

Chapter 3

Communication and media in Burma

What characterizes communications in a nation that has come to be described as enveloped in “a cloak of secrecy” (Smith, 1991a)? And what impact does this secrecy, and the environment of suspicion and fear from which it arises, have on the process of democratic change among Burmese in exile?

This chapter will provide a brief history of communications and media use in Burma, including the organizing methods that led to the uprisings of 1988, and the student demonstrations in 1996 and 1998. I will examine communications among the ethnic nationality groups, including the impact of the ceasefires brokered with many groups by the military regime. Highlighting some of the controls on communications and technology use inside Burma, I will demonstrate the ways in which these controls have contributed to the climate of fear and uncertainty that characterizes communications in the country today. I will explore the various ways people resist these controls. I will also examine the role of foreigners in political communication in Burma, exploring in particular some high-profile communicative acts carried out in the past few years by foreigners in Burma. My own experiences and conversations with people in Burma also help to flesh out an account of the communications environment that spawned the various elements of the Burmese opposition movement, and which still influences their work in exile.

A Brief History

Burma is a country of great ethnic diversity, in which over one hundred different languages and dialects have been identified (Smith, 1991b). The country is wedged between Thailand and Laos to the East, India and Bangladesh to the West, and Tibet and China to the North. The central plains of the Irrawaddy Delta are ringed by mountains that are home to a variety of ethnic peoples. Ethnic statistics in Burma are generally unavailable, and contentious when they are, since there has been no attempt to take a count of the population since the British census in 1931 (Smith, 1991a). The 1974 Constitution identifies seven divisions and seven ethnic states – Chin, Kachin, Karen, Kayah (Karenni), Mon, Rakhine (Arakan) and Shan. There are several other large minority groups in the country as well, such as the Lahu, the Nagas, the Pa-O and the Wa, and there are many Chinese, Tamils, Bengalis and others of Indian origin living in the country.

Burma was annexed by Britain in three stages between 1824 and 1886, and was governed at first as a province of India. The British divided its administration in Burma into two divisions – Ministerial Burma and the Frontier Areas, in which the ethnic nationalities were given autonomy to govern themselves. The British also used a divide-and-conquer strategy by employing ethnic minority men to help control the Burmans, who were agitating for independence in central Burma. During World War II, the Burmans fought with the Japanese against the Allies while the hill peoples such as the Karens and Kachins stayed loyal to the British. The British exacerbated existing tensions between the various groups by using ethnic minority soldiers to police the Burmans, who

were pushing for independence.

After independence in 1948, Burma experienced only a few years of civilian rule before General Ne Win took over in a coup that brought the military into power in 1962. While there has been reshuffling of personnel over the years, the military has remained in power. In December 1987, Burma was accorded Least Developed Country (LDC) status at the UN, which recognized that after years of economic decline, Burma was one of the world's ten poorest nations. This was so embarrassing that the government in power at the time, the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP), waited for four months to announce this news to its own people (Smith, 1991a). And so, while Ne Win instituted his plan for the "Burmese Way to Socialism," the country languished in isolation. As conditions throughout the country worsened for the central regime, territories were designated as white, brown or black areas, corresponding with the degree of control the government had over that area. White areas were entirely under the government's control, brown areas were partially government-controlled, and black areas were under the control of ethnic nationalist groups. Visitors to Burma were generally restricted to all but the white areas.

Scholarly work in Burma has also been severely restricted by the country's isolationist policies, and there are few works that examine the development of media and communications technology use since Burma's independence. The few descriptions that do exist make clear that historically, Burma was a highly literate country with "proud educational traditions" (Smith, 1991a, p. 17). Western-style newspapers were introduced into the country during the colonial period, and a host of locally-produced magazines and

newspapers appeared soon afterwards (Smith, 1991a). This diversity of outlets continued after independence in 1948, and the Burmese press during the 1950s was recognized as among the freest in Asia, with more than 30 daily newspapers in several languages and representing a wide variety of political viewpoints (Hollstein, 1961; Smith, 1991a).

While many of these papers were sympathetic to particular political parties, they remained relatively free of government control, and there was no serious attempt at censorship or harassment of journalists or writers (Allott, 1993; Smith, 1991a; Smith, 1999c).

Communications, media and control, 1962-present

Secrecy has characterized military rule in Burma from the start of Ne Win's rule in 1962. Immediately upon taking power in a military coup, Ne Win targeted the press by imprisoning newspaper editors and establishing the state-run newspapers, *Working People's Daily* and *Forward Weekly* (Smith, 1991a). Two years later, in 1964, Ne Win nationalized all newspapers, but agreed to allow them "full freedom of expression within the accepted limits of the Burmese Way to Socialism" (Allott, 1994, p. 89). Within a few years the country's previously vibrant private press was decimated, and by 1988 only six papers remained from the thirty that were being published at the start of Ne Win's rule. The remaining papers were mouthpieces for the army or Ne Win's political party, the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP). Following the socialist philosophy for the role of the media in serving the overall goals of the society (Browne 1989), the Burmese media was used by the government to explain official policies, to provide the information

they thought the populace needed, and to exhort people to work harder for the national cause (Allott, 1994; Smith, 1991a).

Writing in a 1971 doctoral dissertation that compared communications and national development in Burma, Malaysia and Thailand, Paul Pritchard Blackburn summarized the Burmese media:

The Burmese mass media system in 1970 evidenced an elite orientation and high degree of ideological content. State control of the media was virtually complete, non-Burman elements of the population were denied access to mass communications channels, exogenous messages were carefully monitored wherever feasible, and most indices of activity showed little increase over those of a decade earlier. Unlike Malaysia and Thailand, Burma gave print media priority over electronic media; radio broadcasting was conducted from a single Rangoon facility, while Burma alone of the three countries had no television. Most messages, typically placed within highly ideological and exhortatory [*sic*] contexts, appeared aimed at elite official, party, and academic audiences. Media output for the masses, consisting mainly of periodicals and feature films, faced heavy governmental pressure to include more content related to advancement of the “Burmese Way to Socialism.” (pp. 1-2)

Since news reporting was forbidden, fiction magazines became popular, and a number of literary periodicals sprang up after the establishment of military rule. Anna Allott (1994) has noted that three types of publications became popular under the military: magazines having to do with business and the free market, religious works, and lightweight fiction and love stories. Several successful magazines were state-owned, but many others were not, and they continued to publish through the years, often having to change their titles when they ran into trouble with the censorship body, the Press Scrutiny

Board (PSB) (Smith, 1991a). In addition to the popularity of literary periodicals, the film industry in Burma was historically characterized as composed of “apolitical, non-controversial historical or folk dramas” and was thus regarded by the military government as a mass medium rather than a vehicle for propagandizing the elite (Blackburn, 1971, p. 315).

Burma’s military governments have been particularly harsh on the ethnic nationalities for their efforts to preserve and maintain their own languages, and members of these minorities have labeled the Burmese military’s approach a process of “Burmanization.” As Martin Smith (1991a) has pointed out, inside Burma, minority group literature has been restricted to “folksy or domestic magazines” such as the Karen magazines *Go Forward* and *Our Home*. In addition, there have long been restrictions on the teaching of minority languages in the nationalized school system, an issue that non-Burmans often raise in discussions with outsiders. Smith (1991a) notes that under the rule of the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) since 1988, there have been even fewer books published in ethnic minority languages than during the BSPP era, and that many non-Burman intellectuals have been arrested or went underground, after being charged with allegedly trying to promote the usage of ethnic minority languages. The SLORC’s xenophobic campaign of Burmanization has also affected the Indian and Chinese communities in Burma. Articles appearing in the *Working People’s Daily* in 1989 decried marriages between “Burmese girls” and Indians or Chinese, saying that they had led to “impure Burmese nationals. Foreigners marrying Burmese girls and trying to swallow up the whole race will continue to be a problem in the era of democracy in the

future” (as cited in Smith, 1991a).

The literacy rate in Burma has historically been very good, and under the BSPP government, the country twice won UNESCO prizes for its literacy campaigns (Smith, 1991a). In 1987, however, the previously reported adult literacy rate of over 78 per cent was reduced to 18.7 per cent, apparently so Burma could comply with the strict conditions required to be considered for LDC status at the UN.¹⁸ Nevertheless, with the exception of some in the rural areas, the Burmese peoples are known to place a high value on education, and many Burmese are concerned about the deterioration of the country’s intellectual and cultural life.

For several months during the period of the 1988 uprisings, Burma experienced a brief hiatus from the strict censorship that had characterized its communications since the beginning of military rule. A huge number of newspapers, press sheets and other publications began circulating throughout the country, many containing biting satire on the political situation under Ne Win and BSPP rule. Even the state-run newspapers reported news more accurately than ever before (Smith, 1991a). With the coup of September 18th that brought the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) to power, however, the clampdown on the press was renewed and writers were harassed and arrested. Many fled to rebel-held territory or to other countries.

The foreign media have also long been a target of the Burmese military. Lt. Gen. Khin Nyunt, head of Burma’s Military Intelligence Service (MIS), enumerated many of the regime’s accusations against foreign media in two books, *The Conspiracy of*

¹⁸ To explain the drop in this figure, BSPP officials argued that earlier figures included monastic education, which could not be regarded as functional literacy for development purposes (Smith, 1991a).

Treasonous Minions Within the Myanmar Naing-Ngan and Traitorous Cohorts, and *A Skyful of Lies* [sic], which attacked reporting by foreign media during the events of 1988. Writing in 1991, Smith (1991a) noted that since 1988, over one hundred cartoons had appeared in the *Working People's Daily* attacking the BBC alone. And while most of the books' accusations against foreign media were inaccurate, Smith (1991a) argued that "this campaign conjured up the image of a network of foreigners secretly working together to seize control of Burma" (p. 72).

Smith (1991a) has described what he calls an "insurgent press" which was established just after Burma's independence in 1948. He noted the publication of a variety of journals, produced in rural areas of the country on Gestetner machines, as well as better quality publications produced in Thailand, that had varying and irregular circulation rates dependent on the funding provided by the various "insurgent fronts" (Smith, 1991a, p. 69). While many new magazines and journals had been produced since 1988, few had made their way into Rangoon with any regularity (Smith, 1991a). There were also intermittent efforts at running ethnic minority radio stations, as well as a radio program from the Communist Party of Burma (CPB) that shut down after the CPB broke apart in 1989. Opposition works from the border areas did find their way to Rangoon, although it was impossible (and would have been dangerous for those involved) to document this with any certainty. Nevertheless, many of the opposition groups have periodically smuggled information into the country in order to counteract government media descriptions of the rebels and to teach people about the gradually deteriorating situation in the ethnic minority areas. One student activist explained to me that prior to

the 1988 uprisings, he met a communist sympathizer who had access to copies of the underground communist newspaper, *Dawn*, which he was sometimes able to borrow for a day. He described to me how he would have to read it and then return it at the exact same time and place the following day. His friend told him that others were also secretly borrowing the newspaper, including some police officers (personal communication, April 18, 2000).

The restrictions on freedom of expression in Burma are clearly not limited to writers. Writing in 1991, Frances D'Souza, director of the media freedom watchdog organization, Article 19, noted that since the military coup in 1988, 15,000 public servants had been sacked or disciplined in Burma for "crimes of thought and expression" (Smith, 1991, p. iv). In such a climate of control, government media have also become suspect, and several scholars have written about the degree to which the mass media lacks credibility with the Burmese people (Allott, 1994; Lintner, 1989; Smith, 1991a; Smith, 1992). For this reason, the Burmese have relied a great deal on the international broadcasters whose news is carried over the airways, thus invisible and far less dangerous than print media. Bertil Lintner (1989) and others have described the high degree of dependence in Burma on international broadcasting services such as the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), the Voice of America (VOA) and Radio Free Asia (RFA) (see also Fink, 2001).

What is clear from past accounts about communications technologies and their use in Burma is that since the start of military rule, media have been rhetorically constructed as a threat, on the one hand, and as the bearers of benign governmental

guidance, on the other. With such limited conceptions, the use of communications technologies has therefore grown slowly, and access to each new technology has been restricted to a select, trusted few. Mi Sue Pwint, a female student from Karenni State, remembers that when she was growing up there were very few telephones. “Telephones were not for the people. They were for the government offices, and officers used telephones, but the normal people had no phones and it was not easy to use the phone” (personal communication, July 3, 2000). This changed in 1986 or 1987, she remembered, when the state instituted a new telephone project, but even then phone conversations were easily recorded by Burmese military intelligence, and people did not feel safe using them (Mi Sue Pwint, July 3, 2000). Burma was the last country in Southeast Asia to set up a television service, which first aired in 1980 (McDaniel, 2002), and two decades later national broadcasting in Burma is limited to three government-run stations broadcasting a few hours a day. And when mobile telephones were initially introduced into Burma, they were considered military equipment (Crampton, 2000, August 31). It is this militarized understanding of technologies and of the importance and power of information that forms the context within which the Burmese underground resistance movements have developed and operated.

Student organizing and the underground (“UG”) leading to 1988

The student movement in Burma has a long history of agitation for change in the country, and is particularly respected for its role in independence struggles against the British, back when the country’s independence hero, Aung San, was a student leader.

More recently, in the months preceding the uprisings in 1988, the students spearheaded the underground activity in Burma that led to massive general strike and demonstrations in August. Aung Zaw, now the editor of *The Irrawaddy* magazine and a correspondent for RFA, was a second-year botany student at Rangoon University in 1988, and was involved in the underground student movement at the time. The underground, or “UG,” was at that time a loose network of small groups of students and others organizing acts of resistance or protest against the military government. The key to survival, for both individuals and groups, was an unspoken agreement not to ask too much about each other. The less you knew about who was involved, the fewer people you could endanger because there was less information you could divulge under conditions of intimidation or torture. As Ko Oo, another UG activist at the time, explained to me, “It was UG work, so even though . . . if I wanted to know, I thought I shouldn’t ask. These were the rules, don’t ask, and also you should not ask how many people, who they are, and so on” (personal communication, April 20, 2000).

Organizational units were small groups of five or six people, one or two of whom would have contacts outside the group. Aung Zaw’s group started with three and built gradually to include seven students. “I think at the time there were other student groups already, doing similar activities like us,” he explained, “but we had no way of communicating with them because even if we had a sense . . . we thought they may be also interested in politics because they’re not too happy with the government, but we don’t dare to talk with them. We might go out with them, or drink, or do all these silly things, but we wouldn’t talk about this” (personal communication, April 18, 2000). Ko

Oo worked with the UG before the 1988 uprisings began, and was surprised when the student groups were able to work openly during the short period of freedom before the coup on September 18th. During that period of above-ground activity he realized that close friends of his had also been involved in organizing for quite some time.

Student activists were creative and resourceful in getting their information and calls to action out to the general public. Aung Zaw and his group used special inkpaper and a roller and mirror to roll out individual copies of their statements. One of his writer friends had given him the roller, which he could transport easily in his shoulder bag without detection. “So that’s what we would do, and we would press about 100, 200 copies . . . and distribute them among the people. It wasn’t very easy. We had to go take buses or public cars and throw them from the bus, or put them in the toilet stalls, the school’s toilet stalls.” Another activist, Ponnya, described the *poster teik-pwe*, or posters battles, he and his friends used to wage at the Rangoon General Hospital. They would get up very early, at around 3 AM, stick a rolled-up pile of posters in their back pants pocket, grab a bottle of glue, and head to the hospital by bus. Once there, they would look around to make sure no MI were loitering around, and then they would post their posters along the walls of the emergency ward. This clandestine form of protest was clearly a source of pleasure for Ponnya, both at the time and in the retelling of it, and it framed his thoughts about those days. “It is impossible to forget this *poster teik-pwe* after the ’88 uprising,” he told me (personal communication, May 7, 2000).

In Burma, teashops play a vital role as meeting places for discussion and organizing. The Mo Chit teashop in Rangoon was famous as a meeting place for student

leaders as far back as the 1930s and 1940s. “People would say that if you hadn’t been to Mo Chit, you hadn’t been to university,” Aung Zaw remembered. The students would occasionally organize a large meeting in the teashop, disguising it by having students sit in small groups at tables around the room, rotating one by one to another table every few minutes. Such choreography would enable everyone to plan how they would all go in separate groups by separate routes to the large meeting place, an old abandoned factory lent to them by a friend. And while this kind of atmosphere bred a great deal of suspicion, it also depended on trust. “Because the host is one of us, he guaranteed everything,” Aung Zaw explains. “So this is the only trust we have . . . we don’t have anything written, and we don’t have a mafia-style of meeting, not like the Godfather, with the black sedans driving, like that. It was simple. So if someone said, ‘okay, trust me, trust this group, at that place, I guarantee it for you,’ that was it. It’s a verbal agreement, a verbal promise only that we had” (personal communication, April 18, 2000). Aung Zaw’s group eventually joined with a few others and by early 1988 included about 30 people, providing a much more efficient means of distributing information.

The events that sparked the unrest in 1988 began that March with a brawl in a teashop between students, one of whom was the son of a local chairman of the local People’s Council, the local powerbase of the military regime. When the People’s Council refused to hear the students’ grievances, students organized a protest that was met by the riot police. An engineering student, Maung Phone Maw, was killed, and another two to three dozen students suffered gunshot wounds. The treatment of those

wounded angered the students further; they were shackled to their beds, armed guards were posted at the doors to their rooms, and higher authorities refused permission for doctors to operate on them, resulting in several deaths (Lintner, 1989, pp. 10-12). When the students' demands for full media accounting of the incident were dismissed, tensions escalated even further. In mid-March, a bloody crackdown resulted in the deaths of approximately 200 students when troops isolated unarmed demonstrators on a bridge and opened fire. This incident is now known as the "Red Bridge" incident, referring to the blood that spilled that day.

Mi Sue Pwint was a 20-year-old student at Rangoon University when she took part in the 1988 demonstrations. At the end of March 1988, as the mood among students in Rangoon remained contentious, many universities and colleges were closed, and the students returned to their hometowns. Many student activists explained to me why this was a mistake for the regime. Mi Sue Pwint and other students from Rangoon University were eager to tell the students from Mandalay and Taunggyi, who were organizing in Loikaw, in Karenni State, about what had happened to students in Rangoon in March. The students gathered in Loikaw were highly motivated at that time and really wanted to act, Mi Sue Pwint recalled, but were unsure about what to do and how to begin. They received letters with information about possible actions from the students in Rangoon, but had little contact with students elsewhere farther afield in Karenni State. But the students in the area pressured each other to become and remain active.

Events continued to spiral into increasing levels of violence, and by mid-June, demonstrations had spread to campuses all over the country, and the students were soon

joined by monks and factory workers. After a particularly violent series of events in June, 1988, Aung Zaw's group had to split up and go into hiding. Many of his fellow students were arrested, and Aung Zaw was forced to flee the city. He hid in a beautiful old monastery, home to two old monks and a big old radio, on which he listened to the BBC and the VOA every evening. He stayed there as protests in the cities grew in strength. On August 8th, tens of thousands of demonstrators launched a nationwide general strike, demanding democracy, human rights, the resignation of the government, and an end to the socialist economic system. The military responded brutally. Troops using automatic rifles fired on unarmed crowds, and armored cars fired machine guns indiscriminately into neighborhoods in Rangoon, killing people in their homes (Lintner, 1989, p. 246, 1991, p. 18). According to reports published in the London *Times* and *Guardian*, between 2,000 and 3,000 people were killed by riot police from the 8th to the 13th of August (Kraeger, 1991, p. 332).

Aung Zaw remembered listening with the villagers all gathered around the radio as the students involved in the August, 1988, carnage were interviewed. "Everyone listened to the BBC, the students, the interviews . . . very moving. So one time I was sitting with about 30 villagers, sitting, smoking cheroots and listening . . . A female student was crying on the radio, giving an interview . . . that was very moving . . . and the villagers all went quiet, they were all really very, very upset" (personal communication, April 18, 2000). It was a shattering experience for the students, and an estimated six to ten thousand students chose to flee to the border areas of Thailand and India. As conventional wisdom has it, a militarized action results most often in an equally

militarized reaction, and after the outrage many students felt at the treatment they had received from their government, it is no surprise that many of them felt that taking up arms against the regime was the only realistic option left to them.

Aung Zaw returned to Rangoon from the monastery where he had been in hiding to find that most of his friends were gone – either missing or had left for the border areas, where they planned to get guns to fight the military regime. At first he stayed in a local police station, staffed by police who had joined the demonstrations on the side of the people and who were providing sanctuary for those in hiding. Some of the policemen gave Aung Zaw and his friends lessons in self-defense and how to use guns. But they were safe there for only a few days, and eventually Aung Zaw decided to leave for the border to join the others. “Everyone was talking about the armed struggle,” he explains, “and all of us thought that that was the only option then.”

This is perhaps not surprising. Stories told by several of the female students make it clear that the demonstrations in 1988 were gendered in significant ways. Some female students recalled being restrained in various ways during the demonstrations, including being prevented from joining the protests by parents or older brothers. This was perceived as a battle for the male student activists to fight, at least until the demonstrations grew large enough to include people from all walks of life. In the beginning, it was the male students who got things started, or were belittled when they didn't. Mi Sue Pwint remembered an incident in which someone sent the (male) student leaders at Taunggyi College a package containing a symbolic gift: a woman's *tamain*, or sarong, and *tanaka*, a kind of makeup derived from the branch of a tree. “Many colleges

and universities made small demonstrations, but Taunggyi College was very silent at that time . . . They think that, how do you say? That they're not brave, [that they are] like a woman." Mi Sue Pwint laughed, but then added that this was not good for women, this kind of comparison. "Later I don't like this, but at the time I didn't really think about it" (personal communication, July 3, 2000). This symbolic "gift," used as a means of shaming the Taunggyi College students into action, associated women with inaction and fear. The associations remained unquestioned at the time, as were the gendered conceptions of the masculine "nature" of the Burmese democracy struggle.

1990 elections

In 1990, elections were held. Most Burma watchers contend that the regime underestimated the feelings of frustration in the country, and thought they had maintained enough control over the media to ensure their own victory at the polls. During the campaigning, the regime restricted the ability of opposition parties to publicly work to garner support. The increasingly popular opposition leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, was placed under house arrest and was unable to campaign for the ten months prior to the election. She was also prohibited from running as a candidate. Nevertheless, her party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), won 82% of the parliamentary seats in a clear show of support. Significantly, the NLD won support in areas dominated by members of the military and their families (Fink, 2001). The NLD also won approximately half of the seats in the ethnic minority states, and most of the nationality parties expressed unequivocal support for the party's goals. After the vote, minority

leaders expressed their satisfaction with the results, despite their fears that many ethnic minority peoples had been unable to vote (Smith, 1991b). I was teaching on the border in 1991 when the election took place, and I remember distinctly the great feeling of hope among the Karen and other opposition activists that something would soon change in Burma.

That hope proved unwarranted. After the election, the SLORC began a systematic crackdown on elected members of parliament (MPs) and members of the NLD. As the situation became more dangerous for elected opposition party members, and as it became clear that the military did not intend to relinquish power, eight elected MPs fled to the mountains in Karen-held territory along the Thai-Burma border. They were led by Dr. Sein Win, a cousin of Aung San Suu Kyi and an elected MP. They arrived at Manerplaw, the Karen and ethnic alliance headquarters, in December 1990, and declared the formation of a national coalition government. These MPs claimed a mandate from over 250 fellow MPs with whom they had earlier tried to set up a government. Dr. Sein Win and the others formed the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma (NCGUB), which then declared a cease-fire with the armed opposition alliance, the Democratic Alliance of Burma (DAB). The 1990 elections provided the opposition with its most powerful claim to legitimacy, a claim the Burmese regime has attempted to counter with its own method of legitimacy, the ceasefires.

Ceasefires and the ethnic minority opposition

It is estimated that at the start of the rule of the State Law and Order Council (SLORC), that perhaps sixty percent of Burma's land area was not secured by the government at any one time, and that within this sixty percent of the land lived only ten percent of the population (Steinberg, 2001, p. 186). But shortly after taking power in a coup in 1988, the SLORC began arranging ceasefires with as many of the ethnic nationality groups as they could. The "rebels" would agree to stop fighting, while the government agreed to allow these groups to pursue their traditional agriculture and promised more assistance with development in education, health care, transportation and infrastructure (Steinberg, 2001). The government established the Ministry for Progress of Border Areas and National Races and Development Affairs specifically to improve conditions in the country's border regions, and has also emphasized the expansion of the national network of roads in recent years. These roads provide villagers with access to regional and national networks, but they are also a means of easy access for the government into previously uncontrolled border regions (Steinberg, 2001). These two things together offer the government a cloak of legitimacy – the ceasefires and their relationship to infrastructural development.

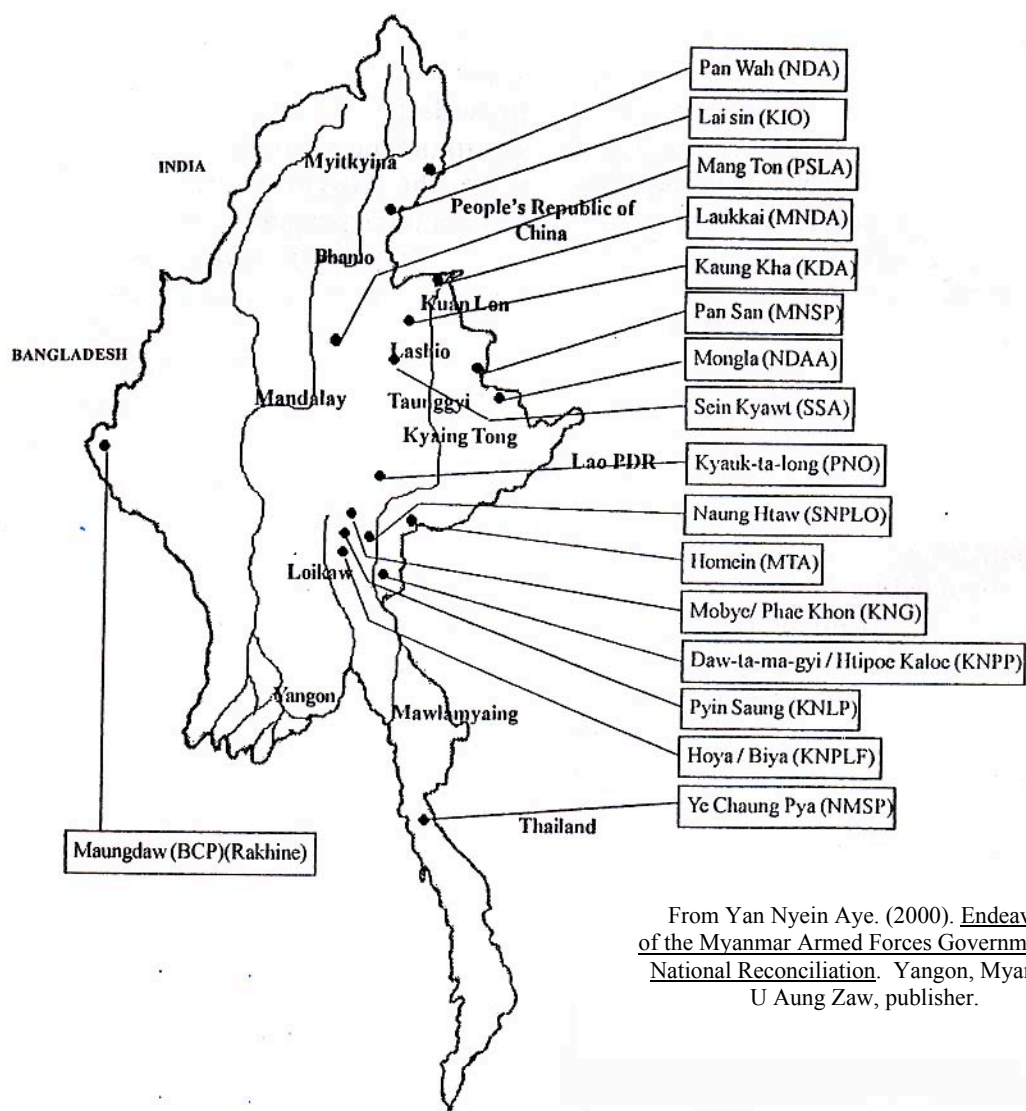


Figure 7. Map Showing the Location of the 17 National Armed Groups That Have Returned to the Legal Fold.

Rimond Htoo, Secretary of the Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP) was a representative of the Karenni people at the talks during which the KNPP decided to agree to a ceasefire with the SLORC in 1995, and the two groups held a ceasefire celebration.

Although Rimond Htoo did not attend the celebration ceremony, he recalls what he heard about what happened at the gathering. Rather than calling it a ceremony of agreement between the two groups, the SLORC constructed the ceremony as one of Karenni surrender. The Karenni had brought their own statement to read at the ceremony, but when it came time to make their presentation, they were permitted to read only the statement prepared for them by the government (personal communication, July 4, 2000). Other groups, he insisted, have had the same experience.

There is bitterness among ethnic nationality leaders that the SLORC/SPDC¹⁹ has been so successful at negotiating with opposition groups individually, rather than having to deal with them as an alliance. Several ethnic leaders expressed regret at the weakness of the National Democratic Front (NDF), Burma's main ethnic alliance. Many see this as a result of both the ceasefires and the willingness of many of the ethnic minority leaders to throw their support behind the democratic movement to the detriment of their own struggles for self-determination. The NDF was first formed in 1976, and later constituted the group of ethnic nationalities included in the Democratic Alliance of Burma (DAB), which incorporated the Burman democratic opposition groups when it was founded in 1988. After the founding of the DAB, the ethnic minority groups have found themselves competing for attention within the opposition movement, struggling for the right to self-determination. On the other hand, calls for democratic change are associated primarily with the goals of the Burmans, especially when viewed from the perspective of the ethnic nationality groups.

¹⁹ The State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) changed its name in November 1997 to the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC).

The weakness of the NDF has only been compounded by the fact that the armed ethnic groups find themselves without their traditional sources of funding, the tax gates they once controlled along the border. They have also been unable to gain foreign funding or access to foreign funders who mostly shun associations with armed opposition groups. But for Hkun Okker, president of the Pa-O People's Liberation Organization (PPLO), the crux of the matter came when the military regime realized the importance of the ethnic minorities before the Burman opposition did. Hkun Okker expressed his belief that the democratic opposition groups have not adequately dealt with the issues of concern to the ethnic nationalities. "Their top priority is to [have the government] hand over power. They never give priority to the ethnic issue. The democratic forces always said, 'Let's forget it for now. Try the democratic system change, and after that we will think about the ethnic issue.' So that is the response of the Burman leaders both outside and inside" (personal communication, July 5, 2000). But it was the military regime that got the upper hand with the ethnic nationalities, he explained, by making ceasefire agreements with different groups individually. "The military regime cleverly recognized that the ethnic power has a major role to play in Burmese politics, so immediately they picked up the armed ethnic groups and they spread out their power the SLORC was very clever. They recognized that he who rules the ethnics, rules Burma" (personal communication, July 5, 2000).

In Thailand, unlike the NLD and other Burman-associated groups working politically toward democratic change in Burma, the NDF and several other ethnic groups are underfunded or receive no outside support at all. At the same time, many of the

ethnic groups that once were members of the alliance have pulled out of the NDF as they have come to ceasefire agreements with the SLORC/SPDC. The government, in turn, has highlighted the series of ceasefires with ethnic groups in its PR campaign, attempting to show the international community that progress has been made in creating peace with elements of what was formerly their opposition. In doing so, the Burmese regime has effectively used the divide-and-conquer method, which resulted in the capture of their opposition alliance headquarters at Manerplaw.

The loss of Manerplaw

The loss of the ethnic alliance headquarters at Manerplaw, while mostly symbolic, nevertheless represented the loss of control over the land and the central communications headquarters of the opposition movement. Manerplaw, just across the border from Ban Tha Song Yang in Thailand, was by the early 1990s the headquarters for almost the entire lineup of non-communist opposition groups in Burma. More than two dozen rebel organizations maintained a headquarters or liaison office in the settlement (Ball, 1998). I visited and stayed at Manerplaw on several occasions during the years I taught in Huaykaloke refugee camp and later in the village of Pwe Baw Lu, just a few miles upriver from Manerplaw. Manerplaw was a short strip of flat land between the Salween River to the East and a mountain range to the West, beyond which was territory controlled by the regime. Just along the river were the buildings housing the military and political leadership of the Karen National Union (KNU) and other opposition groups, and nearby was the headquarters of the All Burma Students Democratic Front (ABSDF). At

night, crowds of soldiers on leave from the front lines would gather around the television set to watch CNN news and videos of foreign movies, such as Rambo. A guesthouse near the river was equipped with separate cubbyholes with raised beds, and a cook, reportedly a former chef at the Strand Hotel in Rangoon, imported for the comfort of visiting journalists and other foreigners. I met many people there over the years from all around the world: journalists, aid workers, teachers and evangelists, as well as other backpackers-cum-teachers like myself. All of them had some interest in the situation and the peoples of Burma. Manerplaw was a place for networking, both among the various opposition interests, but also between them and outsiders. Burma was slowly becoming better known to the world.

The fall of Manerplaw in January, 1995, was due in large part to the formation of the Democratic Burmese Buddhist Army (DKBA), a breakaway group of Buddhist Karen, through behind-the-scenes manipulation by the Burmese military, but also in part to a breakdown in communications security among the Karen. The formation of the DKBA provided the Burmese regime with inside information about the layout of the area surrounding the Karen headquarters at Manerplaw, which fell to the Burmese shortly afterwards. Then in February, the Burmese military captured Wangkha, the army base across the border from the Huaykaloke refugee camp and one of the Karen's most symbolically important military sites. While the "human intelligence (HUMINT)" that the Burmese army obtained from the DKBA helped in the capture of Manerplaw, it also became clear that the Burmese military had been intercepting KNU radio messages for some time, and reprinting them, sometimes word-for-word, in the state-run newspapers in

Burma in the days after they had been intercepted (Ball, 1998). Desmond Ball (1998) has called it a matter of “stupendous folly” that the Karen were not more careful about their “communications security (COMSEC)” operations after the Burmese published these conversations in their newspaper, making it clear that they were in the active process of interception (p. 187). He described the Karen leaders as “old men who had become tired, depressed and careless” (p. 187).

1996 and 1998 demonstrations

The year following the fall of Manerplaw saw more unrest inside Burma. Just as the student demonstrations in 1988 were sparked in part because the incidents leading to the death of the student Phone Maw were misreported on state-run television (Ko Bo Kyi, personal communication, August 18, 2000), the misreporting of government TV was also a factor in the student demonstrations of 1996. In October, 1996, after a brawl in which the police beat two students, one of them seriously, the students demanded that the police tell the true story of what had happened on state-run television. That evening, when the news broadcast what the students saw to be outright lies, the students protested in the streets. They were met by security forces who tried to intimidate them into leaving. At 2 AM the security forces finally used water cannons to storm the area and chase the students away (Win Naing, personal communication, August 15, 2000; Fink, 2001).

Misinformation played a large role in organizing and responding to these student demonstrations, as it does in much of the communication that occurs between the military regime and the various opposition groups. Many student leaders at that time considered

the practice of propaganda a normal and necessary part of their struggle against the government. As Win Naing explained, “SPDC, they do some propaganda, and also we do some propaganda . . . like a movement.” So during the 1996 disturbances, members of the leadership of the main student union, the All Burma Federation of Students’ Unions (ABFSU), used propaganda to create student action. The ABFSU leaders wrote an unattributed statement saying that the students were not good people, that they were fighting with police and were dangerous. Then they distributed these statements among the students, who assumed they had been printed by the government (personal communication, August 15, 2000).

The use of planted information to deceive both “the enemy” and one’s own constituency was an important means of conceptualizing information as a tool of war. In such an environment, the truth of all information is subject to question, and the motivation behind all communications must be analyzed. Any communication received by the opposition groups had to be considered potential misinformation deliberately planted by the Burmese military to cause divisions within the opposition. This environment tainted public discourse in Burma, where people tried to read between the lines, interpreting the stories as best they could under the restrictive circumstances.

Compounding the ambiguity, violence and fear associated with information inside Burma was the fact that the very centers for intellectual discourse, the universities, had been closed for most of the time since 1988. Between 1962 and 1999, universities had been shut down 13 times, for periods of one month to three years (Fink, 2001, p. 182). The universities in Rangoon and Mandalay had re-opened in late 1991 and early 1992,

but were closed again from December 1996 until mid-1998, when they were opened again for a brief period before protests broke out once again and they were once again closed. One of the students involved in organizing the brief protests in 1998 was Thet Win Aung, who was arrested and sentenced to fifty-three years in jail, with the sentence later increased to fifty-nine years (Fink, 2001). Thus, while the students inside remained committed and active on behalf of change in Burma, they also faced severe consequences for their actions.

The tension between the people and the regime was palpable when I visited Burma. In fact, there were two overwhelming feelings I heard expressed by the Burmese I met. One was an intense anger at the government for the restrictions under which they had to struggle to survive and the increasing difficulty they faced in making ends meet. The second feeling, which counterbalanced the first to keep people quiet, was fear.

Communications in Burma Today

Getting off the plane in Rangoon,²⁰ on December 21, 1999, I waited in line at the foreign exchange booth. It was mandatory for all tourists traveling independently (rather than with a packaged tour group) to exchange U.S. \$300 at the start of their trip to Myanmar. I had been coached by activists in Thailand in the ways to get around handing over this money directly to the military government. I knew I would have to exchange money at the market eventually in order to avoid the ludicrous official exchange rate, but at least I'd be helping someone with their commission on the exchange, adding at least

²⁰ Along with the name change imposed on the country in 1989 were changes in the names of many cities and towns. The capital, known before as Rangoon, was renamed Yangon.

one layer of benefits between my expenditures and the military coffers.

“Just slip the people at the counter a fiver,” a friend had suggested, “it works.” I had never bribed anyone in my life, and the thought was exciting, in a James Bond kind of way. As I neared the counter, though, I had my doubts. I wouldn’t be dealing with just one clerk, I could now see. There were three women behind the counter where I was waiting in line, and several armed men were standing nearby guarding the exit into the rest of the airport terminal. When my turn came, I sauntered up to the counter. “You must exchange three hundred dollars,” the woman said to me in English, with a smile. I showed her the travelers checks I was holding, for \$150. “Can I change this?” I asked. “Well, ma’am, you need to . . .” her eyes caught sight of the green five dollar bill sticking out from under a corner of one of the travelers checks. “Yes, that’s right, ma’am.” Like a charm, the atmosphere had changed, and there were smiles all around. Then she officiously stamped and handed me an envelope, leaned towards me and said, “You don’t tell about this to anyone, okay?” We smiled, and I left, walking past the armed men clutching my envelope, printed in receipt of \$300.

The remainder of this chapter explores the communications environment in Burma today, in which money often speaks volumes, and official rules are vague and shifting, adding to an already overcharged atmosphere of suspicion and distrust. I will describe the controls placed on communications technologies and media, and the government’s reaction to the introduction of new information technologies (NITs). Their attempts to control the flow of information include the use of metaphor and language to induce fear of both communications technologies as well as the media’s potentially

dangerous content, the withholding of information to perpetuate uncertainty, and the high costs of access that restricts use of NITs among all but the wealthiest Burmese. People living in this environment of censorship and control have developed their own forms of resistance, and this chapter details some of these. I also examine the role of foreigners in a few high-profile, publicity-generating events inside Burma. All of these factors contributed to the communications environment in Burma, from which the Burmese opposition arose, and which it will hopefully be instrumental in changing.

Censorship and Fear

The Printers and Publishers Registration Law of 1962 is Burma's primary legal instrument of censorship. It was introduced in 1962 soon after the coup that initiated the military rule of the past forty years, and has been amended several times, most recently in 1989, with increasing scope and more severe punishments (Sen, 2001). All books, periodicals, songs and films distributed in Burma are required to be approved by the country's censorship body, the Press Scrutiny Board, prior to their publication and distribution, and there is no judicial review of this board's decisions. There are no privately owned newspapers, and the four state-owned newspapers do not raise political cases or legal issues, providing instead a dry rundown of the daily activities of the generals (Sen, 2001).

My own trip to Burma in December, 1999, was unsettling. The feeling that I was being followed and needed to be extremely careful about the people I met with and the logistics of contacting them was countered by another feeling – that I was overreacting.

At these times it seemed that the warnings I'd gotten from teachers and Burmese friends outside the country to avoid speaking Burmese and drawing attention to myself were a bit over the top. This ambiguity and the resultant ping-pong movement I experienced between these two extremes was an embodiment of the polarity created by on the one hand seeing the Burmese situation in the black and white terms of good vs. evil that characterize much of the Burmese opposition's rhetoric, to on the other hand, recognizing the substantial areas of gray in the everyday lived reality inside Burma.

A famous writer in Rangoon who was a hub for the Rangoon community of writers explained to me that it was well-known among writers that the government kept a blacklist with three categories: white, gray and black. Those writers on the white list were believed to be no threat, and could get approval within two or three months from the Press Scrutiny Board to publish. Those on the gray list were of more concern to the government, and the Press Scrutiny Board examined their writings more carefully. But it was the writers on the black list that had the most difficulty, often having to wait as much as a year to hear back from the Press Scrutiny Board, and then having to rewrite their work very often (personal communication, December 27, 1999). Another writer told me that when the government arrested writers, they usually found some other charge to arrest and convict them of, rather than explicitly arresting them for their writings (personal communication, December 29, 1999).

A popular novelist told me that because she was on the blacklist, it took her two to three years to get a novel published, and that she was always asked to make revisions, sometimes even having to rewrite the personality of one of her main characters. The

censorship board disliked characters that resembled any of the famous opposition leaders, for example. Burmese novels also had to avoid referring to premarital sex, she told me, which the government claimed was “not fit for Myanmar culture,” despite what she saw as a prevalence of premarital sex among Burmese young people (personal communication, December 28, 1999).

From Inwa Publishing House, Burmese people could subscribe to the *Singapore Straits Times*, *Business Times* (both of which were published in English in Singapore), Chinese newspapers, as well as *Time*, *Newsweek*, *Asiaweek* and the *International Herald Tribune*. All of these magazines and newspapers, however, were expensive and censored before being distributed. In addition, people got access on a limited basis to uncensored copies of the *Bangkok Post* and *The Nation* (published in English in Thailand), the *Far Eastern Economic Review* and other magazines through the airline flight and sanitation staff who serviced planes flying into Rangoon. These people had developed relationships with the staff of specific bookstores, which kept these illegal magazines behind their counters (personal communication from the editor of a major magazine, December 27, 1999).

The Burmese daily newspapers were a reflection in print of the government’s attempts to engineer changes in society, featuring dry listings of the visits of various ministers to various public works or development projects, where they gave the proper advice on the successful implementation of the project and then left with their entourage, the list of which took up more than half of many of the articles. People jokingly referred to the infamous Insein prison as Burma’s journalism school, reflecting both the fact that

so many journalists have been imprisoned there and that Burma has no school of journalism. One woman I met in Rangoon described how she reads the *New Light of Myanmar* from the back to the front. She said she skips the front and back covers of the newspaper because the photographs of top SPDC brass make her angry, so she goes directly to the marriages and obituaries in the back of the paper. She also said that the *New Light of Myanmar* is useful in that you can use its lists of which ministers went where to do what as a means of understanding shifts in the power hierarchy within the SPDC (personal communication, December 28, 1999). She also noted that the government's reaction to accusations against it, often by printing the accusing report so they could respond to it, told readers a good deal about what was bothering the regime at any particular time.

In Rangoon, I met with several writers, and all of them explained how they operated under conditions of censorship. The editor of one popular Burmese weekly magazine, who did not feel free to speak at the guesthouse where I was staying, invited me to his home to discuss the restrictions he faces in getting his magazine published. He explained that his magazine was established in the late 1980s, and quickly adopted the necessary forms of self-censorship and production of “sugar-coated news” that was required for approval by the Press Scrutiny Board. Such self-censorship was especially necessary, he told me, when writing about a problem in the country, and while his staff could sometimes write about what was happening and how to change it, they could only do so if the authorities weren’t blamed directly or by name. They also had to avoid

certain information, such as the price of rice, exchange rates, the “market price” of kyat,²¹ and so on (personal communication, December 27, 1999).

This magazine editor also explained how the procedures for gaining approval for publication and for publication itself had changed over the years. Prior to 1996, the government allowed the publishing houses, primarily privately owned and run, to blacken out areas that had been censored, but this was no longer possible. When we spoke, the process required publishers to print about 100 initial copies of a magazine edition, which were then submitted to the Press Scrutiny Board. The magazine editor had to await the results, then edit and make corrections, and once it was finally approved, print the magazine in final form in larger quantities. In this way, the censorship was at least not physically obvious in the blackened-out parts of magazines (personal communication, December 27, 1999). People learned to read between the lines in such a climate of censorship. As one magazine editor I met in Rangoon described it, the writing needs to be very careful in order to impart as much information as possible in as subtle a way as possible, so as not to incur the financial losses of having to reprint an entire edition of a publication should there be a decision to censor even a portion of it. This concern acted as a powerful incentive to self-censorship.

The editor also explained the procedure that he had to go through in order to have his magazine approved for publication (personal communication, December 27, 1999). About 38 copies of the magazines had to be submitted on Wednesday, and were then distributed to various ministers, military intelligence and the National Library. The

²¹ At the time of my trip to Burma, the official exchange rate was six Burmese kyat to one U.S. dollar, whereas the black market rate hovered around 350 kyat to one dollar. The price has fluctuated wildly since then, and continues to be a source of embarrassment for the Burmese government.

magazine scrutiny board meeting was on Saturday, and in the evening after the board meeting, the magazine was informed of what they could and could not print. They then had to make the necessary changes and re-submit the magazine by Monday. On Tuesday they got the okay and could print. Even so, if there were late objections by one or other of the ministries that had to approve the magazine, they could be stopped in the middle of printing and would have to change what was required of them to change. The various officials who received the initial uncensored copies of the magazine for review then often sold them in the market for extra money (personal communication, December 27, 1999). In the end, the Deputy Home Minister had to sign his approval for every issue of every journal or magazine. Another magazine writer I met in Rangoon told me that the Press Scrutiny Board had recently announced a page restriction for weekly journals, acknowledging that they were unable to read so much material every week (personal communication, December 29, 1999).

Censorship in Burma also carried over into the reporting of law, which has serious implications for legal practice. Law reports are the basis upon which lawyers determine past precedent, and thus upon which they build their cases [in a system marked by transparency]. The cases included in law reports are generally landmark cases that are considered important for a point of law, and many law reports are published by law publishing companies. In Burma, the government publishes the *Burma Law Report* annually, but the cases to be included are hand-picked by the government. Many landmark cases are missing from the record. While including cases involving theft, embezzlement, rape, murder and receiving stolen property, the *Burma Law Report* has

not included a single political case since 1988 (Maung, 2001).

The writers I met in Burma all seemed to be struggling with the issue of how much they were willing to work with a regime they disliked through compromises in the integrity of their writing in order to get things printed that they felt were necessary for the Burmese people. For example, one of the writers I spoke with was concerned that there was no journal in Burma about literature, or philosophy, or that dealt with serious health issues such as sex education and AIDS. She said that to publish a couple of good-quality journals would require working with the government in order to get licensed, something she didn't want to do but that she felt had to be done (personal communication, December 28, 1999).

State-run broadcasting in Burma was controlled by the government, but the authorities could not control the airwaves entirely. The military regime had long been antagonistic to the international broadcasting services in Burmese provided by the Voice of America (VOA), the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), and at times attempted to jam them (Ball, 1998). The government's antagonism towards foreign broadcasting in Burma was exemplified in the book *Skyful of Lies* [sic], in which Lt. Gen. Khin Nyunt attacked the reporting by foreign media, especially the BBC and VOA, during the events of 1988. The government regularly criticized the broadcasts of the VOA Burmese service for creating what a Burmese army commander called "restiveness within Burma's defence services" ("Burmese commander", 2000), and accused foreign broadcasters of sensationalism for spreading rumors about counterfeit banknotes produced by the Burmese government (Myanmar Information Committee, 2001).

Burmese state-run television, featuring images of monotonic announcers interspersed with pictures of monks and officious-looking men in green, played like background noise in the Burmese homes I visited. Those who spoke about Myanmar TV at all told me how boring and repetitive it was. I met one woman in Rangoon whose husband worked for Myanmar TV, which she explained used to be private but had been taken over by “military people in civilian clothes.” She told me a joke that was circulating at the time:

A man walks into a TV shop with a TV he recently bought, and complains to the shop owner that the TV does not work properly. “This is supposed to be a colored television,” he says, “but it only has two colors: green and yellow.”

It was understood by the Burmese that yellow represented monks and green represented the military and that this was a mockery of the daily TV rundown of which military leaders gave what gifts to which monks for what reasons (personal communication, December 24, 1999).

In its struggle to maintain control over the flow of information, it is predictable that the government would be wary of new information technologies. One of the regime’s first reactions to the availability of computer-mediated communications was the introduction of the Computer Science Development Law of 1996, which imposes an automatic jail term of 7 to 15 years on anyone who imports, possesses or uses a computer modem or fax machine without government permission. The law gave the Ministry of Communications, Posts and Telegraphs the power to determine what types of computer equipment were to be restricted. The punishment also applied to anyone who set up a link with a computer network without prior permission, or who undermined state

security, law and order, national unity and culture, or transmitted state secrets by using a computer network and information technology (“Burma junta,” 1996).

In July 1996, just a few months before this new law was introduced, the death of Leo Nichols in a Burmese prison created a storm of criticism for the Burmese regime. Nichols was imprisoned for possession of an unregistered facsimile machine, which he had used to send out a weekly column written by Aung San Suu Kyi for the Japanese daily *Mainichi Shimbun* and its English-language counterpart, the *Mainichi Daily News* (Zaw Win Maung, 1996).²² Nichols was a Burmese citizen, an Anglo-Burman, who served as an honorary consul for Denmark, Finland, Norway and Switzerland. All of these countries unsuccessfully appealed for an independent autopsy to be carried out on Nichols’ body after the Norwegian Deputy Foreign Minister alleged that he was tortured while in prison (“Dead envoy”, 1996; “Memorial for consul”, 1996). According to Burmese officials, Nichols died of an apparent stroke after being held in solitary confinement, but they refused requests for an independent inquiry into the cause of his death. Foreign Minister Ohn Gyaw was quoted as saying that Nichols’ death was caused by the “richness of food” he ate in jail, which was “not compatible with his health” (Cooper, 1996). This incident indicates the extent to which the generals in Rangoon were willing to risk international condemnation in order to police the use of communications equipment and suppress the efforts of the opposition NLD.

²² The year-long series of weekly columns was entitled “Letter from Burma,” and was picked up by several other newspapers around the world and posted on the Internet.

Easing restrictions, maintaining control

Despite signs that the government is easing restrictions on the use of new information technologies, their use is controlled through keeping prices high and threats for misuse severe. The government's Myanmar Posts and Telecommunications (MPT) began providing an e-mail service in 1997 ("Public," 1999). Its use, however, was limited by cost and access was out of the reach of most Burmese. In October 1998, Secretary-1 Lieutenant-General Khin Nyunt announced that the government was formulating an Information Technology Master Plan that included allowing access to the Internet for private businesses ("Burma Internet").

Private businesses, foreign NGOs, expatriates and diplomatic personnel did at times have intermittent access to e-mail, but about ten days before I arrived in Burma in December 1999, the two private e-mail servers that had been operating in Rangoon were shut down with no warning. There were many rumors about why this had happened. I was told that a company called Eagle, owned by an American and managed by his Burmese wife, was the first to offer e-mail service in Burma. In addition to the substantial setup costs, there was a monthly service charge of US \$80, making it affordable for diplomats, some NGOs and businesses, but unaffordable for most Burmese. Then a former employee of Eagle reportedly opened a rival firm called Netmail, which was poised to provide e-mail service at a much more affordable price. One rumor was that through competitive positioning, one of the companies had tried to oust their rival by accusing them of providing Internet access, downloading "subversive" websites, and sending them through e-mail. Another rumor was that a colonel in the

SPDC sent out information on one of the e-mail servers about things the government didn't want getting out. As happened several times after I left Burma, articles printed in the press outside the country corroborated some of the rumors. An Australian paper reported on December 30, 1999, that the Burmese military government had charged six people, including a senior military officer, with violating the Official Secrets Act for downloading anti-government material ("Internet download," 1999). Nevertheless, the variety and number of rumors made it difficult to know what had really happened, an ambiguity that characterized the everyday experiences of those living in Burma.

What remains clear despite the various stories is that the government stepped in and shut down both private servers. Shortly after this, the regime posted an announcement on its homepage stating that MPT is "the only entity allowed for public postal and telecommunications services in Myanmar" ("Public," 1999). The announcement also said that preparations for ISP access to the Internet and e-mail were "at the final stage," and that services would soon be available to the general public ("Public," 1999). Then in January, 2000, the regime issued a list of regulations for users of its Internet service, which among other restrictions, prohibits any writings "detrimental to the interests of the Union of Myanmar" or related to politics, holds the account holder responsible for all activity on the account, prohibits hacking or other forms of misuse, and requires account holders to obtain permission before creating a web page ("Regulations," 2000). The government remains the country's sole e-mail and Internet provider.

Some government officials and those associated with them are reportedly keen users of the Net, including former dictator Ne Win's daughter Sandar Win, who until her house arrest in early March, 2002, was reportedly a regular e-mail user (Bardacke, 1996). She was placed under house arrest when her husband and three sons were arrested for allegedly plotting a military coup against the current SPDC leadership. Information and communication technologies have figured prominently in the regime's own "coverage" of the events during press conferences held to explain the official version. The government's website, *Myanmar.com*, provided transcripts of these press conferences, along with photographs of SPDC leaders officiating at the event and of the various communications equipment confiscated during the government's raids of the homes and offices of the alleged coup-plotters. Placing both Ne Win and Sandar Win under house arrest, the government cut her phone lines and confiscated her mobile phone, limiting her communication in much the same way they had done with Aung San Suu Kyi. Communications technologies are powerful symbols, especially in Burma, where the country's lack of wealth and its otherwise underdeveloped infrastructure contrast starkly with the high tech nature of these technologies. The struggle over the use and control of these technologies reflects the power dynamics at play in the society as a whole, and a window on these dynamics is available in the symbolism at play in public events such as these government press conferences.

The government's concern with the potential impact of new information technologies was apparent in the fact that although they were slowly increasing the number of citizens permitted access to e-mail accounts, all messages had to pass through

a central server controlled by the military, where they could get held up for hours while the censors read them (Neumann, 2002; Zarni Win, 2001). A few Internet cafes had opened in Rangoon, but Internet access was unavailable. Instead, members could use e-mail or surf the newly-created “Intranet” of government-approved sites. The annual membership fee of one club, US \$500, along with a monthly service charge of \$65 for 30 hours of use, indicates how these Internet cafes were reserved for the country’s elite (Chon, 2001). Tourists and business travelers could legally e-mail from the more upscale hotels, but these services were also expensive (Zarny Win, 2001).

Nevertheless, computer courses were advertised all over Rangoon and other cities and were reportedly standard in many schools, and the government had set up a task force to examine e-commerce (Chon, 2001). The government *New Light of Myanmar* newspaper and the government website, *Myanmar.com*, included frequent news of new IT developments, such as computer labs in schools or new opportunities for e-commerce, often accompanied by photographs of Burmese citizens using computers. Yet communication between those inside and outside Burma was limited; several businesses in Burma had websites, but they did not have e-mail accounts, so they could not be contacted online regarding their services (Zarny Win, 2001).

Despite the government’s promotion of development in new information technologies, the use of surveillance, threats, and high costs kept most Burmese from being able to access and make use of the newest information technologies. The gendered and paternalistic rhetoric surrounding the use of these technologies painted a picture of a dangerous world in which the country, rhetorically constructed as a woman, and the

people, constructed as children, had to be protected by the father figure, the SPDC itself. The symbolic construction of information and communication as dangerous in the wrong hands while a means of protection if appropriately controlled by the government as father figure reinforced militarized understandings of the technologies and their association with potentially harmful consequences.

Father knows best

The government's strict control over the media and the cloak and dagger rhetoric that accompanied it was limited to some degree by its need to develop the country's information technology infrastructure in order to attract foreign investment and develop new forms of commerce. The regime responded to this need and to the accusations of its critics by launching a PR campaign aimed at improving its image. The campaign was directed in large part by the Office of Strategic Studies (OSS), a think tank headed by Lt. General Khin Nyunt, chief of Burma's military intelligence and the junta's third-ranking member. A key tool in this campaign was the regime's own website, *Myanmar.com*, launched in 1996, the same year the government instituted the Computer Science and Development Law. The website had become increasingly more sophisticated over the years, and included information on travel and business in Burma in addition to its ongoing postings of responses to accusations by the regime's critics. The homepage offered a choice of language options: English, German, French and Japanese, making it clear that the site was intended primarily for the eyes of outsiders and those educated Burmese in exile fluent in one of these languages. From the start, *Myanmar.com* had

been used to answer the various charges of the government's critics, and despite the fact that the site had become increasingly technologically sophisticated and professional in appearance, its xenophobic rhetoric was compounded by the fact that it remained a self-contained little bubble within cyberspace. Although the site included links to government offices, embassies, businesses and media within Burma, websites run by the other ASEAN governments were the only external links provided on *Myanmar.com*.

The government's ambivalence toward new information technology was exemplified by the rhetoric found on its website. Information technology was rhetorically constructed both as a threat and as a means by which the government could protect the country from dangerous outsiders who were seen as manipulating new information technology to undermine Myanmar's unity. The government was rhetorically constructed as the nation's protector, and from the beginning the site has featured proclamations about the noble efforts of the government to develop the country's infrastructure. The government's paternalistic attitude towards the people of Burma was reiterated in its responses to its critics. Following the links to the "Political Situation of Myanmar," led to a list of responses to the regime's critics, charge by charge. This section included articles with titles such as "Accusing Myanmar of Not Being Serious in the Fight Against Narcotic Drug" [*sic*] and "Allegations on Exercising Forced Labor in Myanmar." The section "Human Rights Issues and Democracy," made the argument, common to several Southeast Asian governments, that in "a third world country like Myanmar" the top priorities must be security, food and shelter, followed by education, health and the economy, all of which the website proclaimed the government was

diligently working to provide for the people. This was why party politicking was restricted, as it would “affect the national unity and drain her strength away elsewhere.” Here as elsewhere on the site, Myanmar was referred to as “she,” and this section argued that a focus on political rights “is like expecting or forcing a child to run first before learning how to walk properly.” Thus, using the figure of a family, the regime had rhetorically constructed the country as the mother, the people as the children, and itself as the father.

The attitude of the government towards the opposition was best exemplified by its on-going attempts to broker ceasefire deals with the ethnic minority groups which had for decades remained allied against it, and by its simultaneous efforts to discredit the Burman opposition to its rule. This was exemplified by the content found on early versions of the website when one followed a link to the Myanmar Information Committee page. Following this link led to a webpage featuring in large lettering the words “Unity is No.1” on the left side of the screen, mirrored on the right side of the screen by the words “Protect Your Country With Information Technology.” Between these two statements and running down the middle of the page was a list of “declarations” reportedly made by ethnic minority groups that had signed ceasefire deals with the military regime. These included accusations that the opposition NLD was encouraging “dangerous foreign interference” and warnings that “interferences of those possessed by external politics and those attempting to disunite the national races” were harmful to the “progress made in national consolidation.” The various “national races” were pictured thanking the government for its magnanimity and goodwill in working to develop the country, and

warning against provocation by the NLD, which “will not produce any positive results.” Thus, the website from the start rhetorically pitted the ethnic minority groups against the Burman opposition, and constructed information technology as both a threat and a means through which the government could protect the country by countering the threat and providing “true” information.

Although the regime maintained that the website was an important tool in making the “truth” known to outsiders and countering the “misinformation” of its critics, its impact appeared uncertain. In an address to gathered staff of Myanmar Radio and TV in February, 2001, Lt. Gen. Khin Nyunt explained plans for the extension of MRTV news and programming to counter false news distributed by some western nations’ news agencies, adding that genuine news about the country had started to attract attention on the government website, which had helped to improve the reporting of foreign news agencies (“Khin Nyunt”, 2001). It was clear that journalists did visit the site, although whether or not they found the information credible is another matter. Thomas Crampton of the *International Herald Tribune*, for example, reported in August, 2000, about the regime’s response to Aung San Suu Kyi’s attempt to meet NLD members outside of Rangoon, when they prevented her car from leaving the city and provoked a standoff in which Suu Kyi and her followers remained camped by the roadside in protest. Noting that when she had done this two years previously, the government had faxed out terse statements to a limited number of journalists, he described how this time he was receiving almost daily e-mails about the standoff as well as invitations to visit the website for more information. He described the government’s language, portraying the standoff

as Suu Kyi's "jolly jaunt into the countryside", and printed several of the captions used by the government and posted on their website under pictures of the incident (Crampton, 2000). He made no explicit value judgment about the government's rhetoric, but allowed the quotes to speak for themselves. In many cases, directly quoting the xenophobic government rhetoric is all it takes to throw into question the contention that the government is effectively counteracting its reputation as draconian. Here, for example, is a recent excerpt from the *New Light of Myanmar*:

The internal and external destructive elements with every intention of misleading the international community, are making fabrications and false news politically and trying to make complaints to the persons who do not know about Myanmar well, organizing and using them. . . . Upholding the national interests and loyalty, the Tatmadaw has never committed any unjust and unfair acts. This is the noble tradition of the people's Tatmadaw. All the entire national people are urged to crush and stamp out the false news and fabrications disseminated by internal and external destructive elements in their attempt to tarnish the dignity of Tatmadaw. ("Stamp out", 2002)

In addition to the affect the website may or may not have had on journalists outside of Burma, several Burmese opposition activists in Thailand explained to me why they valued the site. It reportedly provided them with the chance to learn about what the regime was thinking and planning, and to catch up on the latest changes in government policy. Nevertheless, on the website, just like in the state-run media, there was a lot left unsaid.

Covering a dead elephant

They want to cover a dead elephant with a goat skin.
(Burmese proverb)

There are many things that don't get reported at all in the Burmese media, including changes in prices of basic commodities, exchange rates, including the "market price" of the Burmese currency, the kyat, or, basically, any bad news. This had become such a pattern that it was a topic for discussion on the news; international media or wire service reports about events in Burma often included the detail that Burmese media was not reporting the incident. Many of the Burmese I met talked about this, and all the writers discussed the need to avoid certain topics in their writing. These topics included increases in commodity prices, natural disasters such as the June, 2001, incident in which a dam broke, killing as many as 1000 people, the increasing drug problem in the country, and even the national soccer team's loss at the regional Tiger Cup tournament in late 2000 (Neumann, 2002). Even the September 11th attacks on the World Trade Center in New York went unreported in the Burmese media until the day after the attacks, when they were reported only briefly. The story was told in a bit more detail a few days later by *The Myanmar Times*, a weekly magazine believed to have close ties with high-ranking military officials (Kyaw Zwa Moe, 2001). State-run media maintained its news blackout on the events until September 21st, when it published the message of sympathy sent by Senior General Than Shwe to President George Bush. Control over information regarding these events was likely due to concerns about possible agitation by Muslims in Burma (Moncreif, 2001). When I asked people in Burma why the government didn't like

to report bad news in the media, one woman laughed, reciting a Burmese proverb: “They want to cover a dead elephant with a goat skin.” With a dearth of information about problems in the country and an overall climate of silence and fear, rumors were plentiful in Burma.

Cracks in the edifice

It was often the government itself that generated interest in otherwise unknown oppositional works. Robert Helvey is a former U.S. Defense Attache in Rangoon who has acted as a consultant to ethnic minority leaders on the Thai-Burma border. During training sessions on nonviolent civil disobedience he conducted with ethnic and Burman dissident leaders, he used the book *From Dictatorship to Democracy*, by peace activist Gene Sharp. When Helvey’s training sessions and Sharp’s book were denounced in Rangoon by state-controlled media, there was a sudden and sharp increase in demand for the book, and thousands of copies were secretly distributed (Helvey, 1996). The book’s influence has since been noteworthy. Aung San Suu Kyi (1996) wrote in her weekly column in the Japanese newspaper, the *Mainichi Shimbun* (Mainichi Daily News), about a fashionable term being whispered around Burma at that time. It sounded like “jeans shirt,” but was in fact a reference to Gene Sharp and his ideas of nonviolent resistance. Suu Kyi (1996) noted that 19 political prisoners had been tried and sentenced to seven years imprisonment on a charge of high treason for possession of Gene Sharp’s book.

While I was in Burma, several people told me stories of others who had become angry with the media. One man described how people sometimes become so angry at the

Myanmar Radio and TV (MRTV) that they shout at their radios or TV sets. The state-run *New Light of Myanmar* and other newspapers also raised the hackles of many Burmese.

One angry woman I spoke with told me about then current newspaper reports that implied that Burmese universities had not been closed. According to this woman, the report listed the number of students attending classes and the number of teachers teaching. A few other people mentioned this same article to me, including one woman who told me that many Burmese had recently become angry when the government's Minister for Economic Planning, Brigadier General David Abel, told visiting Japanese dignitaries that 70% of Burmese classes were open (personal communication, December 28, 1999).

According to a writer I met in Rangoon, one way people communicated with the government was to intentionally talk about complaints they had when they knew that military intelligence (MI) officers were around. Their belief was apparently that their complaints might in this way be reported upwards to the authorities through their spies. The writer explained that in order to remain "safe" from the army's wrath, those doing the complaining had to be general and could not name specific parties. Although this could be risky, many people felt that this tactic was effective in communicating at least to a degree with the regime, and that such anti-government talk had become more common and even trendy in teashops (personal communication, December 28, 1999).

It was primarily inside Burma that the use of what Downing (2001) has identified as "ephemeral media" was most effective. Ephemeral media are media with a "one-shot concentrated pungency," described by a Greenpeace activist as "'mind-bombs': influential, sometimes archetypal images that can cut through the hypnotic drone of the

day-to-day babbling to reach people at a deeper emotional level” (as cited in Downing, 2001, p. 102). This type of opposition media was the most appropriate given conditions inside Burma, and activists in the country have made creative use of such media.

Examples of ephemeral media use in Burma included the strategic use of clothing, such as wearing yellow, the color which had come to represent the opposition National League for Democracy (NLD). One NLD activist I met in Shan State celebrated the auspicious day of September 9, 1999, chosen by activists as the day to commemorate the 1988 uprisings, by wearing yellow and arranging only yellow books for display at his bookstand. An activist in Mandalay also told me that many people wore yellow that day, and that he had heard several people were arrested, although he hadn’t witnessed this himself. But he had seen many people use candles instead of electricity that night in a silent symbolic gesture of support for the opposition. Other forms of ephemeral media included such initiatives as organizing people to go to pagodas around the city at a given time and ring the bells simultaneously a pre-arranged number of times. Activists did this on the tenth anniversary of the 8/8/88 uprisings, for example, when they rang the bells in pagodas around Rangoon eight times at exactly eight minutes after 8 PM (Win Naing, personal communication, August 15, 2000). Activists in Burma found creative ways to drop their “mind bombs” so that they were effective but also minimized the dangers of openly communicating opposition messages inside Burma. They wrote notes on paper money, which they used to pay for carfare, ensuring that the money circulated immediately. They scrawled messages on bathroom walls, or distributed printed statements by placing a pile of them on top of a public taxi, so that when the taxi moved

the papers went flying and people could snatch them up if they were curious.

The events surrounding the tenth anniversary of August 8, 1988, also known as “Four Eights,” provided plenty of opportunities for such opposition “mind bombs,” although there was also a tightening of surveillance. On August 8, 1998, stickers printed with “Don’t forget 8-8-88” and “The army must serve the people” were found on the walls of a well-known monastery in central Burma. A few weeks later, an ABSDF media release, posted to the BurmaNet News Listserv on August 20, 1998 and then carried by the BBC Summary of World Broadcasts on August 21st, announced that the military authorities in Mandalay were offering cash rewards for people who could provide information about political activists who had been placing anti-military stickers all around the city, and who had written anti-military statements on walls of monasteries, schools and other public places (ABSDF, 1998). In a twist of the government’s own rhetoric, statements written on walls of Rangoon University buildings accused Burmese authorities of being “ax-handles of the Chinese” (ABSDF, 1998). This refers to the term used often in Burmese state-run media to describe Aung San Suu Kyi. An “ax-handle” is a traitor, a wooden handle used to cut down the very trees from which it came, symbolizing a traitor to one’s own kind.

But the act of communication was not always connected to such public expressions of defiance. Sometimes communication was less about communicating to a mass of people and more about the maintenance of a personal sense of dignity and hope. In Rangoon I met an elderly communist activist and teacher who had spent many years imprisoned in solitary confinement because of his writings. He described his time in jail,

and how through time spent in a cold cell without proper food and medicine he had become partially paralyzed. As he spoke, he shuffled over to a bookshelf, where he picked up and handed me a flat metallic object. It was a picture frame, made from what looked like a hammered silver metal of some kind, intricately patterned with designs in relief in the metal.

“I made it from my empty toothpaste tubes,” he told me. “I hid it from the guards.” He described other things made by other prisoners he knew, such as poems printed on plastic bags, and small paintings or drawings, smuggled out by those rare visitors permitted into the prison. I heard similar stories in Mandalay, where I visited a family of a well-known artist who had been imprisoned for his artistic mockery of the authorities and their attitude toward Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. His family had been able to afford to buy and smuggle some materials into the prison for him by bribing the guards. They furtively yet proudly showed me the things he had made in prison. There was a T-shirt with defiant slogans painted in colored paint, and several intricately-done embroideries of calendars for the year 2000, symbolically referred to as a year that would mark a turning point in Burma’s history. One calendar had an embroidered fist and a statement that he would perform his act “my own way,” in defiance of the censorship for which he had been imprisoned.

Former political prisoners in Burma talked about how important it was to be able to read and write whenever possible in order to both communicate and to keep themselves mentally occupied and alert in confinement. Prisoners wrote poems or other compositions using bricks or medicine tablets as markers on the concrete floor, or by

committing the poems to memory by chanting them over and over (Bo Kyi, personal communication, August 18, 2000). Bo Kyi is a former student leader and political prisoner who founded the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (Burma), or AAPP, based in Mae Sot. He described to me how in Mandalay prison he was able to get some books to read and was able to study English every day with a teacher he met inside. They would write the words in the dirt with sticks, and Bo Kyi would recite what he had learned to commit it to memory. Prisoners also made use of the plastic bags in which their families would bring them food; using a small nail, they could write on the plastic bag and circulate their writings within the prison. Some of the prison wardens were sympathetic to the student prisoners, and others needed money and could be bribed to smuggle things in or out of the prisons for them. As Bo Kyi described it, “some people handmade things from plastic bags, made beads from plastic bags, some people made sculptures. We bought soap and they would make a sculpture of a woman” (personal communication, August 18, 2000).

In March, 1996, twenty-two prisoners in Insein prison were tried and received an additional seven years with hard labor for their part in publishing weekly news bulletins in the prison and writing and smuggling letters out of the prison, including one to former UN Special Rapporteur, Professor Yozo Yokota (ABSDF, 1997). The transcript of their trial, smuggled out of Burma and published by the All Burma Students Democratic Front (ABSDF) in 1997, provides important insights into the degree to which political prisoners in Burma have remained active despite the odds against them, as well as how these activities threaten the military authorities. The report provides details of the various ways

that prisoners communicated, both among themselves and with outsiders, including writing on prison shirts and smuggling them out, smuggling in radios piece by piece and reassembling them inside, and publishing and circulating magazines and news bulletins in the prison. The report is also telling for the importance the regime obviously places on information and the means of its distribution, which they clearly see as a threat. The list of evidence brought to bear against each of the accused included, in addition to the three radios and the batteries found in their cells, copies of foreign magazines such as *Time* and *Newsweek*, some Burmese magazines sold legally, such as *Dana* and *Thuta Swae Sone*, sheets of paper and plastic bags with articles or stories written on them, ball point pens and refills, colored pencils and felt-tip pens, a picture of Aung San and several of Aung San Suu Kyi, English language study books, a book of Buddhist Sutras, and various other documents (ABSDF, 1997).

Outsiders Within

A big attraction to the Burmese cause for students around the world is the fact that so many of those lobbying for change in Burma identify themselves as students. Students from outside Burma have been centrally involved in the creation of several high-profile media events by visiting Burma specifically to create their own “mind bombs” in the ostensible hopes of encouraging international news coverage of the situation in Burma. In honor of the tenth anniversary of the 8/8/88 uprisings, for example, eighteen activists from the U.S., Australia, Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines, dubbed the “Rangoon 18,” flew into Rangoon as tourists. On the morning of August 9th they divided

themselves into groups and began passing out thousands of palm-sized pamphlets printed with the slogans “8888” and “Don’t Forget – Don’t Give Up.” They were arrested and held in Rangoon before being tried, sentenced, and then deported. In mid-September 1999, a 28 year-old Briton named Rachel Goldwyn chained herself to a lamppost at a marketplace in Rangoon and began singing democracy songs. She was promptly arrested and charged with seven years of hard labor for “undermining peace, security and stability” with her actions, which drew a crowd of several hundred people (Lyll, 1999). Another Briton, James Mawdsley, was sentenced to 17 years in prison earlier in September, 1999. He had been arrested and deported twice before from Burma on charges of anti-government activity, which this third time consisted of entering the country illegally, shouting revolutionary slogans and carrying pro-democracy leaflets (Lyll, 1999).

All of these actions by outsiders traveling in Burma have been controversial, since they have had both physical and emotional consequences. Activists inside Burma were affected by the actions of the “Rangoon 18,” because they led to a tightening of security which made action more difficult and dangerous. One activist who was inside Burma at the time of the action by the “Rangoon 18” thought that they should not have done what they did, because it played right into the hands of the regime and its propaganda to the Burmese people.

The SPDC showed [these foreigners] to the Burmese people in the Burmese newspaper and media. Every day they say that the westerners and America intervene in our country, that “this is neocolonialism.” They say this many times, many times, and people are not clear all the time about this. (personal communication, August 15, 2000)

This activist and others expressed discomfort with the idea that foreigners should enter Burma and take this type of action. “In my opinion,” another activist told me, “they should support from the outside.”

Shades of Grey

One of the Rangoon 18 was Malaysian journalist Ong Ju Lynn (1998), who wrote about her experience for *Nation* magazine. In the aftermath of the media event, Ong (1998) pointed out that it was the six Americans who became the biggest heroes of the event, while the other 12 were recognized less often in the reporting on the incident. But her feelings about the event focused on how, against her own will, she had come to see her captors as people.

I came home with a knot in my chest that wouldn't go away. We came home jubilant and triumphant. Heroes. But I did not feel jubilant and triumphant. I was ashamed, not for what I did (leafleting, small matter). But because I really didn't want to see my captors as people, so I can come home and condemn the junta with authoritative vigour. So I can mock their ignorance and stupidity. My captors who are part of the junta, who work a 9-to-5 job, and go home to their families and TV sets. A small piece in a monstrous structure (Ong, 1998).

Ong (1998) ended her article by vowing to continue speaking out on behalf of the Burmese people, but also by recognizing that what used to appear to her as a clear target of evil, a bull's-eye of red in the center of a white circle, now appeared as “mixed to a solid pink.”

Why does the picture get painted in these ways? For those who put countless

hours into the struggle against the regime, there may be a compulsion to see things in black and white in order to justify the sacrifices required. But this act of dichotomizing the situation in black and white terms of good vs. evil or the opposition vs. the junta, like any dichotomy, contributes to the divisiveness of the situation, perpetuating the process of militarization by provoking an equally vehement response. In addition, associating the opposition as good in contrast to the evil of the regime makes invisible the oppressive characteristics within the opposition itself, as well as the positive attributes of members of the military regime.

Attention to the shades of gray that complicate any reality that has repeatedly been painted in black and white is a key means of interrogating that which is most taken-for-granted. I would like to follow Lynn's example by examining the dominant metaphors used to frame our understandings of communications technology and its use. In Burma's case, and I believe more universally as well, two competing metaphors seem to dominate our thinking about technology. On the one hand are the utopian views of the Internet and other technologies as the means to counter repression and control in order to usher in a new era of democratic change and a freer world. But more often the metaphors used to discuss and write about communications technologies and media in Burma associates them with war, including the "information warfare" in the public relations campaigns of the regime and its opposition. These metaphors connecting communication and media with war will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 5.

The attention to war is of course necessary and understandable in any situation such as Burma's, where real war **is** being waged, and where people die regularly as a consequence. But at what point do the metaphors of war, repeated often enough, come to shape our expectations and our everyday lives as much as they are shaped by them? At what point do we begin to see our complex set of complex relationships with others only in terms of black and white?

The Communication Dance – A Final Duet

January 19, 2000

My final day in Burma, and my final meeting with X, a well-known writer. I had read one of his stories and was eager to discuss with him the meaning of the story and the intention behind some of its symbols and events. Other writers had been eager to tell me about how they had to write indirectly, to make a point subtly while ostensibly using another as the main idea of their article or story. One writer had told me that X seemed to be very clever at using symbolism that was clear to the public but which nevertheless got past the censorship board. I felt it was lucky that I was intimately familiar with one of X's stories; in my final summer program in Burmese language just a few months earlier, I had studied the story carefully and tried to analyze its meaning.

Our meeting had been facilitated by Saya Gyi Y, a venerable writer who has been imprisoned more than once and who is a sort of hub among Burmese artists and writers. W, another popular writer I had met with, had also suggested that I meet with X, especially since I knew one of his stories well. I approached the meeting eagerly.

The taxi driver had difficulty finding the place, but as we grew nearer, people's reactions to our questions grew more sure (and less like the hesitant but still positive responses which I had learned indicate a genuine uncertainty). As we were stopping to ask someone the way for about the sixth time, a man walked up to the taxi and bent down, sticking his youngish-looking face into the window on the driver's side.

"Miss Lisa?" he asked. He was smiling, his face was kind and I felt immediately at ease. He ushered me around the back of what seemed to be a sort of ramshackle furniture-building workshop, across a muddy plot and up a dark set of stairs to an upstairs apartment. Like many other Burmese I have met, he lives simply, with his family in a few dark rooms, a kitchen of charcoal burners, and a simple squat toilet off in a tiny room in one corner.

He motioned for me to sit at a small table near what seemed to be the only sunlight in the rooms. The table was lined with a clean, pressed white tablecloth, and on it sat the inevitable *yay nway* (a clear Burmese tea), a china plate with two unopened packets of pocket tissues, a covered lacquerware bowl and a few books. He motioned for me to sit down, and as I did so, a young woman appeared with a plate of fried coconut snacks. He introduced her as his daughter, and she smiled shyly. As we sat there and began talking, she produced another plate – this one of a kind of coconut pudding. Then she returned with a cup of sweet Burmese tea for me. X uncovered the lacquerware bowl to reveal *laphet thok*, a Burmese wet tea salad. There was barely room on the table to fit all of the snacks he had laid out for me.

He nervously fingered the unopened packets of tissues and smiled at me. We had

already established that our conversation would need to be in a mix of Burmese and English, as both my Burmese and his English were far from fluent. I began with the introduction I used for the people I had established that I could trust, whom I'd met through others I could trust. I told him that I was a student studying Burma, and that my interest in Burma had begun ten years earlier, when I'd lived with Karen refugees from Burma in Thailand. I explained that I was currently living in Thailand along the Burmese border and studying the uses of new information technologies among groups working for democracy in Burma. I explained that although my project was based on the border, it was necessary for me to also understand the situation of communication inside the country as well. He said very little during this introduction. As I had said these things to several others before him, my Burmese slid easily from me and filled me with a bit more confidence. I explained that I was interested in how symbolism is used by writers who cannot be direct, and I asked him about his short story.

I had assumed when I read his story that he had written it specifically to address the problems in Burmese literature that several other writers had talked with me about explicitly. They had argued that the state of censorship in the country was so great that there have been few genuinely good works of fiction which have been able to pass the censorship board. As a result, they are concerned with the quality of Burmese fiction and the direction in which it is being forced to develop.

As X explained his intentions in writing this story, I took notes eagerly, but grew increasingly disappointed. He said nothing about the quality of fiction, and mentioned nothing about censorship at all. I thought perhaps if I reworded the question that my

inquiry would be better understood.

“Are you worried about the situation of fiction in Burma today?” I asked him.

“What do you mean?” His response surprised me.

“Well, for example, other writers have told me that there is a lot of censorship and that for this reason they are worried, because they believe that to publish good fiction is not possible in Burma.” He paused and shifted in his chair. It was several beats before he answered.

“If there were no censorship at all,” he began slowly, “it would be very bad.” He looked at me and continued. “For example, what if I write about you and it is not true. What can you do?” I told him that in the U.S. I could sue for libel. But I also wondered whether I’d not understood him correctly, or he hadn’t understood me. He went on to explain that he believed that some censorship was necessary, especially as regards religious issues. I asked him whether or not he had ever been censored. He smiled nervously.

“A little bit,” he answered. But, he said, different writers are censored to different degrees, and it depends on what they are writing. “For me, I have no problem, because I am not a politician. Some other writers are politicians so they have some problems.” He repeated that he thought some censorship is necessary, especially with regard to religious issues and also with the various ethnic nationalities. He said that if there were no censorship, various religious groups and ethnic groups would begin writing bad things about each other and this would lead to quarrels and instability. He was beginning to sound a bit like an article from the *New Light of Myanmar*. I began to wonder whether or

not I had made a mistake coming to see him.

“For example,” he argued, “bad things should not be written about the ethnic groups, since they are not very strong.” I asked him why the government published books such as “Wither the KNU?” a government account of the rebel group. X answered that the government sees them as different from the nationalities, as insurgents. I said nothing for what seemed like quite a while as I decided what to say next.

I tried to remember back to what I had already told him. Had I told him that I lived on the border? I had. I’d even told him I’d lived with Karen refugees. Had I told him I was interested in the opposition groups? Yes. I’d try another way to figure him out.

“Do you think there is a lot of censorship now?” I asked him. He paused a long time before answering, looking away from me out the window.

“Some,” he said slowly. “But some censorship is necessary. On the other hand, too much is not good. I would like to see more flexibility.”

“A kind of middle path,” I offered, hoping to indicate that this was my own preference as well. His face brightened.

“Yes, yes. The middle way is best.”

I decided to find out more about his relationship with Saya Gyi Y and W, the other writer who’d suggested we meet.

“How do you know Saya Gyi?” I asked. But it turned out they’d never met. He had never met W directly, either, but they had spoken over the phone. I was beginning to get worried. I had made mistakes traveling around Burma. I had said what felt like too

much on the phone a few times, and had been too trusting of people on a couple of occasions, but it seemed so far that I'd managed to stay out of trouble. Had I now, on my very last day and during my last meeting, just blown it? After all, many, many people had warned me that the MI plants people "in every sector."

I became angry at myself for having given away so much information about myself right up front, and for not more explicitly asking Saya Gyi and W more about X and how well he could be trusted. I decided to flip the tables a bit.

"Is there anything you want to ask me?" I asked. He hesitated for a moment, and then said that he was worried about how I'd interpret his story. He assured me that he did not intend to imply that there are no good bookstores in Burma, and that he was worried that I would "look down on" his country. I assured him that I had come to see him specifically to understand his meaning clearly, and that he didn't need to worry, that now I understood clearly what he meant and that I did not look down on Burma and Burmese writers. There was another pause.

"And what will you do with those?" he asked, gesturing towards my notes. I thought quickly about how to avoid telling him that I'd hoped to hear more about censorship. Fearing that I may have already caused suspicion with this man who could, for all I knew, be a military spy, I decided it would be best not to bring up my research again. I answered that since I'd studied his short story in my Burmese class, it was mainly for my own interest and to be able to tell my Burmese teacher when I returned home. She would also want to know about our conversation, I explained.

"Is that okay?" I asked.

“Yes,” he answered. “But . . . are you really a student?” The question scared me.

“Yes, I am really a student. I am not a journalist. Don’t worry.” As I often do when I get nervous, I began to rattle on, about how I was trying my best to understand all sides, and how the “middle way” seemed the best way to me, too. By now we were both clearly nervous, and I decided it would be best if I left as soon as was politely possible. As far as I remembered, he knew only my first name. I couldn’t remember whether or not on the phone the day before Saya Gyi Y had told him I was leaving for Bangkok that evening. Would MI be able to track me down by a first name only, if they knew I was leaving that day? There were only a few flights, and not many tourists. I was glad that I’d arranged another way to get my journal and my notes out of the country. I resolved to go carefully through my bag one last time before heading to the airport, just to make sure there was nothing that could link me with any of the people I’d met with during my trip.

When I said that I needed to go, X picked up the two books that had been lying on the table.

“A present for you – my short stories,” he said, and he opened the front cover of the first book. He wrote out “To Lisa,” and then said, “and your last name is B-R-O-O-D-I-N?”

“E-N,” I answered, without correcting him about the D, which should be a T. Saya Gyi had given him my full name. He wrote inside the cover of each book a little note to me, “Lisa Brooden.” I began preparing mentally to be thoroughly searched on my way out of the country in just a few hours – and perhaps being unable to return.

Rushing back to the guesthouse where I was staying, I hurriedly went through my

bags, removing anything that seemed potentially threatening to any of the people I had met with. My journal was no longer with me; I had left it with a friend to get out of the country in another way. I had also gone to the trouble to make a xerox copy, which I left with another friend as a backup. All that remained was a single sheet of paper that listed the codes I'd used in my journal instead of people's names. I managed to fold that up into a very small packet and hide it in my clothing. As I finished throwing things into my bag, two new friends I had met at a recent painting exhibit showed up to drive me to the airport.

I sat in the front seat, next to XXXX, the driver. As we made our way to the airport, I grew increasingly worried about being searched. XXXX was telling me about a famous Burmese writer and painter who now lived abroad and produced commentaries for one of the big international radio services. As he praised this man, he quieted down, explaining how this writer's words were powerful and true, as it is impossible to be in Burma these days. His candor gave me courage.

"Do you know X?" I asked.

"Oh, another very good writer. I have never met him, but I like his stories very much." He looked over at me. "Why are you asking about him?"

"I met him today," I admitted, "and was worried by our meeting."

"Why?" he asked.

"Well, he seemed to be very nervous, and he said some unusual things. For example, he said that there is very little censorship in Burma today," I answered. "I am afraid that maybe he will say something about me, and I will be searched at the airport."

XXXX laughed.

“You don't have to worry about him. I have not met him, but I know his stories well. I can guarantee you that you don't need to worry about him.” He smiled as I looked at him questioningly.

“He just finished several years in jail and he doesn't want to go back,” he said.

“He was scared of you! How did you come to meet with him?”

As I explained how I'd met him, it became clear to me that we had both been scared by each other, spooked by the thought that each was working for or connected with the military regime in some capacity.

At the airport, I passed through customs with no trouble. No one gave my bags a passing glance. As I sat in the waiting area for the plane to board, I contemplated how free I suddenly felt. I wondered about all those times I suspected I might be followed, or return to my room to find my bag had been searched. I thought about X and the comical dance we had danced earlier that day, each scared of the unknown other, each unable to communicate what we were both feeling. This is the irony of living in fear. You just never know, and the ambiguity is never-ending. To drop one's guard is to put oneself in danger. To maintain that guard means keeping all but one's closest companions at arm's length. You may well be bursting inside with anger or fear but you cannot speak about it. You just never know.