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Can Pandora's Box Be Closed? How People in Myanmar Access and Identify Trustworthy Information After the Coup

ARDETH MAUNG THAWNGHMUNG[1]
JENIFER WHITTEN-WOODRING
TUN TUN LYNN
University of Massachusetts, Lowell, USA

CATHERINE ABOU-KHALIL
Boston University, USA

In 2012, Myanmar's government abolished its censorship board, opening a Pandora's box of unregulated free speech in the country's previously cloistered information environment and raising hopes for a forthcoming transition to democracy. The military coup of 2021 would dash these hopes. To learn more about the media environment in countries that oscillate between democratization and authoritarianism, we use the case of military-ruled Myanmar, assessing how citizens' trust in various news and information sources is affected by government efforts to reimpose information control. We conducted in-depth interviews with people from Myanmar and found that despite violent repression and media restrictions—or perhaps because of them—many in the country risk accessing news and information. Furthermore, the military's brutality and its efforts to constrain communication have led to decreased trust in government media sources. Myanmar's experiences offer a cautionary tale about the limitations of authoritarian governments, particularly those that have weak capacity, to restrict access to information once they have allowed some media freedom and Internet access.

Ardeth Maung Thawnghmung: Ardeth_Thawnghmung@uml.edu
Jenifer Whitten-Woodring: Jenifer_WhittenWoodring@uml.edu
Tun Tun Lynn: TunTun_Lynn@student.uml.edu
Catherine Abou-Khalil: ckhalil@bu.edu
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People who used Facebook for fun have turned into "keyboard fighters" who share the posts for information, provide tips for security and emergency preparation. Getting information is crucial.

—A Myanmar respondent, June 3, 2023

In 2012, a newly elected semicivilian government in Myanmar allowed increased access to Internet and independent news media after decades of maintaining one of the world's most closed communication systems. These moves initially fueled hopes for democracy, which ended abruptly with the 2021 military coup. In the months that followed, the military junta sought to silence critical voices and limit Internet access, but the military soon learned it would be difficult to return to the previous closed communication system. We posit that a communication system is similar to Pandora's box in Greek mythology in that its contents cannot be contained once opened.[2] We find that the military's brutality and its efforts to constrain communication have led to a decreased public trust in government media sources.

After years of relying on Facebook and other social media platforms to access news from a range of sources, people in Myanmar's postcoup era have used them to spread alerts about military repression as well as mobilize protests and armed resistance. When the military blocked Facebook and limited Internet access, Internet users pivoted to virtual private networks (VPNs), which allowed them to access blocked websites, protect their data, and hide their Internet protocol (IP) addresses. Furthermore, when the military banned independent news outlets, journalists responded by taking their operations underground and online.

This struggle for public access to information continues. While the military remains in control of the country, it is difficult to know how successful it has been at controlling communication and the flow of information. To answer this question, we reviewed the junta's efforts to restrict media access and freedom through interviews with local community leaders, researchers, and young activists that focused on the perspectives of media audiences in Myanmar. We find that many respondents no longer consider government-controlled media credible and that they are finding ways to gain unrestricted Internet access.

Although our study is primarily descriptive, it has theoretical implications beyond Myanmar about the ability of authoritarian regimes, specifically those with limited capacity, to restrict Internet use once they have allowed access and the costs regimes incur in terms of public trust of government and government information for attempting to restrict communication. In addition, this study illustrates how a change in political context can reshape popular use and trust of different media sources.

[2] The term "Pandora's box" denotes a prolific source of troubles and originates from Greek mythology. In the same way that Pandora released troubles from her box with hope remaining in it, we propose that from the junta's perspective, the Internet represented trouble; from the people's perspective, it offered hope (for more, see Hesiod, 1932).

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Opening Pandora's Box: The Introduction of (Limited) Democratic Institutions and Internet Access to Myanmar

Myanmar was ruled directly and indirectly since 1962 by a series of military regimes that maintained one of the world's most restricted media systems. The years of economic isolation and military repression against calls for power sharing and greater political autonomy by ethnic minorities led to widespread poverty, underdevelopment, and eventually mass demonstrations for freedom and democracy in 1988. The military increasingly relied on China for trade, investment, and weapons to circumvent Western economic sanctions in response to its brutal crackdown on mass protests and a prodemocracy movement led by Aung San Suu Kyi. To sustain its long-term survival, the military regime implemented semidemocratic reforms through the 2008 constitution, paving the way to a quasicivilian government. The constitution, however, allowed the military to retain significant power, first under its own created party, the Union Solidary Development Party, in 2011 and later through Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) in 2015.

In the course of several years, Myanmar's media system opened under a semidemocratic government composed predominantly of former military generals. Between 2012 and 2014, the government abolished prepublication censorship and began issuing private media licenses. Despite these changes, most news organizations were still state-run, and many private media outlets were owned by associates of high-ranking military officials (Brooten et al., 2019). Though the government no longer overtly controlled all media, both civilian and military authorities maintained indirect control through harassment, intimidation, and punitive legal action against critical journalists (Young et al., 2023). The challenge for the semicivilian government was to determine how much media freedom and Internet access to allow to facilitate economic development, the perception of political legitimacy, and democratic reform without relinquishing political power and empowering the opposition (Howard et al., 2011).

Internet access, mostly through smartphones, grew from less than 1% of the population in 2011 to more than 95% in 2016 when the opposition party, the NLD, took over the government following its victory in the 2015 elections (Brooten et al., 2019). The Internet, which people accessed primarily through Facebook, soon displaced radio as the population's primary news source (Brooten et al., 2019; Whitten-Woodring et al., 2020). By 2018, there were 18 million Facebook users in Myanmar (McLaughlin, 2018). Through its Free Basics program, Facebook provided easy and affordable access to domestic and international news as well as posts by celebrities and political leaders (Bode, 2012).

Internet access connected people within Myanmar to the international community, seemingly paving the way for them to mobilize and push for improved governance and human rights. Thus, there was the perception that Internet access was fostering democratization. At the same time, Internet proliferation gave the military and the civilian government a new way to surveil the population, exert influence, and spread misinformation. United Nations investigators found in 2018 that hate speech on Facebook helped fuel violence against the Rohingya, a religious minority group that has historically suffered from discrimination and repression in Myanmar. While some found that Facebook users were significantly more tolerant of other religions and ethnicities than nonusers (Deejay et al., 2024; Samet et al., 2024), there is evidence that the relaxation of media restrictions, increased availability of Internet access, and electoral

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victory of the civilian opposition party led some people to be more trusting of government and military sources (Whitten-Woodring et al., 2020).

On February 1, 2021, everything changed as a military junta deposed the civilian government and assumed control of the country. Two days later, the junta, which became known as the State Administration Council (SAC), ordered Internet service providers to block Facebook and WhatsApp. Within days, these restrictions were broadened to include Twitter and Instagram (Freedom House, 2022). This period was marked by nightly Internet shutdowns. On March 15, all mobile connections were shut down. On March 18, public WiFi connections were cut off, followed by wireless broadband services on April 1. With the sale of mobile phone and Internet service provider Telenor's Myanmar assets to a close associate of the SAC, the military effectively gained control of mobile service providers.

The SAC targeted journalists and banned most independent media outlets. By the first anniversary of the coup, the SAC had killed at least three journalists and arrested 115 others (Frontier Myanmar, 2022; Reporters Without Borders, 2023). Since the 2021 coup, Myanmar has become one of the world's top jailers of journalists (Reporters Without Borders, 2023). Many outlets moved underground and online. News organizations like the Democratic Voice of Burma and Mizzima, which were banned in the country before 2012, returned to exile to provide news, relying on citizens to report on events within Myanmar.

By 2023, Internet access was limited to 1,200 government-sanctioned websites (Freedom House, 2022). The military raised the price of SIM cards and the cost of fixed-line Internet connections, yet "people in Myanmar continued to use digital tools to share information and organize opposition to the military" (Freedom House, 2022, para. 1). When the SAC banned satellite dishes, people hid them. The military sought to criminalize VPNs, but Myanmar citizens persisted using them, although they risked arrest in doing so. People in Myanmar who did not have Internet access received information from those who had unfettered access through VPNs. They also used phones and word of mouth to share news.

Public Trust and a Shifting Political Environment

Scholars have looked at the use of digital technology and social media in promoting or preventing democratic backsliding, which has grown around the world over the past decade.[3] Some studies have focused on how activists use digital platforms to organize resistance against democratic erosion or build solidarity within and across different cultural and religious groups (Laebens & Lührmann, 2021; Ridout et al., 2020; Ryan & Tran, 2024; Ryan et al., 2024; Stokke & Kyaw, 2024; Thinh, 2024). Others shed light on how both anti- and pro-authoritarian groups have resorted to online measures to undermine each other (Bünte, 2023; Laebens & Lührmann, 2021; Thitsar, 2025). Several studies focus on the importance of the existing political environment in influencing online strategies against antiauthoritarian practices. Chan (2024) found that political consumers are limited to covert resistance in a closed political system like

[3] Although Myanmar never fully democratized, the partial transition to a civilian government was a substantial move toward democratization. Thus, the 2021 military coup that ended all pretense of civilian rule was experienced as democratic backsliding.

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Myanmar, while political consumers can leverage both boycotts and buycotts as overt resistance in hybrid regimes such as Hong Kong and Thailand.

Few studies, however, have investigated how dramatic shifts in a communication system shape people's trust of media and their ability to obtain news or circumvent official restrictions on digital platforms. Instead, most academic studies have focused on media credibility and government trust in democratic countries with a long history of media freedom, such as the United States, or on entrenched authoritarian countries like China, which has adopted a high-tech "great firewall" system, and Russia, which has relied on disinformation (Polyakova & Meserole, 2019). This research in political communication and journalism studies across different regime types indicates that public trust in media will change when political and media environments turn restrictive. Gainous et al.'s (2018) study on Malaysia, which has a restrictive media environment, and Jones' (2004) study on the United States both found that a lack of trust in the state is associated with a lack of trust in media. People in autocracies are less likely to trust journalists because they know journalists must self-censor to secure and maintain their positions, but they are also more likely to trust online news because they perceive it to be less censored (Gainous et al., 2018; Tsfati, 2010). Tsfati and Ariely (2014) found that while there is a lack of trust in the state-controlled media in autocratic countries, there is a lack of trust in private news corporations in democratic countries because of concerns about the influence of ownership.

Other studies in Western democratic countries find that people are more trusting of sources of news and information that reflect their ideology and distrusting of those that do not regardless of the medium (Bode, 2012; Lee, 2010; Lee & Ma, 2011; Stroud, 2007; Truex, 2016; Tsfati, 2010; Tsfati & Cohen, 2012). Restricting media consumption to congruent sources is made easier by Facebook and other platforms because they employ algorithms aimed at keeping people online by directing them to sources that are similar to those they have sought out (Bode, 2012; Lee & Ma, 2011; Messing & Westwood, 2014; Tsfati, 2010).

People's trust in media is also influenced by a source's credibility, meaning its perceived fairness, bias, and accuracy (Bode, 2012; Kang et al., 2011; Luo et al., 2020; Metzger et al., 2010; Sterrett et al., 2019; Tandoc, 2019; Tsfati & Cappella, 2003). It is common for those who distrust traditional news sources to seek news and information online and especially from social media, where they find interactivity, connectivity, and a lack of restrictions (Tsfati, 2010), yet these qualities conflict with journalistic professionalism, which prioritizes independent objective coverage. Online news sources provide the opportunity for interaction, while offline journalism is usually one-way news sharing (Tsfati, 2010). Luo et al. (2020) found that Americans look for social cues when assessing the trustworthiness of a post on social media, including the amount of engagement (likes and comments) and whether the person posting or sharing is someone they know and trust (Luo et al., 2020).

While existing scholarship has expanded our knowledge on media consumption and trust in sources of news and information across different regime types, there has been little systematic analysis on how changes in media restrictions and democratic backsliding shape public trust in media. The case of Myanmar offers a unique opportunity to assess how government efforts to reimpose control over information affect people's trust in various sources of news and information.

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Research Questions

We seek to answer the following research questions to explore how government efforts to reimpose restrictions on access to news and information influence people's trust in media sources:

RQ1: How effective have the military's efforts been in keeping people from accessing the Internet and social media?

RQ2: Where do residents in Myanmar turn to for news and information, and how has this changed since the 2021 coup?

RQ3: What sources do they deem trustworthy and why, and how has this changed since the 2021 coup?

We draw from existing research to hypothesize that (1) the military's efforts to restrict antimilitary communication are highly effective given its willingness to employ brutal repression against rule breakers, (2) respondents in Myanmar will be less trusting of state media and traditional information sources, and (3) they are more likely in postcoup periods to rely on news from relatives, friends, social media platforms, and media that share their political positions.

Methods

To answer these questions, we conducted two rounds of interviews with key informants, most of whom currently live in Myanmar or have recently left the country. The first round of interviews, conducted in early 2023, involved 31 respondents and focused on how people select and assess the trustworthiness of sources of news and information in the precoup and postcoup periods. The second round of interviews, conducted in 2024, involved 22 additional respondents and included more questions on how people cope with restrictions and lack of access to online media. Half of the respondents from the first round of interviews are local researchers who participated in one of the authors' ongoing research projects. The second round of interviews was conducted through several of these local researchers' networks. In addition to local researchers who work for civil society and community-based organizations, religious institutions, and international nonprofit organizations, the respondents included business owners, farmers, community leaders, and employees of government and private enterprises. Both interview rounds were conducted under highly restricted and polarized situations, where we took extraordinary care by not asking respondents' identifying information such as ethnic/language backgrounds. We mainly compared the semidemocratic period (2011–2020) to the postcoup period (2021–present).

The respondents are predominantly young, between the ages of 20 and 40.[4] Because of the political environment in Myanmar, this is a sample of convenience rather than a representative sample. However,

[4] Only five of 31 respondents from the first round of interviews and one of 22 from the second round are Gen Z (ages 18–25). Adults over 40 account for only three of 31 respondents from the first round and two of 22 from the second round. Millennials (ages 26–40) represent 23 of 31 respondents from the first round and 19 of 22 respondents from the second round.

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given the focus on how people access and assess news and information in a postcoup context, it was essential to include those with regular and sophisticated engagement with digital platforms. Young people in Myanmar are disproportionately more likely to use VPNs, engage with Telegram and Facebook for news, and serve as "keyboard fighters" who access and share resistance content online (and offline with those who do not have Internet access), and thus, they represent the segment of the population most directly involved in digital resistance.

Findings

Effectiveness of Military Efforts to Restrict Internet and Information Access

The respondents reported that although it is risky and difficult to access the Internet since the coup, they are doing so and that their focus is more on news and information than entertainment. As one respondent said, "People who used Facebook for fun [before the coup] have turned into 'keyboard fighters' who share the posts for information, provide tips for security and emergency preparation." Some respondents reported an increased use of online and social media platforms since the coup:

> People in Myanmar use Facebook more now than they did before the coup. They share the revolutionary news on Telegram. Most people do not only follow revolutionary media sources, but they also follow media that are the first to report emerging news. Before [the] coup, they were not so interested in the news. (Interviewee #4, 2024)

Our respondents have taken steps to protect themselves against the SAC, which has arrested authors of pro-revolutionary posts on Facebook. One respondent noted how people often mask their identities to prevent the military from accessing their information, saying that "after the coup, most people changed their usernames on Facebook, locked their account, deactivated it, or they changed their account from public to friends only" (Interviewee #2, 2024). Our respondents reported that many people are using VPNs to access Facebook and other platforms, with one noting,

> There are numerous free VPNs available, so we can use social media without difficulty, except for the fact that the Internet speed can be slow. If we want to exchange and discuss sensitive and important matters, we create groups on Viber and Telegram. (Interviewee #6, 2024)

These findings are supported by several reports from the postcoup period. For instance, a survey by the Media Development Investment Fund (MDIF, 2024) of senior executives from 40 independent Myanmar media outlets (most of which are now operating in exile) found significant digital audience growth in the wake of the 2021 coup, particularly from Facebook followers. Lehmann-Jacobsen and Thitsar (2022) also found that despite the military's campaign against satellite dishes, they are still used broadly to access news and information.

Respondents shared that people living in Myanmar have found numerous ways to protect themselves from being caught accessing forbidden information online. For example, they will often have

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two phones: one to use in public that does not have a VPN or any incriminating accounts and another that includes a VPN that they only use at home (Young et al., 2023). People in Myanmar are also much more careful about how they interact online, "After the coup, the Facebook users from Myanmar have avoided making likes, shares, and comments on Facebook posts. [This is] because the military investigates and arrests users who like, share, and comment on news that will hurt the SAC" (Interviewee #13, 2024).

The MDIF (2024) survey also identified a similar trend of decreased interaction with online news media, including making comments or reacting to posts, for fear of retribution from the military. Despite news organizations' efforts to diversify their use of platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram to reach a wider audience, Facebook remains the top platform where they publish their news, and most of the media executives reported a steady growth in their Facebook audience since the coup (MDIF, 2024).

Preferred Sources and Platforms Before and After the Coup

The respondents confirmed that before the coup, the most common way to get news and information was via online platforms, especially Facebook—whether through friends or news pages they followed. Before the coup, in addition to the Internet, television was a common source.[5] Although most respondents relied on Facebook as a platform to access news, many indicated they have multiple ways of getting news, including newspapers and the radio. One respondent explained they received their news "via online and radio news, which [their] dad turned on, and also word of mouth in the village" (Interviewee #21, 2023). It is important to note that the news many people accessed through online platforms, such as Facebook, was produced by newspapers, television, and radio stations.

After the 2021 coup, the Internet and Facebook remained the most common platforms to access news and information. In fact, most respondents reported increased Internet use after the coup. This may be because of the need to keep abreast of political developments within the context of the escalation of violence and uncertain political environments. For example, Lehmann-Jacobsen and Thitsar (2022) found that while politics was widely mentioned by their respondents in 2018, particularly among men, this topic "outperformed other topics by a landslide in the 2022 study" (p. 10).

Before the coup, TV was the second most favorite medium, partially because of accessibility; however, this changed after the coup. Our respondents said that watching television news decreased,

[5] The 2017 International Republican Institute (IRI) survey (p. 41) of 3,000 citizens of Myanmar found that more people in the precoup period relied on TV (32%), family and friends (19%), and radio (17%) as sources of news than on Facebook (14%). However, 73% of respondents said they get most or some news from Facebook (IRI, 2017, p. 47). Seventeen percent of the respondents said they listen to state media MRTV regularly (IRI, 2017, p. 57). Lehmann-Jacobsen (2018) found that television was a popular medium in precoup Myanmar, with more than half of the respondents reportedly watching it every day (p. 9). They reportedly highlighted state-owned media as being the most trustworthy and reliable during the precoup period and that Facebook served as a major source of Myanmar's news and information flows (Lehmann-Jacobsen, 2018, pp. 13, 16–18).

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none of them reported reading newspapers, and only a small number indicated they still listened to radio news. Meanwhile, their online news access has become more focused on specific websites and Facebook. Some respondents said that in addition to friends and family, they gravitate toward Facebook groups with people living in different regions. One respondent said they prefer "reading reliable online news and contacting friends who live in different areas of the country by phone to get information" (Interviewee #10, 2023).[6]

Accessing news via word of mouth, particularly from friends, family, or people living in different areas, increased after the coup and remained the second most common way our respondents reported receiving their news. One respondent indicated that how they obtain and share news varies depending on access to electricity and telephones: "When there isn't electricity or access to the Internet, people primarily receive information by word of mouth, and if [they] get to the area where there is Internet access, [they] read news on Facebook" (Interviewee #3, 2023).

Our respondents' favorite sources for news and information remained similar before and after the coup, but there have been some interesting changes. Word-of-mouth sharing was not mentioned as often by respondents as a favorite way to obtain news before the coup, but they reported that in the postcoup environment, they "rely on word of mouth, as [they] don't have Internet access all the time" (Interviewee #23, 2023). One respondent who has been displaced from her home also noted:

> It is very difficult when we have no Internet connection. We don't know which people are relocated to what places. We can now use the Internet because the place where we have relocated gets Internet connection. We don't know the conditions of people who don't get Internet. (Interviewee #8, 2024)

When the Internet is down or people are concerned their phones are being monitored, word of mouth is seen as the best option for information sharing, but their preference is the Internet. Respondents still "prefer online sources that are easier to access and you can check any time" (Interviewee #1, 2023). Most respondents said they try to access news at all levels (national, international, and local), but that local- or town-level news is available more through word of mouth or Facebook groups and pages.

Media Trustworthiness Before and After the Coup

Consensus remained among respondents that their least favored news source was news from government and military newspapers and TV channels, which was consistent before and after the coup. It follows that the government-owned media networks Myanmar Radio and Television Broadcasting (MRTV) and Myawaddy (MWD) were the least trusted sources after the coup, with more than two-thirds of the respondents mentioning that at least one of these sources lacked credibility. Many respondents said they

[6] This finding is also supported by Lehmann-Jacobsen and Thitsar (2022), who conducted a survey of 223 people and found a decline in the reliance on television as the most popular medium. They attributed this decline in part to a loss of license by most popular television stations and official restrictions on politically sensitive content, as well as an increase in Internet usage (Lehmann-Jacobsen & Thitsar, 2022, p. 10).

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do not trust military government news sources because they "are lying" and because they "praise the government, hide the bad, and write only the good side of the government" (Interviewee #24, 2023). One respondent mentioned that news presented by government media is "completely different from what is really happening in the country" (Interviewee #16, 2023). Another explained in more detail why they dislike the SAC's news:

> [It is] brainwashing and propaganda news. For example, about the Mocha Storm, what they are saying is different than what is happening on the ground. They show people donating and giving food, but what they are actually giving people is a small tin of rice, an egg, and a piece of metal for a roof. It's really disappointing. (Interviewee #26, 2023)[7]

Though it had been an issue before the coup, awareness of government bias grew afterward. In contrast, trust in nongovernment sources, especially news shared on social media platforms, increased after the coup.

When asked about their opinions on international versus domestic news, many respondents indicated they check international news like VOA, BBC, RFA, and sometimes CNN, finding these sources reliable because of their global credibility and longevity and because "they have fact checked and included different perspectives" (Interviewee #4, 2023). However, most said they prefer domestic news. Our 2024 respondents were critical of international news media because there was "less coverage of Myanmar's news in Western media," as the attention shifted from the 2021 coup to other crises such as the war in Ukraine (Interviewee #4, 2024).

Almost all respondents emphasized the importance of learning from people "on the ground" or indicated the importance of community-centered news when asked how they decide which news sources to trust. This was also the case before the coup, as one respondent explained, "Government news talks for itself. Facebook talks for the people and what's happening with the people."[8]

Our respondents indicated that trust is mainly decided by analyzing (not in any particular order) the ownership of the news outlet, the source of the information, and whether the story reflects their lived experiences. First, if the news organization is government-owned, it is less trustworthy. The presumption is that these sources are focused on spreading military or government propaganda. Second, journalists and news media are perceived as more credible if they are on the scene and/or talking to people on the ground. Third, people are more likely to trust sources if the content is congruent with their beliefs and lived experiences. Fourth, on Facebook, the credibility or "trust is based on number of followers and page's

[7] Cyclone Mocha struck western Myanmar on May 14, 2023, destroyed homes, buildings, farmland, and infrastructure, and incurred damages of $2.24 billion, equivalent to 3.4% of Myanmar's GDP in 2021 (The World Bank, 2023, p. 1).

[8] This quote is from interviews conducted in Myanmar in 2019 before the coup (Whitten-Woodring et al., 2020, p. 7).

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bluemark,"[9] how long the source has been around, and if they fact check (Interviewee #31, 2023). Lastly, some respondents indicated that since the coup, they take matters into their own hands and often cross-check their sources. For instance, if they received news from word of mouth, they would look up news online and also watch TV news channels.

The respondents indicated that people in Myanmar care about news centering on people's firsthand experience within their community, "People want to know what's happening in the country more than ever after the coup. We're always looking for reliable sources of information on social media" (Interviewee #3, 2024). Respondents repeatedly mentioned they prefer many perspectives when reading their news.

Criteria for Assessing Trustworthiness of Media Sources

The criteria for assessing trustworthiness of a source include the type of news outlet, the political position of the individual, and the perceived bias of the news coverage. Before the coup, respondents were divided, preferring either state-owned news outlets that relied primarily on government sources or independently owned media that offered alternative views. Respondents said people with Internet access also found trustworthy posts by individuals on social media platforms sharing their experiences, but the trustworthiness of the posts depended on the identity of those individuals. Before the coup, respondents were divided about their assessment of the trustworthiness of individual posts, with some preferring posts from government officials or celebrities and others preferring posts from people "on the ground" or close to a given situation. After the coup, all except one respondent indicated a preference for the news to be straight from people "on the ground," regardless of the medium. They demonstrated a strong interest in community news, especially from the resistance movements.

The third criterion and point of assessment is the perceived bias of the news coverage, but the assessment for bias shifted after the coup. One study (Young et al., 2023) conducted before the coup indicates that people's greatest concern about international media was that they were often one-sided, especially concerning coverage of the Rohingya. Non-Rohingya respondents from this study were critical of international media coverage of the Rohingya crisis. They perceived the news coverage as biased and felt their own struggles were overlooked. In the postcoup era, our respondents said the bias of the international media shifted from "imbalanced coverage of Rohingyas issues" to "insufficient attention on the plight of Myanmar." Our respondents reported a preference for multiple perspectives and greater concern about one-sided coverage by the SAC government news.

The criteria for assessing the credibility of posts on social media platforms also shifted. Before the coup, respondents found official sources more credible, though definitions of "official" varied, with some considering celebrity posts on Facebook to be official and others considering government posts official. Postcoup, interviewees paid more attention to Facebook's blue checkmark verification, whether the information had been fact checked, and the poster's number of followers.

[9] The Facebook blue checkmark is a verification badge that "indicates that Facebook has confirmed that it is the authentic presence for that person or brand" (Facebook, 2026, p. 1).

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We find evidence that strategies to assess the credibility of all news and information outlets also changed. As shown in Table 1, before the coup, interviewees relied primarily on instinct when assessing trustworthiness of a source or story. Postcoup, our respondents reported they will cross-check among various sources and with friends and family to see if the news stories are consistent and accurate.

Table 1. Criteria for Assessing Trustworthiness of Media Sources.

Criteria	Before the Coup	After the Coup
Type of news/information outlet	Divided: Respondents preferred either government-owned media or independent media Unified: Most interviewees liked social media platforms (especially Facebook).	Unified: Outlets with a focus on community news, social media platforms, and word of mouth
Source of information	Divided: Government and/or celebrity sources or firsthand experiences of people	People "on the ground" sharing their firsthand experiences
Perceived bias of outlet	Opposed to one-sided news and propaganda	Prefer multiple perspectives, opposed to one-sided news and propaganda
Credibility	Use of official sources	Verification, fact checking, number of followers
Strategy	Relying on instinct and feelings	Cross-checking among various news sources

Generational Differences

We acknowledge that our study has limitations, in that most of our respondents are Millennials, as well as in our reliance on our network members, most of whom are anti-junta. There is also a need to explore potential generational and regional differences in media trust and utilization of different sources of news and information. While we are unable to draw meaningful conclusions about these differences because of the limited number of cases and the overrepresentation of Millennials in our interviews, we observed some differences across generations. For example, four of five Gen Z (ages 18–25) respondents reported being skeptical toward state-controlled television stations before the coup and said they relied primarily on international and independent media, while two of the three older respondents reported they trusted state media. Millennial (ages 26–40) respondents, on the other hand, reported more mixed habits in the precoup period, with 22 of 23 Millennials identifying independent and international outlets as their most trusted sources and 12 of them reporting occasionally watching state TV and reading newspapers. In the postcoup period, all respondents across generations reported they rejected state-owned media entirely for misrepresenting facts and for dismissing the severity of the military violence. While most Millennials actively followed exiled media, many of them and one Gen Z respondent said they monitored state media selectively to analyze the junta's discourse, assess military movements, or compare narratives across platforms.

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A majority of all respondents viewed Western media as "generally fair" or "somewhat fair," but they criticized them for their lack of understanding about Myanmar's context, insufficient coverage on Myanmar in the postcoup period, and failure to capture the magnitude of the violence and the political crisis. Both Gen Z and Millennial respondents now rely heavily on VPNs and have shifted sensitive communication to encrypted platforms, using precautionary measures by restricting accounts, keeping fake or multiple Facebook accounts and mobile phones, and clearing sensitive data, posts, group chat histories, or applications during travel. Fifteen of 19 Millennials reported they have increased their Internet use to access news, ensure personal security, and perform remote work. Millennials were also the group most likely to emphasize the proliferation of misinformation and fake accounts, psywar content, and the need to verify posts across multiple sources.

In contrast, the older cohort in the second interviews reported they reduced their online activity and avoided riskier platforms entirely because of cost, government restrictions and shutdowns, fear of surveillance, and limited digital skills. They still rely on Facebook and other online sources as their primary source for news and display trust in exiled news outlets, but mainly focus on a mix of radio, interpersonal communication, and simplified Facebook routines in the postcoup period.

Again, while these differences are interesting, they are based on small samples of convenience, and so we caution against drawing conclusions about them. Instead, this study should be seen as a starting point. In short, more research—ideally a large N study—is needed to test the utility of our findings, but it is difficult, if not impossible, to conduct this type of study in postcoup Myanmar.

Discussion

Contrary to our first hypothesis, which predicts that Myanmar's military would be effective in constraining online behavior, both our primary data and secondary sources show that online users continue to circumvent military restrictions to obtain news and share information. While the junta has tried to return to a closed media environment, it has not been able to close the lid to the Pandora's box of information that was opened in Myanmar in 2012. Less than a decade of relatively unrestricted Internet access enabled people to become Internet savvy as they quickly learned to circumvent the junta's efforts to restrict their access.

When the SAC banned critical news media, journalists continued their reporting, often from exile, relying on online communication from citizens (effectively citizen journalists) to provide information "from the ground." Later, as the junta imposed Internet restrictions and banned all but 1,200 websites, including Facebook, online users circumvented these restrictions by using VPNs, even though they could be arrested for doing so. These changes are not only because of people being accustomed to almost a decade of open Internet and information access but also because of a growth of distrust in the government as they have gained access to news beyond government-controlled outlets on platforms online. From 2012 to 2020, the rapid introduction of the Internet and adaptation of Facebook normalized access to relatively uncensored information in Myanmar. Unlike authoritarian regimes with the capacity for more sophisticated censorship and filtering of content, the SAC has, since 2021, relied on the brute force of Internet shutdowns and overt

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punishment of those who defy their criminalization of VPN access. These tactics have further undermined public trust in government and government-controlled information.

Our respondents indicated that, following the coup, online users who previously used the Internet and social media platforms primarily for entertainment became more interested in accessing these platforms for news and information. Social media platforms have become a vital tool for communication and mobilization for protestors and revolutionaries, as we have seen with the Arab Spring and youth protests in Chile (Howard & Hussain, 2013; Markham, 2014; Suh et al., 2017; Valenzuela et al., 2012). As other studies have demonstrated, accessibility to news and information facilitates political mobilization (Neyazi, 2019). Despite the risks, people are using the Internet and social media platforms to follow the resistance movement, and some have become "keyboard fighters" to combat the junta's efforts to censor critical information and support the resistance movement. Social media has become an important tool to challenge authoritarian government and bring democratic reforms.

We nevertheless find support for two of our hypotheses; that respondents in Myanmar are more likely in postcoup periods to be less trusting of state media and traditional information sources (hypothesis 2), and to rely on news from relatives, friends, social media platforms, and media that share their political positions (hypothesis 3). Our findings reveal that more restricted political and media environments led individuals to rely more on media they perceived as independent of the state and nontraditional sources of information. We find that before the 2021 coup, some of our respondents relied on newspapers and TV channels, most of which were government-owned, to obtain their news. Since the coup, more respondents have become cautious of government-owned news outlets, and most people are not reading newspapers or watching television news. Instead, more interviewees are obtaining news through word-of-mouth communication mainly because of safety and access issues.

Respondents' preference for online news and social media platforms grew stronger after the coup, which indicates a shift from accessing print and broadcast media, although it is important to note that most broadcast and print media also maintain an online presence on Facebook and other platforms. The National Unity Government, a parallel government composed of the deposed NLD's elected lawmakers and prominent activists, established its own radio and TV stations, which can also be accessed online.

Before the coup, some respondents found government news sources to be trustworthy; however, they have become unpopular in the current environment. Respondents kept referring to the importance of news from people on the ground. They share information with friends, family, and their communities through phone calls and word of mouth and report that people who do not have Internet access get information from those who do. They are more likely to trust journalists who are on the scene and/or talking to people on the ground, and/or contents that are congruent with their beliefs and lived experiences, and/or posters who have many followers and those who have a bluemark. Their perceived bias of international news coverage media has shifted from unfair coverage of Rohingyas issues in the precoup period to insufficient attention on the plight of Myanmar in the postcoup period. Before the coup, our interviewees were skeptical and worried about the spread of misinformation through Facebook. This concern remains in the postcoup period, but distrust in social media platforms has decreased since the coup.

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Our findings align with those of other recent studies. Respondents from a study by Lehmann-Jacobsen and Thitsar (2022), for instance, ranked military-/government-associated news (MRTV, Myawaddy, MRTV-4, Eleven, New Light of Myanmar) as the most untrustworthy sources, and exiled media (Mizzima, DBV, BBC Burmese, Khit Thit, RFA, VOA) were ranked as the most trustworthy news sources (p. 16). Barker et al. (2021) also found that trust in social media increased by 56%, and trust in family and friends increased by 150%, while trust in traditional information sources like TV (54% drop) and newspapers (46% drop) declined. Lehmann-Jacobsen and Thitsar (2022) found a continued correlation between trust in a news organization and its local presence. Ethnic media outlets have, in particular, become relevant in the current situation, being able to report in real time on social media for local audiences.

Beyond these findings, we also uncover some interesting patterns across different generations that require more in-depth and large N research. While all respondents across generations reported they rejected state-owned media entirely in the postcoup period, Gen Z respondents were more likely to show skepticism toward state-controlled television stations than their older counterparts in the precoup period. In addition, both Gen Z and Millennian respondents are more likely than their older cohorts to increase online activity to share news and mobilize protest and to use sophisticated precautionary measures to avoid the junta's surveillance in the postcoup period.

Conclusion

According to Greek mythology, when Pandora opened her box, she forever released its evils, with one important exception: Hope remained within the box. In Myanmar, after decades of maintaining one of the world's most closed communication systems, the semicivilian government opened Pandora's box of Internet access. In this case, though, hope also escaped the military's confines because Myanmar's keyboard fighters will not go back to that closed system and the SAC lacks the capacity to stop them from accessing the Internet and information. Our preliminary findings address our key research questions regarding online behavior and media trust in the environment that experiences democratic erosion by demonstrating how online users continue to circumvent military restrictions to obtain news and share information. They also shed light on how military's brutality and its efforts to constrain communication have led to a decreased public trust in government media sources, and increased reliance on relatives, friends, social media platforms, and media that share their political positions.

The case of Myanmar also has implications for democratic countries that are experiencing authoritarian shifts because it sheds light on how a shift in political context can reshape use and trust of different media sources. Future research should investigate how the introduction of censorship and lack of access to information that often accompanies democratic backsliding influence political communication, especially in the United States and Europe.

Myanmar's case has limited implications for highly capable and strong authoritarian countries like China, which has advanced technology and human power to control digital spaces. In China, censorship predated Internet access; thus, as Internet access increased, the Chinese government was able to develop and adapt its censorship regime. In contrast, the introduction of the Internet in Myanmar was accompanied by

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a reduction of the government's censorship regime. Yang (2025) found that, in China, consistent censorship of information—apolitical as well as political—has normalized censorship and led to acceptance of it.

In contrast, the case of Myanmar is particularly relevant to situations where the state has limited capacity and resources to deliver services and suppress antigovernment activities. Myanmar's military is notorious for its brutality against civilians, but is also infamous for lacking the capacity to administer and implement its draconian policies. Additionally, the coup brought about a collapse of state infrastructure and the depletion of civil servants that had amassed during the earlier period of semicivilian government. Furthermore, the removal of the semicivilian government increased the public's demand for information, its suspicion of the state media, and its awareness of the SAC's manipulation of information. As Roberts (2020) argued, the demand for information and awareness of information manipulation will foster both resilience and resistance to censorship. In sum, the brutality of Myanmar's military combined with its lack of capacity emboldened Myanmar's keyboard fighters to keep the lid of Pandora's box open.

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