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**The Impact of Censorship on the Development of the Private
Press Industry in Myanmar/Burma**

by Kyaw Thu

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Information on the use of country name

The use of the country name of Myanmar has been controversial among the international community since the military government changed the names of the country and cities in 1988. From that point on, Burma officially became Myanmar and Rangoon became Yangon. In this paper, I will use Burma when I refer to the period before the junta changed the name and use Myanmar for the later period.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

In October 2008, the Myanmar censorship board suspended the publication of *True News* weekly journal for two months as the journal had violated the censorship rules.

The censorship board, also known as the Press Security and Registration Board (PSRD), penalized the journal for publishing a photo of child labour on its front-page and failing to submit adequate information prior to publication.

The suspension was a big loss for the journal that had been launched a month previously. It forced the journal to reorganize its editorial team and persuade its staff not to leave the paper. The most unfortunate effect was that the journal lost the bulk of its readership.

Myanmar is one of the most highly censored countries in the world and it is not unusual for private publications to face punishments such as the one experienced by *True News*. Because of the strict nature of the censorship policy in Myanmar, private papers have to take extra care not to break the rules.

In the authoritarian context, the rulers view the press as a servant of the state and the press is completely dominated by the state, whereas in the context of Libertarian theory the press is viewed as an independent institution that informs and entertains the general public, discovers the truth, promotes democracy and performs the role of watchdog of government accountability¹.

The Myanmar government, like other authoritarian regimes, heavily censors publications and penalizes the private press if they violate the censorship policy. Private newspapers in Myanmar are either directly or indirectly affected by the government censorship policy.

An interest group called the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) has described the censorship process in Myanmar as 'arbitrary, intensive, and highly restrictive'². Since publications are still facing suspension and closure orders, publishing a newspaper in Myanmar is considered to be a risky business.

¹ Ernest Zhang & Kenneth Fleming (2005): "Examination of Characteristics of News Media under Censorship: A Content Analysis of Selected Chinese Newspapers' SARS Coverage", *Asian Journal of Communication*, 15:3.

² Shawn W. Crispin, "In Burma, transition neglects press freedom", Committee to Protect Journalists, 20 September 2011 (<http://www.cpj.org/reports/2011/09/in-burma-transition-neglects-press-freedom.php>)

In addition, journalists who are associated with exiled media groups are targeted and arrested by the regime and given long prison terms. In September 2011, the nominally-civilian government gave a ten-year prison sentence to twenty-one year old Sithu Zeya who was working for the exiled media group Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB), based in Norway³.

According to a CPJ 2011 Special Report, Myanmar ranked among the ‘world’s five worst jailers of the press for four consecutive years’⁴. CPJ said at least fourteen journalists and media support workers were in prisons across the country as of September 2011, while the independent media freedom monitoring group, Reporters Without Borders, reported that seventeen journalists and three netizens were behind bars as of 2011⁵.

The CPJ report said, “Journalists are typically charged with violating the country’s censorship laws, among the strictest in the world, or engaging in “anti-state” activities such as disseminating information to the outside world”⁶.

Reporters Without Borders’ Press Freedom Index 2010 stated that Myanmar is one of the world’s most repressive countries, together with Iran, North Korea and Syria, toward the press and journalists.

It put Myanmar at 174 out of 178 in its annual Press Freedom Index as the government imposed strict censorship rules on the press, restricted the freedom of journalists to report and detained journalists.

Fortunately, True News has survived although it faced one of the most severe punishments in PSRD history. However, *The Action Times* journal that was banned for a month at the same time never appeared in the market again. In *Action Times*’ case, the journal was suspended for ‘modification of the approved version’ when it was published⁷.

According to journalists interviewed, the suspension of *The Action Times* for a month so financially threatened the journal that it was forced to close.

With a population of over fifty-eight million⁸ and total adult literacy rate of 92%⁹, the press industry in Myanmar has a lot of potential to expand its market.

³ “Enough is Enough: DVB VJ given an additional 10 years in jail”, Free Burma VJ, 14 September 2011 (<http://www.freeburmavj.org/news-and-report/enough-enough-dvb-vj-given-additional-10-years-jail>)

⁴ “Imprisoned Journalists in Burma”, Committee to Protect Journalists, 20 September 2011 (<http://www.cpj.org/reports/2011/09/imprisoned-journalists-in-burma.php>)

⁵ “Many news sites unblocked, but 17 journalists and 3 netizens still held”, Reporters Without Borders, 20 September 2011 (http://en.rsf.org/burma-many-news-websites-unblocked-but-20-09-2011_41021.html)

⁶ “Imprisoned Journalists in Burma”, Committee to Protect Journalists, 20 September 2011 (<http://www.cpj.org/reports/2011/09/imprisoned-journalists-in-burma.php>)

⁷ “Weekly journal suspended for one month by censor board, another weekly faces two-month suspension”, International Freedom of Expression Exchange, 2 October 2008 (http://www.ifex.org/burma/2008/10/02/weekly_journal_suspended_for_one/)

⁸ Khin Myat, “Elderly need help, welfare experts say”. Myanmar Times, 19 – 25 October 2009, (<http://www.mmmtimes.com/no493/n013.htm>)

A report released by Reporters Without Borders in 2010 said Myanmar's people are 'big media consumers'. The report was based on a poll of 2,950 people across the country who were asked how the public get their news. The report said the rate of reading print media in Myanmar (36 %) is 'high for a developing country'.

Although the press industry in Myanmar has the potential to expand its market, many scholars, rights groups and media professionals claim that the development of press industry is hindered by the strict censorship policy.

Nwe Nwe Aye (2010: 56) claimed that "the circulation of state-owned daily newspapers and private owned weekly journals combined remains relatively low compared to countries in the region". For example, whereas Thailand with a population of sixty-five million published 3 million copies per day in 2007, Myanmar with fifty-four million people published only 400,000 copies a day in 2005. The Press Freedom Index shows that Thai media enjoys more media freedom than their counterparts in Myanmar.

Critics claim that censorship undermines journalistic work and the development of private press industry as a whole. They say that media in an authoritarian context can neither assume a watchdog role nor promote democracy.

1.1 Rationale of the study

The aim of the study is to assess the impact of censorship on the private press industry and journalistic work in Myanmar. While the study will include discussion of the potential for more media freedom under the new government, it mainly focuses on the media under the military government from 1988-2010.

This report is based on surveys and in-depth interviews with journalists, publishers and executives from newspapers, journals and publishing houses in Myanmar. The survey was carried out from August to September 2011, including 77 journalists who represent over 10 private publications in Myanmar. In addition, in-depth interviews with publishers were also included to study the impact of censorship on the business of private newspapers. The interviews with publishers and experts were conducted via emails and personal meetings throughout my fellowship period from October 2011 to March 2012.

They were asked questions regarding censorship and how it impacts on their reporting and creativity, as well as on the business of the newspapers. The study focuses on Myanmar's two biggest cities Yangon and Mandalay, which are home to most of the media companies in the country. In addition, the study also included journalists in Nay Pyi Taw, the new capital city where government ministries are located.

⁹ UNICEF, Statistics on the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, (http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/myanmar_statistics.html)

The paper tries to answer two key questions:

1. What has been the impact of censorship on journalistic work and the quality of newspaper publishing?
2. What has been the impact of censorship on the private press industry?

1.2 Organization of the paper

This paper has been organized into five parts. Chapter 1 includes an introduction that describes censorship in Myanmar and the rationale behind the research study.

Chapters 2 will emphasize the history of censorship, why governments use censorship and how it evolves. In addition, a comparative study of the censorship of authoritarian states such as Zimbabwe, Syria, and Vietnam will be presented.

Chapter 3 includes a brief history of print news media in Myanmar. This part will focus on the period after independence and up to the present day. Because the British introduced the newspaper to Myanmar, a brief background of colonial rule in Myanmar will also be included to explain the history of the press industry in Myanmar. In addition, newspaper history will be presented in order to compare the newspaper industry in the colonial period, after independence, under the socialist regime and most recently, under the military government.

Chapter 4 contains the major part of this study, covering the impact of censorship on journalistic work and the production of quality newspapers. Moreover, it closely looks into the relationship between the development of the private press industry and censorship.

Surveys and in-depth interviews with nearly 80 reporters and editors will be included to assess the impact of censorship on journalistic works and publishing quality newspapers.

Interviews with ten publishers and media executives will be described in order to assess the impact of censorship on newspaper businesses. This section also explores the censorship's impact on revenue, readership and brand image of the newspaper. In addition, this chapter will look at the prospect of media freedom and market potential.

Chapter 5 is the conclusion of the report. This chapter will present major findings and give recommendations based on the findings.

Chapter 2

Comparative Study

2.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I will mainly explain the historical background of censorship and the motives behind it. In addition, I will also explore what kind of system and tools are used by governments in order to control the media in today's globalized world. A comparative study of media censorship and media systems between authoritarian states such as Zimbabwe, Syria, Vietnam and Myanmar will also be presented.

2.2 History of censorship

Media censorship, which is repeatedly condemned by rights groups, is not an unusual phenomenon in the world. It has its roots in ancient times when rulers and religious leaders imposed restrictions on the press in order to block the spread of information that they deemed to challenge their power base and belief system.

Censorship has been widely used throughout the history by kings, religious organizations, governments and communities. Regardless of the differences of geographical location, religion, culture and tradition, the motive for the censorship was unchanged from one region to another.

Caso (2008:12) asserts that censorship is an abuse of powers "to forbid speech, writing, and images they considered a threat to their authority or contrary to divine law"¹⁰.

The earliest form of censorship practice can be found in ancient Greek and Roman empires and in ancient China. Prominent philosophers like Socrates (469-399 BC) and Galileo Galilei (1564-1642) were considered as some of the earliest victims of censorship in Europe. Both men were punished by the rulers and religious leaders for challenging the established power base and belief system.

In China, Emperor Qin in 213 B.C ordered the burning of books as he wanted to unify the country's belief system and rewrite his own history¹¹. According to Newth (2010), censorship in China "was considered a legitimate instrument for regulating the moral and political life of the population"¹².

¹⁰ Frank Caso, *Censorship*, Facts on File, Global Issues. June 2008

¹¹ Ibid

¹² Mette Newth, "The long history of censorship" Beacon for Freedom, 2010, (http://www.beaconforfreedom.org/liste.html?tid=415&art_id=475)

However, flourishing democratic systems and respect for the human rights in Western hemispheres in the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries gave great opportunity for freedom of the press and a diminished role of censorship in the regions.

Several bills such as the English Bill of Rights (1689) and The Virginia Constitution (1776) guaranteed freedom of speech and press¹³. In addition, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1948, guaranteed freedom of opinion and expression.

Although freedom of the press is taken for granted in democratic societies nowadays, the media under authoritarian regimes is still wrestling with the rules and regulations imposed upon it. Countries under totalitarian rule are still fighting for freedom of the press and freedom of expression.

Despite the progress in rights and freedoms that have been made in the past decades, most countries across the globe still make use of censorship motives and techniques which were applied in the past. According to Caso¹⁴, there are three basic reasons for censorship that have been used by the rulers throughout recorded history to consolidate their power and justify their actions. These are retention of political power, upholding of theological dogma, and maintaining community standards.

Among these three reasons, retention of political power or political censorship is often practiced by governments and rulers in order to block criticisms of their rule and to silence the voices of dissent¹⁵.

2.3 Systems for media control in different countries

Rulers throughout history have used various methods to implement censorship and control the press. Today, it has extended to broadcast media and the internet. The most common ways of controlling the media are licensing and enacting laws which seriously undermine the freedom of the press.

Countries like Syria, Zimbabwe and Vietnam have laws and regulations that effectively limit the freedom of press and impose severe restrictions on journalists. Freedom House, an international human rights group, designates these countries as ‘not free’ as the governments impose several restrictions on the press and journalists.

For example, in Syria, the 1963 State of Emergency law that allows the authorities to arrest journalists and suppress the newspapers is still in place¹⁶. Despite the fact that the

¹³ Frank Caso, *Censorship*, Facts on File, Global Issues. June 2008, p. ix.

¹⁴ Frank Caso, *Censorship*, Facts on File, Global Issues. June 2008

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Freedom House, “Freedom of the Press 2011 – Syria”, 2011.
(<http://www.freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2011/syria>)

Syria Constitution guarantees freedom of the press and speech, journalists never have a chance to exercise their rights and are arrested by the authorities¹⁷.

Akram al-Bunni (2008:100) said that the Syria 2001 Press Law ‘tightens the legal restrictions on form of expression’ and was ‘tailored to the interests of the ruling elite’. Those who violate the Press Law can be imprisoned for one to three years and fined from 500,000 to 1 million Syrian pounds (\$10,000 to \$20,000)¹⁸.

In the case of Zimbabwe, the constitution itself has conflicting statements about freedom of expression and freedom to receive and impart ideas and information without interference. Whereas Article 20 of the constitution guarantees freedom of speech and expression, its subsection states that “freedom of expression can be limited or even revoked entirely for reasons of morality or to maintain public safety and order”.¹⁹ (Caso 2008: 238).

Furthermore, the Information and Protection of Privacy Act (AIPPA), the Public Order and Security Act (POSA) and the Censorship and Entertainments Control Act impose huge restrictions and a tightening grip on the media industry²⁰. Several journalists and media companies have been victims of these laws²¹.

As in Syria and Zimbabwe, the communist government in Vietnam enforces laws and regulations to restrict the work of journalists and media industry. Vietnam ranks 165 out of 178 in Reporter Without Border’s Press Freedom Index 2010. Nguyen (2010:1) stated that training departments under the ruling Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) ‘control all media and set press guidelines’.

Similar to Syria and Zimbabwe, the Vietnam Constitution of 1992 acknowledges the right to the freedom of expression²². But laws such as defamation laws and the criminal code forbid the voice of opposition. These laws have been used to throw several journalists and bloggers behind bars²³.

Control of the media in Myanmar is not much different from countries like Syria, Zimbabwe and Vietnam. The Myanmar government has also used the same mechanisms and legal tools to prohibit freedom of the press and expression.

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ [Ibid.](#)

¹⁹ Frank Caso, *Censorship*, Facts on File, Global Issues. June 2008

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Wacuka Mungai, “Zimbabwe Special Report: On a Rampage”, Committee to Protect Journalists, 11 July 2002. (<http://cpj.org/reports/2002/07/zim-july02.php>)

²² Karin Deutsch Karlekar, “Press Freedom in 2010: Signs of change amid repression”, Freedom House, 2011. (<http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=251&year=2011>)

²³ “CALL FOR SUPPORT FOR VIETNAMESE BLOGGER BEHIND BARS FOR MORE THAN TWO YEARS”, Reporters Without Borders, 19 November 2011. (http://en.rsf.org/vietnam-call-for-support-for-vietnamese-19-11-2011_41422.html)

Numerous laws such as the Printers and Publishers Registration Law of 1962, the 1975 State Protection Law (The Law to Safeguard the State Against the Dangers of Those Desiring to Cause Subversive Acts), and the Internet Law (2000) prohibit the freedom of the press and restrict journalists.

Unlike the countries mentioned above, Myanmar had no constitution at the time of military rule from 1988-2010. Therefore, there was no constitutional framework that granted freedom of the press and expression. In addition, the country lacked a functioning parliament that could scrutinize the work of the military government and pass laws.

While the countries use similar techniques to control the press, the media system in Myanmar does have areas of difference when compared to the case of Vietnam and Zimbabwe. As stated by Nguyen (2010)²⁴, there is no private media establishment in communist Vietnam and all the media outlets are under the Communist Party that rules the country. He also asserted that the party directly intervened in the editorial policy of the TV, radio and newspapers. The editors at all media outlets are required to attend a weekly editorial meeting organized by the party's Propaganda and Education Department.

Contrary to communist Vietnam, in Mugabe's Zimbabwe the newspaper outlets are privately owned and relatively independent from the government. There are a few privately owned newspapers, published daily and weekly. Private newspapers such as NewsDay, Standard and Zimbabwe Independent enjoy autonomy from government intervention²⁵.

The Myanmar media system is somewhere between Vietnam, where the Communist Party controls all the media outlets, and Zimbabwe where the government gives some freedom to the newspapers and private newspaper ownership is allowed.

Although the Myanmar government allows private ownership of newspapers, there are no privately-owned daily newspapers as the government-institutionalized prior-censorship system prevents the publication of daily newspapers.

However, the new constitution that was approved by the majority of eligible voters in a nationwide referendum held in May 2008 granted freedom of the press and expression²⁶. In spite of this, it is too early to say whether the new government that came into power after the general election in November 2010 will fully comply with the constitution.

²⁴ Giang Nguyen, "Media Landscape in Vietnam", 2010.
(<http://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/resources/media-landscapes.html>)

²⁵ Andrew Meldrum, "Freedom of the Press in Zimbabwe", *Pressing Change*, The Harvard International Review, 22 December 2010. (<http://hir.harvard.edu/pressing-change/freedom-of-press-in-zimbabwe?page=0,1>)

²⁶ Seth Mydans, "Constitutional referendum still the priority for Myanmar leaders," (<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/09/world/asia/09iht-myanmar.4.12747427.html>)

During the interview with the AFP news agency in December 2011, Than Htut Aung, chairman of Eleven Media Group, said that the private press was still facing restrictions in reporting. "We have not won the right to express different political views yet. We cannot report the voices of families of political prisoners in detail, or discuss the release of political prisoners," he said²⁷.

²⁷ Kelly Macnamara, "Myanmar's muted press strives for a louder voice", AFP, 12 December 2011. (<http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5ioWclPeB3IW5HPiu9ip5h-cPNdQ?docId=CNG.8ad19815029ca4669be532e8366eb5c8.3a1>)

Chapter 3

Brief History of Myanmar/Burma

3.1 Introduction

This chapter aims to explain the historical background of Myanmar (Burma). It briefly describes Myanmar (Burma) under successive governments and administrations. This chapter also tells the history of the press in Myanmar (Burma) and how it has evolved from colonial days to the present time.

3.2 Myanmar/Burma under British rule and the socialist government

Myanmar, formerly known as Burma, is home to over fifty-eight million people. It is located in mainland Southeast Asia and has diverse ethnic groups. Myanmar shares borders with China, India, Bangladesh, Thailand and Laos.

The total area of the country is about 677,000 square kilometers, over two times larger than the United Kingdom's 243,610 square kilometers. The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) report said about 31% of the population lived in urban areas and the remaining 69 % in rural regions in 2007²⁸.

Burma was occupied by the British who waged three wars with successive Burmese Kings to capture the whole country. War with the British ended in 1885 when the last King of Burma was arrested and sent to British-occupied India.

Decades of British occupation were interrupted by the Japanese invasion of Burma during World War II. The country gained independence from Britain in 1948 when democracy flourished in Burma.

Burma briefly practiced a democratic system of government from 1948 to 1962, a period many older Burmese recalled as the best period in the history of modern Burma²⁹.

However, conflicts between members of the ruling Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League (AFPFL) party, and the revolts of communist and ethnic groups had weakened the newly independent country.

Citing the need to safeguard the union from disintegration, military leader General Ne Win staged a coup in March 1962 and overthrew the democratically elected civilian government led by Prime Minister U Nu.³⁰

²⁸ UNFPA 'Country Report on 2007 Fertility and Reproductive Health Survey', UNFPA, 2009

²⁹ The military briefly took control of the country as a 'caretaker government' between 1958-1960.

³⁰ Robert H Taylor, *The State in Myanmar*, University of Hawaii Press, 2009.

As soon as it took control of the country, the military announced that it would follow the 'Burma Way to Socialism' and formed the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP)³¹.

The socialist government nationalized businesses, newspapers, banks, factories, and imposed huge restriction on trade. It also declared all political parties illegal and co-opted the civil societies.

Burma under General Ne Win can be compared with Indonesia under Sukarno who also nationalized private businesses and turned the country into state owned enterprises.

Prawiro (1988: 236) claimed that nationalization in Indonesia turned "tax revenue-providers to subsidy-absorbers"³² as decline in export earnings, due to decreasing production, could not finance the nationalized state enterprises.

Similarly, unprofitable state-owned enterprises became a financial burden for the BSPP government when rice exports, which were the major foreign currency earner, declined. Corruption was widespread and state-owned enterprises were barely viable.

Burma had been the largest rice exporter in the world before World War II but it lost its status under the BSPP. Party Chairman General Ne Win acknowledged that the once-largest rice exporter could barely feed its own people³³.

The frustrations of the general population were fuelled by a disastrous demonetization of the local currency (kyats) in 1987, with no compensation given for the public's losses. This in turn led to demonstrations in 1988 (also known as 8.8.88) and the end of the BSPP rule.

3.3 Myanmar under military rule (1988-2010)

The military government, known as the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), came into power after it crushed the nationwide demonstrations. A general election was held in 1990, which the National League for Democracy (NLD) led by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi won in a landslide victory.

The 1990 elections were not for "governing parliament, but to a Constituent Assembly"³⁴. According to Network Myanmar, a non-governmental organization, the 1990 election was to elect the candidates who would be drafting the constitution. The

³¹ Ibid

³² Prawiro, 'Indonesia's Struggle for Economic Development, Pragmatism in Action', Penerbit Fajar Bakti Sdn. Oxford University Press, Malaysia, 1998.

³³ David Steinberg, *Burma/Myanmar: What Everyone Needs to Know*, Oxford University Press, 2010.

³⁴ Network Myanmar, "The May 1990 Elections", 29 February 2012.
(<http://networkmyanmar.com/political-mythology>)

network states that “a national referendum was to be held and then proceed to a second election based on the new constitution, if approved”³⁵.

The NLD won most of the seats in the election but walked-out from the national convention that was to draft the constitution. Diller (1996) said the junta tried “to sidestep the mandate of the 1990 elections in which the people expressed their will for a civilian democratic government”³⁶. In addition, the SLORC arrested the elected candidates and expelled them from the national convention.

In other words, the SLORC did not want to acknowledge the NLD victory and imposed restrictions on the party. The SLORC later changed its name to the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) in 1997. The junta then changed the country name from Burma to Myanmar.

The SPDC initiated economic reform and tried to reach ceasefire agreements with armed ethnic groups, which were located mostly in border areas. In addition, it introduced a market-oriented economic system and introduced a Foreign Direct Investment Law in 1988 to attract FDI.

Between 1989 and 2005, Myanmar received US\$ 13,815.86 million of foreign investment in electricity production, oil and gas, manufacturing, mining, hotel and tourism and real estate development (Kudo and Mieno: 2009)³⁷. In addition, total trade volume sharply increased from US\$ 415 million in the 1989-90 financial year to US\$5.5 billion in 2005-2006³⁸.

Myanmar under military rule saw the establishment of several regional groupings such as Greater Mekong Sub-Region Economic Cooperation Organization in 1992; the Association of Southeast Asia Nations (ASEAN) in 1997, and the Irrawaddy Chao Phraya Mekong Economic Strategy Group in 2003³⁹.

Though the junta initiated several reforms, it also imposed constraints on media, civil society and groups that worked for democratization and advocated for good governance. Oppression of opposition groups, politicians and media was widespread.

Hundreds of candidates elected in the 1990 election, as well as student leaders and media personnel who opposed the junta, were arrested. Leading student leaders such as Min Ko

³⁵ [Ibid.](#)

³⁶ Janelle M. Diller, “An Impediment to the Restoration of Democracy”, 1996 (<http://www.ibiblio.org/obl/docs/LHR-Diller3.html>)

³⁷ Koichi Fujita, Fumiharu Mieno and Ikuko Okamoto, Editors, “*the economic transition in Myanmar after 1988*,” NUS Press, National University of Singapore, 2009

³⁸ Tin Maung Maung Than, Editors Daljit Singh and Lorraine C Salazar, “*Myanmar’s foreign trade under military rule, patterns and recent trends*,” Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore, 2007

³⁹ David Steinberg, *Burma/Myanmar: What Everyone Needs to Know*, Oxford University Press, 2010.

Naing and Ko Ko Gyi were among them, due to their involvement in the 2007 Saffron revolution⁴⁰.

Several human rights groups, such as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch Group and Freedom House criticized the government for its poor human rights record, arbitrary arrests and restriction of freedom of speech and the media.

Despite the increase in revenue from trade and foreign investment, per capita income of the general population is quite low compared with ASEAN member countries that have similar sized economies.

Asian Development Bank figures from 2006 indicated that Gross National Income (GNI) per capita in Myanmar was \$281, while in Cambodia it was \$490 and in Laos \$500 (ADB:2006)⁴¹. Myanmar also received less Official Development Assistance (ODA) compared with other countries in the region⁴².

Myanmar appeared on the international stage again when Cyclone Nargis struck the country in May 2008, leaving over 140,000 dead⁴³. Although devastation from the cyclone was massive and there was widespread criticism of the junta's handling of the crisis, the government still held a referendum on the controversial constitution⁴⁴.

As planned, the SPDC held a general election, the first time in 20 years, on November 7, 2010. Nobel Peace Prize laureate Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and other leading political figures were prevented from running for the seats, as electoral law did not allow a convicted person to stand for a seat. Critics claimed that the electoral law was designed to block her, as she was under house arrest at that time.

According to *Network Myanmar*, the electoral law did not prevent her standing for election as she was not under house arrest, but under 'restrictive residence'. However, the group said the junta might have other excuses to debar her from the election⁴⁵.

The NLD responded by boycotting the election, which was believed to favour the pro-government Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP). As expected, the USDP won a landslide victory and secured over 75% of the seats⁴⁶.

⁴⁰ Phanida, "Min Ko Naing & '88 generation students' given 65 years", Mizzima 15 November 2008. (<http://www.mizzima.com/news/inside-burma/1307-min-ko-naing-a-88-generation-students-given-65-years.html>)

⁴¹ Asian Development Bank (ADB) "ADB Annual Report 2006" (<http://beta.adb.org/documents/adb-annual-report-2006>)

⁴² Kyaw Thu, "Development increasing, but slowly: UNDP," (<http://www.mmtimes.com/no496/n014.htm>)

⁴³ "FACTBOX: Key facts about Cyclone Nargis", Reuters, 30 April, 2009. (<http://www.reuters.com/article/2009/04/30/idUSSP420097>)

⁴⁴ Larry Jagan, "Junta Gives Referendum Priority Over Cyclone Relief", IPS News, May 8, 2008. (<http://www.ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=42284>)

⁴⁵ Ibid

3.4 Myanmar after the election

A new civilian government came into power in March 2011, when the SPDC that ruled the country for over 20 years was formally disbanded. U Thein Sein, a former general and prime minister in the previous government, was appointed as president.

U Thein Sein promised economic reforms, good governance and reduced poverty in the country soon after he was sworn in as president. Dialogue between the government and the opposition resumed again.

Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, also known as ‘the Lady’ was invited to Nay Pyi Taw to attend a state-sponsored workshop on ‘Rural Development and Poverty Alleviation’. She also met with the president for the first time in August 2011⁴⁷.

The government has taken on a series of reforms such as legalizing labor unions, relaxing restrictions on media, and the suspension of an unpopular hydropower project financed by China⁴⁸. In addition, the parliament passed a bill allowing for peaceful protests⁴⁹.

The president signed an amendment to the Political Party Registration Law that paved the way for the NLD to re-register and enter formal politics. The NLD, on November 18, 2011, announced that it would re-register the party and compete in by-elections. The Union Election Commission (EC) in January 2011 permitted NLD’s application for registration as a political party⁵⁰.

Opposition leader Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and her party won a landslide victory in the by-election that was held on April 1, 2012.

Myanmar was rewarded for such reforms by being offered the chair of the ASEAN regional bloc in 2014⁵¹. Furthermore, the U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton made a

⁴⁶ Ko Wild, “USDP wins 77pc of seats, Xinhua, not the UEC, says”, Mizzima, 19 November 2010. (<http://www.mizzima.com/news/election-2010-/4593-usdp-wins-77pc-of-seats-xinhua-not-the-uec-says.html>)

⁴⁷ IRIN, “Dramatic Developments in Burma but still many challenges ahead”, The Guardian, 11 November, 2011. (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/global-development/2011/nov/11/burma-dramatic-developments-challenges-ahead>)

⁴⁸ Jonathan Watts, “China angry over Burma's decision to suspend work on £2.3bn dam”, Guardian Newspaper, 4 October 2011. (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2011/oct/04/china-angry-burma-suspend-dam>)

⁴⁹ AFP, “Myanmar parliament passes protest bill”, AFP, Nov 23, 2011. (<http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5i1nCNCpaVjsJsnm0emY-ZAeYR8iw?docId=CNG.2d2d1a538fa4fdec530ea4bcd47d82d7.301>)

⁵⁰ SAI ZOM HSENG, “Burma Election Commission Allows NLD Registration,” Irrawaddy Magazine December 13, 2011. (http://www.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art_id=22643)

⁵¹ Kyaw Hsu Mon with AFP, “ASEAN nod ‘a victory for our country’, says adviser”, The Myanmar Times, 21 - 27, 2011(<http://mmtimes.com/2011/news/602/news60205.html>)

historic visit to Myanmar at the end of November 2011. Her trip made her the first U.S. senior official to visit Myanmar in 50 years.

According a New York Times report, the U.S will ease “some restrictions on international financial assistance and development programs in Myanmar, in response to a nascent political and economic opening up in the country”⁵².

Hillary Clinton’s trip was followed by the British Foreign Secretary William Hague and many other high ranking officials from Western countries in an effort to urge the government to speed up the reform.

The government made a surprise move by releasing political prisoners and journalists in January 13 2012, when prominent student leaders such as Min Ko Naing and Ko Ko Gyi were released. The government amnesty also pardoned former prime minister and head of military intelligence U Khin Nyunt from house arrest⁵³.

In a response to the release of the political prisoners, the United States on the same day announced it would send an ambassador to Myanmar to normalize the diplomatic relations between the two countries. The U.S had recalled its ambassador from Myanmar in 1988, when the military oppressed the popular uprisings in the country. A Charge d’Affaires has headed the U.S. mission since then⁵⁴.

However, some critics have said the reform is superficial and the regime does not genuinely want to transform the country.

3.5 Background of the press industry in Burma

Newspapers were first introduced into Burma by the British in 1836, ten years after the first Anglo-Burma War (1824-1826), when the British occupied Tenasserim Division (now Tanintharyi Region) and Arakan (now Rakhine State).

Newly appointed Tenasserim Divisional Commissioner, E. A. Blundell, envisioned publishing newspapers both in English and Burmese language to disseminate information to the British-occupied territories and surrounding countries.

The very first newspaper in Burma was published in Maulmain (now Mawlamyine), Tenasserim Region that was under the British administration⁵⁵. The editor was Rev.

⁵² STEVEN LEE MYERS, “Clinton Says U.S. Will Relax Some Restrictions on Myanmar,” The New York Times, December 1, 2011. (<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/02/world/asia/us-will-relax-curbs-on-aid-to-myanmar.html>)

⁵³ BBC, “Burma frees high-profile dissidents in amnesty” 13 January 2012 (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-16540871>)

⁵⁴ Joby Warrick, “Clinton, citing thaw, says U.S. will send ambassador to Burma,” The Washington Post, January 14, 2012.(http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/clinton-citing-thaw-says-us-will-send-ambassador-to-burma/2012/01/13/gIQAEx1MwP_story.html)

⁵⁵ UPI U Ba Than, “History of Myanmar Journalism”, Papers on History of Journalism, Vol. 1, 1978.

Cephas Bennet, an American missionary who was a principal of the government school as well.

'The Maulmain Chronicle' was published on 3 March 1836. The newspapers were published weekly every Wednesday, in both English and Burmese language editions.

Blundell promised that the paper would be apolitical and only focus on less sensitive issues such as arrivals and departures of ships, government notifications and news from neighboring territories. "The price of the paper will be half-a-rupee to non-subscribers and one and a half rupees a month to subscribers," wrote Blundell in the announcement (Than 1978:22).

Although Blundell had high expectations of his paper, he had to close *The Maulmain Chronicle* as editor; Bennet was more interested in missionary work than working for the paper.

However, the paper reappeared in the market again in April 1837 when another missionary, George Henry Hough, was appointed as editor. In spite of limited subscribers, the paper did well due to the advertisements.

During that period, Maulmain was a growing trading post in Burma. About 2,500 foreign nationals lived in the city. Several newspapers emerged in Maulmain about five years after *The Maulmain Chronicle* was published.

After the Second Anglo-Burma War (1852-1853), many newspapers moved to Rangoon (now Yangon), where British government offices were relocated. The newspaper industry rapidly expanded to other cities when the whole of Lower Burma was under the British administration.

The Maulmain Chronicle, which was later renamed *'The Rangoon Chronicle'*, also moved to Rangoon. The paper became critical of the government and one of the editors was sentenced to one month in the prison⁵⁶.

Newspapers published in Rangoon and Maulmain gained the attention of the Burmese King in upper Burma. King Mindon was inspired by the *'The Burma Herald'* newspaper to publish a newspaper of his own in Mandalay City, the then capital of Upper Burma.

Thus, the *Yadanabone Naypyidaw Newspaper* was first published in Mandalay on March 20, 1875 with the investment of King Mindon. He promised freedom of the press and journalism, and the paper was given great autonomy. However, publication of the *Yadanabone Naypyidaw Newspaper* stopped after the British conquered Upper Burma in 1885.

⁵⁶ UPI U Ba Than, "History of Myanmar Journalism", Papers on History of Journalism Vol. 1, 1978.

Though there were some limitations, the newspaper industry continued to prosper under the British administration. Newspapers in the colonial period played a critical role in the struggle for independence and educating the public. Several journalists and editors, including independence architect General Aung San, (the Lady's father), had worked as an editor during the colonial period.

The press industry flourished after Burma won its independence in 1948. Over 100 newspapers were published in different languages from 1945 to 1968. Not only male journalists were prominent. Female journalists played an important role in the press industry. There were more than twenty women editors and publishers between 1919 and 1961⁵⁷.

Apart from English and Burmese language editions, newspapers in Chinese, Hindi and other ethnic languages were also published before the socialist government revoked publication licenses in 1966⁵⁸. Though the government in 1950s did not censor the press, the ministers sometimes arrested the journalists if they disliked their reporting.

Nevertheless, newspapers under the AFPF government enjoyed more freedom in 1950 than newspapers under the socialist government that came to power after the military coup d'état in 1962.

Burma's newspaper industry faced a critical situation when the socialist government took control of the country. Ironically, the government announced that newspapers must be nationalized in order to guarantee press freedom for working people⁵⁹.

Several prominent newspapers were nationalized and turned into propaganda papers. Newspapers that were not nationalized stopped publishing for several reasons. However, the Chairman of the BSPP, General Ne Win, granted some publication licenses to ex-politicians and veteran journalists in the 1970s⁶⁰.

The Printers and Publishers Registration Law of 1962, enacted soon after the Revolutionary Council seized power, required all the private newspapers and journals to get approval from the Press Scrutiny and Registration Division (PSRD) before publication.

Those who register dishonestly and published news and articles that were deemed to harm "ideology and views of the government and causing harm to the country" could be

⁵⁷ Daw Kyan, "History of Myanmar Journalism", Papers on History of Journalism Vol. 1, 1978

⁵⁸ UPI U Ba Than, "History of Myanmar Journalism", Papers on History of Journalism, Vol. 1, 1978.

⁵⁹ UPI U Ba Than, "History of Myanmar Journalism", Papers on History of Journalism Vol. 1 1978 Pg 72

⁶⁰ http://asiapacific.anu.edu.au/data/assets/mp3_file/0015/5190/Burma-Update-2011-Session-D.mp3

sentenced for seven years and/or face fines of 30,000 kyats⁶¹ (equivalent to US\$5,000 at the official exchange rate USD1= 6 Kyats⁶²) (Nwe Nwe Aye 2010: 132).

Moreover, several laws enacted after 1962 imposed huge restrictions on publishers and journalists. Laws such as the 1975 State Protection Law (The Law to Safeguard the State Against the Dangers of Those Desiring to Cause Subversive Acts), The Television and Video Act (1996), The Motion Picture Law (1996), The Computer Science Development Law (1996) and Internet Law (2000) effectively prohibited media freedom and blocked the creativity of journalists and media personnel⁶³.

Thitsar (2009: 89)⁶⁴ asserts that prior censorship process is “time consuming and wasted resources” as all the stakeholders involved in publications had to put in more energy and extra care.

3.6 Newspapers under military rule

The junta or SPDC which succeeded the socialist government in 1988, relaxed restrictions on the private press and granted publication licenses. A government-organized *Myanmar Printers and Publishers Association* was established in 1990 when the government permitted importing of essential raw materials such as paper and machines for press industry (Thitsar: 2009, Nwe Nwe Aye: 2010).

Nevertheless, private papers in the 1990s only covered less sensitive areas such as music, celebrity news, entertainment and sports.

U Pe Myint (2011) ⁶⁵ claims that the relaxation of the private press was due to the SPDC market-oriented policy which encouraged the establishment of private businesses. However, the publication licenses only went to politically corrupt individuals who were close to higher authorities, and government ministries that sought funding by publishing the papers or hiring out licences to private publishers (U Pe Myint: 2011).

An executive at a private journal that focused on business and general news said the journal had to pay 1,560,00 kyats (US\$2,000) a year for hiring a publishing licence from a licence owner who was close to the PSRD. “Generally, the lease period is two or three years. The contract can be renewed if both sides are OK,” he said.⁶⁶

⁶¹ Kyats U.S Dollar exchange rate in black-market today is US\$1=790 Kyats

⁶² Official exchange previously was USD1= 6 Kyats. However, Myanmar government floats currency on April 1, 2012, the exchange rate at present is USD 1 =815 Kyats

⁶³ http://www.irrawaddy.org/research_show.php?art_id=3534

⁶⁴ Thitsar, “A Study on the Potential Development of the Private Periodicals (Printed Media) Beyond 2010” Thesis for Executive Masters in Public Administration, 2009. Yangon Institute of Economic

⁶⁵ U Pe Myint, “Development of Weekly News Journals in Myanmar during the Last Two Decades,” Seminar at ANU 2011.
(http://asiapacific.anu.edu.au/data/assets/mp3_file/0015/5190/Burma-Update-2011-Session-D.mp3)

⁶⁶ Email interview with the executive at a media company on December 3, 2011.

Starting from 2000, the government has allowed several publication licences for news-focused journals or weekly newspapers. Today leading publications in Myanmar such as the *7 Days News Journal*, *The Myanmar Times*, *Kumudra (Modern)*, *Flower News* and *The Voice* emerged during that period.

Among them, *The Myanmar Times* was the first foreign investment in the Myanmar media industry. The paper was a joint venture between Australian national Mr. Ross Dunkley and his Burmese partner U Sonny Swe.

The English edition was published in 2000 and the Burmese language edition followed a year later. During the heyday of military intelligence (MI) in Myanmar, the paper enjoyed favoritism, as U Sonny Swe was the son of one of the then powerful military intelligence senior officers.

However, Sonny Swe was arrested and sentenced to fourteen years in prison, when the military intelligence division was crushed by the government in 2004⁶⁷.

Nonetheless, the number of private publications increased when the PSRD was transferred to the Ministry of Information from the Ministry of Home Affairs in 2005. Nwe Nwe Aye (2010) quotes Myanmar Marketing Research & Development (MMRD) data to show that the number of private journals increased from fewer than 40 in 1998 to over 100 in 2007⁶⁸.

In addition, private publications that were allowed to publish a maximum of 28 pages in the past were then permitted to publish up to 72 pages (Thitsar: 2009). Permission to publish more pages was a huge incentive for the private press as they could earn more revenue by allowing more space for the advertisers⁶⁹.

“The government relaxed some policies when they announced the election and constitution. We had a chance to write political stories, to some extent, at that time,” said Maung Wuntha, a prominent journalist and consultant editor at the *People Age* journal⁷⁰. He said the private press was allowed to have more coverage on political news by the time the government announced the election date in August 2010⁷¹.

Until recently, the government has restricted the coverage of the NLD party and its leader Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, who was under house arrest. A number of major publications

⁶⁷ BBC, “Burma's prime minister 'arrested',” BBC, 19 October, 2004. (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/3755052.stm>)

⁶⁸ Nwe Nwe Aye (2010), “media, corruption and economic development” Master Thesis submitted to Ritsumeikan University, Japan

⁶⁹ Thitsar, “A Study on the Potential Development of the Private Periodicals (Printed Media) Beyond 2010” Thesis for Executive Masters in Public Administration, 2009. Yangon Institute of Economic

⁷⁰ Interview with Maung Wuntha on September 14, 2011

⁷¹ BBC, “Burma sets 7 November date for first poll in 20 years,” BBC, 13 August 2010. (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-pacific-10961366>)

were suspended temporality for publishing Daw Aung Suu Kyi's photo on the front page when she was freed on November 13, 2010⁷².

Most of the major publications, such as *7 Days Journal*, *The Voice*, *People Era*, *Venus*, *Myanmar Newsweek*, *Pyithu Khit (The People's Age)*, *Myanmar Post and Snap Shot* were suspended for a week, while *Hot News* got two weeks suspension. According to the *Myanmar Times* report, the suspension was "the largest number in a single week in the division's history."⁷³

What was most surprising was that a sports journal, that was usually apolitical, was suspended for two weeks as the journal was accused of publishing a hidden message on the front page. The *Guardian* reported that the front page headline of *Weekly Eleven Sport Journal* was the main reason for the punishment. The headline said: "Sunderland Freeze Chelsea," "United Stunned by Villa" and "Arsenal Advance to Grab Their Hope".

However, words of certain letters were colored differently and turned out to be "Su Free Unite & Advance to Grab Hope"⁷⁴.

3.7 The role of state-owned media

Apart from privately owned weekly newspapers, the government publishes daily newspapers, which are considered the government mouthpiece. The government so far has not granted daily publishing licenses to any of the private publishers who are repeatedly urging for this lucrative opportunity.

There are four daily newspapers, of which three daily newspapers - namely *New Light of Myanmar (English Edition)*, *Myanmar Alin*, *Kyehmon (The Mirror)* - are published by the Ministry of Information and another one, *The Myawaddy Newspaper*, is published by the military. In addition, regional authorities in Yangon and Mandalay also publish daily papers for regional audiences.

According to the Ministry of Information, the circulation of state-owned daily newspapers is between 100,000 and 200,000. The Myanmar News Agency, another state-owned news service, provides stories and content for the state-owned papers.

In addition, there are two TV channels and one radio programme run by the government and the military. These two TV channels, *MRTV* and *Myawaddy*, are hugely controlled by the government and usually consist of propaganda and news on government official visits to factories, schools, pagodas and hospitals. These TV channels also show a South Korean film series which is popular in Myanmar.

⁷² Yadana Htun, "Nine journals suspended by censorship board," *The Myanmar Times*, November 29 - December 5, 201. (<http://www.mmtimes.com/2010/news/551/news55103.html>)

⁷³ Ibid

⁷⁴ The Guardian, "Myanmar media suspended after highlighting Suu Kyi," *The Guardian*, November 22 2010. (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/feedarticle/9372388>)

State-owned newspaper and TV channels are the prime source of official information and the government usually makes official statements via these outlets. Both local and international journalists rely on state-owned media for information about major political decisions and other big events such as the release of political prisoners.

In recent years, the government granted licences to private companies to invest in broadcast services. There are four TV channels and 7 FM radio channels run solely by private companies or joint ventures with the government. Unlike state-owned TV channels and radio, private channels focus on entertainment, drama movie series, travel and sports news.

Since private broadcast companies are also highly scrutinized by the state, these channels rarely air news on politics. However, private companies are likely to get permission to broadcast sensitive news in the near future as the government relaxes its control over the media.

3.8 Private press under the new civilian government

Significant changes in censorship policy were implemented after the civilian government assumed its duties on March 30, 2011⁷⁵.

Article 354 of the *2008 Constitution of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar* also stated that the public has the right 'to express and publish freely their convictions and opinions', if it is not contrary to the laws, enacted for Union security, prevalence of law and order, community peace and tranquility or public order and morality⁷⁶.

In June, three months after the new government was sworn in, the Ministry of Information, that controls the media industry, announced that 'pre-censorship' would be lifted for some publications⁷⁷.

According to the announcement, publications are categorized into two groups based on genre. The first group includes 178 journals and magazines that focus on 'entertainment, health, children, technology and sports news'. The second group comprises 180 publications that cover 'news, politics, religion, business, education and crime'.

Under the new censorship policy, publications that were included in the first group were no longer required to submit drafts for prior-censorship, while the second group still needed to pass the censorship board.

⁷⁵ The Guardian, "Burma junta disbanded as 'civilian' government sworn in," The Guardian, 30 March 2011. (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/mar/30/burma-civilian-governmnet-junta-disbanded>)

⁷⁶ The Ministry of Information, "Constitution of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar," The Ministry of Information, Union of Myanmar, 2008.

⁷⁷ Yadana Htun, "Pre-censorship lifted for some publications." The Myanmar Times, June 13 - 19, 2011. (<http://www.mmtimes.com/2011/news/579/news57906.html>)

However, *The Myanmar Times* quoted U Ye Tint, Managing Director of the Government Printing and Publishing Enterprise that ‘publishers and editors have to take responsibility for their publications’.⁷⁸ In other words, the editors have to self-censor the publications.

In addition, the publications are required to pay a 5,000,000 kyat deposit (US\$ 6,000⁷⁹) and the department would confiscate some of this deposit if there was a censorship complaint⁸⁰.

Soon after the government and Daw Aung San Suu Kyi resumed dialogue, the censorship board again relaxed restriction on publishing sensitive news and pictures. The Lady met with the President U Thein Sein in Nay Pyi Taw in August 2011, for the first time since SPDC handed power to the civilian government. The state-run *New Light of Myanmar* on August 20, 2011 published an article concerned with the meeting and a picture of the President and the Lady with the background of her father, independence hero General Aung San, on the wall of the presidential mansion⁸¹.

According to the state newspaper, “the President and Daw Aung Suu Kyi tried to find potential common grounds to cooperate in the interests of the nation and the people putting aside different views”⁸².

Since censorship policy depends on the political landscape of the country, the PSRD further relaxed directives to the press after this historic event. Images of the Lady are now ubiquitous and journals can publish her pictures on front pages^{83 84}.

Soon after the state-run paper published the meeting, U Thint Swe, who is the head of PSRD, called for an end to media censorship in the country and a closing down of his department.

“Press censorship is non-existent in most other countries as well as among our neighbors and as it is not in harmony with democratic practices; press censorship should be abolished in the near future,” U Tint Swe remarked⁸⁵.

⁷⁸ Ibid

⁷⁹ The Irrawaddy, “Burma's Bankers Bemoan Foreign Exchange Conditions ,” November 19, 2011.(http://www.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art_id=22493)

⁸⁰ Ibid

⁸¹ The New Light of Myanmar, “President U Thein Sein, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi vow to cooperate for national interest,” The New Light of Myanmar, 20 August, 2011. (<http://www.burmalibrary.org/docs11/NLM2011-08-20.pdf>)

⁸² Ibid

⁸³ WSJ STAFF REPORTERS, “Yangon's Many Faces of Change,” The Wall Street Journal, November 5, 2011.(<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052970204505304577003600676458934.html>)

⁸⁴ KIHN OO THAR, “Suu Kyi Makes Front Page in Burma ,” The Irrawaddy Magazine, August 24, 2011. (http://www.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art_id=21951)

⁸⁵RFA, “Call To End Media Censorship,” Radio Free Asia, 2011-10-07. (<http://www.rfa.org/english/news/burma/censorship-10072011203136.html>)

“More (media) freedom is expected in the near future as the country undergoes democratic change,”⁸⁶ he added, saying that his department allowed reports on pro-democracy leader without restriction.

In addition, bans were lifted from previously banned websites such as YouTube, Reuters, British Broadcasting Corporation, Voice of America, and Radio Free Asia.

The newspapers also started to receive extraordinary attention from the population as they can now publish the text and pictures that were considered highly sensitive in the past. The private press has greatly benefited from the opening up of political opportunity in the country.

Nowadays, the newspapers and journals are making a fortune by publishing Daw Aung San Suu Kyi pictures. “The Lady is good business. Before, we ran about 6,000 copies. Now, it’s 10,000,” commented a senior editor of a local weekly journal⁸⁷.

“I think in broadcasting, print and online, private involvement is likely to be bigger in the future,” said Nwet Kay Khine, a regular contributor to the *Voice Journal* “but in what direction are these investments going?”⁸⁸ She is worried that commercial interests could spoil the media sector in the long-term when the industry is liberalized.

The potential for the development of the media sector also attracted new investment from cronies who make their fortune through having close connections with senior government officials. The publishers interviewed for this paper revealed that they are concerned about their business as several tycoons are planning to invest in the media business. Some are about to launch new publications within a few months.

Though the censorship is relaxed and the head of the PSRD is calling for the abolition of the censorship department, it is unclear when the newspapers will enjoy complete freedom of the press and be allowed to publish daily⁸⁹. In spite of the call for ending censorship, it is unlikely that freedom of the press will be completely granted in the near future.

In a parliamentary session in September 2011, Minister of Information U Kyaw San said that censorship was still needed and that freedom of the press would bring more disadvantages than advantages⁹⁰. This comment by the Information Minister can be

⁸⁶ Ibid

⁸⁷ Martin Petty and Jason Szep (editors), “INSIGHT - “The Lady” media splash presents new face of Myanmar,” Reuters, Nov 22, 2011. (<http://in.reuters.com/article/2011/11/22/idINIndia-60656920111122>)

⁸⁸ Email Interview on February 26, 2012

⁸⁹ Private Newspaper and journals are only allowed to publish weekly

⁹⁰ Phanida, “Burma still needs censorship: Information Minister ,” Mizzima, 09 September 2011. (<http://www.mizzima.com/news/inside-burma/5905-burma-still-needs-censorship-information-minister.html>)

interpreted as showing that the government will still impose some restrictions on the media.

Chapter 4

The impact of censorship on quality journalism

4.1 Introduction

This chapter aims to describe important issues related to the prior-censorship system and how it impacts on quality journalism and the business of the media companies in Myanmar. The chapter also illustrates the role of censorship in the Myanmar media industry and how it operates. A survey of 77 working journalists inside the country will be presented and explained. In order to study the impact of censorship on the newspaper business, the author has also interviewed ten media executives and newspaper owners in Myanmar.

4.2 The role of PSRD in the Myanmar print industry

Myanmar can be considered as one of the few countries that have a strict censorship policy which effectively prevents journalists and newspapers from publishing stories freely.

According to the Printers and Publishers Registering Act of 1962, all private publications are required to apply for publication licenses and get permission from the government to publish and distribute newspapers, journals and other publications.

The Press Scrutiny and Registration Division (PSRD), which is also known as the censorship board, is responsible for regulating the printing and publication industry in the country. The division is under the Ministry of Information whose task is to disseminate government announcements and propaganda through state-owned TV, radio stations and daily newspapers.

PSRD is the focal point for the Myanmar media sector, especially the press media, as it has the authority to issue and revoke the publication licenses of newspapers, journals and other kinds of publications.

In addition to administering the issuing of publication licenses, the PSRD is also responsible for censoring publications and giving approval for publishing and distributing them to the market.

Staffed with several dozen government officials, of whom some are former military officers, the board never hesitates to punish newspapers and journalists that contravene the censorship policy and oppose the government.

The censorship board scrutinizes every detail in the press in order to block information that the government regards as publicly sensitive. The board regularly issues censorship

policy and guidelines that are benchmarks for controlling the private press. Private newspapers are regularly informed of the latest PSRD news and its censorship policy.

Generally, the PSRD guidelines⁹¹ are categorized into four sections (1) Politics (2) Economics (3) Social and (4) General. Each of the sections has detailed information and instructions for the editors to follow and practice.

In accordance with the guidelines, the board censors news and articles that criticize the government and its policies, stories that encourage individuals or groups that oppose the government, news and pictures that contradict the culture and traditions of Myanmar, pornography and stories based on unreliable sources, etc.

Since all the private publications are required to get approval from the censorship board to publish their papers, they have to submit draft copies to the board in advance for the officials to read and decide on.

The PSRD procedure requires all the weekly newspapers to submit two-thirds of the draft copy to the board two to three days in advance. The editors are not only obliged to submit texts, but also pictures, commercial advertisements, birthday wishes, poems, obituaries and so on.

For example, if a paper publishes on Monday, it would have needed to be submitted on Friday. Since it usually takes two days for the PSRD to read and approve the draft copy, the editors get the decision from the censorship board on Saturday night or Sunday morning.

The prior-censorship system would allow staff at the board to scan the copy and cut the stories and pictures that broke censorship rules.

The remaining one third of the draft copy that was not submitted usually includes updated news and pictures and can be submitted one day in advance of publication. The PSRD usually gives permission on that day, especially at nighttime. In some rare cases, the liaison officer from the newspapers has to knock on the door of the censorship official at night and ask for permission.

This time-consuming and red-tape-ridden process prevents private publications from publishing any daily newspapers.

Depending on the sensitivity of the news, the officials cut the whole story or some critical paragraphs in the story. In addition to text, pictures are closely scrutinized as well. In some cases, the board has instructed the editors to rewrite the story and submit it again.

Besides their censorship responsibilities, the staff at the censorship board is obliged to scan every story with a critical eye and to discover even the smallest mistakes.

⁹¹ Guidelines are issued by the PSRD and distributed to the newspapers

“The mindset of the staff at the censorship board is to cut the stories and paragraphs. So, we give more information in the news and articles so that they have a chance to cut something in order to satisfy their wishes,” said Maung Wuntha, a veteran journalist and editor of a local publication⁹².

PSRD prior-censorship mechanism

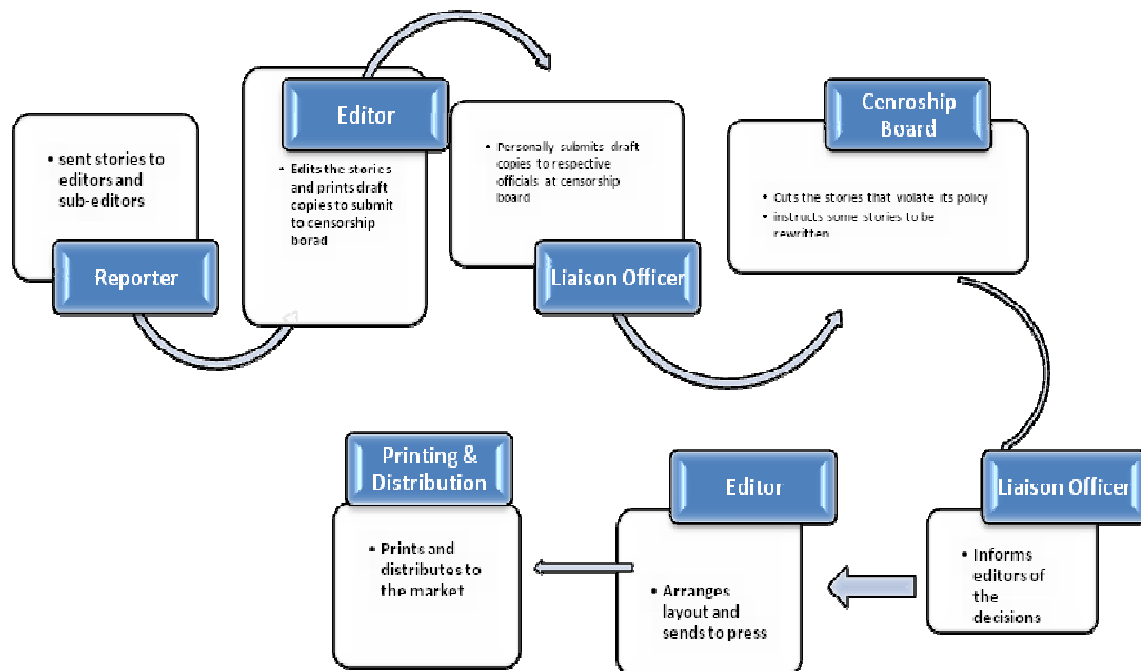


Figure 4.1 Censorship process in Myanmar

As shown in figure (4.1), the prior-censorship process requires several steps for journals to be published and sold in the market. Instead of the paper getting printed after the editors have finished the final layout, it needs to pass several steps before reaching the publishing stage. Therefore, if there is a delay in one step, it impacts the entire system.

The prior-censorship process takes up time and resources, especially with regard to transportation costs and the hiring of additional staff to liaise with the censorship board. “It (the system) makes us waste time and money,” said U Thiha Saw, chief editor and publisher of *Open New Journal*⁹³.

4.3 Impact of censorship on quality journalism

⁹² Interview on September 17, 2011

⁹³ Interview on December 24, 2011

Since the censorship policy is strict, most of the private publications are regularly subjected to having their stories cut by the board. The editors interviewed said the censorship board rejects 30-40% of the stories submitted every week.

Nearly half of the submitted stories become a waste, as they cannot be published. The public also has missed the opportunity to receive information that may be for them.

In other words, the rejected stories became a financial loss for the newspapers as well as the journalists, who devoted his or her time and energy to the story. In addition, it discourages the reporters from working harder and producing better stories that tell the real situation of the country's politics and economic affairs.

A survey⁹⁴ carried out in August and September 2011, regarding with the journalists opinion on censorship in Myanmar by this author, shows that the majority of the journalists are upset with the censorship policy as it not only blocks the flow of information to the public, but also destroys the impartiality of the news and articles. They complain that censorship undermines ethical reporting as stories become unbalanced and one-sided.

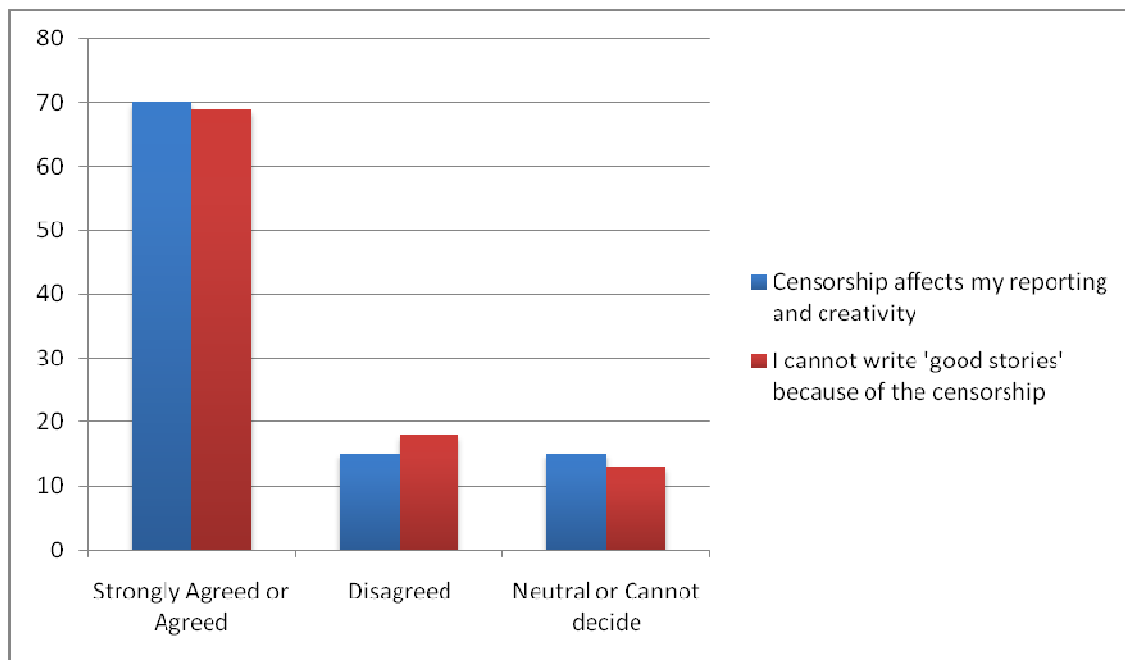


Figure 4.2: Impact of censorship on quality journalism

⁹⁴ Survey Questionnaires' is attached in Appendix

As seen in Figure 4.2, 70% of the 77 respondents answered that censorship affected their reporting and creativity, while 15% of the respondents did not agree. According to the survey, the 15% of respondents who did not agree that censorship affected their reporting and creativity were mostly focused on less sensitive issues such as entertainment and sports. The remaining 15% of the respondents answered they cannot decide or are neutral.

The survey also showed that 69% of the respondents agreed that they couldn't write 'good stories' because of the censorship, whereas 18% replied that it did not impact on their writing. The remaining 13% said they could not decide or were neutral.

Journalists involved in the surveys said that the public are not freely informed of current events as the censorship policy blocks the flow of information. They believe that information on important issues such as health problems, disasters, and poverty should be available to the public without any barriers.

"The public essentially needs to know this information. When the censorship chops the stories, the information doesn't reach the public. We cannot write stories that the public should know," said a reporter who has over three years' experience in journalism⁹⁵.

U Phyo Wai Linn, editor in chief of the forthcoming journal *The Union*, said censorship undermines the quality of journalism. "It prevents us from writing stories from a different perspective," he said⁹⁶.

Another journalist who wants to be anonymous said the newspapers couldn't disseminate complete and exact information to the readers. "Since the censors cut some of the paragraphs, it destroys the impartiality of the story. It makes the stories biased. It also reduces the confidence level of the journalists," she said⁹⁷.

"Censorship certainly does have an impact on the quality and scope of reporting. Journalists are always going to be reluctant to chase and report on topics that they know are likely to be censored," said Thomas Keen, editor at the Myanmar Times English version.⁹⁸

A health editor at a local leading publication said it is difficult for the stories related to the deterioration of the health situation in the county to pass the censorship board.

"If we write stories on a decrease in population of people living with HIV/AIDS (PLHA) and decreasing child mortality rate in the country, it passed the censorship. However, if

⁹⁵ Interview on September 14, 2011

⁹⁶ Email interview on February 20, 2012

⁹⁷ Interview on September 10, 2011

⁹⁸ Email Interview on February 13, 2012

we write stories on an increase in child mortality and PLHA rate, they cut the whole story,” she said⁹⁹.

She said this is quite irritating as the press cannot inform and educate the public and enhance their concern with health care problems in the country. “As there is no transparency, it is quite difficult for all the stakeholders to find out what is really happening on the ground and to look for the solutions to prevent spreading diseases,” she said¹⁰⁰.

An assistant editor at a private weekly paper echoed that censorship undermines ethical reporting. “It makes the reader see us as biased,” she said, adding that the censorship destroys impartiality of the story and damages newsworthiness.

Furthermore, companies and government departments also pressurize the censorship board to block the stories that can affect their business. An editor-in-charge of a journal that focuses on entertainment and lifestyle said she was forced to publish an apology announcement on a news story that was not wrong.

“When a celebrity or a business person complains about our news (like gossip), the PSRD applies severe pressure to correct it by any means even if the writing is correct. We are not freely allowed to do things,” she said¹⁰¹.

A senior editor¹⁰² at a leading private paper said she had learned from the PSRD that other ministries put pressure on the board to block any stories that harm their department. Although the reporter gets the news from different sources, often it is required that he or she also obtains agreement from the government department that the story relates to.

“If we want to publish stories that directly or indirectly concern a government department, we usually need to get agreement to certify that the department is willing to release the information. But they rarely give the agreement,” she said¹⁰³.

In a country where transparency is a taboo subject, getting agreement from a government official is a very rare occasion.

A political reporter at a private journal said censorship destroys the credibility of the stories and newspapers. She said she is forced to change her writing style as she is afraid that the board will cut her stories.

“As we need to get agreement from the respective government ministries, we are required to send the stories to the departments for approval. If the story is about a positive aspect

⁹⁹ Email Interview on August 17, 2011

¹⁰⁰ Email interview on December 3, 2011

¹⁰¹ Email interview with an editor at an entertainment journal February 25, 2012

¹⁰² Interview on September 8, 2011

¹⁰³ Email interview on September 15, 2011

of the department, it can get agreement and pass the censorship. If it is on a negative aspect of the department, it cannot get agreement and pass censorship. Sometimes, the department rewrites the stories, as they desire. It is difficult to perform the watchdog role of the media,” she said¹⁰⁴.

Veteran journalist Maung Wuntha said he is forced to self-censor as he worries that otherwise the message cannot reach the public. "Of course, I practice self-censorship, as I am afraid that the information I want to provide will be totally cut. I tone it down sometimes,” he said¹⁰⁵.

In addition to journalists, cartoonists in Myanmar are handcuffed by the censorship policy. Most of the cartoonists usually avoid sensitive issues as the entire cartoon can be cut, said a cartoonist who worked for a private paper¹⁰⁶.

In the worst-case scenario, censorship also affects the livelihood of the journalists as some of the publishers refuse to pay for the stories that are cut by the board. Since the salary and wage policy of newspaper companies differ one from another, the impact of censorship on the income of the journalists varies. (See Figure 4.3)

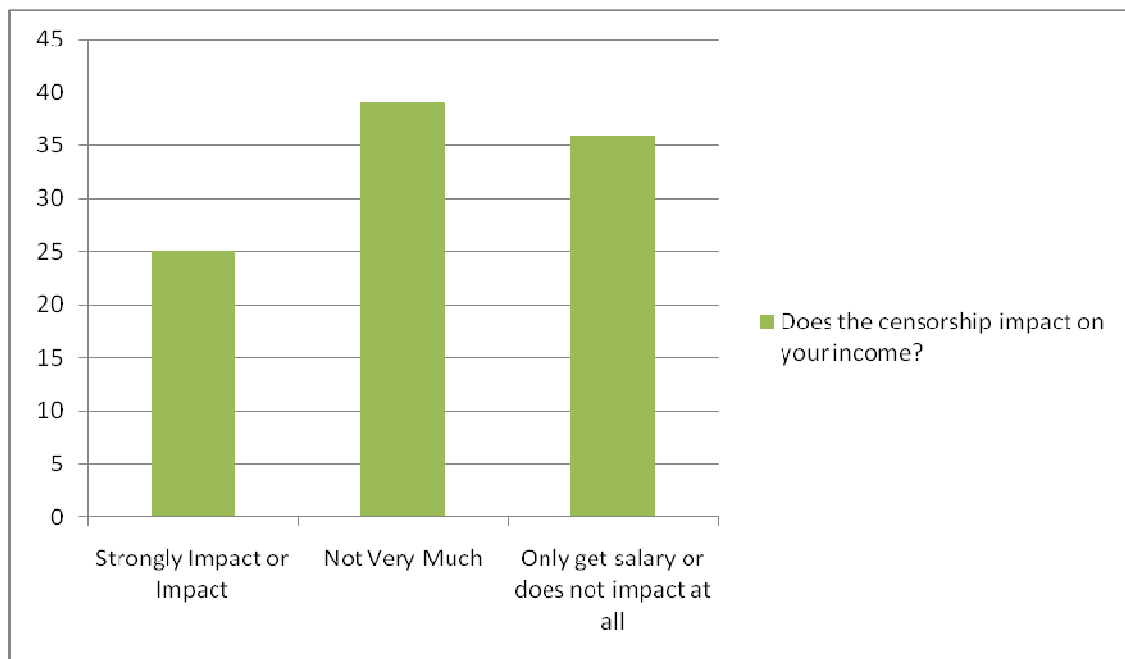


Figure 4.3 the impact of censorship on the income of journalists

¹⁰⁴ Interview on August 23, 2011

¹⁰⁵ Interview on September 25, 2011

¹⁰⁶ Email Interview on January 23, 2012

As seen in figure 4.3, the survey showed that 25% of the respondents revealed that censorship ‘strongly impacted’ or ‘impacted’ on their income, while 39% said it did not impact ‘very much’. The remaining 36 % said it ‘did not impact at all’ as they are provided a flat salary or their newspapers do not calculate the wages based on published stories.

“My publisher does not pay for the stories that are cut, so I’d prefer not to write sensitive news that can be censored,” said a journalist who has over eight years’ experience in the field¹⁰⁷. She said the journalists at her newspaper get a basic salary that is lower than other publications, plus an additional fee for published stories.

“We have a quota system. If number of stories we write exceeds the quota, we get paid for them. But if our stories are cut and cannot be published, we don’t get paid,” she said¹⁰⁸.

However, journalists working at the other newspapers that have a different wage policy said censorship does not impact on their income. “We pay even though the stories are cut by the PSRD. We don’t decide fees based on publication of articles,” said an editor at one of the leading newspapers, whose circulation is over 100,000¹⁰⁹.

The journalists said censorship is the largest obstacle to the news reaching the public. They believe that abolishing the censorship mechanism would help them to write stories more freely and to enhance their journalistic skills.

¹⁰⁷ Interview on September 12, 2011

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Email interview on January 28 2012

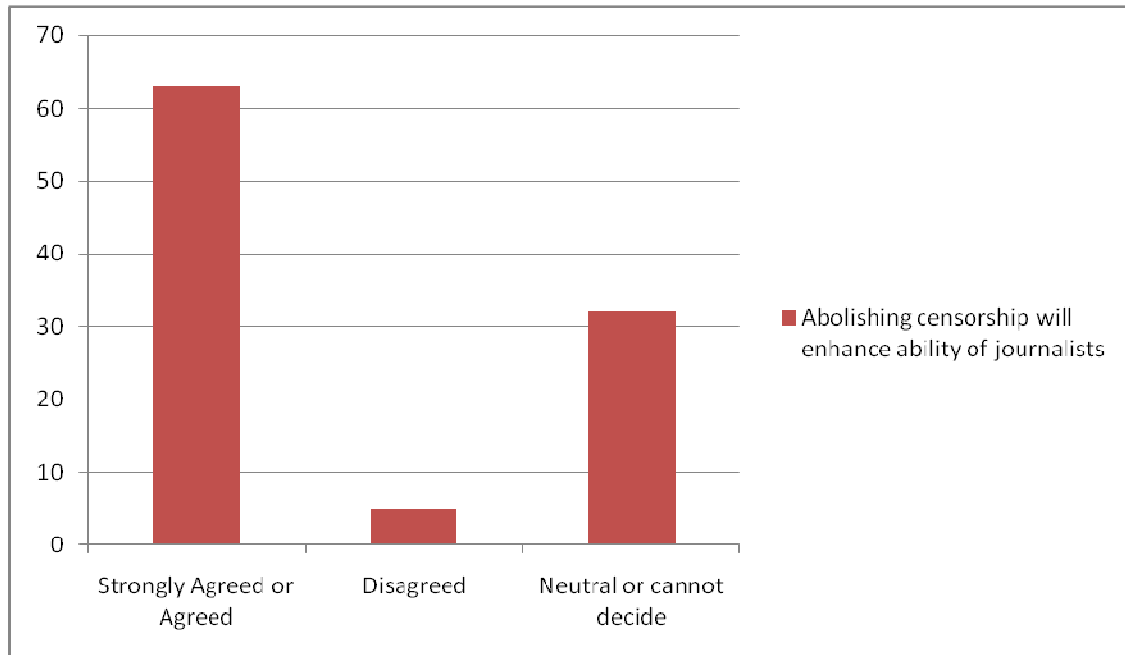


Figure 4.4: Journalist's attitudes toward abolishing the censorship system

The journalists interviewed and surveyed for the most part agreed that abolishing censorship would help them to report more freely and enhance their abilities in writing the news.

As seen in figure 4.4, the survey indicated that 63% of the respondents wanted the censorship to be abolished, while 5% did not agree. Thirty two percent of the respondents remained neutral or did not know. The journalists who remained neutral reveal that they are concerned if the absence of censorship would encourage unethical reporting. Some journalists worried that unethical reporting could destroy the credibility and reputation of the press. They thought of the censorship board as a referee that sometimes act like a mediator to solve disputes between press and business organizations or individuals. They worried that if the absence of the censorship could encourage journalists to do unethical reporting, there could be more lawsuits against newspapers in the future.

4.4 The impact of censorship on publishing quality newspapers

Compared with countries where the media and printing industries are booming, the media industry in Myanmar can be considered to be in the nascent stage. So can the capacity of the printing press.

The capacity of the printing machines in Myanmar creates problems as the printing press cannot print out several thousand copies within a short time frame. These time constraints force editors to take the risk of printing some pages without getting any approval from the PSRD.

The editors interviewed for this report asserted that they have to take risks every week in order to deliver the newspapers to readers on time and compete in the challenging media market. Though the editors take a calculated risk, they sometimes face a serious problem when their prediction turns out to be wrong.

U Aung Kyaw Min¹¹⁰, deputy editor-in-chief at *True News Journal* said it is difficult to predict censorship policy. “The censorship policy is changing with time. I don’t even think they have a clear policy since it is changing all the time. We have to be careful always,” he said.

Since it is difficult to predict the censorship policy, most of the newspapers are punished for publishing the stories without getting approval from the board. The least severe punishment is to give a warning to the editors and the most severe punishments are suspending the publication or revoking the publication license.

In January 2008, *The Myanmar Times*, one of the leading publications, was ordered by the PSRD to suspend its publication for a week as the paper had published a story without getting censorship board permission. In addition, it was forced to sack the editor-in-charge of the Burmese Language edition Nwe Nwe Aye and chief-of-staff Win Kyaw Oo¹¹¹. Similarly, the censorship board, in May 2010, ordered the suppression of publication of two journals *The Voice* and *First Music* for breaking the rule by publishing unauthorized stories¹¹².

In November 2010, the PSRD suspended nine journals for publishing a picture of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi when she was released from house arrest on 13 November 2010, a few days after the general election¹¹³.

Sometimes, the editors painted the rejected stories with black or silver ink to avoid punishment. In some cases, the editors had to enlarge the pictures and add more ‘pull-quotes’ to fill the empty space in the pages as censorship had cut most of the stories submitted. This makes the newspapers’ layout design look awkward and unattractive.

Since the press is highly controlled and the journalists are subject to interrogation due to their reporting, the press in Myanmar has several limitations in performing its watchdog role. It is difficult for the private press to hold the government accountable, promote transparency and educate the public.

¹¹⁰ Interview on September 12, 2011

¹¹¹ RSF, “Myanmar Times and other media threatened and sanctioned by military censors,” Reporter Without Border, 16 January 2008. (<http://en.rsf.org/burma-myanmar-times-and-other-media-16-01-2008,25072.html>)

¹¹² Yadana Htun , “Journals suspended for breaking govt censorship rules,” *The Myanmar Times*, May 31 - June 6, 2010.(www.mmmtimes.com/2010/news/525/news007.html)

¹¹³ Yadana Htun, “Nine journals suspended by censorship board,” *The Myanmar Times*, November 29 - December 5, 2010(<http://www.mmmtimes.com/2010/news/551/news55103.html>)

U Thiha Saw said the PSRD never tolerate stories that discover misconduct of government and its officials. Nor do they tolerate stories that relate to past bad deeds of the government, he said.

The private papers cannot publish news on politics, anti-government opinion, the economy, corruption cases, child labour and other information that should reach the public. Moreover, it also prevents the publication of breaking news which could grab the reader's attention.

“Without censorship, we could practice journalism more effectively and we (the journalists in Myanmar) could become more responsible professionals. Our lives would be better without the time consuming and annoying steps of censorship,” said San Oo, a senior sub-editor of a private journal¹¹⁴.

4.5 The impact of censorship on the business of private newspapers

Because of the prior-censorship system and strict censorship policy, it is impossible for the private press to publish breaking news that can attract more readership and boost the circulation.

According to the executives and owners of the newspapers, the private press usually loses their readership to foreign radios services such as BBC Burmese and Voice of America (VOA). While the public cannot get the information they need from both private and state-owned media domestic outlets, they turn their interest to foreign-based radio channels and exiled media establishments for information.

Ross Dunkley¹¹⁵, an executive of the Myanmar Consolidated Media Company, said foreign media would be important sources of information for the public for as long as censorship exists.

U Ko Ko¹¹⁶, chairman of the Yangon Media Group, also shared the same view. He said public attention on newspapers and journals was comparatively low compared to radio audiences.

The executives and publishers said censorship made all the papers similar as editors do not have a choice but to print the same stories allowed by the board. As the PSRD filters the information, the newspapers are forced to publish the same content. (See Figure 4.5)

“The readers said they know all the news by reading only one paper as we are forced to publish the same stories as appeared in other journals as we do not have choice,” said U Ko Ko¹¹⁷.

¹¹⁴ Email Interview on January 27, 2012

¹¹⁵ Email interview on October 23, 2011

¹¹⁶ Interview on December 19, 2011

¹¹⁷ Interview on December 22, 2011

Because the same stories are repeatedly printed in different publications, the reader has no motivation to purchase more than one newspaper. In a country of 58 million people, with an over 90 % adult literacy rate¹¹⁸, the print market in Myanmar is much smaller than it should be.

Ministry of Information figures showed that there are over 350 private publications in Myanmar. Until recently all the private papers had to pass the prior-censorship process to get approval for publishing¹¹⁹.

According to insider sources, the biggest circulation of a journals or weekly newspapers is 130,000 copies, while the lowest circulation is under 5,000 copies¹²⁰. The publishers said the market is shrinking, as the private press has limited space and cannot publish breaking news.

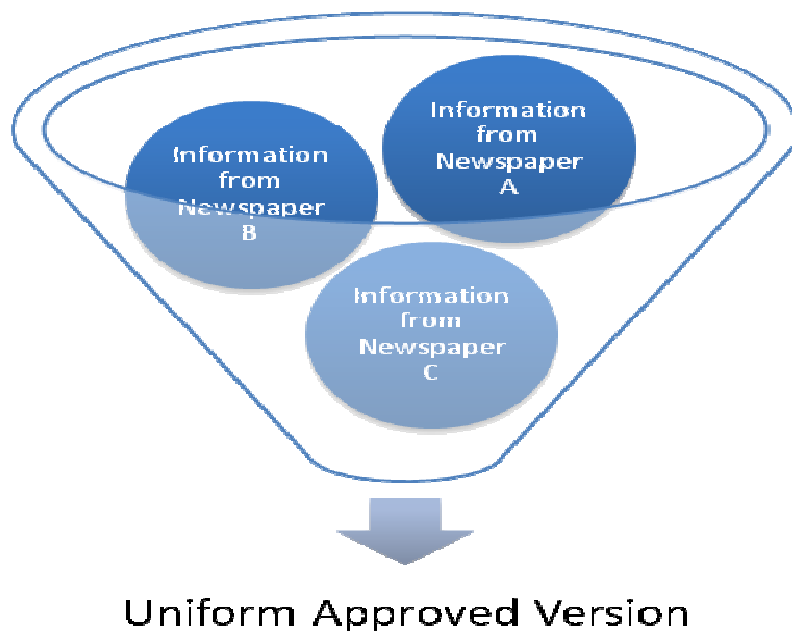


Figure 4.5: Filtering of information by the PSRD

In addition to the market contraction, the newspapers suffer heavy losses when they have to suspend the publication.

¹¹⁸ UNICEF, “Myanmar, Republic of the Union of ,” (http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/myanmar_statistics.html)

¹¹⁹ Some kind of publications are exempted from prior-censorship under the new government

¹²⁰ Publishers refused to state their circulation officially due to the tax evasion.

U Myo Hlaing Aung¹²¹, a general manager of the Inforithm-Maze, a company that publishes several journals, said it would represent a big loss for the media companies if they have to suspend their publication.

“The operating cost is the same although we cannot publish even one issue. We lost the operating cost and the revenue from advertisements if we suspend the publication,” he said. Inforithm-Maze publishes flagship papers in the market such as *7 Days News* and *Internet Journal*.

He said *7 Day News* lost 2 million kyat (US\$25,000) in 2010 when the journals were ordered to suspend the publication of one issue by the PSRD. “I think it would be very difficult for the smaller media companies to survive if they have to suspend the publication for one or more issues,” he said.

Similarly, Mr. Ross Dunkley said his paper lost US\$50,000 when the government ordered to stop the publication for one issue in 2008. He said the impact on sales and advertisement revenue was ‘extremely significant’¹²².

A publisher in Mandalay, the second largest city in Myanmar, said the paper could lose advertisers if it is forced to suspend the publication. “We can lose our customers if we fail to publish,” she said¹²³. She mentioned that it is difficult for her publication to communicate with the PSRD as the journal headquarters is located in Mandalay, which is over 700 kilometers north of Yangon, where the PSRD headquarters are located.

U Zeya Thu¹²⁴, editor-in-charge of *The Voice* journal, said suspension of the publication had huge impacts in terms of financial and readership loss. *The Voice* was ordered to suspend publications over three times as the censorship board thought it violated the rules.

“We can lose customers who want to advertise their product in a timely manner. The readers can switch to other journals,” he said. One of the reasons for suspension of the publications was that the censorship board members were overcautious in order to prevent pressure on them from the higher authorities, he said.

Ironically, the newspapers or journals that are ordered to suspend usually get publicity as the journal is generally considered to be brave enough to publish unauthorized stories, which the government views as sensitive. “Some people like this,” said U Zaya Thu.

¹²¹ Interview on December 23, 2011

¹²² Email interview on November 10, 2011

¹²³ Email interview on November 5, 2011

¹²⁴ Interview on August 20, 2011

U Ko Ko and U Myo Hlaing Aung also agreed that the newspapers got more publicity when they were suspended. “Some publications use the penalty from the PSRD as a marketing tool to get more publicity,” said U Ko Ko¹²⁵.

4.6 The changing Myanmar media landscape under the new civilian government

As discussed earlier, since the civilian government led by President U Thein Sein came to power in March 2011, the censorship board has been relaxing its policies and rules regarding the private press.

The constitution that was approved in 2008 stated that the public has the right to express itself and publish freely if it is not contrary to the nation’s laws and national security.

Moreover, the government is drafting a new media law which is expected to be submitted to parliament this year (2012). If the parliament approves the law, there will be no censorship in Myanmar and private companies would be allowed to publish daily newspapers¹²⁶. In addition, exiled media establishments such as Mizzima and Irrawaddy Magazine, Democratic Voice of Burma - that are critical on government - are allowed to enter the country and meet with oppositions groups, government officials and civil society groups¹²⁷.

Publishers interviewed revealed that the censorship policy relaxed recently as a consequence of the changing political landscape in the country. “And the circulation of publications has jumped,” said U Ko Ko¹²⁸.

“As we get more freedom, we can publish pictures of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and her speeches. We can also cover other sensitive news that was not allowed in the past. That attracts readers’ attention,” he said.

U Thiha Saw also acknowledged that the circulation of his paper also increased as a result of relaxation in media censorship under the civilian government.

The publishers and media executives said the circulation of news-focused journals jumped by 30% to 50% as a consequence of the relaxing of the government censorship policy and the permission to publish pictures of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and her activities. (See Figure 4.6)

U Myo Hlaing Aung said the print market is expanding as a consequence of the relaxing of censorship policy. “In previous times, it was enough for the readers to buy only one

¹²⁵ Interview on December 22, 2011

¹²⁶ Aye Sapay Phyu and Zaw Win Than, “Media law review to include private sector,” March 26 - April 1, 2012, The Myanmar Times

¹²⁷ SAW YAN NAING, “Burma Aims to be Role Model for Media, Says Govt Official,” http://www2.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art_id=23071

¹²⁸ Interview on December 22, 2011

paper. Now, they have to buy more than one paper, as they want to get more information from different papers. So, the market is also expanding,” he said¹²⁹.

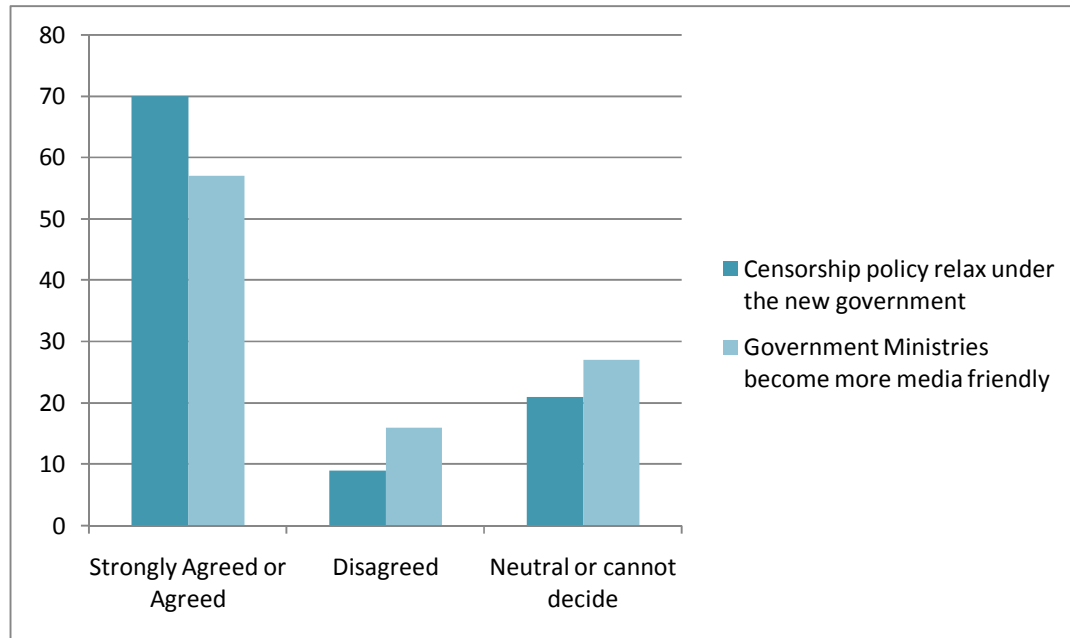


Figure 4.6: Journalists’ opinions on censorship policy and government ministries’ attitude toward media under the new civilian government

As seen in Figure 4.6, the majority of the journalists agreed that the censorship policy has relaxed after the civilian government replaced the military government in March 2011. 70% of the respondents agreed that censorship policy relaxed, while 9% did not agree. The remaining 21% could not decide or were neutral.

In addition to relaxing the censorship, the government ministries became more media friendly after the civilian government replaced the military junta. The interviewees said that newspapers could now have access to information from the ministries when compared with the past.

As shown in Figure 4.6, 57% of the respondents agreed that government officials became friendlier toward the media, whereas 16% did not agree. The remaining 27% could not decide or were neutral.

“We now receive more news sources and can cover stories from different angles,” said U Ko Ko, who added that foreign media such as the BBC Burmese service and VOA could lose their audience in the future¹³⁰.

¹²⁹ Interview on December 23, 2011

¹³⁰ Interview on December 22, 2011

Publishers and executives of media companies are optimistic that the print market in Myanmar has huge potential to grow when the government gives more freedom to the press industry.

“I think people will be more interested in newspapers if there is no censorship at all. We can also publish stories that the public should know. I am sure the circulation of the papers will sharply increase if there is no censorship,” said U Phyo Wai Linn¹³¹.

“I am sure the print market has potential to expand. And more and more new investments are flowing into the media industry,” said U Myo Hlaing Aung¹³².

¹³¹ Email Interview on March 2, 2012

¹³² Interview on December 23, 2011

Chapter 5

Conclusions and Recommendations

Censorship, especially prior-censorship, has had a huge impact on the private press industry in Myanmar both in terms of quality and financial loss. As the press was highly controlled by the state, it had little space to perform its watch-dog role and promote transparency in society.

The lack of the freedom of the press prevented both individuals and groups from expressing their opinions freely, and the public could not find a proper platform to voice their concerns. Therefore, censorship also reduced public interest in the press and weakened the role of the media in society and in the democratization process.

In addition, censorship also demoralized the journalists by destroying the impartiality of their news stories. The people, as well, lost their ‘right to receive information without interference’¹³³ as stated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, a mandate that Myanmar, a member of United Nations, is required to follow.

As stated in the previous chapters, censorship is not only undermining the ethical reporting and quality of journalism, but also hindering the development of the press industry in Myanmar. It shrinks the size of the market and blocks the potential of the print market to expand by imposing numerous rule and regulations.

However, the recent political changes in Myanmar can encourage the private press industry to expand as the new government loosens its control on the media. The publishers also foresee that the market will grow in the near future, when the prior-censorship system is likely to be abolished.

The government is expecting to grant daily publication licenses to private publishers when the media law, which is currently being drafted, is approved by the parliaments.

Due to the flow of new investment in the media sector soon after the civilian government was sworn in, we can already see fierce competition between old and new media companies to control the market within the next few years. As in the former communist countries in Eastern Europe, liberalization of the media market could favour wealthy individuals or groups controlling the media market in Myanmar in the future.

Since most of the publishing houses in Myanmar are family-owned ventures, the influx of new investments in the industry could force small companies out of business. Another possibility is that small publishers could merge with each other to form bigger companies to fight financially-stronger groups in the market. As a consequence of the changes in the

¹³³ United Nations, “The Universal Declaration of Human Rights,” (<http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/>)

political landscape, the nature of media ownership will be transformed and it will encourage the emergence of media moguls.

Furthermore, mounting investment in the media sector can create more employment opportunities for journalists and attract young people to the journalism profession. However, lack of human resources in the press industry would force newspapers to compete to attract qualified and experienced journalists. In the meantime more and more young journalists will be recruited to fulfill the demand.

A large pool of inexperienced, but dynamic young journalists could create tension in the society, as they are not well equipped with the necessary knowledge and experience to work under stressful conditions. Additionally, competing between the newspapers for the scoop and a larger share of the market could result in them attacking each other through their writing. As a result, the public could lose their trust in the press.

In order to prevent this, an independent media regulatory body needs to be established to monitor the press.

The government said it is working to form a 'Media Freedom and Ethics Promotion Committee', which will be tasked to act as a mediator in the absence of a censorship board in post-military rule and solve the potential problems between the press and the public. U Ye Htut, a senior official from the Ministry of Information, recently revealed that the committee would follow the model of Press Complaints Committee (PCC) in the United Kingdom¹³⁴.

However, the new committee needs to be independent from both the government and private businesses. In order to make fair judgments, committee members should not have any affiliation with political parties.

The state-owned media outlets also need to change their policy and presentation in the post-military era. It is too early to privatize the state-owned newspapers at this stage as the private papers could be acquired by wealthy cronies. However, the new civilian government should relax its control on the state-owned press and grant more autonomy.

Finally, both the government and civil society groups should set up journalism schools¹³⁵ across the country to fulfill the market demand and produce well-trained journalists. This would help the press industry by providing skilled journalists who will work to inform the general public.

¹³⁴ SAW YAN NAING, "Burma Aims to be Role Model for Media, Says Govt Official," The Irrawaddy Magazine, February 21, 2012. (http://irrawaddy.org/article.php?art_id=23071)

¹³⁵ The country so far has only one journalism school. The school was established recently and produces about 40 students annually.

Appendix

Questionnaires

Name of the journalist

Name of the Journal/ Newspaper

Position:

Date:

Please tick (✓) if you agree

(1) Age

Under 20 Years	20-30 Years	30-40 years	Over 40 Years

(2)

Male	Female

(3) Education level

Matriculation Exam Pass	Graduate	Post Graduate	PhD

(4) Work experience as a journalist

(A) Under 2 Years

(B) 3 to 5 Years

(C) 5 to 10 Years

(D) 10 and Above

(5) How many journals have you worked for?

- (A) One Journal
- (B) Two Journals
- (C) Three Journal and Above
- (D) Freelance journalist
- (E) Work for News Agencies

(6) Why do you interested in Journalism. Why do you want to be a journalist?

(7) How does the censorship impact on our reporting?

	Strongly Agreed	Agreed	Neutral	Disagreed	Strongly Disagreed	Cannot Decide
Censorship affect on my reporting						
Censorship block my creativity						
I cannot write good stories because of the censorship						
The editors do not assign to cover sensitive news as they are afraid that censorship board will cut the stories.						
I don't write stories that can be censored.						

(8) Do you usually self-censor the stories as you are afraid of censorship will chop your stories?

- (A) I do self-censorship
- (B) I don't do self-censorship

(9) As Myanmar has censorship policy, self-censorship is the best way to pass the censorship board.

Strongly Agreed	Agreed	Neutral	Disagreed	Strongly Disagreed	Cannot Decide

(10) Changing writing style is the best way to pass the censorship.

Strongly Agreed	Agreed	Neutral	Disagreed	Strongly Disagreed	Cannot Decide

(11) Have you ever revealed the news source as the censorship board pressures you or your newspaper?

(A) I have revealed the source

(B) I never revealed the source

(12) If you answer you have revealed the source

(A) Have the source faced problem?

(B) Nothing happen to the source

(C) I don't know what happened to the source

(13) As censorship board cut my stories, it impact on my income.

Strongly Impact	Impact	Not Very Much	Only get salary or does not impact at all

(14) I do not write sensitive news as my income will be reduced if the censorship board cut my stories.

Strongly Agreed	Agreed	Neutral	Disagreed	Strongly Disagreed	Not concern

(15) Which kinds of news stories are censored most?

Politic	Business	Social	Sport	Arts and Entertainment

(16) Which kinds of news stories usually pass censorship?

Politics	Business	Social	Sport	Arts and Entertainment

(17) Abolishing censorship will enhance the ability of journalist. Censorship should be abolished.

Strongly Agreed	Agreed	Neutral	Disagreed	Strongly Disagreed	Cannot Decide

(18) Censorship policy relaxed after the new civilian government sworn in.

Strongly Agreed	Agreed	Neutral	Disagreed	Strongly Disagreed	Cannot Decide

(19) Government ministries are more media friendly after the new civilian government sworn in.

Strongly Agreed	Agreed	Neutral	Disagreed	Strongly Disagreed	Cannot Decide

(20)How do you think of the journalist salary compared to other professions?

Very Low	Low	Mild	Good	Very Good

(21) Do you think lifting of previously banned websites such as BBC, VOA, Reuters and YouTube is the first step for media freedom?

I think	I don't think	Neutral	Cannot Decide

(22) Your opinion on Censorship.

Thank You for your answer.

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