

Political Violence and Journalism in a Multiethnic State

A Case Study of Burma (Myanmar)¹

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Debates about the role of media in situations of political violence call into question whether journalists should focus on “objective” reporting or instead facilitate conflict resolution. Yet an increasingly problematic assumption is that journalists are outsiders to the communities in conflict, especially as aid agencies increase their funding for media development and journalism training in conflicted areas. By focusing on the situation facing journalists from Burma (Myanmar) living in exile in Thailand, this article explores the consequences of political violence on the development of indigenous journalism in a multiethnic state. Although influenced by the recent surge in foreign funding, these journalists struggle to develop a context-specific model for their work, calling into question the relevance of the dominant U.S. approach to “objectivity.” The contested nature of concepts such as *unity*, *independence*, and *censorship* in these often high-risk areas suggests the need for a more complex model of media development in contexts of political violence.

Keywords: *Burma/Myanmar; political violence; journalism; journalism training; indigenous journalism; media development*

Current debates about media and journalism in contexts of political violence move between, on one hand, arguments for “objectivity” in reporting and, on the other, conceptualizations of the journalist as a facilitator of resolution to the conflict. Should reporters in conflict situations strive to be “objective,” neutral observers or do they “highlight the carnage in such a way that public pressure might bring about outside intervention?” (Botes, 1996, p. 2). Most contributions to this debate, however, take as a given that the journalist is an outsider to the community, and this in an era when large sums of money are being devoted by aid agencies to training indigenous journalists in areas of conflict in the basics of journalism and media development.

Author's Note: I would like to thank John Downing and Rachel Malcolm-Woods for their comments on earlier drafts.

By focusing on the situation of journalists from Burma (Myanmar) living in exile in Thailand, this article explores the consequences of political violence on the development of indigenous journalism in a multiethnic state. Drawing on data gathered from participant observation and in-depth interviews with Burmese journalists in Thailand and along the border between Thailand and Burma, the research examines how local journalists are struggling to develop a context-appropriate model for media development that adequately addresses their need to deal with disagreement and difference in a context of political violence. The research calls into question the relevance of the dominant U.S. approach to “objective” journalism. In this often dangerous context, the definition of concepts such as *unity*, *media independence*, and *censorship* must be seen as provisional and contested, given the various pressures brought to bear on journalists. The model of journalism arising organically in this context is influenced by the recent surge in foreign funding for journalism training yet borrows elements of the normative, objective model and the model of peace journalism. The inappropriate nature of imported journalistic ideologies, however, suggests the need for a more complex model of media development in such complicated and conflictual contexts.

Violence and Ethnicity in Burma

Home to the world's longest-running civil war, Burma is characterized by great ethnic diversity, with more than 100 different languages and dialects identified (Smith, 1999).² Population statistics are generally unavailable, and contentious when they are, because there has been no attempt to take a count of the population since the British census in 1931 (Smith, 1991). 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 as many Chinese, Tamils, Bengalis, and others of Indian origin. The most recent figures available, from 1983, list the majority Burmans as constituting 69% of the population (Steinberg, 2001).

Annexed by Britain in stages between 1824 and 1886, Burma was governed at first as a province of India. The British divided its administration in Burma into two divisions: Ministerial Burma in the central area of the country, and the Frontier Areas, in which the ethnic minority groups were given autonomy to govern themselves. 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 agitating for independence in central Burma.

After independence in 1948, civil war broke out between ethnic minority groups and the Burman government, and Burma experienced only a few years of civilian rule before a coup brought the military into power in 1962 under the leadership of

General Ne Win. Despite reshuffling of personnel over the years, the military has remained firmly in power, and political violence has been a defining characteristic of its rule. Worsening economic conditions throughout the 1970s and 1980s, along with the regime's abuses of its own people, led to the massive protests in 1988. Initially led by students, the demonstrations eventually involved hundreds of thousands of civilians who took to the streets. The Burmese military reacted with violence, gunning down thousands of people during the protests, which with few exceptions were non-violent.³ The uprisings eventually led to a coup and the takeover by a reshuffled military under the name the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC).

At the time of the 1988 uprisings, nearly 20 insurgent forces were active over about one third of the country, controlling vast rural areas (Smith, 1995), and it is estimated that perhaps 60% of Burma's land area, home to only 10% of the population, was not secured by the government (Steinberg, 2001, p. 186). The ethnic insurgencies and the government's counterinsurgency operations have led to massive numbers of casualties⁴ and to the pattern of violence perpetuating long-standing distrust, especially between the Burmans and the non-Burmans, although factionalism is also widespread within the Burmese opposition groups.⁵

Shortly after taking power in 1988, the SLORC began arranging ceasefires with ethnic nationality groups, who would agree to stop fighting in exchange for government promises of more assistance with development in education, health care, transportation, and infrastructure (Steinberg, 2001). These two things together—the ceasefires and their relationship to infrastructural development—offered the government a cloak of legitimacy despite its status as an international pariah after the bloodshed of 1988. Yet many ethnic minority leaders believed, as did Hkun Okker, president of the Pa-O People's Liberation Organization, that the military regime got the upper hand by making deals with 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. . . . They recognized that he who rules the ethnics, rules Burma. (Hkun Okker, personal communication, July 5, 2000)

Nevertheless, the resistance gained new impetus in 1988 when the border-based ethnonationalist movements were joined by thousands of Burman student activists who fled the country in the crackdown after the uprisings.

Burma's revolutionaries, so energized back then, have continued to struggle; however, after close to two decades since the 1988 uprisings, they now recognize how slow the process of genuine social and political change can be. The Burmese opposition today must be understood as a dynamic, ever-negotiated "movement" of groups constantly slipping into and out of tensions and alliances. In general terms, the movement is widely conceptualized as having, on the one hand, an "ethnic" element, a coalition of minority groups with the shared goal of a dignified measure of

self-determination for the ethnic nationalities within multiethnic Burma. The opposition's most visible element, however, is the Burman majority, primarily concerned with the development of democratic governance. Despite much genuine agreement and cooperation between Burman and ethnic nationality groups, significant tensions remain.

The actions of the current incarnation of the military regime, the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), have added to the volumes already dedicated to documenting abuses by the Burmese government. Human Rights Watch (2005) sums up the current regime's abuses in this way:⁶

The SPDC restricts the basic rights and freedoms of all Burmese . . . [and] continues to commit systematic, widespread, and well-documented abuses in ongoing conflicts with ethnic minority rebel groups, including extrajudicial executions, rape, torture, forced relocation of entire villages, and forced labor. As of late 2004, an estimated 650,000 people were internally displaced in eastern Burma alone, and at least 240 villages have been destroyed, relocated or abandoned since 2002. Some 2 million Burmese have moved to Thailand, including 145,000 refugees living in camps. (n.p.)

In addition to the struggle for their survival, Burma's ethnic minority groups are concerned about preserving their cultures, especially because many are convinced the military regime is conducting a campaign to "Burmanize" the country. The SPDC promotes an (apolitical) cultural diversity by celebrating public ethnic minority cultural performances while committing abuses against these peoples in the rural areas. Meanwhile, the ceasefires between the regime and various ethnic factions continue, although with much mutual suspicion.

In addition to the violence perpetrated against ethnic minority peoples, much attention is paid to the ongoing detention of Burma's democratic leader and 1991 Nobel Peace Prize laureate, Aung San Suu Kyi. Beginning with her arrest before the country's 1990 elections, which were won by the opposition in a landslide but subsequently ignored by the regime, to her release from house arrest in 1995, rearrest in 2000, release in 2002, and rearrest in 2003, her detentions have garnered international media attention. Aung San Suu Kyi remains under house arrest as of this writing.

It is within this context of political violence against dissident Burmans and ethnic minorities that the Burmese opposition in exile is attempting to transform patterns of behavior that have led to such a factionalized, militarized pattern of leadership. Media, and especially journalism, are seen as key components in the transition to a more open and transparent democratic process and a reduction in political violence. I have seen the Burmese media in exile develop in impressive ways since my first contact with Burmese activists when I lived in Thailand as a volunteer teacher in a camp of refugees from Burma from 1989 to 1992. It is this development, a result of and also in tension with foreign assistance for media development, that is the focus of this research.

Situated Knowledges and Multisited Ethnography

My research is guided by the recognition of what Donna Haraway (1988) called "situated knowledges," an acknowledgment that marginalized groups offer us a means of widening our field of vision by incorporating the perspectives of those whose voices we hear least often. Relevant here is Patricia Hill Collins's (1991) vision, in which "dialogues among and coalitions with a range of groups, each with its own distinctive set of experiences . . . form the larger, more general terrain of intellectual and political discourse" (p. 36). Yet exploring a phenomenon as complex as the Burmese opposition movement also calls into question the notion of *place* as conceived by conventional anthropological approaches. The world can no longer be seen as composed of discreet cultures bounded geographically, and the idea of moving in and out of "the field" no longer holds (Gupta & Ferguson, 1997). I, therefore, employ a multisited approach to ethnography, exploring patterns of communications access and use and the movements of people, money, ideas, and discourses between and through sites—linkages that interest a growing number of scholars (Burawoy, 2001; Marcus, 1995; Molyneux, 2001; Weber, 2001). Multisited ethnography works to build "a montage that lends greater insight into the whole, into the connections, disconnections and reconnections" between sites (Burawoy, 2001, p. 156), exploring "the chains of mutual knowledge and interdependence that constitute them" (Weber, 2001, pp. 485-486). A multisited approach recognizes "that any ethnography of a cultural formation in the world system is also an ethnography of the system" and must therefore grapple with the shifting, transnational locations of cultural production common in today's world (Marcus, 1995, p. 99).

The research presented here is based on participant observation with a wide variety of Burmese media groups based in Thailand during fieldwork from October 1999 through August 2000, and again from June through August 2005, as well as in-depth interviews with more than 50 Burmese media journalists and activists. I use an inductive, interpretive approach, allowing issues of concern to emerge from observation and interaction and conversation, rather than through development of an *a priori* set of hypotheses to be proven or disproven. Triangulation of method and sources, and member checks, in which the themes emerging through field notes and interviews are discussed with a wide range of participants for their feedback, are an important part of this process. Although this feedback is not the primary determinant of the interpretations provided here, for which I take full responsibility, it does provide a chance for participants to challenge my interpretations and participate in the creation of knowledge, an opportunity often absent for participants in more deductive approaches to research (Joseph, 2005).

Long-term commitment to fieldwork with Burmese media personnel has provided me with insight into changes they have faced over time, and the last several years, especially, have seen significant strides in Burmese independent media development.

This is due perhaps in large part to increased foreign funding for independent media, which has emerged in tandem with debates about the effectiveness and impact of U.S. influence on journalism worldwide, especially in areas of political violence.

Journalism and Journalism Education in the Context of Political Violence

The U.S. approach to journalism arose from a distinct political economy in which “objectivity” enabled the press to distribute newspapers without alienating widely divergent readerships and in which many of its news values, such as a focus on “conflict, violence, celebrity, the unusual,” also sell newspapers (Napoli, 2000, p. 262). This approach often characterizes journalism education in countries where there is “no philosophical foundation for an independent press, no experience with democracy and no economy capable of supporting a press entirely dependent on advertising and circulation” (Napoli, 2000, p. 262). And in many developing and “transitional” countries, skeptics have questioned the usefulness or even the viability of the “objectivity” paradigm as a central organizing feature of journalism (Napoli, 2000, p. 262). Even when reporting is successfully framed as “objective,” its conventions nevertheless influence which elements of a conflict get highlighted or omitted (Botes, 1996).

The objectivity model, it is also argued, is an ideal that we do not actually find in journalistic practice, although many argue that it is an ideal worth striving for. Yet, however committed to “objectivity,” journalists purvey national myths and present national rituals, participating in the construction of national identity and mediated constructions of “us” and “others” (Terzis, 2001). This tends to perpetuate “a world view that consistently favors the home nation perspective on world affairs” (Terzis, 2001, p. 4). The gap between the normative concept and the reality of journalistic practices begs the question: “Why should a model stay a model if it is so far removed from what is actually practised in newsrooms around the world?” (Josephi, 2005, p. 576). In addition, much of the research on journalism around the world assumes the normative expectations of the U.S. professional model and is designed in such a way that the expectations function to shape the research questions as well as the findings (Josephi, 2005).

As the United States exports its model of good journalistic practice abroad, critics have proposed new models that encourage journalists to go beyond “objectivity” and involve readers in the process of finding solutions to problems (Napoli, 2000). The public journalism or civic journalism movement, which has gained currency in the United States since the 1990s, challenges the normative model by calling for citizen involvement in newsmaking, and news coverage from the perspectives of citizens rather than “experts” (Rosen, 1991). And several writers, including journalists, have called for a “solution-oriented journalism” in which journalists examine solutions to

problems and areas of common ground in addition to the traditional “five Ws” formula examining the who, what, when, where, and why of an issue (Botes, 1996; Terzis, 2001).⁷

There is some consensus that media can indeed play a significant role in situations of political violence. Good reporting

should look beyond stated positions toward the interests and needs of the parties. Such reporting assists disputants and conflict resolvers to get to the root of the problems causing the conflict, and tells us what a conflict is really about. (Botes, 1996, p. 30)

Yet media can also function to escalate hostilities, as was the case with the infamous Radio Mille Collines in Rwanda (Uvin, 1998). Media are often manipulated by politicians who use ethnic conflict to “encourage readers to be ethnically, rather than nationally, conscious” to further their own political goals (Nyambuga, 2004, p. 486). In situations of violence, concerns about the need for journalistic professionalism are addressed by the claim that “there need not be a contradiction between solid, ‘objective’ journalism and the production of programmes which aim to promote peace rather than war” (Hieber, 1998, p. 7). Rather than promoting a journalism of detachment, such an approach, labeled by some as “peace journalism,” is lauded as a “‘journalism of attachment’ to all actual and potential victims” in situations of conflict (Galtung, 1998, p. 14).

Yet most of the literature on political violence and media takes as a given that the journalist is an outsider to the community. Recent efforts to establish media in areas of conflict have demonstrated the strengths and weaknesses of such an approach, especially given the importance of journalists’ proximity to those media audiences living in a conflict zone (Hieber, 1998). Nevertheless, much of this discussion centers on the difficulties faced by outside organizations attempting to establish a presence in areas of conflict (Hieber, 1998).

Although some research has attempted to assess the impact of foreign journalism training on the trainers (Becker, McConnell, & Punathambekar, 2002), little work has been done to explore the significant difficulties facing journalists indigenous to areas of conflict or the training efforts being made in such situations. A recent book by Kumar (2006) is the sole work thus far focusing on the recent surge of independent media development efforts. The work developed out of a multicountry assessment, directed by its author, of media assistance programs funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). Aside from its unquestioned assumption that commercial media provide the best means of achieving “the ideal of a ‘Fourth Estate’” (p. 1), this work takes an uncritical stance toward the much-critiqued modernization approach of early theorists of media development such as Daniel Lerner and Wilbur Schramm. In addition, Kumar (2006) uncritically cited “foreign policy experts” who suggest that the absence of internal dissent and debate in countries of the Middle East “directly and indirectly contributed to the growth of international terrorism” (p. 7).

This last view is consistent with the large body of research on terrorism that does not take into account differences in the motivations for and media coverage of “grievance terrorism” and “institutional terrorism” (Wittebols, 1991, p. 253) or “terrorism from below” and “terrorism from above” (Tuman, 2003, pp. 120-123). Wittebols’s (1991) typology of terrorism and media usefully distinguishes between violence motivated by an interest in redressing grievances or altering the power structure, or *grievance terrorism*, and by an interest in “maintaining power and the status quo,” or *institutional terrorism* (p. 253). This model also examines the media coverage of terrorism, which tends to emphasize grievance terrorism against the state but ignores institutional terrorism. Although important for its contribution to exploring the complexities of political violence, this model also addresses only those situations in which outsiders to the violence provide the news coverage. A more complex model is needed to better reflect the situation on the ground in conflicted multiethnic states such as Burma, where media development efforts are targeted toward journalists indigenous to the situations of violence.

The need for critical attention to journalism training in areas of conflict is especially acute at this time, when increasing amounts of money are being devoted to training local reporters (Kumar, 2006; Napoli, 2000; USAID Bureau for Policy and Program Coordination, 2003). The U.S. State Department and USAID, for example, have devoted an average of US\$33 million per year for independent media development efforts since 1991, ranging from approximately \$13 million in 1992 to \$61 million in 1999 (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2005). One of USAID’s two largest independent media contractors is Internews, which began work funding and providing training for independent media among the Burmese opposition by opening an office in Thailand in 2000.

Such training programs have primarily emphasized the dominant Western paradigm of the “objective” journalist, who must try to balance the story, verify information, ascribe information to named sources, and especially, keep their own feelings and views out of a story in which there is to be no underlying agenda (Khaing Mar Kyaw Zaw, personal communication, July 15, 2005; Napoli, 2000). Yet the recipients of such training are often members of groups involved in the conflicts they are reporting, and very little attention has been paid to the constraints they face in this work, let alone the relevance of their journalism training. This article aims to jumpstart this discussion.

Burmese Opposition and/or Independent Media⁸

Burmese opposition media are many and varied yet have in common an opposition to the political landscape in Burma and a desire to oust the military and end the ongoing violence. The Thailand-Burma borderland has for decades provided activists with the freedom to develop and distribute alternatives to the highly censored, government-controlled media in Burma. At this point, Burmese opposition media can usefully be divided into two broad categories. The first is composed of a

few well-funded, widely read, and increasingly professional independent media that are “unmarked” in terms of ethnic identification. These media include *The Irrawaddy* (in English and recently Burmese) and *New Era Journal* (in Burmese). They cover the activities of a wide variety of groups in Burmese society and address important issues in international news, especially if they concern Burma in any way.

The second broad category that has developed, especially since the mid-1990s, are those media identified with the ethnic nationalities, which I will call *ethnic media*. These are produced primarily from locations along the border, although not exclusively, because there are also many ethnic-identified publications printed in Thai cities and by groups in exile, and a myriad of online sources maintained from outside Burma. Several of these media have become significant voices for ethnic nationalities, putting them “on the map” for outsiders interested in Burma, and for other groups in the opposition. Several of them grew out of information groups established to document human rights abuses by the military regime, which then began publishing newsletters for their own peoples in their own languages and for the international community (Brooten, 2004). The Burmese media in exile continue to develop in number and sophistication, stimulating debate about their role in bringing about change in Burma.

Media Independence—A Debate

There are two kinds of news groups, I would say. . . . One is to report things as they are and how we think they should be. And the other . . . is fighting for a cause. . . . With the Shan Herald Agency for News, it's sort of like a private army. . . . Have pen will fight! Have computer, will type! (Khuensai Jaiyen, personal communication, July 20, 2005)

There is an ongoing debate among Burmese opposition and ethnic media staff and their audiences regarding the role of the media in countering political violence. Although there is a strong tendency for media to proclaim independence from political groups, especially noticeable since the arrival of Internews in Thailand, there are also those who question the veracity of such claims, and others who believe that media must play a role in motivating people to work for the cause. For many, this has meant promoting the “unity” of their people, although the definition of *unity* seems to have been shifting among Burmese opposition media during the past several years. There is also evidence that the motivation to proclaim political independence may for some stem as much from the demands of funding agencies and training in journalism as it does from a genuine desire or ability to maintain independence from political power-holders.

Unity and Independence

Unity is a concept understandably useful to groups who find themselves the target of violence, and it comes up repeatedly in discussions with Burmese activists and

in writings about Burma. Several scholars have remarked on the emphasis on unity in Burmese political culture, a unity defined as unanimity and manifested through consensus (Callahan, 1998; Silverstein, 1980; Steinberg, 2001). Callahan (1998) argued that the Burmese political party that grew out of the resistance to British colonialism, the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League (AFPFL), "never developed any mechanisms to accommodate and resolve conflicting views, visions, and objectives" (p. 53). Suppression of dissenting viewpoints became the norm, impeding the development of government structures that could tolerate competition and political differences (Callahan, 1998). Thus, Callahan argued, Burma emerged as a state through a series of military actions aimed at restricting dissent and emphasizing unity, defined as uniformity or unanimity. Even the country's "democratic era" of civilian government between 1948 and 1962 was characterized by challenges to the government and within it, often backed by arms and violence (Callahan, 1998).

This historical norm of unity conceptualized as unanimity runs deep, promoting a noncontroversial journalism diametrically opposed to demands for media independence. Yet opposition media vehemently stress the importance of their independence, a tendency especially noticeable after journalism training. Some media groups have taken to this concept more readily than others. "We were the first people to use in Burmese the words 'independent media,'" explained Aung Zaw, editor of *The Irrawaddy* magazine, arguably the most professional independent Burmese print and online source by Western standards. "People were disgusted with us, and snipped at us, 'What the hell? What is that? Independent media?' We didn't care, you know" (Aung Zaw, personal communication, April 18, 2000). That strategy seems to have worked, and *The Irrawaddy* has grown, becoming more professional in appearance and more widely read than in its early days as a simple information sheet. Yet it is comparatively easy for *The Irrawaddy*, based in the bustling Thai city of Chiang Mai, to remain free of reliance on the border-based Burmese political leaders. Perhaps recognizing this, Aung Zaw alluded to a kind of coercion facing some opposition media. "Now a lot of people are using this word, 'independent,' whether they like it or not. This may be eye-catching for donors" (personal communication, April 18, 2000). Indeed, in the past several years the concept of independence has become central to discussions of media development.

Yet although most Burmese media groups laud the concept of *independence*, many also maintain that complete independence is an unrealistic goal, given the political violence they must deal with. A group of Kachin young men set up the Kachin News Group (KNG) in Laiza, a town in the Kachin-controlled area of the Burmese border with China a few years ago, and when a power struggle occurred within the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO), KNG reported it in their online news report. The report angered the KIO leaders, and as a result, the KNG members had to flee Laiza in fear for their lives (Naw Din, personal communication, July 29, 2005). They set up on the China side of the border, in Shweli. However, because Shweli is

far from Kachin state, news about the Kachin became difficult to come by. The KNG was unable to continue reporting and lost its funding. Working on a shoestring budget, they now have members in New Delhi, India, and Chiang Mai, Thailand, as well as two reporters inside Kachin state. Yet security for their reporters is difficult, and to gain safe access to areas of Kachin state, they had to develop relations with a splinter group from the KIO, a relationship that although useful, also calls into question their trustworthiness, especially with the KIO and with foreign funding agencies (Naw Din, personal communication, July 29, 2005).

Similar concerns about security on the Burma side of the border in Thailand have plagued the Mon media groups, the Kao Wao News Group, and the Independent Mon News Agency (IMNA). When IMNA published a report in its *Guiding Star* newspaper on thefts in a refugee camp by the Hongsawatoi Restoration Party (HRP), HRP leaders put out a warrant for the arrest of its editor (Nai Taing Taw, personal communication, August 6, 2005). Such stories are common among those journalists working along the border.

Good relationships with political groups are also necessary for access to information and for help with the distribution of media inside Burma. The leadership of the New Mon State Party (NMSP), for example, angry with a report in the *Guiding Star*, refused to distribute the newspaper in the Mon areas they controlled. They also refused to cooperate with IMNA in writing a report about the abuses of Mon women by Burmese soldiers, despite the fact that information provided by their soldiers in the field would have strengthened this report, making it more likely to draw international attention to the abuse of these women (Nai Taing Taw, personal communication, August 6, 2005). This leads Mon journalist Nai Taing Taw to argue that

without their cooperation we cannot distribute [the paper] inside Burma . . . so if we are working very independently, [which] we can do, because we are in Thailand, we cannot reach the people inside Burma. . . . We have a choice, and I think we should balance. We should cooperate with them and criticize them a little, not more. (personal communication, August 6, 2005)

Ironically, for some media groups, their relationships with local political organizations make it possible for them to attend journalism training. Without the help of Burmese political leaders and the relationships they have developed with local Thai authorities, many journalists would not be able to obtain the travel permits necessary for safe travel in Thailand, as most do not have the legal status to remain in the country (Nai Kasauh Mon, personal communication, August 6, 2005; Nai Taing Taw, personal communication, August 6, 2005). In addition, in this precarious situation it is often the journalists' willingness to exchange information with local Thai authorities regarding activities across the border in Burma that helps ensure their continued safety in Thailand (Khuensai Jaiyen, personal communication, July 20, 2005).

Censorship, Self-Censorship, and Peace

Those Burmese opposition leaders who think of democracy as an end state rather than an ongoing process often silence dissent through coercive or violent means. The past several years, however, seem to have ushered in a bit more acceptance among political leaders of the idea of critique and debate as central to democratic systems. Media groups have played a key role in this ongoing shift. Many opposition writers insist on using their press freedoms to promote a free media, despite challenges from the Burmese government and opposition groups. They claim the freedom to criticize if it is warranted, and they challenge the view that press freedoms can be given, like a “reward” in the aftermath of a change in political leadership. As Aung Zaw said about some of the political opposition groups,

They always say, “As long as the movement goes on, don’t criticize. After the movement is over, after the revolution is over, write whatever you like. You will get press freedom, everything.” But I said, “No, it’s not like that. Democracy doesn’t come in a chest or in a box. It doesn’t come like, ‘Here is democracy’ . . . ‘Today we overthrow the government, the government is gone. Tomorrow we will get press freedom, everything is fine, do it.’” It’s not like that. (personal communication, April 18, 2000)

One of the founders of the Human Rights Foundation of Monland (HURFOM), Nai Kasauh Mon, explained that at the group’s inception, they intentionally did not invite anyone from the NMSP to get involved, so that they could work free from the influence of any political organization (personal communication, July 22, 2000). In one issue of their newsletter, they printed a story outlining the continuation of people’s suffering in the aftermath of the NMSP ceasefire with the Burmese regime. Nai Kasauh Mon wrote, “ ‘Does this mean the New Mon State Party (NMSP) can’t protect them?’ So, like that I criticized [them]. Whether they like it or not, I don’t know . . . I write the truth, but I send it to them” (personal communication, July 22, 2000). He described another incident.

When we had some news about some NMSP leaders involved in corruption, we put this news [in the paper]. And they said it made disunity among them, and they sent a letter back to us, and we also put this letter [in the paper].

When the leaders got angry,

we also told them that you must become a democratic government, not like a dictatorship, so if someone analyzes you, talks to you, you must accept it. If you don’t agree, you say you don’t agree. . . . It’s no problem. We try to improve our Mon community to [have] a more democratic way of thinking, of participation. (personal communication, July 22, 2000)

Khuensai Jaiyen, founding member of the Shan Herald Agency for News (SHAN), described a report the group published several years ago about the people’s plight and the reactions from political leaders of the Shan State Army (SSA):

One rural villager said, "Every four times I hit my hoe on the ground, the first time is to feed the Burmese army, the second time is for the Shan army, the third time is for the village and the monks, and the fourth time, only then is it for my family." And one of the SSA officials was angry. But they shouldn't be. We told them, "We are not criticizing you at all, but it's true. We didn't make it up. It was said by the people themselves. You should listen to it and become more humble in dealing with people. (personal communication, June 28, 2000)

It is clear that media groups have met censorship by opposition leaders with resistance, arguing that such actions are reminiscent of the very reasons for their struggle in the first place. "It is like a regime, too," Nai Taing Taw observed (personal communication, August 6, 2005).

Although they struggle for independence, media at times censor themselves, often in the name of a concept of *unity* correlating with peaceful coexistence and avoidance of confrontation. Just a few years ago, this type of unity was central in discussions of self-censorship among opposition media. Many opposition media staff expressed the opinion that freedom of speech and total independence was inappropriate under the current circumstances. They argued that given the struggle, and the history of factionalism within the movement, this was not the time to do anything that would undermine unity, understood as the avoidance of opposition or critique, and as necessary to prevent factionalism and maintain the peace.

Saw Thaw Thi insisted that the Karen newspaper he edited, *Kway K'Lu*, was and would remain independent of any outside influence, including the political leadership of the Karen National Union (KNU), but also that it would not be a forum for criticism of any Karen organization.

We think that it will not create understanding. . . . Our problem is to make the Karen people understand each other, regardless of what organization they belong to, what religious belief they have. Our problem is to make them understand each other and unite. (personal communication, July 24, 2000)

As a result, he told me, they did write about problems among the Karen, but with great care. "We have written about it very politely. We try to wipe out pain from the society" (Saw Thaw Thi, personal communication, July 24, 2000).

When the opposition radio station, the Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB), was established as the official voice of the opposition political leadership, there was contention among leaders regarding who would control the station, its budget and its programming.⁹ Despite the fact that the DVB had negotiated for independence in its day-to-day operations, especially its reporting, the staff saw its mission primarily as providing information for the people of Burma about the work of the opposition organizations. DVB founding member Khin Maung Win explained that the station was meant to be a mediator between the various peoples in Burma and the leadership of the opposition National League for Democracy (NLD), which won the majority

of parliamentary seats in Burma's 1990 elections but has since been prevented from taking power.

We consider it important to get reconciliation in Burma. The Shan people must know about the opinion of [Karen leader] General Bo Mya, or the Karen people. And NLD must know what General Bo Mya is saying. The same, how [Burman leaders] Dr. Naing Aung thinks, how Moethee Zun thinks. They should be informed, the rest of the people in Burma. (personal communication, August 23, 2000)

As people at the grassroots level became "armed" with more information, Khin Maung Win told me, they began to criticize their leaders. DVB staff members, however, did not perceive of the station as a forum for this criticism. According to Khin Maung Win and confirmed by other DVB staff, the station

never criticizes any organization, not just NCGUB [the Burmese government in exile, the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma]. They never criticize rights violations in [the Burmese student armed group, the All Burma Students Democratic Front] ABSDF or [the Karen National Union] KNU or any other organization. . . . It's not written policy. It is understood. We don't criticize. (personal communication, August 23, 2000)

DVB wouldn't play that role until a later day because if they criticized opposition organizations, he told me, "we would never get unity. DVB doesn't want to be part of the fighting in the present movement" (Khin Maung Win, personal communication, August 23, 2000). In the case of many opposition media, then, unity was seen as requiring independence from political organizations, but also avoidance of criticism or disagreement between groups in the name of peace.

Changing Notions of Unity, Independence, and Peace

Recent developments suggest that some media are challenging the meaning of *unity* and potential sources of legitimacy as a means to usher in more peaceful relations between and among groups. Those who most vehemently claim independence from political groups also seem the most willing to raise contentious issues and criticize the opposition, and to work to protect their right to criticize in this way. Those most successful in this regard have done much to open space for public debate over issues of political legitimacy. For the SHAN, for example, *unity* has paradoxically come to be associated with a separation from all of the competing Shan political organizations. According to SHAN's Director, Khuensai Jaiyen, things changed when he and his staff decided to distance themselves from the propaganda efforts supporting the infamous Shan drug "warlord" Khun Sa, and other Shan leaders. As he explained, "it's not propaganda anymore. We have become . . . maybe to use the right word, professional." This shift has also led to new ways of thinking about unity.

When we left Khun Sa, we were then without any organization . . . and when we thought about which organization to back up, we found that just backing up one organization would be a bad idea. Supporting, cheerleading just [one group] against other Shan groups, [this is] what we've done in the past. It wouldn't be a wise thing to do when we are thinking about unity. We want to be a neutral ground where every group can meet. (Khuensai Jaiyen, personal communication, June 28, 2000)

Khuensai Jaiyen added that when they'd begun thinking in this way, they found that people saw them as more credible, "even more than other political organizations, because we are independent" (personal communication, June 28, 2000). Nevertheless, he described the process of change as difficult, involving "several reorientations" during several years, including workshops with local nongovernmental organizations interested in journalism (personal communication, June 28, 2000).

The source of legitimacy has begun to shift for some media from a dependence on political leaders to a focus on the organization's credibility with the people at "the grassroots." When asked, most journalists say it is in fact to increase the trust of their readers that they need to remain "objective" and unbiased in their reporting. *Unity* has thus begun to take on a very different meaning for these groups, defined as an apolitical stance that allows every group a voice. This kind of unity, which I have heard referred to as "unity in diversity," requires the inclusion of dissenting voices and the ability to criticize political groups and leaders. It requires journalists to attend first and foremost to the needs of the audience, and to work to build their trust. "I am a journalist, not a nationalist," Nai Taing Taw told me; "I could be a nationalist, but when I write the news, I'm a journalist" (personal communication, August 6, 2005).

Many journalists from Burma in exile in Thailand describe their status as professionals as a work in progress; however, they also link professionalism with qualities that they believe will help to reduce political violence by the Burmese regime and opposition political groups, in large part through increasing the level of transparency. Nai Kasauh Mon explained that his professional training gave him the courage to ask leaders critical questions and to urge them to call a press conference if they have information rather than trying to pressure individual journalists to promote their causes (personal communication, August 6, 2005). Nai Taing Taw described how the Mon news groups have worked to reduce fighting between opposition groups. "We can expose what they are doing to each other. We can prevent this. . . . They cannot do the bad things because we can criticize them through media" (personal communication, August 6, 2005). Naw Din describes similar work by the Kachin News Group and maintains that "if the Kachin people know that [information], then they have the power to criticize Kachin leaders, and they can advise them what to do" (personal communication, July 29, 2005). This, he hopes, will reduce people's fear.

Most of the Kachin people are afraid to tell the true story to other people. That is psychologically a problem, because of the war. In the past, if we say something wrong,

KIO can kill a person. One mistake, they kill you or put you in jail. . . . So that's why we have a great ambition, to write more of the true stories about the Kachin. (personal communication, July 29, 2005)

With increased attention to the needs of their audiences, Burmese opposition media, especially those targeted toward minority ethnic populations, have become concerned about how their messages reinforce not only fear but also victimization.

People are already scared. There is fear. You have to tell them to do something. Courage! Create the stories to have more courage, not to tell people about the scary, scary army unit that came to [a village], killed all the people, raped all the women. That's also very depressing. I think we've got to change. (Aung Zaw, personal communication, April 18, 2000)

An article in *Burma Issues*, an opposition publication focused on grassroots organizing, points out how rarely the nature of conventional reporting is critically examined (Miller, 2002). The article notes that documentation of abuses, when stripped of contextual data including the cultural and economic realities of the situation, "becomes universal and quantitative in nature," leading to a devaluation of other aspects of villagers' lives, including the ways in which they are active agents rather than passive victims (Miller, 2002, p. 2). The article maintains that the social and psychological side effects of this process are rarely acknowledged but suggests that to avoid these negative consequences, each incident of abuse should be contextualized so that marginalized people are recognized by others as effective participants in their own lives.

It is perhaps not surprising that those labeled primarily as victims have begun to express dissatisfaction with the emphasis on human rights abuses and other bad news. Saw Thaw Thi, editor of *Kway K'Lu*, for example, admitted that readers have complained that the news is all bad, and that this makes them feel lonely and depressed (personal communication, July 24, 2000). Nai Kasauh Mon of the IMNA has also responded to readers' complaints and explained that although IMNA's publications still contain news about human rights abuses,

we put [in] more encouraging news about Mon literature and culture. How many thousands of students have completed the dry season Mon literature training, for example. So that gives the people some good news about our successes, and that gives them some motivation. (personal communication, August 6, 2005)

Several journalists told me about how they are trying to make their publications more positive by reducing their dependence on political news and including more good news and news about sports events, traditional cultural ceremonies, profiles of local people, and so on.

Concluding Thoughts

Although the journalists I spoke with were in large part pleased to have access to training in journalism by Internews and other nongovernmental organizations, many felt that some of the expectations of the dominant U.S. approach to "objective" journalism do not work well given the political violence characterizing the local context. This is especially true for ethnic minority media based close to areas of conflict. Although the larger, more professional media such as *The Irrawaddy* perhaps most closely fit the model of objective journalism, their need for news from the ethnic minority areas of Burma means that they rely on the ethnic media for information, as these groups have physical access and knowledge of the local languages not available elsewhere. Because of this, ethnic minority journalists call for recognition by journalism trainers to the personal security issues facing journalists and their sources, who often cannot be named, and to recognize how their need to maintain relationships with local political leaders, for example, has an impact on all opposition and/or independent media.

Burmese opposition journalists also recognize the relationship of the dominant professional model with a capitalist economy and question its relevance in a context of violence. Nai Taing Taw admitted that one of his motives for providing objective reporting on the Mon was that the Mon people overseas rely on the Kao Wao website for news and, because of this, are willing to support the group financially. However, he questioned how his group's financial independence through advertising, a topic in his journalism training, would even be conceivable in the current context (personal communication, August 6, 2005). As Khaing Mar Kyaw Zaw of the Karen Information Center put it, "When the media say they are independent, their objective is to gain people's trust, to be able to sell their news more and to be number one in fame" (personal communication, July 15, 2005). Yet her training and her own work have convinced her of the need for a journalistic ethic that transcends the realities of this normative model as it is often practiced, including in the United States. "As a journalist, you shouldn't look to the government, businessmen, or organizations. You have to focus on giving true information to your readers only" (personal communication, July 15, 2005).

Local journalists also recognize the impossibility of complete independence in the contexts in which they work, even among the most professional media, and the need for seeing the U.S. ideology of objective, independent journalism as an ideal toward which to aspire rather than a standard against which to be judged. Yet, as Josephi (2005) argued, if journalism's "normative aspect is seen as its legitimization and yardstick for performance," then journalism in practice will always be "measured against what ought to be rather than what is, thus depriving the inherently inferior practice of a chance to influence the so-called professional model practice" (p. 576). The practices of these local journalists have arisen directly from their working environments and practical needs. The desire to reduce dependence on negative

political news in favor of more local news and more celebrations of success, for example, has more in common with peace journalism than with the dominant U.S. model of “objective” journalism emphasized in their journalism training. All of this suggests the need for additional attention to how practice might better inform the development of a more contextualized, relevant model for journalism in such complex, conflictual, and developing media contexts.

Notes

1. The country’s name has taken on especially political connotations since 1989, when the military regime changed the name to the *Union of Myanmar*. Although the government claimed the new name is ethnically neutral and promotes national unity, the opposition movement opposed the name change, made without consulting the people. *Burma* has been the term preferred by the opposition. Although the United Nations (UN) has accepted the name change, the U.S. government has not, and the terms have become an indicator of one’s political position in the struggle for control over the country. Because this article focuses on the opposition movement, the term *Burma* will be used here. The term *Burman* is used to refer to the ethnic majority of the country, whereas *Burmese* is used as an adjective to refer to the language and the country’s various peoples. Thus, an ethnic Karen, for example, is Karen and one of the Burmese peoples.

2. The civil war between the Burmese government and the Karen National Union (KNU) has been ongoing since 1948.

3. The number of people killed in 1988 is unknown; however, according to reports published in the London *Times* and *The Guardian*, between 2,000 and 3,000 people were killed by riot police from the 8th to the 13th of August, 1988 (cited in Kraeger, 1991, p. 332). Estimates of the total killed during 3 months of unrest range as high as 10,000 people, including thousands of monks (Smith, 1999).

4. Since independence, “an average of ten thousand deaths a year due to insurrection may well be an accurate figure,” according to Burma scholar Martin Smith (1995, p. 225).

5. By the 1980s, all of the major ethnic groups had some element of their population in revolt (Steinberg, 2001), and antigovernment student groups and political parties have shown a tendency to expel members expressing minority viewpoints or “to fragment around leaders of uncompromising positions” (Callahan, 1998, p. 64).

6. For extensive documentation of human rights abuses in Burma, see reports from the U.S. State Department (www.state.gov/g/drl/hr/c1470.htm), Amnesty International (<http://web.amnesty.org/library/eng-mmr/index>), Human Rights Watch (<http://hrw.org/doc?t=asia&c=burma>), and the Online Burma Library (www.burmalibrary.org/index.php).

7. This approach, it is ironic to note, has come to resemble development journalism, which has historically been dismissed in the United States as a means by which totalitarian regimes keep their hold on power (Napoli, 2000).

8. Although some Burmese media groups dislike being labeled “opposition media,” preferring instead to be called “independent media,” there is clearly debate over the very possibility of independence in the Burmese context. It is true, however, that all of the media groups are independent of the Burmese military regime. It is also true that all these groups have in common their opposition to the regime. Recognizing the limitations of these terms, I nevertheless use them interchangeably here, for lack of a better option.

9. After heated debate among opposition groups about the role of the government-in-exile, the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma (NCGUB), in the operation of the station, the Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB) staff was promised independence in its operations. The only requirement was that the station continue opening each broadcast with the statement, “This is the Democratic Voice of Burma of the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma.” This compromise allowed the NCGUB to remind people in Burma every day of its continuing opposition to the military regime, while giving the DVB editorial control (Khin Maung Win, personal communication, August 23, 2000).

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