Deadly posts

Examining and countering harmful
social media content in post-coup Myanmar

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Acknowledgment

Contents

Executive summary

The 2021 military coup in Myanmar dismantled the country's nascent democratic reforms and, over the past four years, has escalated into a full-scale war between the military regime and anti-coup armed groups. In its brutal crackdown on pro-democracy forces resisting the coup, the military has sought to control the public sphere both online and offline.

Spreading propaganda to legitimize the actions of the junta is a common tactic among authoritarian regimes and Myanmar is no exception. In the post-coup context, numerous unverified accounts and channels have emerged on widely used social media platforms—such as Facebook, Telegram, YouTube, and TikTok—disseminating vast amounts of hate propaganda, justifying the regime's atrocities, and spreading harmful content. Much of this content targets individuals who express opposition to the military. Civil society organizations, fact-checking groups, and independent media have reported on these activities, prompting platforms like Facebook to respond by deplatforming users, removing content, and shutting down accounts. Despite these measures, bad actors continue to adapt, taking advantage of weak content moderation policies to maintain their presence online.

The real-world impacts of hate speech and harmful content on social media have been well-documented in existing research. In post-coup Myanmar, some of the most disturbing content poses life-threatening risks, including doxing personal information, encouraging arbitrary arrests or lethal attacks, and inciting violence against political opponents. In addition to extensive documentation by independent organizations, several participants in this study identified content calling for actions against political dissents as one of the most serious threats facing the people of Myanmar. While propaganda circulated by the military and its supporters aims to justify atrocities, most people do not believe these narratives, as their intent is often overt and easily recognizable. Rather than persuading the public, the primary objective appears to be demonstrating the regime's power and instilling fear to deter dissent.

Current regulatory frameworks and content moderation policies of social media companies remain inadequate and are frequently exploited by military actors. These shortcomings enable the manipulation of digital platforms for committing and legitimizing human rights violations. This study explores how religious, ethnic, and gender minority groups are targeted on social media and analyzes the discursive strategies used by military supporters to justify violence and frame pro-democracy groups as aggressors. These efforts aim to normalize state-led oppression and present violent measures against dissenters as necessary and inevitable. The paper also examines countermeasures undertaken by social media companies and civil society organizations to address these threats.

Introduction

Despite the enormous benefits that social media brings to society, one downside is how it assists the spread of hate speech and harmful content to a larger audience. Hate speech, hate propaganda, and atrocity-justifying ideologies existed in society long before social media was created. They have had a huge impact on historical crimes such as genocide and mass killings as well as extremist campaigns and racial conflicts in the contemporary world. Myanmar is no exception. The political liberalization in 2010 brought the internet and mobile phones to Myanmar, with around half the population accessing mobile phones by 2016 and 18 million people using Facebook by 2018 (Stecklow, 2018). Hate speech on Facebook fuelled anti-Rohingya campaigns in 2017 and 2018 that led to genocide (IIMM, 2024). In response, Facebook took action to remove content that includes words promoting hate and inciting violence against the Rohingya and Muslim minority in Myanmar (Crystal, 2023).

However, after the military coup in 2021, the prevalence of military supporters weaponizing social media to threaten pro-democracy activists and anyone else opposing the junta has become seriously concerning. Actions through social media platforms, especially Telegram, include doxxing and urging authorities to arrest, imprison, and execute political dissents (Crystal, 2023). Labelling this issue an "online campaign of terror," UN experts expressed their concerns and urged social media platforms to prevent and mitigate these human rights abuses on their platforms (OHCHR, 2023). Despite the actions and policies of social media companies, these actors still maintain their presence on social media platforms, though the number of users and contents vary among platforms. Beyond the propaganda and hate speech typical of authoritarian regimes, Myanmar has seen a surge in online violence that has resulted in real-world harm. Intellectum Research Consortium (2014) captured these relationships by examining the messages of pro-military Telegram channels and the human rights abuses on the ground.

Hate speech and life-threatening messages by pro-military users against political dissenters have been widely reported. Target groups vary, and include women, ethnic minority groups, and newly founded anti-coup political groups. These messages also promote hatred and incitement, and their formulation, including narratives, varies depending on the target groups. It is evident that the military is responsible for mass killings and atrocities on the ground. The online messaging also plays an influential role in encouraging offenders, praising them, and justifying their actions in mass killings and genocides throughout history—for example, in the cases of Rwanda and the Holocaust (Maynard & Benesch, 2021). Dangerous speech that influences violent offline actions is not limited to hateful messages; other forms such as legitimizing, glorifying and justifying violence itself are also dangerous. While certain messages may be considered hate speech or dangerous in one context, they may be not in another. Similarly, the extent of harm caused by inflammatory speech differs from one country to another. Therefore, in analyzing the degree of harmful speech, it is essential to consider not only the speech itself but also other factors, such as the broader social and political context.

By adopting the analytical framework of dangerous speech developed by Maynard and Benesch (2021), which emphasizes both context and content, this paper examines the speaker, the audience, the socio-historical environment, the medium of dissemination, and the content of the message. While all these elements are crucial for analyzing dangerous speech, they are not all necessary to define a message as dangerous. The two key factors in defining dangerous speech are the content and the presence of a susceptible audience. Nevertheless, the other aspects are essential for understanding how content is formulated and how the meaning of a message is shaped—often rooted in prior conflicts. This paper focuses on social media platforms as the primary medium, as they enable rapid and low-cost dissemination to a wide audience.

To prevent the spread of dangerous content and minimize risks of violence and atrocities, social media companies are not solely responsible, even though they possess significantly greater resources and capacities. Other stakeholders—such as the state, international organizations, and civil society groups—can also take preventive measures. However, these actors cannot tackle the problem alone; coordinated and collaborative action is essential. This paper also sheds light on the existing responses of these stakeholders to the prevalence of harmful content in post-coup Myanmar, as well as the impacts of their actions.

Research methodology

This research sought to answer two main research questions.

The first question is to explore the nature of dangerous content on social media after the coup and how it can threaten targeted audiences on the ground. The research analyzed a total of 32 social media monitoring reports from 2021 to 2024 by three national groups: The Red Flag, Burma Affairs and Conflict Study (BACS), and another group that prefers to keep anonymity for the safety of team members. (This organization is cited as "local social media monitoring group" and has extensive experience in monitoring hate speech and fake news, sharing their findings among trusted partners). All have been monitoring hate speech, propaganda and fake news in Myanmar since the military coup. Furthermore, semi-structured interviews with 13 participants from CSOs, NGOs, fact-checking groups, and national media were conducted to gather their observations on dangerous content and how they can impact society. For the safety of participants, their identities are anonymized in presenting the findings.

The second question is to analyze counter-responses of key stakeholders—particularly social media companies and civil society groups. Most harmful content is disseminated by pro-military forces, resulting in no intervention by the junta that controls the major state infrastructure. On the other hand, a shadow government opposing the military does not have control over institutions and infrastructure to enforce regulations to counter harmful content on social media. Therefore, this paper cannot lay out the responses of the state actors against such content. Regarding data collection, we reviewed the publicly available social media policies and then we reached out to respective policy teams for interviews in addition to the interviews with civil society organizations. However, none accepted our invitation, and one provided a link to the community guidelines and policies of its platform.

Literature review

Harmful content on social media

Spreading hate speech and inciting violence online are not nascent phenomena. Practitioners and academics alike have discussed their impacts as well as strategies to grapple with them. The first challenge is to define what is online hate speech and what is not. Notwithstanding an ongoing debate, a common working definition has been developed, referring to any speech via digital communication platforms to disseminate messages that promote hatred, discrimination, or incitements targeting any individuals and groups based on their identities such as race, ethnicity, colour, nationality, religion, gender, and disability (Castaño-Pulgarín et al., 2021; Piazza, 2020; Tsesis, 2002). Hate speech can be found in several forms, such as religious hate speech, online racism, political hate speech, gender online hate and terrorism (Castaño-Pulgarín et al., 2021). Offenders can include "lone wolf" individuals, organized hate groups, and state actors, mostly in the case of genocide and mass atrocities.

Defining a word or text as hateful can be contested depending on different languages and cultures. Furthermore, establishing a broad and ambiguous definition could impose challenges to monitoring, preventing, and tackling harmful online content. Benesch et al. (2021) indicate that prevailing hate speech definitions refer to content that targets individuals and groups based on their shared identity, and so they raised the question about speech that insults individuals without referring to their belonging to a particular group. Furthermore, they underscore that the word "hatred" can be emotionally subjective. Therefore, they provide a clearer and narrower definition by describing dangerous speech as "any form of expression (e.g. speech, text, or images) that can increase the risk that its audience will condone or commit violence against members of another group" (Benesch et al., 2021).

Two crucial points should be noted in the above definition. One is that dangerous content can be found in several formats in addition to words or text. Since hate groups and bad actors have been seeking to create their hate content creatively to avoid regulations, other scholars also remind us that such content can be found beyond text format (Brown, 2018; Matamoros-Fernández & Farkas, 2021). Another point, which is contested among scholars and practitioners, is the direct relationship between online hate speech and violence in the real world. Despite admitting the serious consequences of online dangerous speech on offline violence, Benesch et al. (2021) assert that their definition refers to an increase in the risk of violence since offenders of violence can be motivated by several factors.

In responding to this debate, many scholars also argue that online hate speech has grave impacts on real-world events by providing numerous examples. For example, Castaño-Pulgarín et al. (2021) highlight real-world violent acts fostered by cyber hate speech, such as the 2019 shooting in Christchurch, the 2019 verbal assault against an anti-Brexit politician, and anti-western hate supporting Osama bin Laden's son and Al Qaeda. The study of Piazza (2020) on the relationship between politicians' hate speech and domestic terrorism, collecting data from 135 to 163 countries between 2000 and 2017, reveals the direct causal relationship between online hate speech by politicians and domestic violent attacks. Indeed, the impact of hate speech and hate ideologies on the bloodiest atrocities and genocides in the Holocaust in Nazi Germany, Stalinist Russia, Rwanda, Yugoslavia, and Cambodia were presented by several scholars

(Maynard, 2015; Oberschall, 2013). The recent case of genocide against Rohingya in Myanmar is a salient example of the impact of hate speech and hate ideologies online (Stecklow, 2018). Tsesis (2002) claims that the danger of incitement and indoctrination that drives followers to commit violent acts is equivalent to whether they are circulated through virtual or physical spaces. The differences are the wider reach and the faster speed of spreading via online networks.

Many scholars such as Tsesis (2002), Maynard (2015), Piazza (2002), Maynard and Benesh (2016), Waller (2002), and Oberschall (2013) underscore the role of hate propaganda employed to justify and legitimize mass atrocities, genocide, and systematic murder. In these cases, three common features of hate propaganda can be found: negatively stereotyping outgroups in which dehumanization can be mostly observed; constructing outgroups as an extreme threat; and eliminationist discourse, including incitement for killing. Piazza (2020) explains why hate propaganda is so attractive to offenders. First, dehumanizing outgroups helps to motivate the followers to commit violent acts against them. Second, it is the easiest tool for offenders to unite and gain support from ingroup members.

Analyzing dangerous content usually focuses on how offenders frame target groups and the features mentioned above are tactics employed for treating victims (Maynard, 2015). As such, Maynard argues that the analytical framework for dangerous content also entails the elements of how those who commit violence are encouraged. Apart from the three elements for framing the outgroups—dehumanization, threat construction, and guilt-attribution illustrating the outgroups committed moral or legal crimes—Maynard articulates three other mechanisms that encourage followers and justify their violent acts: "deagentification," "virtuetalk," and future bias.

Deagentification is an attempt to convince followers to believe that they have no choices as unavoidable conditions such as the nature of war, the actions of outgroups, and racial struggle force them to commit violent acts. In other words, it can be understood as "destruction of alternatives." In this way, the killers do not see that the decisions are made by any agency. *Virtuetalk* is formulating a social value and satisfactory mental image for perpetrators by describing their violent actions as duty, honour, courage, loyalty, patriotism and self-defence. Such a form of ideological conception, i.e., the glorification of killing, can be found in several classic cases of atrocities. *Future bias* is constructing a future desirable vision and convincing the supporters of atrocities that such future conditions greatly outweigh the costs of present actions and their consequences.

The analytical frameworks noted above are helpful for content analysis, which is vital to observing harmful ideologies and speech. However, understanding the milieu where such content emerges is also imperative. For that, Benesch et al. (2021) propose a framework with five aspects to analyze the milieu of dangerous speech: speaker, audience, medium, message, and context. Examining the social, cultural, and political context is also essential to understand the language of hate speech, as some hateful words and dehumanization words are created based on the historical and cultural background of the social conflicts in certain countries. Therefore, analyzing both context and content is crucial to prevent and tackle dangerous speech.

Regulating online harmful content

Commercial solutions and legal actions are common tactics for handling hate speech. Several countries have anti-hate speech laws and criminalize hate speech and incitement for violence. However, legal action faces various limitations in tackling online harmful content. For example, Brown (2018) contends that adopting laws takes time while hate groups attempt to create their content innovatively to avoid legal action. The process of adapting laws could not follow with the same speed as the online content which is instantaneous and spontaneous. Another challenge for legal action is that the authorities cannot act when defendants are not under their jurisdiction (Tsesis, 2001). Online messages spread across countries and speech from one place could affect violent actions in another, making it difficult to press charges.

In addition to these practical limitations, there are other drawbacks to the legal approach. Benesch et al. (2021) stress that many governments employ anti-hate-speech and related laws to punish political rivals and to silence activists and journalists. This provokes debate about criminalizing online hate speech versus protecting freedom of expression. Another reality to consider is that when the regime and its supporters are active distributors of online dangerous speech, authorities may ignore the law, and legal action will not be effective.

Considering the limitations of legal actions, scholars underscore the role of internet companies in tackling online harmful content (Tsesis, 2001; Brown, 2018; Wooley, 2002; Benesch et al., 2021). Brown (2018) asserts that tech companies have a moral responsibility to tackle dangerous content on their platforms. By establishing policies, social media companies prevent certain words and content that are hateful and incite violence. However, monitoring harmful content requires substantial resources since billions of people use social media and disseminate messages every day. To cope with that, social media companies employ automated methods to detect harmful content, with many flaws. For example, these companies are prone to remove content shared by human rights defenders and activists for including words that are against their rules. Tsesis (2001) highlights that private service providers filter content too widely, banning sites and content indiscriminately. Therefore, Tsesis raises a profound question as to what extent power should be handed to those with commercial interests to define. and block hate speech.

In practice, policing hate speech, disinformation, and even propaganda is not simple. Woolley (2022) stresses that it is impossible to track who is behind today's propagandistic content as producers employ encrypted apps, anonymise their accounts, and hire proxy persons. In his research on digital propaganda, he found three trends in how propagandists adopt their tactics and avoid actions by regulators and moderators. First, online propagandists move to change their strategies from "inorganic" to "semi-organic," meaning that they assign real persons together with digital tools rather than relying completely on automated tools such as bots. Second, producers of such propaganda hire social media influencers to spread their messages. Since payment or benefits are not transferred via social media platforms, it is challenging for companies to identify the relation and to track the sponsors of the content. The final strategy is to employ encrypted messaging apps (EMAs) and private chats, which imposes difficulties for regulators and monitoring groups to track them. Although propagandists' content may not always include hate speech and incitements to violence, it is a serious threat when it does. Most concerning is when this is carried out by organized extremist groups or authoritarian regimes to support systematic murders or mass atrocities.

Propaganda of the military regime

Massive propaganda from the military regime in Myanmar, like other authoritarian regimes in the world, is not a new phenomenon. Ruling the country for around 50 years from the coup in 1962 until liberalization in 2010, the Myanmar military employed state-owned media such as newspapers and television programs, and the education system, as propaganda machines (Dukalskis, 2017). Once the country had access to the internet with the political transition in 2010, the military kept spreading its propaganda messages on social media platforms (IIMM, 2024). The generals invested immense resources in propaganda machines and channels after the coup in 2021.

The State Administrative Council (SAC), for example, announced the plan on 23 October 2021 to provide funding up to 15 billion Myanmar kyat (around 7 million USD) to those from the entertainment industries and media sectors who collaborate with the coup leaders (Nwet Kay Khine, 2022). Significantly, the SAC scaled up its propaganda machine on all available social media platforms since the coup. The tactics, platforms, and patterns of content creation were well documented and analyzed, for example, in the report "Cruel Footstep, Cunning Step: Analyzing the Trends of Pro-Myanmar Military Propagandists" published by The Red Flag (2024) (See also Thu Rain Hlaing, 2023 & The Red Flag, 2023). According to these reports, the propaganda disseminated by the junta and its supporters often includes false information, misinformation and disinformation, as well as fabricated news framing pro-democracy activists and anti-coup groups as a threat to the country and perpetrators of violent acts. A member of a national media group focusing on fact-checking indicates that the pro-military propagandists sought to use VK by luring their followers to join but such an attempt failed since VK was not popular among Myanmar netizens (Interview with HSSM-08, 2024).

Notwithstanding the tremendous efforts and investment of the SAC in its propaganda machine, people do not buy their propaganda narratives. According to the observation of the research team on these propaganda channels, even SAC supporters often expressed doubts and questioned them. Tireless efforts of national and international NGOs providing awareness about digital literacy during the past ten years contributed to this, according to interviewees in this research. What is the regime's aim, in that case, in engaging in massive propaganda that has no power to convince people? Huang (2015) proposes a useful concept to respond to it, explaining that indoctrination is not the sole intention of propaganda by dictators. He contends that political propaganda is usually understood as an attempt to persuade people with messages of pro-regime values to shape the behaviours and attitudes of its citizens. However, producing unified massive propaganda messages has another goal which is to demonstrate the strength of the regime in maintaining social control and political order, imposing fear on citizens, which is defined by Huang (2015) as "signalling." With that, the authoritarians seek to instil a belief among citizens that the government is so strong that they cannot rebel against it. The propaganda messages are often formulated as dull and unpersuasive forms to ensure that people explicitly see them as propaganda (Huang, 2015).

This pattern is exactly what we see today in propaganda by the military regime in Myanmar. One of the interviewees noted that it seems that pro-SAC people intentionally spread messages with simple language and fake news on social media platforms as explicit propaganda content, and netizens, as a result, apparently know that these are propaganda messages. However, they are scared of commenting and

responding because this could lead to doxing or even arrest (Interview with HSSM-01, 2024). This is, we believe, exactly what the military aims to see.

Take the arrest of a Hip-Hop singer, Byuhar, on 24 May 2023 at his house for criticizing the junta for the instability of the electricity supply (The Irrawaddy, 2023b). The next day, a Facebook account "Natoyo Natoyo" shared the photo of Byuhar from the police station with the caption stating, "Look at Byuhar as an example. Those who criticize the SAC will face the punishment certainly" (Local social media group, May 2023). Notorious propaganda accounts on Telegram, such as Han Nyein Oo and Ba Nyunt, often publish that they can be found everywhere and any Facebook users who challenge them will face serious consequences (The Red Flag, July 2023). According to these findings, we believe that the influx of propaganda messages by the SAC and its supporters on social media platforms aims to signal the regime's capacity to control social and political order and instil fear. While we do not contend that their propaganda messages have no intention of persuasion and indoctrination, the "signalling" approach itself imposes a serious threat to citizens.

Harmful content on social media

Hate speech targeting different identity groups is spreading globally, and this is worrisome because it can be a precursor to serious human-rights abuses—including imminent atrocities, mass violence, or even genocide. Hate speech from actors such as extremist groups and ultranationalists is not a new phenomenon, but messages can spread faster and farther now with the help of technology, particularly social media platforms and messaging apps. Extremist groups or bad actors can disseminate hate content in various forms, ranging from text to video clips, to a wider audience across the world. Myanmar is not an exception. In the last ten years of the liberalization period, Myanmar drew global attention when hate speech against Rohingya people on social media, particularly Facebook, played a vital role in fuelling mass violence and ethnic cleansing (IIMM, 2024).

After the 2021 military coup, the nature of harmful content on social media platforms has become even more threatening, affecting a larger population beyond the Muslim minority. Regarding dangerous speech that can result in egregious harm to society, Benesch et al. (2021) and Maynard and Benesch (2016) propose a concept of dangerous speech differentiated from hate speech as its definition is vague and inconsistent. Benesch et al. (2021) define dangerous speech as "any form of expression (e.g. speech, text, or images) that can increase the risks that its audience will condone or commit violence against members of another group," naming hallmarks to help analyze speech in the real-world situation. These include dehumanizing outgroups, justifying the violence, portraying outgroups as an existential threat, and attacking women and girls. With the extensive reviews of social media monitoring reports by independent local organizations, all these hallmarks can be found in content on Facebook, Telegram and YouTube in Myanmar after the coup, mostly disseminated by pro-military actors.

Since Meta, the parent company of Facebook, took action after the 2021 coup against user accounts and channels of military and associated actors, many these actors have shifted to Telegram and other platforms such as YouTube and TikTok. According to local social media monitoring groups such as The Red Flag and BACS, the Telegram platform, which has looser policies and measures against harmful content, became the most widely used by bad actors in Myanmar after the coup. Analyzing such content within the framework of dangerous speech by Benesch et al. (2021) is not the primary purpose of this research. However, some alarming issues that have been found in the post-coup situation will be described to understand why and how social media content in Myanmar could be used to justify mass violence and atrocities committed by the military against citizens who opposed the coup.

Among 32 reports by three national social media monitoring groups reviewed in this research, the most observed forms of content are "guilt attribution" and "threat construction," both of which seek to justify the ferocious violent actions of the military regime across the country. Guilt attribution is an effective alternative form of dehumanization for perpetrators because it is much easier to motivate followers to commit violence against outgroups (Maynard, 2015). Guilt attribution refers to the developing narrative that the victims have committed heinous crimes and thus deserve severe punishment without considering morally restrained treatment (Maynard & Benesch, 2016). Such propaganda messages were found in horrific crimes of world history such as the Rwandan genocide and the Holocaust (Maynard, 2015). For example, a member of German Police Battalions that committed mass killings against Jews testified that he was convinced that the Jews were not innocent but guilty and all Jews were criminals

and the causes of Germany's decline (Goldhagen, 1997). In a similar vein, a Rwandan genocidaire attested that they believed all Tutsis were the sources of trouble for the country and that was the main reason they killed Tutsis (Zimbardo, 2011).

From the early days after the coup, the military and its supporters spread messages of guilt attribution targeting the National League for Democracy, the winning party in the 2020 elections, and civilian protesters via Facebook. For instance, a Facebook user named U Kyaw posted in March 2021 that Kyel Sin, a young lady who joined the protest in Mandalay on 3 March, and two other civilians were shot to death by soldiers in an attempt to crack down on a protest that planned to set fire to the village and ward administration office (Local social media monitoring group, March 2021). Likewise, a Facebook user, Wai Yan Lin, wrote that soldiers shot a 12-year-old boy in Shwe Bo Township in March 2021 because they saw that the boy held a knife and a bottle of petrol (Ibid).

Later, many of these bad actors shifted to Telegram channels and their targets became National Unity Government (NUG), Ethic Armed Organizations (EROs), and People Defence Forces (PDFs) with similar framing messages after the resistance groups took up arms. Ba Nyunt Telegram Channel, one of the notorious pro-military channels, disseminated that PDFs killed 26 civilians in Mobye Township, Shan State, in June 2023, using photos from Khit Thit Media of the military's mass killing of civilians on 15 June (The Red Flag, June 2023). People Media, the propaganda channel for the State Administrative Council (SAC), presenting itself as mainstream media, reported on its Telegram channel that 17 male and 2 female villagers were killed by PDF groups in Wuntho Township, Sagaing Region, in January 2024 (BACS, January 2024). However, independent media pages report that they were killed by soldiers from Battalion 120 in their mission to defeat PDF groups (Ibid). So it was false news with fabricated content that portrayed that resistance groups were responsible for these crimes and that killing them was necessary.

Another mechanism of dangerous speech surging on social media is "threat construction"—where victims are characterized as serious threats to in-groups, and followers of an atrocity-perpetrating regime see violent acts as defensive. Where guilt-attribution frames victims as responsible for past crimes, threat-construction depicts that victims plan frightening new tragedies, which can be even more powerful when it imposes fear of the future (Maynard and Benesch, 2016). The construction of such a threat makes people perceive a criminal act as a heroic one (Maynard, 2015). Since 2012, the ultranationalist movement in Myanmar led by radical Buddhist monks and laypeople, known as MaBaTha (the Patriotic Association of Myanmar), garnered widespread attention for its extremist messages of exclusion against Muslim minority groups—by constructing a future threat for Buddhism and the country, which later justifies genocide against the Rohingya Muslims committed by the military (Walton & Hayward, 2014; IIMM, 2024). After the 2021 coup, the military and its supporters continued bringing such a narrative of a future threat stemming from Islamophobia, but this time added anti-coup opposition groups as an ally of Muslims and an enemy of Buddhism.

Highlighting news from Afghanistan about the Taliban declaring it had taken control over the country on 15 Aug 2021, pro-SAC people used this opportunity to impose fear about Islam in Myanmar. Moe Sai, a Facebook user, wrote on 6 August that Zaw Wai Soe, a Minister of Health and Education in the National Unity Government (NUG), formed by elected representatives from the 2020 General Election, was a Muslim working for Islam, and that he encouraged only Buddhist young men, but not Muslims, to join

PDFs in the war (Local social media monitoring group, August 2021). Similarly, on 16 August, a Facebook user, Sansan Wana, posted that Afghanistan was a Buddhist country 55 years ago that became Islamic after Muslims occupied it, and that the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) now plans to occupy Myanmar to transform into an Islam State (Local social media monitoring group, August 2021). In this post, the word "Pork eaters" is used to refer to Muslims. There are many similar examples of expressions being created avoid the keyword-based content moderation policies of social media companies (The Red Flag, March 2023). Another reason these posts were not removed right away is that they were framed as commentary on international news, with messages layered in to create fear for the Buddhist population. In August 2021, numerous similar contents connected with Afghanistan were circulated on Facebook.

Regarding the explosion of a Buddhist temple in Mandalay on 21 August, SAC supporters on Facebook have accused PDFs and NUG of committing (Local social media monitoring group, August 2021). Some alleged that NUG and PDFs can have a connection with OIC. On 19 August 2021, the military-owned television channel, Myawaddy TV (MWD), reported that terrorist PDF groups killed a Buddhist monk in Min Kin Township, Magway Region, though PDF groups in the region denied the accusation (ibid.). This narrative continued circulating after several users shifted to Telegram. On 26 July 2023, Hmine Wai's Telegram account shared that PDFs killed Buddhist monks and destroyed monasteries; however, they never killed "Kalar" (an offensive word referring to Muslims) and fired Mosques (The Red Flag, July 2023).

Tracking information about how the military plans to spread these messages on social media in a coordinated and systematic way is challenging. However, it is observed that similar contents have been circulated within a minute among multiple users, some of whom claimed that they are working for the military. A CDM soldier in the interview responded that he heard the military assigned around 300 soldiers from the Department of Research and Innovation to produce propaganda and control the digital public sphere on social media platforms (Interview with HSSM-13, 2024). Some pro-SAC Telegram channels such as Han Nyein Oo mentioned that they served in the military. Nevertheless, independent organizations have yet to verify the real identities of these users.

Dangerous content on social media can cause real-world harm—both directly and indirectly—by encouraging violence outgroups and by inciting other audiences to develop hatred toward those groups. (Benesch, 2014). A flood of harmful content on social media platforms in Myanmar can be seen as atrocity-justifying propaganda for the military. Nevertheless, in this research, we could not measure the precise implications of these propaganda messages on the ground. A member of local social media monitoring groups explains that although netizens do not believe the propaganda of the junta, they are still fragile regarding racial and religious issues (Interview with HSSM-01, 2024). For example, the junta has been spreading racial incitements targeting Rakhine State since early 2024, and it impacted the population when the communal tension between Rakhine and Rohingya people escalated in mid-2024 after the Rohingya were forced by the junta to organize a protest against the Arakan Army (Interview with HSSM-01, 2024; RFA, 2024).

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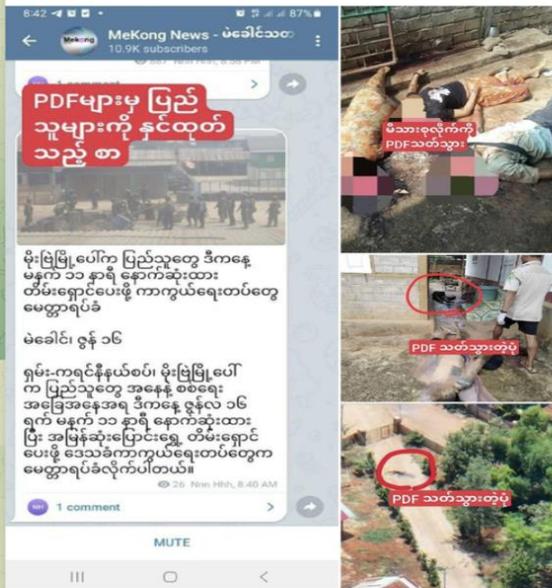
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Life-threatening harmful content

Our research shows that the most dangerous content spreading on social media in post-coup Myanmar, threatening real harm to people on the ground, is messages urging authorities to harshly punish outgroups, often in violent ways. We call it "advocacy for elimination." Pro-SAC people disseminate massive posts on social media urging security forces to defeat the opposition groups with several possible actions, ranging from arbitrary arrest to mass killing. This content is mostly found on Telegram but also spreads on available channels such as Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok, regardless of the policies and measures of these platforms. All interviewees in this research assert that such content is the most dangerous form according to their observations after the coup in Myanmar.

Some of this content will be described to understand how the messages are circulated. In February 2021, Facebook users Ba Thit and Daw Sabdar posted messages that threatened the lives of journalists. Ba Thit wrote, "Kill journalists from *DVB* and *Myanmar Now* wherever you see them" (Local social media monitoring group, February 2021). One commenter endorsed this post by writing that when at least one is killed, then others will no longer dare to speak out. Similarly, Daw Sadar posted, "I want to suggest that nationalists (*A Myo Thar Yay Thamar Myar* in Myanmar language) and politicians from the marches expressing support for the military should ask journalists the name of the media group they work for and kill them if they are from *DVB* and *Myanmar Now"* (Ibid.). Responding to a civil disobedience movement (CDM) led by civil servants from several public service departments, a Facebook user Zar Zar Lwin sent out a post in February: "Fire a gun aiming at CDM teachers, doctors and civil servants from the department of railway. As a citizen, I request it" (Ibid.).

After armed fighting escalated across the country, with a shadow government declaring a defensive war, bad actors on social media targeted newly founded armed resistance groups known as PDF, NLD Party, and the NUG government. In September 2021, a Facebook page with the name Radio Free Myanmar (RFM), imitating Radio Free Asia (RFA), a US-based media broadcast, published, "PDF terrorist groups founded by NUG and CRPH terrorist groups brutally shot a teenage girl who is a member of USDP party (the military-backed party) in Chaung-U Town, Sagaing Division, on 20 September" (Local social media monitoring group, September 2021). No independent media confirmed this allegation. This post had 1.1K reactions and 482 comments, most of which responded aggressively with hateful messages, and 20 users shared it. In addition, with the harmful ideology of extreme nationalism, pro-SAC people also incite the Buddhist population to carry out violent actions against anti-coup groups. On 11 October 2021, a Facebook user Zar Ti Thway Zar Ti Man posted, "Insults to Sasana and religion become excessive. All Buddhists need to join in eliminating terrorist PDFs" (Local social media monitoring group, October 2021).

Facing action by Meta in accordance with its policies, major bad actors migrated into Telegram with its laxer regulation. Not all these bad actors have vanished on Facebook, and some have been revitalized with new accounts. However, on Telegram, they can more overtly promote their messages advocating for elimination and other incitements. On 28 April 2023, Telegram account Kyaw Swar, notoriously known as one of the military's propagandists, advocated the destruction of Pekin Village, Pekon Township, Shan State, comprising 700 households and around 2800 residents. Calling it a home for opium and terrorist groups such as KNPP, PDF, and CDM police, the message was that crashing this village will achieve peace in Karah State (The Red Flag, April 2023). This post had 7.3K reactions as of our date of documentation.

Before that, the military launched air strikes on 25 April targeting a hospital in Pekon township where many IDPs were being treated, injuring five civilians, including a doctor and nurse (Irrawaddy, 2023a). Sharing this news, a Facebook user All May Lay wrote that only PDF members and CDM people resided in this hospital, and no civilians were there (The Red Flag, April 2023).

In the same vein, soldiers killed a resistance leader and 14 civilians, including three women, in Tataing village, Sagaing Region, in March 2023, and they left the dead bodies, cutting their legs and arms (Khin Yi Yi Zaw, 2023). Another vile pro-SAC actor's Telegram account, known as Han Nyein Oo, shared photos with a message of "Kill them all. Villagers are rebels, and rebels are villagers" (The Red Flag, March 2023). Content advocating similar violent actions, including massacres and atrocities, by pro-SAC users on social media has been documented by several independent organizations. An interviewee from a local social media monitoring group noted that this content was not common in the early days after the coup, but that it later surged, resulting in real harm on the ground (Interview with HSSM-03, 2024). Regarding these real-world harms, a respondent from an ethnic media group monitoring hate speech and fake news states that after the pro-SAC Telegram channel Hmine Wai urged the military to conduct an airstrike in Lashio Township, Shan State, air fighters dropped bombs within 24 hours. While he grants that this case could be coincidence, we witness many cases like it, and it is difficult to know if the military is taking cues from the propagandists or not (Interview with HSSM-06, 2024).

This kind of content—advocating for security forces to eliminate anyone who opposes the military, or justifying atrocities committed by the military, or inciting people on the ground to carry out violent acts— is flatly toxic and dangerous for society. Bad actors on social media platforms in Myanmar also spread other kinds of messages that directly threaten the lives of. *Doxing,* together with incitement and advocacy for punishment, poses extreme danger to Myanmar citizens with social media accounts and digital footprints, and even to those without. In January 2021, before the coup, Facebook user Thakhin Mg Mg shared a screenshot of a Facebook comment written by a woman from Mandalay criticizing Buddhist monks involved in a march to support the military. The post included her photos, her family photos with two young children, and her address, and it called for followers to take action against her on the ground (Local social media monitoring group, January 2021). After the military coup, this pattern of doxing continued targeting activists, members of political parties, supporters of PDFs, and anti-coup protesters. For example, on 16 September 2023, Facebook user Htet Paing published a photo of a woman, her Facebook account link, and information about her family members—accusing her of having communication with PDFs in Monywa Township, Sagaing Region (Local social media monitoring group, September 2021). Doxing cases in Myanmar via Telegram channels are infamous. The notorious Telegram channel Kyaw Swar targeted a woman who participated in a flower campaign protest online on 19 June 2023 by posting her photo wearing a red flower, including her name and Facebook account. This post also called on followers to try to find and share her address (BACS, June 2023).

These tactics blatantly threaten anyone who expresses an opinion against the military in both digital space and the physical world. Cases of arbitrary arrest and raids due to doxing were reported by national monitoring organizations, domestic media, and international organizations. An interviewee from a digital security organization shares that one of his friends was arrested after his personal information was circulated in a pro-SAC Telegram channel although his Facebook profile was locked (Interview with HSSM-12, 2024). As a result, netizens, particularly in urban areas, are very cautious to post anything against the

military on social media. One respondent indicates that people inside the country are increasingly self-censoring on social media platforms as they do not feel safe (Interview with HSSM-04, 2024).

Countering harmful content on social media

Before the coup, under the NLD government, the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Culture developed the draft *Interfaith Harmonious Coexistence Bill* in 2016. This was later revised as the *Bill for Protection Against Hate Speech* with responsibility transferred to the Military of Home Affairs (Article 19, 2020). The bill faced criticism for its heavy emphasis on punitive measures and for defining "hate speech" in overly broad terms that could undermine freedom of expression. Consequently, it was not passed. In the absence of a specific law addressing hate speech, the government relied on sections of the Penal code—such as 124(a) on high treason and sedition and 505(c) on inciting violence or criminal activities—to prosecute individuals accused of spreading hate speech or inciting violence. These provisions were frequently employed by both the military regime and civilian governments to punish individuals who criticized the government (Py Thet, 2023). To counter hate speech, the NLD government in February 2018 also formed a social media monitoring team, which sent official letters to Facebook to take action against accounts, pages, and groups that spread hate speech and incitements. However, this move faced criticism for its lack of transparency and for controversial cases where accounts of political activists were also removed (Ibid.).

The spread of harmful content on social media after the coup is beyond hate speech, as illustrated in the previous section. In addition, the State Administrative Council (SAC) has actively disseminated hateful propaganda and threatening messages through its owned broadcasting networks, newspapers, and leaflets. These materials frame anti-coup armed groups, including ethnic revolution organizations and pro-democracy movements, as terrorists (Py Thet, 2023). The propaganda also includes accusations that pro-democracy groups are collaborating with foreign governments and the Organization of Islam Cooperation (OIC) and are attempting to undermine Buddhism. Similar narratives are promoted by military supporters through social media channels. The SAC has no incentive to take action against those who share hateful propaganda aligned with the military. On the contrary, such individuals often help identify and expose those who oppose the regime by revealing the personal information of political dissidents. Since the regime and its supporters are primary sources of this harmful content, domestic legal mechanisms cannot be relied upon to address this alarming issue in post-coup Myanmar.

Civil society groups, including media organizations, play a crucial role in countering harmful content. According to our interviews with various CSOs and media groups, they undertake three main activities in response. First, they monitor social media platforms and identify harmful content, which ranges from fake news and hate speech to calls for violence. Some groups further categorize this content into levels of severity, depending on its potential impacts. A member of a social media monitoring group explains that criteria for defining harmful content include its potential implications on people on the ground, the likelihood of inciting racial or ethnic conflict, and instances of doxxing (Interview with HSSM-01, 2024). She also notes that the impacts are not only immediate but also long-term, as such content gradually shapes public ideologies and opinions. In addition to monitoring, these groups prepare reports and share them among trusted partners, some of whom publish the findings as an open-access resource.

Second, these groups carry out capacity-building training and awareness-raising activities focused on digital literacy and fact-checking. As a result of these efforts, for years since before the coup, the digital literacy of many netizens has improved. They are now better able to distinguish between fake news and authentic news and have become more aware of the importance of verifying information before sharing

it. However, many individuals remain vulnerable to hateful propaganda and hate speech, particularly targeting different racial and religious groups (Interview with HSSM-02, 2024). Furthermore, a significant gap persists between urban and rural populations. While urban residents often have greater access to such training and awareness programs, people in rural areas continue to be left behind.

A third key activity involves advocating with social media platforms to take action against harmful content and users, and recommendations to improve regulations. The level of engagement and responses from social media companies vary. For example, Meta is more responsive when civil society groups report contents and users that violate community standard (Interview with HSSM-01, 2024). A participant in the interview describes that CSOs face challenges in reaching out to some social media platforms, particularly Telegram, and that they do not always act in response to reports about harmful content (Interview with HSSM-05, 2026). He shared that when his group reported hate speech targeting Muslims, escalated by a rape case in Phyuu Township, Bago Region, Meta replied that these posts were not against its community standard. Interpretations and definitions of hate speech differ between social media companies and local groups. Another issue is that social media companies take disproportionate and broader actions that undermine freedom of expression. For instance, content moderation based on keywords often removes the reports of independent media and civil society groups.

When discussing efforts to counter harmful content on social media, the role of platform owners is often placed at the centre, as they possess greater resources and more advanced technologies. Myanmar's most widely used social media platform, Facebook, has been identified by numerous studies as a "useful instrument" for spreading hate speech and inciting real-world violence (UNHCR, 2018). This was particularly evident during the Rohingya genocide, where Facebook was used to create in-group policing among segments of the Rakhine population, ultimately contributing to attacks against the Rohingya people (Schissler, 2024).

After the coup in Myanmar, Meta announced a policy to ban the Myanmar military ("Tatmadaw") from their Facebook and Instagram platforms. The company later expanded this policy to remove Pages, Groups, and accounts representing military-controlled businesses (Meta Newsroom, 2021). Nonetheless, Global Witness (2021) reported that Facebook's algorithm and moderation policies were weak in the areas of incitement to violence, glorifying the suffering or humiliation of others, and misinformation around widespread election fraud. Additionally, content that supported violence against civilians or advocated for the arrest of civilians in Myanmar was not adequately moderated. On the other hand, interviewees with the social media monitor from Myanmar Civil Society, which focuses on fact-checking and social media monitoring, said that military propagandists have regularly managed to come back to the Facebook through tactics such as changing their names, using coded words that have meaning for locals only, and creating images, videos, and reels (Interview with HSSM 02 & HSSM 09, 2024).

When Facebook blocked the military and its supporters after the coup, Telegram became one of the most popular platforms, with its special privacy and security features such as hiding phone numbers and identities. Unfortunately, it also openly allows users to disseminate harmful content and disinformation in a very strategic way. Thousands of Myanmar anti-coup civilians and pro-democracy activists have been targeted and arrested because of doxing on Telegram.

Failing to improve regulations, Telegram removed a small number of channels when facing pressure and criticism from CSOs and media (Interview with HSSM-08, 2004). However, these channels can easily be created again (Ibid.). Furthermore, the Telegram reporting system is not user-friendly because individuals must report harmful messages circulated in a group where there might be thousands of messages. Although civil society groups are trying to pressure Telegram, there has not yet been any progress (Interview with HSSM-10, 2004).

YouTube is another platform for misinformation and disinformation in Myanmar. Reuters news agency conducted a review, discovering that dozens of channels had pretended to be news outlets or political programmes, and were spreading misinformation about the 2020 general elections in Myanmar (Reuters, 2020). YouTube took some actions against junta-related assets after the coup attempt. The platform's official website states that it took down when it was flagged by their systems or people. YouTube said that its Trust and Safety Organization has a specialized team of analysts called the Intelligence Desk. This team is responsible for identifying and evaluating potential threats and risks, such as new misinformation trends or dangerous internet challenges. They also monitor existing threats like extremist conspiracy theories and track how they evolve and spread across different media platforms (YouTube Blog, 2022).

Another widely used platform in Myanmar is TikTok. Since the coup, soldiers and police forces under the SAC regime have used TikTok to intimidate, threaten and even deliver death threats to protesters (Reuters, 2021). One tactic involves posting videos with explicit threats of violence, displaying weapons and using aggressive language directed towards those who oppose the military's rule. Myanmar civil society groups and activists urged TikTok to take action through media to attract the company's attention (Ratcliffe & the Guardia reporter in Yangon, 2021). Although TikTok implemented initial measures against assets affiliated with the junta after the coup when activists called for action, there has been no sustained and proactive intervention as media scrutiny of the moderation issue has diminished (Lyons, 2021).

Despite their crucial role, social media companies' responses are typically limited to removing content and blocking users from their platforms—measures that offer short-term solutions. In addition, as Tsesis (2001) emphasizes, social media companies are private service providers that often filter content too broadly and indiscriminately. This practice continues to provoke a debate over how to balance the prevention of hate speech with the protection of freedom of expression. It also raises important questions about the extent to which private corporations should be empowered to determine which content is considered harmful and should be banned. Furthermore, addressing harmful content requires long-term solutions, including fostering tolerance among different social groups, safeguarding freedom of expression, and promoting peaceful coexistence.

Conclusion

Harmful content on social media platforms in Myanmar, which has proliferated since the 2021 coup, goes beyond hate speech and poses direct threats to individuals on the ground. Although the spread of hate speech and fake news on these platforms predates the coup, the military and its supporters have deliberately disseminated toxic and dangerous content, including justification of the junta's atrocities, hate speech against minorities, racist and sexist rhetoric, and propaganda that incites real-world violence. Such content has had serious impacts, both direct and indirect, causing real-world harm.

Furthermore, calling for the elimination of pro-democracy activists—such as by doxxing personal information—poses an immediate and serious threat to the lives of civilians. The junta's propaganda on these platforms also fosters a climate of fear, deterring citizens from expressing dissent or participating in any activities against the military regime. In Myanmar's context, the strategic exploitation of social media platforms through coordinated information operations has transformed these platforms into tools for disseminating disinformation and hate speech. The spread of misinformation and the incitement of violence via these channels have led to tangible consequences, including persecution, displacement, and loss of life. Consequently, social media companies, entrusted with the responsibility of content moderation, now play a pivotal role in protecting vulnerable communities in Myanmar. Their moderation policies and practices directly impact the safety and security of individuals and groups at risk.

This issue cannot be resolved by any single actor; instead, collaborative actions and a range of measures from relevant stakeholders are essential. However, in Myanmar, the state is deeply implicated in the dissemination of harmful content and is directly responsible for atrocities. Therefore, legal mechanisms cannot be relied upon at this stage. As a result, the roles of the other two actors—social media companies and civil society organizations—become especially critical. Each actor possesses distinct capacities and resources. While tech giants have advanced technologies and substantial resources, civil society organizations offer valuable local knowledge and direct access to affected communities. Therefore, social media companies should proactively engage with civil society groups and human rights advocates to better understand the specific needs and risks faced by diverse populations.

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