigns against the Rohingya minority. The Special Rapporteur on Myanmar, Yanghee Lee, noted that: "I'm afraid that Facebook has now turned into a beast, and not what it originally intended".



A Muslim worker in Yangon, Myanmar.
Credit: Wa Lone

How Facebook 'became the internet' in Myanmar

The role played by Facebook in the genocide of the Rohingya people must be seen in the light of the dominant position the social media company holds in Myanmar. It is the largest social media platform in the country but has become much more than just an app. According to a start-up founder in Yangon, "We don't Google, we Facebook". For many users, Facebook simply *is* the Internet and few venture beyond the app. The historically censored and state-controlled Myanmar media has a bad reputation so many users view Facebook as a more reliable source of information, because the information is seen as having been shared by friends.

Facebook's dominant position in Myanmar can be explained by some factors specific to the Myanmar context but also many structural factors that are similar to other developing countries undergoing transition. First, as cheap Chinese 3G phones entered the market, distribution of the Facebook app was rapidly increased through a network of mediators such as phone manufacturers, vendors and network carriers. Most phones came preloaded with the app, either by the manufacturers or by phone vendors who often opened accounts for customers without them knowing their passwords. Several of the network carriers



either offered free access to Facebook as part of their mobile plans or helped Facebook spread its Free Basics project. Facebook had around 120,000 users in 2010. By 2018, an estimated 18 million users were active on the platform.

The Free Basics project, a limited version of the internet, had been disconnected in Myanmar by September 2017. The project has been criticized for harvesting metadata about users and violating the principles of net neutrality by predominantly featuring third-party services from companies in the United States. The Myanmar Free Basics platform contained few Myanmar-based news websites and no alternative email provider or social media platform could be accessed. Ellery Biddle, advocacy director of Global Voices, used the term “digital colonialism” to describe how Facebook was using Free Basics to turn users into passive consumers of US goods.

Second, the cheaper Chinese smartphones came with very little storage. Myanmar users therefore had to carefully select only the apps that they used on a daily basis. This explains why Zappya, a file-sharing peer-to-peer app, and a Zawgyi font keyboard were competing with Facebook for most downloads. It also explains why educational apps struggled to gain traction and why many international development organizations had little success with distributing the apps they had developed.

Third, the Myanmar language lacks a single encoding standard. The majority of Burmese speaking people use a font known as Zawgyi for text input. This is incompatible with Unicode, the globally accepted industry standard. Content created using Zawgyi cannot therefore be read on all devices and applications that use the Myanmar language so content has to be converted. One of the reasons why Google was less appealing to the Myanmar

population was precisely the fact that the search engine only accepts Unicode, whereas Facebook allowed both Zawgyi and Unicode.

That Facebook catered to the masses by offering Zawgyi has had several negative consequences. The lack of a single standard has made automation and the detection of misinformation on the platform difficult. Facebook has been accused of not adequately serving the linguistic needs of the local population. For instance, the platform did not translate its Help Centre information, which was initially only available in English and only later translated into Unicode. This made it difficult for Zawgyi users to communicate with Facebook, read its community standards or report transgressions. In August 2018 Facebook announced that it was removing Zawgyi as an option for new users and pledged to improve font converters for existing users.

Myanmar is a multi-ethnic country with 135 officially recognized ethnic groups and over 100 languages. By catering only to Burmese, the majority language, Facebook has reinforced the linguistic dominance of the Bamar majority's language on the platform. While Unicode could be adapted to some of the ethnic languages, Zawgyi cannot.

Despite these challenges, very few donor-based ICT initiatives in Myanmar focused on building the IT infrastructure or investing in large-scale ICT projects aimed at aiding the Myanmar transition to Unicode. Instead, international organizations played into the hands of Facebook by boosting its monopoly by posting content on the platform and paying for advertisements to spread information campaigns.



Facebook's response to international criticism

The case of Facebook in Myanmar is a good example of the implications of a digital divide, where companies such as Facebook are able to dictate the terms on which they operate in developing countries. Unlike India, which has been able to negotiate with Facebook over the distribution of hate speech on WhatsApp, Myanmar and other countries such as Sri Lanka have had little bargaining power. In most of the developing countries where Facebook or Facebook-owned apps are dominant, Facebook lacks country-specific representation and rarely has offices with local points of contact.

In Myanmar, Facebook largely ignored the warnings of civil society organizations. While commercial entities such as digital agencies and public relations firms based in Myanmar often had direct access to the Facebook offices in Singapore, civil society organizations more often than not received no response to their emails.

However, in the light of the severe criticism expressed by the United Nations fact-finding mission, Facebook commissioned a human rights impact assessment in 2018. The assessment concurred that Facebook had played a crucial role in disseminating hate speech and presented an action plan to mitigate future risks. Facebook has responded to hate speech on its platform in Myanmar using three methods: banning, blocking and deleting content.

In 2017 Facebook banned the word "kalar", a derogatory word for Muslim, across the platform. Other common Burmese words, such as "kalar pae" meaning chickpea, were removed by default by the software, creating confusion on the platform about why certain accounts and posts had been reported. In August 2018, Facebook removed 18 accounts and 52 pages followed

by 12 million people. One of the accounts belonged to Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, commander-in-chief of the armed forces, who was singled out in the report commissioned by the United Nations as responsible for the ethnic cleansing operations in Rakhine State. Facebook argued that the accounts had been identified as being part of a military propaganda campaign, but refrained from making public a detailed record of how the campaign had been constructed and how it was financed. Min Aung Hlaing responded by creating a new account on the Russian social media site VKontakte. Members of ultranationalist Buddhist groups also launched anti-Facebook campaigns, but these were less successful judging by the number of followers.

In March 2019, Facebook labelled four ethnic armed groups – the Arakan Army, the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army, the Kachin Independence Army and the Ta'ang National Liberation Army – dangerous organizations and banned them from the platform. This move was counter to the recommendations of the human rights impact assessment Facebook itself commissioned. It was also contrary to the views of local civil society and human rights groups in Myanmar. Concerns had been raised that the removal of these accounts, which were the official presence of armed groups and several associated news channels, would create a vacuum that might be filled with disinformation.

Myanmar civil society groups and international internet freedom organizations have called for greater transparency on how Facebook regulates its content. It is crucial that bilateral and multilateral donors actively support such demands, especially with regard to regulations that have a direct effect on ethnic groups and consequently also on the frail peace process in Myanmar.



In the light of this heightened criticism, Facebook recently called for greater involvement by governments and regulators in helping to set a global framework for internet regulation, especially with regard to harmful speech. Zuckerberg wrote: “We have a responsibility to keep people safe on our services”. This is a welcome development and participation should be encouraged, although critics have argued that Facebook is trying to shift responsibility on to the international community instead of stepping up its own efforts to curb misuse of the platforms.



Young man in a tea shop, Mandalay, Myanmar.
Credit: Sarah Schulman

The Chinese response to international criticism

Myanmar's proximity to China has always made the Sino-Myanmar relationship important, but through the liberalization reforms initiated in 2011 Myanmar was trying to decrease its dependence on Chinese FDI. However, the ethnic cleansing operations led by the *Tatmadaw* in 2016–2017 changed Myanmar's position vis-à-vis the international community. Faced with international criticism of human rights abuses and stagnant FDI, Myanmar recently agreed to proceed with development of the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC). This paves the way for a number of Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects, such as special

economic zones, natural gas pipelines, the Kyaukpyu deep-water sea port and the long sought-after Kyaukpyu-Kunming high-speed railway line connecting China to Myanmar's West Coast. This foreign policy shift could have far-reaching consequences for how Myanmar deals with Facebook-as-the-internet in the future, as digital infrastructure has become an important element of China's BRI investment strategy.

While Facebook and democratic states struggle to manage abuse on social media and the internet, China has begun to propagate an alternative internet model. Chinese companies already offer BRI participating countries such as Myanmar technology powered by artificial intelligence (AI) to accompany fibre-optic links and mobile phone network equipment. Advanced face recognition technology and data collection tools aimed at online surveillance and censorship are integral components of the Chinese internet.

In July 2017 the Chinese State Council issued a three-step development plan to make China the world's leading nation in AI by 2030. This announcement made it obvious that China had greater aspirations for the BRI than merely connecting Asia and Europe through physical infrastructure. China's long-term strategy for a 'digital Silk Road', backed by multi-billion-dollar investments in research and technology development, has come at a time when the leading AI nation, the United States, has made severe cutbacks in its national science funding, pulled back on its technology investments in developing countries and engaged China in a trade war.

In November 2017 China hosted a two-week seminar on “Cyberspace Management for Officials of Countries along the Belt and Road Initiative”. Among the technologies presented were tools for real-time monitoring of negative public opinion. In his



speech at the Chinese Communist Party Congress in October 2017, President Xi Jinping called the Chinese model for managing the internet a “new option for countries and nations that want to speed up their development while preserving their independence”. Freedom House noted in its Net Freedom report from 2018 that China has increased its “charm offensive against internet freedom” by more actively convincing other governments to adhere to China’s internet policy.

The rise of a fragmented internet

The rise of China’s alternative internet model comes at a time when recent events, such as Russian interference in the US election in 2016, have placed the Western liberal internet model under scrutiny for failing to protect its users against disinformation, social media manipulation and privacy infringements. Social media has proved especially vulnerable to influencing operations during election cycles, which have targeted developed and developing countries alike.

Following the rise of China as a global power, visible not least in the ongoing trade war with the United States over 5G, some are suggesting that the internet is becoming a ‘splinternet’, meaning that the internet is breaking up into several national and regional networks. The United States dominates one version of a more or less unregulated internet, by way of private sector technology companies, while China dominates the other.

This process of internet fragmentation has been enhanced by the failure of private sector technology companies, not just Facebook, to manage hate speech. Technological shortcomings have plagued elections in many countries around the world, raising concerns not least in countries that have seen escalating violence

caused by radicalization on social media platforms. Hate speech distributed on social media platforms and messenger apps has stirred ethnic and religious tensions leading to violent clashes not just in Myanmar, but also in Sri Lanka, India and Indonesia. It is not only technology companies that are to blame, however, as the misuse of the internet is also a failure of the international community to safeguard and regulate it globally.

In the absence of such an international framework, some positive trends are nonetheless discernible. Whereas companies such as Facebook, Amazon and Google were previously able to roll out their services and products without having to negotiate bilaterally, the same companies are now faced with legal obstacles such as the European Union’s General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). International development agencies can play an important role in supporting national data protection laws inspired by the EU to safeguard privacy and net neutrality vis-à-vis private sector internet service providers.

In an example of the shift in bargaining power, the Indian financial authorities recently put the launch of WhatsApp’s mobile payment system on hold until the app adjusted its features to better manage hate speech. This came after the Indian government blamed the Facebook-owned encrypted messenger service WhatsApp – an app with 200 million users in India, making India its biggest market – for rumours spread on its platform and mobilizing groups into acts of violence. In Sri Lanka, on the other hand, a country with less bargaining power, the authorities continue to shut down Facebook and internet access more generally after rumours and disinformation led to riots and violence against Muslims.



To make the Chinese internet model less appealing to fragile states, the Western liberal internet model will need to carefully assess and develop strategies for mitigating the risks that directly affect democratic values online.

Implications for ICT for development

The rise of alternative internet models also comes at a time when the discourse on the internet and its transformative power has shifted. The establishment of the Stockholm Internet Forum (SIF) was one of several Swedish initiatives that stemmed from the belief that dominated the debate on new media and technologies in the 2000s that ICT could bring about democratization. The Arab Spring further spurred such notions and Western policymakers, journalists and commentators were quick to name the uprisings after different social media platforms.

Consequentially, many development agencies shifted their policies to contribute funds directly to technology-driven organizations in the belief that technology could bring about democracy in and of itself. In 2011, the then-Director General of Sida, Gunilla Carlsson, redirected SEK 150 million to projects supporting "Twitter and Facebook revolutions" in authoritarian regimes.

Critical voices cautioned early on against technological determinism and 'cyber-utopianism'. Some argued that the net freedom agenda failed to take account of anti-democratic possibilities for censorship, surveillance and propaganda, especially in states undergoing transition. Scholarly work also showed that internet penetration in several of the Arab Spring countries was too low to explain the social movement mobilization that had occurred. Such sentiments coincided with more general

criticisms of the democratization theories prevalent in the 1990s and early 2000s.

Interestingly, the most common view within Sida today is that the strategy of targeting small-scale ICT actors in the wake of the Arab Spring was largely a failure. The ICT sector has since become a small segment of the overall Swedish development cooperation budget and Sida generally refrains from supporting small-scale ICT projects.

While developing countries such as Myanmar have continued to receive ICT aid linked to a democratization framework, the international community has failed to adopt international regulations to safeguard against harmful content online. One reason for this, according to UN officials, is that UN member states have insisted that governance of the internet should "refrain from becoming a UN exercise", thereby diminishing the possibility of the UN taking a more proactive role. An aggravating circumstance has been that the liberal internet version is to a large extent owned by private sector corporations.

With a weak international body governing the internet and with no universal definitions of ICT, international development cooperation agencies often struggle to integrate and assess the impact of ICT on their work. In addition, the scarcity of resources often means that ICT units in development agencies are absent or tend to be understaffed and used for internal IT support. Development agencies are often unable to engage in or initiate multi-stakeholder processes and public-private collaborations are still quite rare in international cooperation.

In addition, although many developed states have adopted far-reaching digital strategies to safeguard citizens online, few have dovetailed the national agenda with



international development strategies. These strategies therefore lag behind when it comes to integrating ICT into development and are potentially increasing the digital divide between developed and developing countries.

Recommendations for ICT for development in Myanmar

The new fragmented internet environment and the misuse of social media platforms, with horrendous outcomes such as those exemplified in the Myanmar case, demand a heightened sensitivity to online issues and risks, especially with regard to international donors engaged in ICT for development.

Sweden, as well as other countries committed to internet freedom and human rights, should continue to engage in multi-stakeholder initiatives aimed at

safeguarding a free, open and secure internet for all. Within this framework, Facebook's recent call for a global set of standards to regulate harmful content on the internet has the potential to strengthen multi-stakeholder participation in internet governance. Sweden should welcome the initiative while at the same time demanding that private sector social media companies continue to mitigate harmful content on their platforms, especially in Myanmar.

In its *Strategy for Development Cooperation with Myanmar, 2018–2022*, Sweden commits itself to supporting activities that safeguard a free, open and secure internet in Myanmar. Within this framework, Sweden can take a leading role in alleviating the ill-effects of Myanmar's digital transition in a number of key areas:

- It is crucial that Myanmar transition to the globally accepted industry standard Unicode. This will require both technical assistance and large-scale educational campaigns, since only a small percentage of users in Myanmar are familiar with the Unicode version of written Burmese.
- Sweden should return to its earlier focus on ICT, such as funding IT infrastructure, offering technical assistance to the government and strengthening digital capabilities more generally.
- Funding is needed to expand the research on social media and digital transformation in Southeast Asia. Specific research projects could assess whether development initiatives such as Facebook Free Basics in Myanmar violated the principles of net neutrality and rules on privacy.
- Sweden should actively invest in collaborations between Myanmar start-ups, ICT organizations and Swedish technology partners. The rapid digital transformation in Myanmar offers great opportunities to develop sustainable digital innovation and counter the misuse of social networking technology.
- Sweden should seek out and support fact-checking organizations that aim to curb harmful speech online.



The failure of Western countries and social media platforms such as Facebook to curb the spread of disinformation, hate speech and social media manipulation has made the Chinese internet model of censorship and surveillance a lucrative option,

especially for countries within the BRI, which Myanmar has now joined. Sweden should carefully follow this development and engage in development projects that counter tendencies towards digital authoritarianism.





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