von Alessandro Gullo

The Janus Face of Social Media in Myanmar

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New technologies always open doors for new activities and that with the greatest socio-political impact in early 21st century are the internet and social media. The Arab Spring in 2011 proved more than any other revolution before its great potential when the social media offered the people an easy way getting connected, organizing protest marches, and supporting movements. Hence, they are associated with a positive image being a 'motor for democratization,' promising freedom of speech. However, what happens if social media is used to promote racism, hatred and evil propaganda instead?

Since the last couple of years, Myanmar is in a transition phase politically as well as socially. While the internet plays a prominent role in this process, especially Facebook has on the one hand opened new possibilities for the Burmese to get informed and advance their opinions in public. On the other hand, many people have learned to distrust the traditional media, which have been censored and manipulated by the military government for decades. This is also why they think "Facebook is an official media and take it for real," as Phyu Phyu Thi, cofounder of the *Myanmar ICT for Development Organization*, states (cf. Einzenberger, 2016).

"The Buddhist Face of Terror"

At least such a good faith in Facebook posts prepares a breeding ground for protagonists willing to spread misleading information, hate speech and rac-

Buddhist monk with cellphone in Myanmar © Alessandro Gullo



ist taunts as well. In Myanmar, the most infamous man making use of modern day intermediary channels in this spirit is probably Ashin Wirathu, a radical Buddhist monk based in Masoyein Monastery in Mandalay. Due to his hatred speech and rampant statements, he has gained an international reputation being the "Burmese Bin Laden." In 2013, the *Time Magazine* eventually spent him a counterfeit on a front page, labelled "The Face of Buddhist Terror."

Wirathu spearheads an ultranationalist group called the *969 Movement*, steering campaigns against the country's Rohingya Muslim minority. Their credo is that Muslims want to build an 'Islamic state' in Myanmar, and therefore Buddhists would need to fight them. So it has happened the group handed out campaign stickers featuring the number "969." But while that number originally represents the Buddha's attributes and Buddhist peaceful virtues, here it means something different though: marking Buddhist-owned stores, taxis and houses and other businesses; Buddhists are urged to only buy in 'their own' shops.

In 2003, Wirathu had already been sentenced to twenty-five years in prison for hate speech and causing uproar with violent clashes and death, but then granted amnesty in 2010. Again there were skirmishes between Buddhists and Rohingya in June 2012 in Rakhine state, killing 200 and making over 100,000 people losing their homes (cf. Coclanis, 2013). Nowadays, many still believe that his words would instigate Burmese to violent actions. According to the international NGO *Institute for War and Peace Reporting*, while hate speech and anti-Muslim sentiments on social media in Myanmar have been increased, the social tensions grew likewise.

The Impact of Social Media

It is no recent phenomenon that propaganda and disinformation are distributed under the appearance of 'freedom of expression' anyway. Yet the social media can do this even faster and more effectively. But how would this work out in Myanmar?

As an example, the sermons and preaches of Wirathu are videotaped and then shared via the internet. One of his most notorious ones starts with the words: "Whatever you do, do it as nationalist!". The statements in the following approve his malicious motivation, instructing the Burmese to boycott Muslims, who are "enemies of the people" – claiming they would steadily increase and become a threat to Buddhism in Myanmar – just ignoring the fact the Muslim minority makes only about four percent in

a population of 55 million. Nonetheless, being told this in interviews, Wirathu simply objects Muslim men would marry Buddhist women and force them into conversion. Despite all of his twists of reality, the far-right monk is still gaining nationwide popularity. So far the rising fear of Muslim domination has taken several hundred lives since 2012.

And there are many other social media posts to blame for eruptions of violence. So in early June 2014, a canard spread in Mandalay, saying a Muslim man raped a Buddhist woman. Wirathu picked this up and reposted it. The riots in the following caused two dead and many more injured. Wirathu was then accused of agitation. Very likely this is also due to the fact that he has had more than 350,000 followers on Facebook. This assumes a tight connection of social media and the great impact on the users affecting their real lives, especially when there's a big community. As the social media inherit the power to rally people fighting for freedom and democracy, on the other side they can be misused to incite racism, turmoil and even murder.

Populist Policies on the Net: The Case of Germany

The internet has opened new paths to reach the masses and to promote opinions, policies and ideologies. From Myanmar over the United States to Europe – social activists and politicians of any color globally recognized how to spread their messages through social media. And especially nationalist movements seem to see their chances.

Comparable to Myanmar, parts of the German society distrust the traditional media and think they hide information. For this reason during the last couple of years many Germans support the right-wing populist Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), and made them the most followed German political party on Facebook. The followers rely on the AfD version of news, as only they 'dare to speak out the truth.' The suspension of investigative journalists at AfD conventions wouldn't cast any doubt among the party's promoters either (Lohse, 2016).

Wirathu alike, the AfD suspects evil forces from outside threatening national values - especially Muslims. Figure 2 (Screenshot Facebook Post AFD; @alternativefuerde) shows a Facebook post, stating "Turks want a sharia state," and immigrant "integration has totally failed." The AfD argues that "64 percent" of all Germans with Turkish descent voted in favor of the Turkish constitutional referendum on 16 April 2017; yet the party conceals while 700,000 (from approximately 1.4 million people allowed) voted at all, only from those 64 percent were pro, making 450,000 voters. Further taking in consideration, that there are currently about three mil-



lion (Desttis.de, 2017) "Deutsch-Türken" ('German Turks,' as the AfD calls them), in the end only 15 percent in Germany voted pro. - This is evidence how facts are falsified by incomplete information!

So the AfD wants to establish their own reality for their supporters, and not allow any critical debate about their policy at the same time. The party just makes itself out to be a harbor for the so-called 'citizens in rage' ("Wutbürger"), who accepts the 'reality' the AfD sees it without questioning, as long as they have the feeling that their voice is being heard.

It looks like the blind trust in social media contents like on Facebook has nothing to do with cultural or national background, but rather with personal preferences and believes, though. That is what the similar sentiments in two countries highly different in cultural, political and economic terms reveal.

What We Can Do

The social media are not the root of nationalist and populist actions and campaigns, as aren't the dramatic consequences. But we just have to accept that they are the modern way of spreading disinformation and hate. - Regarding Myanmar, the conflict between Muslims and Buddhists has also been lasting for many years, such as in the 1980s the civil rights of the Rohingya were revoked. Since then the minority permanently faces latent violence and persecution. What's new is that there can be countrywide spontaneous outbursts of rage due to nationalist Facebook posts raising the crowds.

Besides, there is good news, too. In March 2017, the highest religious authority in Myanmar banned Wirathu from performing sermons for one year. This decision is based on the conclusion that his acts and speeches lead to hate and civil strife. Ironically, this issue also shows Wirathu's big sphere of influence.

Screenshot Facebook Post AFD; @alternativefuerde

Traditional Myanmar moving fast into modern times. Evening impression at Shwedagon Pagoda, Yangon. © Alessandro Gullo



Anyway, the core problem remains the naïve attitude of many users towards the Janus-faced character of social media – as much in developing countries like Myanmar as in Western countries like Germany. According to the *United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)*, that's a matter of "low media and information literacy rate." – But how to deal with it? It's not enough to only take Facebook and other social media players into responsibility, though it's crucial to know about their amplifying roles.

While now the web consumers are scrolling down the contents and using online apps, they are exposed to masses of information which they scan and evaluate within seconds. Any web browser interaction like viewing sites or answering to posts is tracked by algorithms running in the background. And since we are all web consumers, we must be aware that dependent on our user behavior we are steadily creating personalized contents and filter

bubbles by ourselves on behalf of these algorithms – and that this narrowed down information data are echoed back to us! So frankly speaking, we are probably victims of our own *liking* and *following*. Hence, at the least every one of us needs to use social media more mindfully, check for the news sources – and teach this awareness to others.

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