



THE ROLE OF ETHNIC MEDIA IN THE “NEW MYANMAR”

Soe Lynn Htwe



Understanding
Myanmar's
Development

RESEARCH
REPORT
No. 06



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International Development Research Centre
Centre de recherches pour le développement international

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National Library of Thailand Cataloging in Publication Data

Soe Lynn Htwe.

The Role of Ethnic Media in the "New Myanmar".-- Chiang Mai : Regional Center for Social Science and Sustainable Development (RCSD) Chiang Mai University, 2017.

84 p. -- (Understanding Myanmar's Development).

1. Mass media--Political aspects--Burma. 2. Burma--Politics and government--21st century. I. Title.

302.2309591

ISBN 978-616-398-185-1

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Cover Photo: Hsen Pai (Shan Newspaper)

Design and Layout: Jeff Moynihan

Published in May 2017 by:

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Foreword

RCSD has established the Understanding Myanmar's Development (UMD) Fellowship program, supported by the International Development and Research Centre (IDRC), Canada, to enhance the knowledge of Myanmar's development, strengthen the research capacity of Burmese researchers, and encourage them to become actively engaged in the study of development policy and practice. The fellowship seeks to promote sustainable academic exchange and dialogue among researchers from Myanmar, Thailand, and other GMS countries. Under this program, 30 fellowships have been awarded to mid-career researchers in their respective areas of social and economic change, agriculture, environment and climate change, health and health care systems, and social media and innovations.

Myanmar is undergoing an exciting and often unpredictable time of transformation on many fronts after decades of isolation. Outsiders have a only limited understanding of the complexities, dynamics and the depth of change taking place—affecting the social, environmental, economic, and governmental spheres, and directly impacting the livelihoods and practiced culture of the peoples of Myanmar. How are they actively taking part in their country's developmental process, and in the face of what obstacles? In this pivotal moment, Myanmar's need for both mind- and man-power to help fill the gaps of data and research on critical development issues has never been greater.

Journalist Soe Lynn Htwe is at the forefront of one of the most dramatically changed areas of Myanmar's society: the press. Since Myanmar's transition to (nominally) civilian control, press freedom has markedly increased alongside exposure to new forces of the market and rapidly developing technology. In the midst of such change, the role of ethnic media in Myanmar is more crucial than ever in shining a spotlight on the conundrums of armed conflict and resource exploitation. Somewhat unique to Myanmar, ethnic media outlets provide for each of the major ethnic groups an outlet for the expression of their own views and standpoints on important issues—and not always in line with the central government of Myanmar. Soe Lynn Htwe shows through his research how these ethnic media organizations face a wall of obstacles—ranging from financial pressure to political contestation from outside actors—and yet continue to provide outlets for a diverse expression of views and thought.

Chayan Vaddhanaphuti, PhD
Director, RCSD

Acknowledgements

This research was funded by an “Understanding Myanmar’s Development” research fellowship at the Regional Center for Social Science and Sustainable Development (RCSD) at Chiang Mai University, with support from the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) of Canada. I am grateful to RCSD for the opportunity to join the program as a research fellow in 2013-14. I also want to thank the Europe Burma Office (EBO), which provided me some additional financial support.

I wish to express my special appreciation to my mentor, Dr. Jennifer Leehey, for encouraging my research and allowing me to grow as a researcher. Without her guidelines, supervision, editing, and constant critical feedback and help, my paper surely would not have materialized. I am also grateful to Dr. Chayan Vaddhanaphuti, director of RCSD, for sharing his expertise, guidance and encouragement. I want to thank Professors Amporn Jirattikorn and Carl Middleton and for their advice and comments and all my fellow researchers in the fellowship program who gave me feedback at our workshops. I am grateful to Dr. Matthew Walton of Oxford University and the research fellows at Pyidaungsu Institute in Chiang Mai for their comments on an earlier version of my paper.

I want to thank Phil Thornton, Calvin McLeod and Angus Watson for their thoughtful comments on my work, and Sai Soe Win Latt for his encouragement to join the RCSD program and undertake the project. Most importantly, I must thank all of my interviewees at *Kantarawaddy Times* and *Hsen Pai* for giving me their time. I

am grateful to Harn Lay and Khu Reh Thomas for their assistance with my research and Nong Hseng Zin for the Shan translation.

I would like to thank my father and my cousin for their unceasing encouragement, support and attention. I am grateful to my family. This paper is dedicated to my daughter, Kimberley.

Abstract

Since 2011, political reforms implemented by President Thein Sein's nominally civilian government have attracted international attention. Under the new government, improvement in press freedom has been noticeable not only for mainstream Burmese media but also for many different exile-based and ethnic media organizations, who now have a chance to gain a foothold inside the country and participate legally in Myanmar's media sphere. Ethnic minority people in Myanmar have new opportunities to present themselves and their perspectives via their own media, after decades of being misrepresented in official news produced under central state control.

Drawing on field research conducted in 2013-14, this paper explores the role of ethnic media in reforming Myanmar. I focus on two case studies. The first, *Kantarawaddy Times* (KT), is operated by ethnic Karenni journalists who were previously based in a refugee camp in Mae Hong Son, Thailand. The other, *Hsen Pai News*, is a larger Shan language publication run by Shan intellectuals based in Yangon. I consider the history of these organizations, the goals and strategies of the editors (media producers), and also the attitudes of their readers (consumers). I examine the particular challenges facing ethnic media in Myanmar today, where these media appeal to a non-mainstream market, use distinctive languages, and face special financial constraints.

The paper argues that the market forces that are now shaping the media landscape in Myanmar threaten to overwhelm and silence

ethnic media. However, I also show how ethnic media groups in Myanmar continue to face these challenges. At this time, access to accurate information is crucial for ethnic minority peoples in Myanmar, because of huge natural resource exploitation projects and unsettled armed conflicts in ethnic minority areas. Ethnic media organizations continue to find ways to disseminate news and cultivate their distinctive perspectives with the larger goal of contributing to a truly inclusive and multi-ethnic Myanmar society.

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1

STUDYING ETHNIC MEDIA

Introduction

Since 2011, political reforms implemented in Myanmar by President Thein Sein's quasi-civilian government have attracted international attention, coming after decades of direct military rule.¹ As part of the new government's reform process, a number of new policies aimed at expanding press freedom have been introduced. These policies have improved conditions not only for the mainstream domestic media, which are now no longer subject to pre-publication scrutiny and censorship, but also for the many formerly exile-based media groups, including ethnic media organizations, which have been invited to operate inside the country with newly granted publishing licenses.

The issuing of publishing licenses to ethnic media groups was a drastic change for the media landscape in Myanmar. Until this change, periodicals and radio broadcasts that focused on the concerns of Myanmar's ethnic minority groups were mostly

1. In this paper, I use "Burma" and "Myanmar" interchangeably, but I prefer "Burma" for discussing historical events. The term "Myanmar" has become more widely accepted internationally since the civilian government came to power, so I use "Myanmar" to refer to events after 2011. In this paper, "Burman" refers to the majority ethnic group and "Burmese" refers to the language of the Burmans, which is widely used throughout the country.

produced outside the country, for example in areas held by armed ethnic groups who were fighting against the central state, or in refugee camps on Myanmar's borders. A few unlicensed ethnic publications were produced inside the country for very limited audiences. Through the years of SLORC-SPDC military government (1988-2011), ethnic language publications and publications concerned with ethnic minority issues could only be distributed inside the country surreptitiously through networks of personal contacts.

Since 2011, ethnic media groups have grasped new opportunities to publish in order to contribute to public discourse in Myanmar under the new civilian authority. This research report will describe and explain the current situation for ethnic media organizations in Myanmar. Drawing on qualitative methods and field research, this paper focuses mainly on two case studies. One is a small ethnic media group Kantarawaddy Times (KT), which is operated by ethnic Karenni journalists. It was previously based at a refugee camp in Mae Hong Son, Thailand, but now produced out of Demoso in Kayah State in Myanmar. The other case study is a larger ethnic media outlet called Hsen Pai, which is run by ethnic Shan journalists based in Yangon. I will discuss these two media groups in terms of their objectives and their strategies for publishing. In my analysis, I consider the perspectives of media producers as well as consumers.

In examining these case studies, my aim is to present a deeper understanding of the particular challenges facing ethnic media organizations in reforming Myanmar, where ethnic media appeal to a non-mainstream market, use distinctive languages, and face particular financial constraints. In this paper, I will argue that the market forces that shape the media landscape in Myanmar today threaten to overwhelm and silence ethnic media. However, I also show how ethnic minority people in Myanmar continue to find ways to preserve their cultural values and express their distinctive perspectives through their media. Moreover, they seek to build mutual understanding with the mainstream population, with the larger goal of contributing to a truly inclusive and multi-ethnic Myanmar society.

The research problem

Myanmar (also known as “Burma”) is non-homogenous country where ethnic minority groups make up nearly 40 percent of the country’s 51 million people. There are more than 130 distinct ethnic minority groups. Kachin, Kayah (aka Karenni), Karen, Chin, Mon, Arakanese, and Shan are recognized as the main ethnic groups, and there are distinct states with these names where these ethnic groups comprise a majority or large percentage of the local population. Burmans are the majority ethnic group especially in the central parts of the country. Ethnic minorities have long been marginalized and persecuted in Burma and have struggled for greater recognition and self-determination. They have been subject to official policies of cultural “Burmanization,” including harsh restrictions on teaching ethnic languages and literatures. For decades, there has been armed conflict between various ethnic-based groups and the central government. Some of these conflicts date back more than 60 years: it is one of the longest civil wars in the world.

Because of strict media control by successive authoritarian governments in Burma, knowledge about ethnic minority peoples and their struggles has been limited. Through the years of General Ne Win’s “Burma Socialist Program Party” (BSPP) rule (1962-1988), and also under the SLORC-SPDC military regime (1988-2011), people living in Burman-majority areas in the central part of the country often had little understanding of the conflicts in ethnic areas. Information presented in state-run newspapers and broadcast media was controlled to project a positive image of the Tatmadaw (Burmese military). Ethnic-minority demands for a more inclusive, federal form of government were presented as separatism that threatened national unity. Moreover movies, which were produced under state censorship, portrayed negative images of ethnic minorities as warlords, rapists and abusers.

In other words, for many decades, the media did not serve as a bridge to create understanding between the majority Burmans and the country’s ethnic minorities. Representations of ethnic minority people produced by them were hardly to be found. Images of ethnic people were largely controlled by the majority-dominated central government.

This situation has begun to change since the installation of a quasi-civilian government in 2011, following general elections held in 2010. Since 2011, the government under President Thein Sein has instituted a variety of reforms, including, as I mentioned, abolishing the notorious censor board and allowing the registration of a variety of new periodicals and privately-owned daily newspapers. (Previously, daily news was produced only by the state, although there were privately owned weekly and monthly publications.) Moreover, the Thein Sein government has embarked on significant ceasefire negotiations with nearly two dozen ethnic armed groups. As part of the cease-fire negotiations, a number of locally-based and ethnic-language publications have been allowed to publish legally in ethnic areas.

Taken together, these changes suggest the creation of a new kind of society in post-authoritarian Myanmar. These seem to be significant steps toward decentralizing the flow of information and creating broader participation in political and public life. In Myanmar today there is more possibility for a diversity of voices to be heard, including voices of ethnic people.

But how far will these changes go? As state control over the media relaxes, will ethnic minorities be able to use these new channels to participate and express their perspectives in the newly emerging society? Will the decentralizing information allow ethnic people to participate in local and national decision making processes?

Since 2011, under the new government, media of all sorts have been playing a role in shaping public opinion. For example, both mainstream Burmese-language media reports produced out of Yangon and also ethnic media reports produced in exile by the Kachin News Group were important in raising public awareness of the potential consequences of the planned Myitsone dam hydropower project in Kachin State. In fact, the Kachin News Group started reporting on this issue in about 2009, but mainstream media did not pick up the story until 2010. By 2011, expanded media coverage about the dam project inspired public protest and political discourse, owing to which the central government decided to suspend the project. This is evidence that media, including ethnic media, can increase public participation in decision making

about development and other important changes occurring in Myanmar. The question is whether this potential will be fully realized.

Thus, my objective in this research is to understand the role of ethnic media in reforming Myanmar. First, I will consider the roles that ethnic media have played in the past, under previous regimes. Then I will discuss the current changes underway in the country affecting ethnic media. I will provide a snapshot of the ethnic media landscape at the present moment (2012-2014) and the difficulties that ethnic media groups face, related to the media market and human resource concerns. In order to understand the current situation, I focus on my two case studies: an ethnic Karenni publication called Kantarawaddy Times (KT) and a Shan-language journal called Hsen Pai.² Drawing on primary field research as well as secondary sources, and considering the perspectives of media producers as well as consumers, I will explore how ethnic media function in the new Myanmar.

Research questions

General questions:

- What is the role of ethnic media in reforming Myanmar?
- How does the current situation compare with the role played by ethnic media in the past?

Specific questions for my case studies:

- What are the producers trying to accomplish? What is their editorial policy or mission?
- What is their language policy?
- What are their strategies for reaching their audiences?

2. In Myanmar, the term “journal” (Bse. “*gya-neh*”) is commonly used for various kinds of weekly, bi-weekly and monthly periodicals.

- What practical difficulties do they face, for example, related to marketing or human resources?
- How do the consumers (readers) perceive these publications?
- What are the contents of these publications? What topics are emphasized? What topics are excluded?

Methodology

Research for this project was carried out between September 2013 and December 2014. I used qualitative methods, including informal, unstructured interviews, group discussions, and in-depth interviews with media producers, distributors and consumers, at several locations inside Myanmar (Burma) and also on the Thai-Burma border. Interviews were conducted in face-to-face settings and sometimes over the telephone. I conducted approximately 70 interviews with people involved in ethnic media. The age of interviewees ranged from 20 to 60 years old, and forty-five of them were male. Most of the people I interviewed were members of ethnic minority groups: especially Karenni and Shan people, but also Karen, Arakanese, and Mon. I also interviewed a few ethnic Burman journalists and editors to know their attitudes towards ethnic media, and I interviewed a Western editor who was working for a Karen media group in Mae Sot Thailand. In addition to media professionals, I interviewed ethnic minority Members of Parliament (MPs), and staff working with Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) that support ethnic media.

My research focused on two ethnic media publications: a Karenni-produced monthly called Kantarawaddy Times (KT) and the Shan-language Hsen Pai bi-weekly paper. I chose these two cases because of the different characteristics of these two media groups. Kantarawaddy Times (KT) is a returned-from-exile publication: it began as a refugee-publication on the Thai border in 2004 and then registered with the Myanmar Ministry of Information in 2012 and began publishing out of Demoso in Karenni (Kayah) state. Hsen Pai began publishing in 2013 and it is based in Yangon. While KT has chosen to publish in the Burmese language, Hsen Pai publishes only in Shan language. KT is quite small, while Hsen

Pai has a much larger circulation. Looking at these two different media groups, their particular problems and their distinct strategies for reaching their audiences helps us to understand the larger situation for ethnic media groups trying to publish in the new Myanmar.

To pursue the case studies required a multi-sited approach. I conducted my research in four main field sites — one on the Thai-Myanmar border and three inside Myanmar. First I visited Dokhita village in Mae Hong Son Province, Thailand, which is near Karenni Refugee Camp #1. KT, which originated on the border, still maintains an office in Dokhita village. Then I went to the small town of Demoso in Karenni State, where KT now has its main headquarters. While I was in Demoso Township, I also visited two remote villages in the area, Dawseh and Dawtamyay, where ethnic Karenni villagers read and share copies of KT. To study Hsen Pai, I went to Yangon where the headquarters of Hsen Pai is based. I also interviewed informants in Panglong in Shan state, which is a distribution center for Hsen Pai, as well as a traditional center for Shan literature and culture. In Panglong, I interviewed distributors and consumers of Hsen Pai, including villagers from Wan Mai, which is a small village near Panglong. In interviews with members of the Shan Literature and Culture Association in Panglong, I learned how Shan literary traditions were maintained through the years of military repression.

I conducted most interviews in Burmese, my native language, or in English. Sometimes I had to rely on a translator who was familiar with the local ethnic language in which the interviewee was most comfortable. I hired research assistants who could interpret these languages for me. When I conducted a content analysis of the Hsen Pai bi-weekly, I hired an assistant to translate the Shan language content into Burmese for me.

In addition to conducting interviews and analyzing media content, my research included collecting copies of various ethnic publications produced across the country, and video tapes, photos and news about ethnic media conferences held in Myanmar. I read reports from United Nations agencies relating to indigenous media, NGO-produced statements and handbooks, and scholarly articles about ethnic media.

Before I began this project, my six-year career as a journalist working on Burma-Myanmar issues gave me background knowledge about ethnic media. I have worked for the exile-based Irrawaddy Publishing Group and the Democratic Voice of Burma, and also as a freelancer for the Bangkok Post. As I was born and brought up a member of the Danu ethnic group, a small ethnic minority in Shan State, I have a personal attachment and sympathy for the struggles and challenges of ethnic media producers. Pure academic neutrality is difficult to achieve. As the American historian and social activist, Howard Zinn said, “you can't be neutral on a moving train” (Zinn 2002). However, in this paper I have critically examined and analyzed the objectives and political ideologies of ethnic media I studied.

Defining “ethnic media”

The terminology for this topic is complicated. People commonly assume that “ethnic media” must refer to publications (or TV or radio broadcasts or websites) that are produced in ethnic minority languages. Of course, minority language publications and broadcasts are an important category of ethnic media. However, in Myanmar today, there are also media groups associated with ethnic minorities that choose to publish in the Burmese language. Some ethnic minority groups are comprised of sub-groups that speak different dialects or use different writing systems. Media producers may find it more convenient to use Burmese. It also has to do with marketability: if a publication is in Burmese, it is likely to have a larger market of potential consumers.

For example, in Karenni (Kayah) State, there are nine main ethnic groups and many sub-groups, each with its own distinct language or dialect. Since most of them use Burmese to communicate with other groups, the publishers of Kantarawaddy Times (KT) mostly use Burmese for that publication.³ Similarly, Chin World, which is

3. In January 2015, *KT* started including a Kayah language supplement to their paper. I will discuss their language policy in more detail in the “Case Study” section below.

produced out of Yangon, publishes in Burmese language to reach a broad audience of Chin people who speak diverse languages and dialects.

In Myanmar, one can find ethnic media published entirely in ethnic languages such as Hsen Pai, which publishes in Shan language and New Kokang Journal, which is in entirely in Kokang-Chinese. One can also find ethnic media that are partly in ethnic languages and partly in Burmese, such as the Kayin Thadin-zin (“Karen News”) produced by the Karen Information Center (KIC) in Burmese and Karen. Finally, there are ethnic media published solely in the Burmese language such as Chin World. I consider all of these examples of ethnic media.

Another complication is that some apparently ethnic media do not actually represent the concerns or perspectives of ethnic minority people. Currently in reforming Myanmar, there is increased government investment in producing ethnic language radio and TV programs. (Ethnic language radio programs have been broadcast by state run radio since the socialist era.) Moreover, the government daily newspaper Myanma Alin (“New Light of Myanmar”), which is distributed nationwide, now includes a supplement page in four local languages (Mon, Pa-O, Sgaw-Karen and Po-Karen) when distributed in Mon and Karen states. Is it appropriate to call these ethnic-language broadcasts and publications “ethnic media” if they are produced by the central government’s Ministry of Information? For the present, I would say “no.”

In her discussion of “indigenous media” in Burma, Brooten observes that indigenous media reflect both the country’s diversity and the need for ethnic nationalities to protect themselves against the government’s assimilation policies (2008: 1). Although I use the term “ethnic” rather than “indigenous,” I agree with this definition. In this paper, I use “ethnic media” to refer to publications, broadcasts or websites that are associated with ethnic minority peoples and that focus on ethnic minority concerns, regardless of whether they use Burmese or an ethnic minority language.

It is also useful to consider “state-based” and “locally-based” publications or media. “State-based” refers to publications that are distributed in ethnic minority areas (i.e. states) in Myanmar. Again, these media may or may not publish in an ethnic minority language, but in any case they focus on local events and concerns. The Myitkyina Journal, published out of Myitkyina, the capital of Kachin State, is a good example of a “state-based” publication. It publishes in the Burmese language and is intended for the multi-ethnic inhabitants of Kachin state, which include Kachin, Red Shan, Pa-O, Lahu, Lisu, Burman, and Chinese peoples. (That is, it is intended for the ones who can read Burmese language). Another state-based publication is Thanlwin Times, which is published out of Mawlamyaing (Moulmein) in Mon state and focuses on news affecting lower Myanmar. Most state-based publications can be considered “ethnic media” according to my definition.

Locally based publications include periodicals like Mandalay Alin (“Mandalay Light”), which is based in Mandalay and focuses on the Mandalay area. It doesn’t have a specifically ethnic focus, but it is a small-scale publication with a local focus. Another interesting example is The Tanintharyi Weekly, a Burmese-language publication based in Dawei, the capital of Tanintharyi Region. It reports on local issues, for example the plans to develop a massive deep seaport and industrial complex in Dawei, that affect all the ethnic people living in the area, including Dawei people, an ethnic group closely related to Burmans, and also Mon, Karen and Burmans. In my view, certain locally based publications that take up ethnic-minority concerns can also be considered part of “ethnic media.”

2

THE HISTORY OF ETHNIC MEDIA IN BURMA-MYANMAR

Beginnings

Modern-style newspapers have been published in Burma since the 19th century. Early English language publications produced in lower Burma under British colonial rule included the Moulmein Chronicle (first appearing in 1836) and the Rangoon Chronicle (founded in 1853). The first Burmese-language newspaper, Yadanabon Naypyidaw, was produced in Mandalay starting in 1874, when upper Burma was still an independent kingdom (Lintner 2000). Under colonial rule there were also publications in minority languages. There was a bilingual Karen-English newspaper Hsa Tu Gaw (The Morning Star) founded in Rangoon in 1842. In the 1940s, in Moulmein, there were two bilingual English-Mon papers: Yamanya Times daily and the Mon Bulletin (Mizzima News 13 February 2013).

After independence in 1948 until the military coup of 1962, Burma enjoyed one of the freest presses of Asia. The print media industry flourished. Ethnic people also enjoyed the freedom to publish ethnic language periodicals. Under the democratically elected U Nu government, schools in Burma's ethnic minority areas were permitted to teach reading and writing in the native tongue to students. There was even a proposal by ethnic leaders to make English an official language for the country in acknowledgment of the country's ethno-linguistic diversity, although this did not pass in parliament.

However, in this period, the central government in Rangoon was also struggling against various communist and ethnic armed insurgencies. In 1949, after negotiations between Prime Minister U Nu and the Karen National Union (KNU) broke down, the KNU initiated its armed resistance, which continues to the present day.⁴ Karen-controlled *Radio Kawthoolei* began broadcasting in 1949 from Karen-held territory: the first insurgent media in Burma. It continued broadcasting intermittently through the 1970s and 1980s from the Thai-Burma border (Smith 1999).

The socialist era

In 1962, Gen. Ne Win took power in a military coup, citing threats to national unity. Under Gen. Ne Win and the Burma Socialist Program Party (BSPP) government, freedom of the press went backward. Daily newspapers were nationalized and the Printers and Publishers' Registration Law of 1962 was enacted, requiring all periodicals to pass through the Press Scrutiny and Registration Division (PSRD) before publishing to ensure they were in keeping with the ideology of the "Burmese Way to Socialism." These restrictions impacted not only mainstream Burmese language media but also ethnic publications.

Under the BSPP, ethnic language publications were not technically banned, as long as they did not deal with news or political topics, and instead focused on cultural matters. However, they faced many difficulties with the PSRD scrutiny procedures. A major problem was that the censor board members lacked ethnic language proficiency. Some ethnic publications tried to submit their work with translations, but the authorities also distrusted the translations. Sai Laike, a veteran Shan journalist and the current editor of *Hsen Pai*, told me that in the late 1980s, the Shan

4. The history of inter-ethnic conflict in Burma is complex. It is rooted in colonial era administrative practices. Tensions were made worse by abuses committed in World War II, in which the Burman Independence Army fought on the side of the Japanese while ethnic Kachin and Karen hill people stayed loyal to the British. Ethnic minority groups have also experienced discrimination and an unfair distribution of resources and power.

Literature and Culture Association at Mandalay University asked permission from the rector to publish a tri-lingual magazine in Shan, English and Burmese. The rector insisted the group get approval from the Shan People's Council, a state-administered association. After the Council affirmed that the magazine's contents were not political, the magazine received permission to publish. However, even then, PSRD took long time to approve publications for distribution. Even when the Literature and Culture Association offered to provide a Shan-to-Burmese translator to assist the PSRD in order to complete the process in a shorter time, the PSRD took a long time to respond. Finally, they gave up and decided to find a way to publish illegally, without submitting to PSRD. (Hurn Kayang interview, December 2014)

In the socialist era, several groups published in ethnic languages without PSRD approval and distributed their periodicals surreptitiously through their networks. For example, the Shan monthly Independence was started in 1973 as a newsheet by leaders of the Shan State Restoration Council (SSRC), an illegal armed group. Beginning in 1984, it was published as a printed newspaper. There were other secret Shan periodicals in the 1980s, like Muak Mai ("New Style"), which was produced in Muse in northern Shan State. Another periodical, Tai Noom ("Shan Youth") was published by the Shan Literature and Culture Association of Kengtong. It was permitted with the condition that it would only be distributed in their group. However, it often spread beyond that network. (Interview with Hurn Kayang, December 2014.)

In this period, school curricula came under centralized control. There were regulations that all subjects had to be taught in the national language, Burmese. As it was no longer possible for ethnic minority children to study their local language in school, literacy rates in ethnic minority languages declined. Meanwhile, because publishing became more difficult, ethnic people had few books and publications to read in their own language. In response, ethnic religious leaders found new ways to promote local language and literature. Some faced persecution from the authorities for this. For example, Mong Naung Sayadaw, the abbot from Pitakat monastery in Panglong was arrested for teaching Shan literacy in the BSPP era. Some Shan residents learned to read by studying

Shan text inscribed on the monastery walls and pillars. (Interviews with Shan monks in Panglong, June 2014.)

After 1988

The 1988 democracy uprisings impacted Burma's media landscape in various ways. The new military authority, the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) that took power in 1988 cracked down on the democracy protestors. Fleeing repression, many students and activists left urban centers and took shelter among ethnic armed groups who controlled border areas. Later, some of these student activists started documenting the human right violations and abuses by the Tatmadaw (Myanmar military) operating in ethnic minority areas. They settled in border areas and established small media agencies to voice their grievances and alert the international community about the atrocities occurring in their homeland.

In the 1990s, media flourished in exile on the Thai-Burma, India-Burma and Bangladesh-Burma borders. Exile-based media included two categories: mainstream and ethnic media. "Mainstream" exile publications that are those that have no particular ethnic identification. The Irrawaddy Magazine, which published in English, and Khit Pyaing ("New Era") journal, which published in Burmese, are good examples of more mainstream publications produced out of Thailand in the 1990s. The second category, ethnic exile-based media, were associated with ethnic nationalities. For example, the Shan Herald Agency for News (SHAN), and the Karen Information Center (KIC) were founded in the 1990s to collect and disseminate information about events in their respective areas. SHAN was established in Shan State in 1991 but moved to Chiang Mai in 1996 in order to be more independent from armed political factions operating in Shan

state.⁵ The KIC was established in 1997 by David Takabaw, joint general secretary of the Karen National Union (KNU).

Both mainstream and ethnic exile-based media distributed their publications inside Burma through underground networks. Also journalists inside the country passed on news to these media groups to report. If caught, contributors to exiled media were punished with long prison terms. For example, in 2010 the Mon monk, Ashin Oakkansa (aka Zaw Latt) was caught and sentenced to 15 years in prison for his activities in previous decades giving inside information to an exile-based Mon media group in Thailand, the Guiding Star, and also for distributing the paper and other political activities.⁶

While activists were establishing news agencies in exile, the SLORC government inside Myanmar was launching new ethnic language radio programs. There were “national races programs” in eight ethnic languages (Shan, Mon, Kachin, Kayah, Rakhine and other major ethnic languages.) Radio was recognized as an important medium for disseminating official information to remote ethnic areas. In ethnic areas, where literacy is often limited, people rely heavily on the radio for information. The government, however, could not completely control the messages broadcast in ethnic languages. According to my interview with a Shan journalist who worked for Myanmar Radio and Television (MRTV) in the 1990s, sometimes he and his colleagues would alter their cultural programs or stories to include references to military abuses, human rights violations and forced labor occurring in ethnic minority areas. They were able to reshape the story to include information they wanted to convey because their supervisors could not understand their language.

5. Actually, the *SHAN* media agency developed out of *Independence*, the newspaper associated with the SSRC that started in 1973. In its public statement about the 1996 move to Thailand, *SHAN* asserted: “*SHAN* will continue to fight against ignorance, disunity and tyranny, because that is the only way to achieve united strength that will eventually overthrow the oppressive regime” (*SHAN* 1996).

6. He was arrested and sentenced in 2010 and spent two years in jail before being released in the general amnesty granted by President Thein Sein in 2012.

Through the 1990s and into the 2000s, the situation for exile-based media developed. From the beginning, ethnic media on the border had close links to non-state armed groups (NSAGs). The media groups were established to support the goals of the armed resistance. They expressed the plight of ethnic people under the central government and helped to build the image of the insurgent groups.⁷ Many of the news reports were one-sided and weak in the journalist ethic of objectivity. However, beginning in the late 1990s, exile-based journalists, including ethnic journalists, began to receive journalism training from international supporters. Starting in 2001, training was offered by Inter News, an NGO contracted by USAID. Inter News trained and supported more than a thousand journalists from Burma's major ethnic groups. Veteran western journalists taught about best journalist practices as well as knowledge of world affairs.

At this time, exile-based media were receiving funding from international donors, such as the US National Endowment for Democracy (NED), and George Soros' Open Society Institute. Funding for ethnic media, however, was much less compared to mainstream exile publications like the *Irrawaddy*, *New Era Journal* and *Mizzima News*. Some of the donors — notably, NED — urged ethnic media not to affiliate with armed groups. Accordingly, ethnic journalists and editors became more independent in this period, although they still sympathized with the ethnic struggle. It became possible to find editorials in ethnic publications that criticized the misdeeds of the armed groups.

Brooten writes about the rising professionalism of ethnic media in this period. She notes that for some ethnic media groups, “the motivation to proclaim political independence may... stem as much from the demands of funding agencies and training in

7. Jirattikorn observes that the Shan State Army-South (SSA-S) used Thai media in various forms, such as print, television, as well as popular music to develop public relations and build moral support. The group was also reaching out to win the hearts and minds of Shan migrant population in Thailand. This engagement with media transformed the Shan armed struggle from a local movement confined to fighting with the Burmese army to a larger movement with a Thai and Shan audience (2011: 17).

journalism as it does from a genuine desire or ability to maintain independence from political power-holders.” (Brooten 2006: 362)

In some cases, the NSAGs were also concerned that media groups should be independent. For example, the Kantarawaddy Times (KT) was first established in 2004 by Karenni refugees living on the Thai border. At first, the founding members had no idea how to produce media and they tried to cooperate with the Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP), the political wing of the Karenni National Progressive Army. However, they were turned down by the high-ranking officers. The officers wanted them to get better educated. Subsequently they joined an internship program with Inter News in Chiang Mai, Thailand, studying alongside journalists with mainstream exile-based media, to develop the skills they needed to produce KT. The KNPP leaders wanted to encourage the younger generation of ethnic editors and journalists to produce publications that would help to maintain ethnic identity.

At the same time, many NSAGs operating in the border areas produced their own propaganda media. The Karen National Union (KNU) published the English language “KNU Bulletin” since 1985 and another tri-monthly journal called *Tha Noo Htoo* (“Precious Policy”) which was established after 1988.⁸ The Shan United Revolutionary Army (SURA) and Shan State Army–South (SSA-S) have also produced periodicals from 1984 to the present. The KNPP started producing a periodical *Ngwe Taung* (“Silver Mountain”) starting in the early 2000s.

Another important development in the 2000s was that diverse ethnic media agencies began to work together. Burma News International (BNI) was established in Chiang Mai, Thailand in 2003 as an umbrella media association. Comprised initially of just

8. *Tha Noo Htoo* publication was directly linked to the KNU, but it included articles from activist Burmese living in the border areas. For example, the exiled NLD leader U Thein Lwin contributed articles about Burmese education system and the 1988 uprising. (Dr. Thein Lwin is now prominent as the head of the National Network for Education Reform NNER which is staging resistance to the Thein Sein government’s policies on education.)

four news organizations,⁹ it expanded through the years and currently has thirteen member organizations.¹⁰ According to the BNI website, their mission is to promote media freedom while providing reliable, accurate, and balanced daily news from the country's different regions and diverse ethnic peoples. Their goal is to become a multimedia enterprise that presents a comprehensive picture of Burma and promotes local, regional and international understanding of the country. BNI's funding, at first, was from the Burma Refugee Committee (BRC), and it currently has support from a major donor, the Open Society Foundation (OSF).

Through the years of SLORC and SPDC control in Myanmar (1988-2011), ethnic media produced in exile were an important window for citizens and international onlookers to understand what was going on in ethnic minority areas. International newspapers routinely cited information from these media and international television broadcasts used footage acquired by clandestine ethnic journalists. Ethnic media played a critical role, through international media, in highlighting the worsening human rights and political situation.

At the same time, ethnic media also functioned to promote various ethnic national identities. Articles and news published periodically in local languages helped to promote awareness of ethnic identity, especially among younger generations. Along with news, ethnic media educated people about their cultural and literary traditions. Through news articles and cultural pieces these publications expressed indirect and poetic messages about the ideals of ethnic self-determination.

9. The first four members of BNI were: *Mizzima News*, *Network Media Group*, *Shan Herald Agency for News (SHAN)*, and *Independent Mon News Agency*.

10. The thirteen members of BNI in 2014 are: *Mizzima News*, *Independent Mon News Agency*, *Kachin News Group*, *Shan Herald Agency for News*, *Kantarawaddy Times*, *Kaladan Press*, *Karen Information Center (KIC)*, *Phophtaw News Association*, *Narinjara News*, *Network Media Group*, *Chin World*, *Thanlwin Times*, *Khonumthung News*. It is noteworthy that BNI includes a Rohingya news group, *Kaladan Press*. This would not be possible if the organization was based inside Myanmar as Rohingyas are not a recognized ethnic group inside the country. BNI also includes the Rakhine nationalist media group, *Narinjara News*.

3

MEDIA IN MYANMAR AFTER 2011

The changing media landscape

In 2011, the media landscape for both mainstream and ethnic media changed dramatically as a part of the reform process initiated by the new semi-civilian government. One important development was that the government offered exile-based media groups the opportunity to apply for licenses to have operations inside Myanmar. This announcement was made in March 2012. Several previously banned exile-based media groups took the opportunity to operate inside the country. The Irrawaddy, Mizzima, Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB), the ethnic-media umbrella group Burma News International (BNI) and several ethnic media groups cautiously returned to Myanmar in order to participate in what they hoped would be more inclusive public discourse in reforming Myanmar.

However, because of uncertainty about the political situation, DVB, Irrawaddy, and BNI decided to maintain their respective headquarters in Chiang Mai, Thailand, although they also opened offices in Yangon. Similarly, the exile-based ethnic media group Karen Information Center (KIC), which produces a Burmese language paper called *Kayin Thadin-zin* as well as a Burmese language website; and the Karenni group *Kantarawaddy Times* both decided to maintain their main offices in Thailand in the border area: KIC in Mae Sot, and *Kantarawaddy Times* (KT) in Dokhita village near Mae Hong Son. In 2013, they opened satellite offices in their respective ethnic states: KIC opened an office in

Hpa-an, Karen State, and KT opened one is Demoso in Karenni (Kayah) state.

On December 2012, the Ministry of Information announced that Myanmar nationals who wished to publish daily newspapers could submit applications for permits, with publication to begin in April 2013. Dozens of media groups applied for these new licenses. In addition, with the closing of the notorious censorship office in August 2012, independent publishing became easier than ever before. In 2014, there were more than 200 daily, weekly and monthly publications, covering news, sports and entertainment, being published in Myanmar. Among them were nine ethnic language news publications, publishing legally inside the country for the first time in 50 years, each distributed in their respective ethnic areas. These ethnic language publications included: *The Guiding Star* (Mon), *Hsen Pai* (Shan), *Panglong* (Shan), *Karen Information Center* (Karen), *Chin Times* (Chin), *Chin Land Post* (Chin), *Chin Healer* (Chin), and *The Voice of Arakan* (Arakan).

New state-based and locally-based periodicals also received permission to publish, for example, *The Taunggyi*, and *The Eastern Yoma* (both distributed in Shan State), the *Myitkyina Journal* (produced in Kachin State), the *Thanlwin Times* (produced in Mawlamyaing for distribution in lower Myanmar); and the *Tanintharyi Weekly* (distributed in Tanintharyi Region). The producers of these state- and locally-based publications included some formerly exile-based journalists who had returned to Myanmar since 2011, bringing with them their experience from many years working abroad. For example, the editor of *Myitkyina Journal* used to work for the media-advocacy NGO Inter News in Chiang Mai, Thailand for many years. In 2013, he moved to Myitkyina and established the journal.

Moreover, ethnic-minority political parties can also produce their own newsletters. Party newsletters were permitted in advance of the 2010 general elections for all political parties, subject to the regulations and oversight of the Myanmar Election Commission. An example is the “White Tiger” newsletter produced by the Shan Nationalities Democratic Party (SNDP) since 2010.

As part of the government’s cease-fire negotiations with armed

ethnic groups since 2012, certain NSAGs have been allowed to publish and distribute periodicals in their respective areas. These NSAG-produced publications include the Voice of Hsan Loi, which is partly in Shan and partly in Burmese and produced by the Shan State Army-South (SSA-S) group; and the Laiza Shi Shanan (“Laiza Newsletter”), a Kachin-language publication of the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO). Most of these NSAG publications do not have formal licenses, but they are permitted anyway.

Meanwhile, other media groups that publish and distribute without a license have come under new pressure. In Chin state, these include: the Palam-based daily *Palam Post*, which is published in Lai-Chin language; the bi-weekly *Hakha Post*, also published in Lai-Chin; *The Tedim Post*, which is published in Zo language; and the *Zo Lengthe* weekly produced by the Tedim Youth Association in Zo language. Previously Chin state authorities turned a blind eye as these groups published and distributed in their respective areas. In fact, the *Zo Lengthe* paper was published for ten years during the military regime era. Then in September and October 2014, the Chin State government announced that all these publications had to cease. They were urged to apply for proper registration with the Myanmar Ministry of Information.¹¹

Difficulties facing ethnic media

While there has been a significant expansion of opportunities for independent ethnic- and locally-based media under the post-2011 government, there are also many obstacles and difficulties. One major problem is that the readership for ethnic publications remains small due to their very specific regional and local focus. The bulk of their readers are in the states or ethnic areas. In the main cities of Yangon and Mandalay, there are few readers for ethnic publications. The limited market directly impacts the

11. *Hakha Post* and *Tedim Post* applied for formal registration and they were allowed to start publishing again in December 2014. Many small publications do not wish to apply for licenses because the procedures are unclear and frustrating.

income of the publication, restricting their ability to recruit and keep employees.

For example, the formerly exile-based *Kantarawaddy Times (KT)* still depends heavily on funding from international donors such as NED and OSF, although they are now distributing legally inside the country in Karenni (Kayah) state. Some recently established state- or locally-based publications have been unsustainable. For example *The Taunggyi Times*, was suspended after publishing just one edition, while the *Eastern Yoma* lasted for nearly two years (2012-2014) before it had to shut down for financial reasons. Likewise, *Thanlwin Times*, which started publishing out of Mawlamyaing in 2012, had to suspend publishing in 2014 because they were losing money every month.¹²

The market for publications in ethnic minority areas is also limited by local reading habits and low literacy rates. In many ethnic areas, people rely on oral communication rather than periodicals to get information. In Yangon and Mandalay and other major towns and cities, reading daily newspapers and weekly journals is common, but these kinds of reading practices are rare in the ethnic areas. In my interviews with Dawseh villagers in Karenni (Kayah) state, I learned that people in their area seldom read newspapers. Rather, they receive news from rendezvous places such as betel shops, teashops and liquor bars. Many also receive information from radio broadcasts, largely FM stations broadcast from Yangon or Naypyidaw, which young people listen to during the day while they work. Villagers may read sports journals for pleasure.¹³ (Interviews with Dawseh villagers, February 2014.)

For these reasons, ethnic media groups are struggling to produce regular weekly and monthly publications. Since 2011, Burmese

12. In 2015, *Thanlwin Times* started publishing again after they received financial support from international donors. However, funding is inconsistent and they cannot publish regularly.

13. The Dawseh villagers in Karenni State told me that they liked sports rather than other periodicals. Because they have to struggle the whole day on the farm, they wish to relax in their free time with entertainment rather than boring political topics. All of the villagers know famous football celebrities.

mainstream print media has expanded rapidly with many investors and opportunities. Ethnic publications have been left far behind compared to mainstream Burmese media.

Another difficulty is getting access to information in remote areas. There are many cases of journalists facing harassment when reporting on politically sensitive issues. On December 3, 2014, a journalist with the Arakan-based Development News Journal was trying to collect information related to the Kaladan Development project. He was taken and beaten by Myanmar Port Authorities. (Interview with Moe Myint Zaw, editor of Development News Journal, December 2014.)

Ethnic journalists are more aware than mainstream Burmese journalists about what is going on in conflict-areas such as in Kachin state or eastern Karen state. However, there are many different armed groups and if a journalist gets access to an area controlled by one armed group, then it is more difficult to access other areas. In Karenni (Kayah) State, it is very difficult to get access to areas controlled by armed groups. It takes time to get permission from armed actors to travel these places. Also transportation to the area is time-consuming and communications networks are poor — so it is difficult to get telephone connections or internet access in order to file reports.

Some high-ranking officers in non-state armed groups (NSAGs) have also been dissatisfied with ethnic publications' critical reporting on them and may refuse to give interviews. (Interview with Nang Phaw Gay, KIC editor, January 2014.) Likewise, state officials may refuse to give interviews to small ethnic media groups, because they think they are unimportant and will not have a big impact on the public.

Limited interest in ethnic issues among mainstream

In Myanmar, most media is produced in urban areas in the Burmese language, and most reporting focuses on topics affecting people in the central part of the country. There is limited reporting on ethnic minority issues. If there is a major story or hot news in an ethnic area, mainstream journalists will get the scoop from

ethnic media. However, they will follow up themselves rather than quoting ethnic journalists. One exception to this pattern was the Yangon-based English language Myanmar Freedom daily newspaper, edited by U Thiha Saw, which regularly used reports from the Kachin News Group (KNG) and the Karen Information Center (KIC) and published news from ethnic media agencies in their editions.

When mainstream Burmese journalists report on issues such as conflict in ethnic minority areas, their reports may miss important contextual information. Mainstream journalists in Myanmar often do not know much about the background and history of ethnic people, not even about basic facts like who the main ethnic leaders are.¹⁴

Even international media like the BBC Burmese language program may misreport on ethnic issues. In 2015, BBC ran a headline that stated “Ta-ang (Palaung) National Liberation Army (TNLA) ambush government convoy.” The article went on to quote a government official who said the investigation of the incident was “ongoing.” Moreover, a TNLA official denied the attack when contacted by the BBC, which isn’t clear in the headline. This kind of misreporting can create misunderstanding between the majority Burman population and the minorities.

With the new opportunities for publishing, some ethnic minority journalists have tried to help mainstream Myanmar society to learn about minority peoples. In 2012, shortly after the reform process started, Shan politicians from the Shan Nationalities Democratic Party (SNDP) tried to publish a weekly journal called Pyidaung Su (“Union”). The “Union” weekly was going to focus especially on what is happening in ethnic areas, with articles about the cultures of different ethnic groups in each edition. However,

14. In my work at Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB), I had the experience of a Yangon-based colleague who complained about the usage “Karenni” when his reporting was translated into English. He had only heard of Karenni State as “Kayah State,” the official name since 1952. He did not understand the history of the conflict and he didn’t know that the older name is preferred by many Karenni people.

when they applied for registration, the government did not allow the name “Union,” and they had to change their name to Unity to get the publishing permit. In the early editions of Unity, the focus on ethnic issues and cultures is quite clear. However, the journal could not maintain that focus for long, due to limited readership. In Yangon and Mandalay, most readers want to know about things that affect them directly. To improve their sales, the journal had to focus on more mainstream Burmese issues. (Interview with Saw Than Myint, former SNDP member, February 2012.)¹⁵

Meanwhile, ethnic media outlets continue to be marginalized in Myanmar. One notes for example that the Myanmar Journalist Association (MJA) does not make any reference to ethnic media groups or ethnic language media in its founding constitution, although it is an independent organization devoted to promoting media rights.

Government-run “ethnic media” and private FM stations

Meanwhile, the Myanmar authorities have also expanded government-controlled media aimed at ethnic minorities. In August 2014, the state-run Myanmar Alin daily newspaper started producing the Tain-yin-tha Thadin-zin (“ethnic news”) supplement, a colorful four-page insert with news from that day’s edition translated into ethnic minority languages, specifically Sgaw-Karen, Po-Karen, Mon, and Pa-O languages. The supplement is published at the Mawlamyaing (Moulmein) printing house under the Ministry of Information and distributed with 20,000 copies to Mon state and 30,000 to Karen State. According to

15. Subsequently, “Unity” got into trouble with the authorities for reporting on an alleged chemical weapons production facility in Pauk Township in Magway region in January 2014 issue. In July 2014, five people (the chief executive officer and four journalists) were tried and sentenced to ten years with hard labor for violation of 1923 Official Secrets Act. After appeal the sentence was reduced to 7 years. This case was widely reported in local and international media. In the midst of the court case, *Unity Weekly* had to suspend publication due to financial problems. The “Unity-Five” are currently serving their sentences.

official statements, the purpose of the supplement is “to help preserve ethnic language, literature, culture, tradition and custom, to improve social media network, and to give Karen, Mon and Pa-O people access to information in their languages” (translated from Myanma Alin, 31 July 2014.)

The Myanmar government has also invested in TV and radio broadcasting in ethnic languages across the country. In September 2013, Myanmar Radio and Television (MRTV) tested a new “National Races” television channel, broadcast from the capital Naypyidaw. The channel included programs in eleven ethnic-minority languages: with 60-minute programs in Kachin, Kayah (Karenni), Mon, Rakhine (Arakanese), and Shan languages will and 30-minute programs in Sgaw-Karen, Eastern Po-Karen, Western Po-Karen, Asho-Chin, Laizo-Chin and Wa. The programs run from 6 am to 12-noon and then repeat through the day. The channel was initiated as part of the Ministry of Information’s effort to develop ethnic minorities’ access to information (DVB website, 10 September 2013.) MRTV’s radio programming in ethnic languages increased. Where previously they had programs in eight languages, this was increased to 14 different languages (Kachin, Shan, Palam-Chin, Mindat-Chin, Rakhine, Wa and Kokang, Sgaw-Karen, Po-Karen, Mon, Karenni (Kayah), Gaykho-Karenni and Gaybar-Karenni). They also increased the time for each ethnic language program to about 45 minutes per program.

It is important to note that the liberalization of media in Myanmar since 2011 has been primarily in the print sector. Licenses for private TV and radio broadcasting have been carefully controlled. These licenses were awarded to powerful business tycoons with close connections to the government or the military. For example, the satellite television service Sky Net is operated by Shwe Than Lwin Co. Ltd., which is owned by military associate Kyaw Win. This group also operates the influential Shwe FM radio station. The tycoon U Tayza of the Htoo Group is invested in Bagan FM radio. However, these big businessmen have been reluctant to invest in ethnic media due to the small market and limited profit.

One interesting case is Cherry FM, owned by the daughter of a big tycoon named Zaygarbar Khin Shwe, who is also a Member of

Parliament (MP) with the USDP party. This private radio station received its license to broadcast in Shan state. Later it expanded its coverage to Yangon and Mandalay. (In fact, the programming is produced in Yangon and sent to Naypyidaw and broadcast from there, via relay stations.) When Cherry FM started, it included Shan language programming, with news and cultural pieces such as Shan story telling. There were Shan language lessons for non-Shan speakers. However, when the station expanded into Yangon and Mandalay, the programming changed. Currently, Cherry FM's 30-minute "Shan program" consists only of Shan songs, which are translated into Burmese. (Interview with former Cherry FM employee via email, July 2014.)

Other broadcast media operating in ethnic areas

As I mentioned, radio is an important medium in ethnic areas as it can overcome illiteracy. Non-state Armed Groups (NSAG) also produce television and radio in their controlled areas. In Kachin state, the KIO operates Laiza-TV and Laiza-FM, and in Karen state, KNU's Brigade #5 operates Radio Kawthoolei in Sgaw-Karen language.

Ethnic people also receive some information from other sources. Radio Free Asia (RFA) broadcasts programs every day in Myanmar's main ethnic languages for 12 minutes each. Until October 2014, Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB), based in Chiang Mai, Thailand, also broadcasted ethnic language radio program in the main ethnic languages, with 30 minutes for each language. However, since 2014, DVB only produces television programs, and only in the Burmese language. Some residents of Shan State listen to a Shan language private radio station, AM 1479, which airs from Chiang Mai, Thailand. It also airs Karen and Akha language programs.

In 2010, BNI launched a "Free Ethnic Voice" radio program with VOA that broadcast from United States. Although broadcasting in Burmese language, the content was ethnic minority concerns. Since 2013, BNI has also worked with DVB to broadcast an "Ethnic Perspectives" TV program broadcast from Thailand. This is also

in Burmese language but focuses on ethnic area news. DVB and BNI are negotiating to implement ethnic language TV program in 2015.

Networking among ethnic media groups

Because ethnic media groups are small and weak in the market, some groups have tried to network together to share information and resources. A good example is the network between the Karen Information Center (KIC) which was established in 1997, and two other groups, one which produces an English-language news website called “Karen News”; and another which produces a Sgaw-Karen-language website called Kwekalu news. All of these media outlets are run by Karen people. They share stories with the aim of reaching a wide audience, including mainstream Myanmar readers and international readers. The KIC, which publishes mostly in Burmese, passes on its reports to the Karen News group which translates them into English for their website. Karen News also translates Kwekalu’s stories from Karen into English, as well as producing original content. In 2013, KIC started publishing in Burmese and Sgaw Karen languages for distribution in Karen State, Mon State, Yangon Region, and Irrawaddy Region. (Interview with KIC editors, 2013.)

In August 2012, just as Myanmar’s media reforms were being implemented, the Nationalities Brotherhood Forum, an alliance of six ethnic political parties¹⁶ released a statement expressing support for ethnic language publications, emphasizing that their parties would begin producing such newsletters. The aim was to promote ethnic languages that had long been restricted. (As I have noted, for decades, the government only allowed the teaching of ethnic languages outside school hours.)

16. The six political parties in the Nationalities Brotherhood Forum are: Shan Nationalities Democratic Party, the All Mon Region Democratic Party, the Rakhine Nationalities Development Party, the Plone-Swor Democratic Party, the Chin National Party and Kayan Nationalities Party.

In April 2013, the Thailand-based Burma News International (BNI) organization held the first ethnic media conference in Mawlamyaing, Mon state. Hundreds of journalists participated in “The Strengthening of Ethnic Voices in Democratic Media Reform” conference. It was also attended by the Chief Minister of Mon State, Ohn Myint, and the Deputy Information Minister Pike Htwe. The stated objectives of the conference were to promote multi-media news agencies in ethnic minority regions; to increase the role of ethnic media in the ceasefire negotiations and peace process; to help develop a new media law in Myanmar in keeping with international standards and principles of free press. At the conference, the ethnic media groups discussed the need for provisions to support ethnic media in the new press law that was being drafted at that time.

This was followed in March 2014 by a second ethnic media conference in Taunggyi, capital of Shan State. The main objective of the second conference was to build networks among ethnic media groups. Participants at the conference also discussed the fact that large, mainstream media outlets should encourage the development of ethnic media and should report more often on what is happening in the ethnic regions of the country. It was agreed that state governments should support the development of independent print media, radio, and television in minority areas. (Interview with Nan Phaw Gay, March 2014.)

A third ethnic media conference was held in March 2015 in Hakha, Chin state. The main objective of the third conference was to discuss ways for ethnic media in Myanmar to be financially sustainable. Over 200 representatives attended from 18 to 20 March 2015. Many ethnic media groups expressed their interest in developing community radio to improve their sustainability. However, my case study, Kantarawaddy Times (KT), wants to implement online digital marketing to improve their sustainability.

4

CASE STUDY 1: KANTARAWADDY TIMES

The story of “KT”

Kantarawaddy Times (or “KT”) was established in 2004 as a biweekly newsletter by Karenni refugees living in Thailand, in Karenni Camp #1 near Mae Hong Son.¹⁷ At that time, there were no independent media inside Karenni (Kayah) State or along the Thai-Karenni border. Seven youthful Karenni refugees founded the publication because they wanted to distribute information about issues affecting Karenni people, including those living outside Myanmar. They wanted give a voice to their people who were facing serious human right abuses, including rape, looting and killing under the Myanmar military regime. Terence Wright (2012) refers to KT as “refugee media” because it involved members of a refugee community working actively to benefit their community and to heighten awareness of their situation among a wider public.

17. Karenni refugee camps #1 and #2 were established on the Thai-Burma border in 1996 after the breakdown of a ceasefire between the Myanmar military and the (KNPP).



KT's founding members initially tried to cooperate with the Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP), which is the political wing of the Karenni National Progressive Army (KNPA). However, the high-ranking officers encouraged them to get further study and to be independent. (I discussed this in chapter three.)

In 2004, KT set up an office in Mae Hong Son in Thailand. They began by printing their newsletter on newsheet (A4) paper, which they distributed once every 15 days. At first, they printed just 100 copies in Mae Hong Son and distributed these to the two Karenni refugee camps on the Thai-Burma border and to civil society groups and NGOs in Mae Hong Son. At that time, few copies went into Karenni (Kayah) State, as networks for spreading news inside the country were not well established at that time. For funding, they sought donations from Karenni people who were working for NGOs in Mae Hong Son. The papers were distributed free of charge.

Later, KT expanded. In 2007, KT began receiving funds from international donors like US National Endowment for Democracy (NED), the Open Society Institute (OSI) and USAID-funded "Inter News" and they were able to expand production to 1,000 copies, in color, distributed every two weeks. Most copies were distributed along the border, but a few hundred copies were also quietly sent into the country through their networks. That year, KT also began producing a Karenni language radio program for Radio Free Asia (RFA), and they established a website with news presented in three languages: Burmese, English and Karenni

(Kayah). They also began producing Burmese language TV footage about Karenni issues for Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB)'s TV. This included footage taken inside the country by undercover journalists. In 2009, they set up an office in Dokhita village outside of Mae Hong Son because, under Thai government policy, refugees could no longer work in the town Mae Hong Son.¹⁸

KT journalists working inside to get stories had to take special precautions to avoid detection. One journalist I interviewed, Kayah Hteh, described how she used a special thumb-drive loaded with encryption software whenever she used internet-cafes to submit stories to the KT office in Dokhita. She told me how she was afraid to use the public Internet facilities at that time. In 2010, when the government held elections, all of the KT journalists from Dokhita went inside to cover the story, and they worried about being caught.¹⁹



Villagers reading Kantarawaddy Times at village meeting (Photo: KT)

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18. The Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP) established Dokhita village in 2009 with permission from the Thai authorities as a place of refuge for landmine victims from the war in Karenni (Kayah) state. Dokhita means “disabled” in Burmese. These landmine victims could not stay in the refugee camps due to lack of access to medical care. *KT* was permitted to work out of Dokhita as well.
 19. Kayah Hteh still works for *KT* on the editorial team. She is in charge of the Demoso office, and is one of the few female journalists involved in ethnic media in Myanmar.

In 2012, Kantarawaddy Times applied and received permission from the Myanmar government to register as a media organization inside the country. In 2013, they opened an office in Demoso, which is about 15 kilometers from Loikaw, the capital of Kayah state. Although it is now a legal organization in Myanmar with about ten employees in the country, KT also maintains an office in a 2-storey bamboo building in Dokhita village in Thailand with six employees. The Dokhita office is mainly responsible for producing the radio programs and TV packages for RFA and DVB, using footage and reports from journalists inside. They also keep up with news about refugee issues.

Presently, KT produces and distributes 1,500 copies every two weeks. Because printing facilities are not available in the state, the paper is printed in Yangon and sent to Demoso by bus. KT has had many problems with distribution due to poor roads in this area, including delays in the delivery of the paper from Yangon and difficulties distributing to villages. In fact, most of KT's readers are in the two main towns of Loikaw and Demoso. At first, in 2013, the paper could not reach many townships, so they only printed 1,000 copies monthly. Then in 2014, they began distributing to more remote townships to test the market. They expanded production to 1,500 copies monthly. In January 2015, they started distributing biweekly. In addition to distributing to all seven townships in Kayah state, about 100 copies of each edition are also sent to Dokhita for distribution in the border camps.²⁰

In all, KT estimates that it has 3,000 readers for their editions within the state, because printed publications are shared in communities. In addition to the journal, they also have over 6,000 listeners for their Karenni language radio program on RFA, according to a survey that KT conducted. The website is not so popular because of low Internet access in the state (and in the camps): the website is mostly accessed by Karenni people living in

20. Copies are distributed as follows: 520 to Demoso, 465 to Loikaw, 120 to Hpruso, 40 to Hpasawng, 40 to Bawlahka, 25 to Shawdaw and 10 to Mese. *KT* also gives 20 copies to Ministry of Information to keep as an archive. As mentioned, about 100 copies are sent to the two refugee camps on the Thai-Myanmar border.

third countries. KT also set up a Facebook page, which is more readily accessible because it is available on smartphones. The Facebook page is becoming popular among Karenni youth.²¹

KT is a unique, state-based publication in Karenni (Kayah) state. There is no comparable periodical. Previously I mentioned the Ngwe Taung (“Silver Mountain”) periodical, which is produced by the non-state armed group KNPP. However, Ngwe Taung cannot be distributed regularly. Its main focus is the party’s political ideology and goals, not general news.

There was another local publication that was associated with the breakaway Karenni Nationalities People Liberation Front (KNPLF), an armed group that split from the KNPP and affiliated with the Myanmar government in 2009.²² The KNPLF periodical was called “Kandarawaddy Times,” spelled with a “da” rather than “ta” (in both Burmese and English). The KNPLF began producing this periodical out of Loikaw while KT was still based on the border. Presumably the intention was to confuse people and to try to draw away some of KT’s readers. Kandarawaddy Times only ran for a year or two and then stopped.

“Kantarawaddy” is an old name to refer to the lands east of the Salween River including Kyebogyi and Bawlake that were administered by the feudal prince. While the spelling with “ta” was widely used in history books, the Myanmar government prefers the name spelled with a “da.” Official uses of “Kandarawaddy” can be found in many places such as the names of the bridge, parks and roads. The KNPLF’s use of this official spelling for its publication indicated its affiliation with the central Myanmar government.

KT not only uses the old spelling (with “ta”) for “Kantarawaddy,” but it also uses “Karenni,” which is an old name for the state. Since

21. In January 2015, *KT*’s Facebook page had over 1,700 “likes.” Some hot news reports on the page had up to 2,000 “likes,” and on average there were about 500 regular readers for each story. In contrast, there were, on average, about 100 regular readers for stories on *KT*’s main website.

22. The KNPLF was established as a Border Guard Force in 2009 under an agreement with the Myanmar military.

2013, KT uses “Kayah,” the government’s official name for the state, but they always put “Karenni State” in brackets after the word “Kayah.” KT uses the unofficial name to help readers remember the history of the state, which might be forgotten. The Burmese government changed the official name of the state to Kayah in 1952, but it was rejected by Karenni nationalists.²³

Since 2013 when they began publishing and distributing legally inside Myanmar, KT has faced many challenges. There are problems related to transportation and communications, a limited market, funding, human resources, and getting access to information. After a review of their language policy, I will discuss some of these challenges below. I will also discuss how readers in the state are responding to the publication.

Language policy

When it was produced on the Thai border, KT was mostly in Burmese, but they included four pages in Kayah language using a writing system called “Kayah-li.” However, when KT began publishing inside the country, they had to reconsider their policy.

Choices about what language and writing system to use are quite complicated because of the ethno-linguistic diversity in the state and also because of the government’s policies and attitudes. In the state’s seven townships, there are nine main ethno-linguistic groups and many ethnic sub-groups with their own distinct dialects. Some of these languages and dialects have writing systems while some have no written form. Due to these language differences, the various ethnic groups in the state usually use Burmese as their common language.

23. The 1875 treaty between the British government and Burmese King Mindon recognized “Karenni State” as an autonomous region. Burma’s 1947 constitution also recognized “Karenni State” as a constituent in the Union of Burma. However, since 1952, Burmese (Myanmar) governments have only used the term “Kayah.” Karenni nationalists still insist on the term “Karenni” which, they say, includes all the ethnic groups in the state. “Kayah,” they say, only refers to one group and should not be the name of the state.

The three largest ethno-linguistic groups in the state are Kayah, Kayaw and Kayan. Among the diverse Kayah peoples, three different writing systems can be found: one based on the Roman alphabet, which was developed by Christian missionaries; one based on the Burmese alphabet; and a third, hybrid system called “Kayah-li” (also called “Kyae Phoe Gyie” in Karenni). Kayah-li was developed by a Karenni scholar and former KNPP chairman named Ku Htae Bu Peh in the 1950s. His idea was to create a writing system that could be shared by the diverse peoples of the state, including Kayaw and Kayan peoples. Although this idea was not realized at the time, some groups adopted Kayah-li.²⁴ Most of the Karenni refugees living on the Thailand-Burma border know the Kayah-li system. In 2004, when their publication was founded, KT editors decided to publish mostly in Burmese but also to include four pages of Kayah language using the Kayah-li script.

For many decades, the military authorities in Burma-Myanmar have regarded Ku Htae Bu Peh’s writing system as “rebel writing” because of its historical association with the KNPP armed resistance and the ideology of interethnic unity. Historically, the central government only recognized the writing system based on Burmese consonants. Due to the controversial status of the Kayah-li system, when KT moved its operations inside the country, they decided to publish solely in Burmese to avoid problems with the government.

When they started, KT received just a 6-month temporary license from the Ministry of Information. The chief editor and founding member, Say Reh Soe explained to me: “[We were concerned that] if we published in Kayah-li, the government would reject this as [illegal] writing. Also, we would be giving trouble to our public. In the past, teachers of the Ku Htae Bu Peh writing system faced

24. In general, Buddhists use the writing system based on Burmese script, while Christians use the Roman alphabet-based system. The Manumaw people (a subgroup of Kayah) and the Kayaw and Kayan people usually use the Roman alphabet-based system. Most of the Karenni people living on the Thailand-Burma border and in the refugee camps know the Kayah-li system. Also, the Yintale people are developing a written form for their language based on Ku Htae Bu Peh’s Kayah-li system.

arrest and torture. We had to have a license in order to publish. For these reasons, we decided we could not print Karenni writing in our journal” (Interview with Say Reh Soe, September 2013). Another issue was that the Kayah-li system was not widely known across the state, although it was known by residents in the refugee camps.

Say Reh Soe told me that he regretted that they had to publish without Karenni (Kayah-li) writing. For him, this meant that KT was not fulfilling its mission completely. The mission of KT is to promote knowledge among Karenni people. “We cannot fully support Karenni knowledge [if] we cannot publish with local language. However, we can help with language barriers. We can help people to express their voices and feelings by translating into Burmese.” (Interview, September 2013.)

In 2012, after the national political reform process began, the Kayah National Literature and Culture Committee began providing training in how to use the writing system in some townships in Kayah state. In 2013, Kayah and Karenni literature committees from inside and outside the country agreed to use Kayah-li as the common written form for local languages. Then, on September 8, 2014, the Kayah State regional parliament agreed that Kayah-li writing system would be the common writing form in the state. Moreover, teachers of this writing style have begun trainings for Kayah employees working at the “National Races Channel” of MRTV.

Because of these changes, after KT’s temporary license was extended in January 2015, they began publishing a supplement to their periodical using Kayah-li writing. This has been approved by the authorities. However, the Ministry of Information insists that the material written in Kayah-li must repeat the Burmese-language content in the paper.

Marketing issues

Like other ethnic media groups in Myanmar, KT faces the problem that its market is very small due to its specific regional focus. KT’s readers are either in the state or on the Thai border: the publication

is limited in its ability to grow much beyond these areas. Karenni (Kayah) state is also one of the least populated areas in Myanmar, which further limits the potential market.²⁵ Moreover, literacy levels are low. People in the state can communicate in Burmese, but they find it difficult to read due to a lack of proper study. KT can be hard for some residents to understand: for example, a Dawseh villager I interviewed told me that he had to read a page more than one time to understand the meaning.

People in the remote rural areas in the state are not accustomed to reading news periodicals. Reading news is more common in the towns in ethnic areas where people have more education and also more time to read. Although KT tries to distribute throughout the state, it relies on Loikaw and Demoso, the main towns in Kayah state, for the bulk of its readership.

In this limited market, KT also has to compete with other, mainstream Burmese publications that are produced in Yangon and distributed in the state. KT is not in competition with the private daily newspapers that have been published in Myanmar since April 2013. The reason is, by the time the news dailies reach Kayah state by bus, most of the news is old anyway. However, KT does compete directly with mainstream Burmese-language weeklies, some of which are quite popular, especially in the towns. Distribution day for KT may coincide with distribution of these mainstream weeklies, and, as it is a bi-weekly, KT's news is not as fresh as these other journals. However, some residents buy KT because of its focus on issues affecting the state.

The publishing cost for each edition is 100 kyats per copy. KT sells each unit for 300 kyats to shopkeepers and other vendors who then sell editions for 500 kyats (approximately \$0.50 USD) each. In very remote areas, KT distributes free of charge because the local people cannot afford to purchase it. It is also free in refugee camps.

25. According to 2014 census, Kayah (Karenni) State is the least populated area in Myanmar with a population of 286, 738.

Funding and human resource issues

Due to its limited market, KT still depends heavily on funding from donors. As I mentioned, exiled Myanmar media received funding from the U.S. government's National Endowment for Democracy (NED), the Open Society Institute (OSI), and other international donors in the 2000s. However, ethnic exile media groups received much less than the mainstream exile publications like *Irrawaddy* magazine.²⁶

KT continues to rely on NED, OSI and (USAID-funded) Inter News for support. It is also seeking support from Europe Burma Office (EBO) to launch an FM radio station on the Thai-Burma border, from Nyarmo, which the highest point in the area (and also the headquarters of the KNPP/KNPA). The radio station aims to air programs for Karenni refugees as well as residents in the state.

Because of their small budget, KT can produce only a limited number of copies for distribution: currently, 1,500 copies every two weeks. Even if distributors request more copies, KT cannot supply them due to the limited print run. Furthermore, basic equipment such as recorders, cameras and computers are insufficient. KT journalists must share equipment, which can delay their reporting. The group also cannot afford to pay for "contributor pieces," that is, invited features or cartoons from independent, freelance writers.

Most critically, KT cannot offer competitive salaries to its journalists. Typically, new journalists go through probation periods when they are not paid but only given food and accommodation. Later, monthly salaries are provided, but these are quite low: 60,000 to 100,000 kyats (USD \$60-\$100) per month.²⁷ Because of the low salaries, it is hard for KT to recruit

26. The *Irrawaddy* had an operating budget of about USD \$1 million in 2010 (*Irrawaddy*, "Speaking Truth to Burma," 25 January 2011). In comparison, in 2010 *KT* received a total of US \$30,000 from donors (\$10,000 from OSI, US \$20,000 from NED).

27. In comparison, as a new journalist at the *Irrawaddy* magazine in Chiang Mai, I received \$500 USD per month as salary.

from the community. KT fails to attract educated people, because they cannot compete with the salaries offered by INGOs and NGOs. For example, recently they tried to hire a Burmese-language editor, but could not find anyone suitable. Journalists who work for KT do so because of their dedication to the mission. San Phyo Tun, a KT journalist based in Demoso told me: “Our salary is very low, but it is supplemented by the nationalist commitment.”

In the past, KT drew from the refugee community for its human resources. Over the years, KT has lost some of its best people to refugee resettlement programs. Since KT was formed in 2004, 15 journalists have been resettled to third countries, including six of the founding members. “Many of our most experienced journalists have left,” said chief editor Say Reh Soe when I interviewed him in the Dokhita office in September 2014. “We try to choose journalists, who don’t wish to resettle in third countries, but people face difficulties staying on the Thai-Burma border and we don’t want to interfere with [our colleague’s] decisions. Now, [for recruitment] our first priority is youth from inside Myanmar, but university graduates are disinclined to join KT and other ethnic media organizations due to the weak salaries.”

Since the move inside Myanmar, the KT group has tried to become more self-sustaining. However, the income they earn from selling the periodical cannot cover office operating expenses and reporters’ salaries. Say Reh Soe said: “We are trying to make enough to fully cover our costs [for salaries and operating expenses]. We have to attract business owners to put their advertisements in our journal. [Now] we have advertisements, but we publish them free of charge. For the sustainability of KT, we will need to make our website better in the coming three years. We will build the capacity [skill] of our web-master and we will update daily news in three languages, Myanmar, English and Karenni. If we cannot run the journal in the long run, we will try to run the website.” Although, at present, internet access is low in Karenni (Kayah) state, KT expects it will increase as mobile phones with internet access become more widely available.

At the present time, KT receives some income by contributing to the US-based Radio Free Asia (RFA) Burmese-language programs,

and also by regularly contributing TV-footage to the exile-based Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB) television station.²⁸

Access to information

In the new Myanmar, reporters still have difficulties accessing information, partly due to the government's lack of understanding about media. According to journalists from KT, state government officials are often reluctant to give interviews with them. Officials view these former-exiles as "outsiders" that may do harm to the country. They fear being involved with an illegal organization, although, in fact, KT is not illegal in Myanmar anymore.

Within the state, there are many armed groups. Journalists have to get permission from them to travel to controlled areas and that can delay access to information. Some areas in the state are off-limits because of opium cultivation controlled by armed groups. Transportation is always a problem in Karenni (Kayah) state: some areas cannot be accessed due to a lack of roads. Limited mobile and telephone networks are other obstacles for journalists trying to collect and transmit information.

Content analysis

I reviewed the contents of ten issues of KT, from January to November 2013. (In May 2013, the publication was suspended for one month because the staff was busy with training activities.)

Each issue of KT is about 20 pages long. Nearly half of the pages are dedicated to topics that affect people in the state. Articles deal with topics such as: exploitation of resources from development

28. RFA produces both radio and television programs in Burmese language for audiences in Burma. *KT* produces four 12-minute radio programs for RFA each month, and receives 22,000 Thai Baht (approximately \$680 USD) monthly. DVB pays 2,500 Thai Baht (or 80,000 Myanmar Kyat, approximately \$80 USD) per story, and *KT* tries to give three or four stories each month, for a total of about \$320 USD per month.

projects, environmental issues, land confiscation in the state, the Myanmar military's #14 training school in Demoso Township, the collection of tolls on roadways by government officials and by armed groups, various cultural celebrations, the Karenni Nationalities Progressive Party (KNPP) and local National League for Democracy party, trips to the state by the central government officials, the 2014 national census, the ongoing peace process, education issues, and women's issues. There are also articles about refugees, landmine problems, opium production and other drugs issues, the shortage of medicines in the "backpack" mobile medical clinics, and so on. These topics, especially about the border area, are rarely discussed in mainstream Myanmar publications.

The paper gives information about what is happening in the state and how people feel about these things. For example, in one article, victims of land grabbing in the state told their feelings about this. Another article was about the dire situation of the Yintale ethnic group, whose livelihood and way of life are threatened by a planned dam project on the Salween (Thanlwin) River.

KT includes some cartoons, illustrations and photographs and there are interviews with Karenni politicians and celebrities. The cartoons in KT make it easier for people to understand what is happening in the state. For example in Vol. 1, No. 4 (January 2013) there is a cartoon about the increasing number of unlicensed vehicles in the state. In Vol. 2, No. 1 (October 2013) the cartoon satirizes the poor phone line connections in the state with a picture of a cowboy who must climb a tree to reach his contact. The cartoon in Vol. 2, No. 2 (November 2013) depicts a refugee as a guardian spirit riding on a timber truck, amidst tree stumps, illustrating the damage from increased logging.²⁹ KT has interviewed: a popular celebrity who was born and brought up the state, politicians from the KNPP, the chairman from Karenni Refugee Camp #2 committee, and Burma News International spokespersons.

29. *KT* provides space for cartoons from local cartoonists, but has no regular cartoon contributor. The journal often sources cartoons from other media outlets, such as the *Irrawaddy*.

Furthermore, there are articles informing people about the cultures of different ethnic groups in the state, including the larger groups like Kayan and Kayaw, and also smaller groups like Yintale. Every issue has one culture story about an ethnic group. However, in the ten issues I investigated, I noticed there were no articles about other ethnic non-Karenni people who come from Shan state, for example, Intha, Pao-O, Shan or about Burman people who also live in the state.

In addition to local news and features, KT includes an “ethnic newsletter” section (“Tain-yin-tha Thadin-hlwar”), which is about four pages long with news from other ethnic-minority areas in the country, such as Kachin, Karen, Chin, Mon, Arakan and Shan states. KT sources these articles from other ethnic media groups or from former-exile-based or international media outlets.³⁰ KT is always careful to credit their sources.

Approximately two pages in KT are devoted to “Myanmar affairs,” including news about Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD, the 88 Generation Peace and Open Society group, and other events and developments in central Myanmar, with former exile-based or international media as their sources. There are also some pages with articles on world news, drawing from international media sources.

KT’s editorials explain the editors’ ideology and their views about state affairs, especially regarding language and history. In its first publication inside the country, KT’s editors explained the history of the journal and requested advice from residents in the state about how to develop the publication. They asked readers to contribute to put more variety in the paper, and they invited people to frankly express their hardships. In its first number, the journal published a front-page article about the January 15 “Kayah Day” celebration. The article highlighted that the new generation only knows the usage “Kayah” because authorities have not maintained local memories about the “Karenni” state that existed in the past.

30. KT uses articles from: *Irrawaddy*, *Mizzima News*, and Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB), Voice of America, Radio Free Asia, and British Broadcasting Corporation.

Reviewing the content of KT, I can see that the editors have several goals for their publication. Their main goal is to promote knowledge among Karenni people, so that all people in the state understand each other better. They want people to understand the issues that affect people who live in the state and in the refugee camps. KT offers a forum for people to express their feelings and explain about their hardships. In this way, KT seeks to be a bridge between different communities.

Kantarawaddy Times is also watchdog for state affairs including the peace process, drug problems in the state, and issues related to mega-development projects. In this transition period, the central government and the KNPP have been negotiating a ceasefire agreement. KT has urged the residents to keep their eyes and ears open about the process. In the Volume 1, Issue 6 (July 2013) issue, KT's editorial argued that it will take time to negotiate this agreement correctly and that citizens in the state should make sure that there are no abuses of human rights while peace is being built. In other words, the peace process is also the responsibility of the public, not just the government and NSAG negotiators. People should not just wait for benefits, but they should participate in democratic change. Also, regarding the issue of opium production in Kayah state, KT has urged that all parties — including government, armed groups, civil society groups and local youths — should take responsibility to solve the problems of drug production and drug addiction. KT monitors the activities of power holders and encourages the active citizenship of ordinary people.

Another very clear goal of KT is to promote knowledge of local history and local languages and cultures, which may be lost, especially among youth. KT promotes the use of the Kayah-li writing style and it encourages usage of “Karenni” (vs. “Kayah”) state. They seek to build pride in local culture and language.

Finally, in developing a tri-lingual website in English, Burmese and Kayah, KT is attempting to reach out beyond its own small area to a larger community. The website includes news, information, culture and history. For example, there are videos for learning to use Kayah-li. The website is aimed not only at Karenni

diaspora living in third countries, but also majority Burmans who may not know much about this area. However, very few Burmans take the time to learn an ethnic language or to really study about the other cultures.

Readers' attitudes

To learn about the perspectives of consumers, I interviewed KT readers in refugee camps in Thailand, in September 2013. When I traveled to Karenni (Kayah) state in February 2014, I interviewed readers in the main towns of Loikaw and Demoso, and in the remote villages of Dawseh and Dawtamyay. I also spoke with a shop owner in Demoso who sells KT and with Bo Htee, an itinerant vendor who sells copies of KT in Demoso on market days and travels to sell the paper in villages in the area.

Most people I interviewed told me that they had heard of Kantarawaddy Times even if they had not actually read it. They knew it represented their state in some way. People said they were pleased about the emerging state-based journal. Bo Reh, who lives in Dawseh, told me he used to read KT when it was published on the border, but he couldn't get it regularly in those days. Now he can get it at a shop in the village. He said: "I feel happy when I see the journal that represents our state. It is better for me to know the problems and weaknesses of our state. This journal is important for us because some people who live in the state don't know about state affairs." (Interview with Bo Reh, February 2014.) Residents I interviewed also mentioned that stories about the state are rarely seen in mainstream Myanmar journals.

Many readers said they liked reading about ethnic minority people in the state because they lacked knowledge of these other cultures. For example, one person said he didn't know the meaning of traditional festivals such as the Dee-ku festival, which celebrates sticky rice, so he was glad to read about it. However, several residents said that they did not wish to read about political topics. Because their lives are difficult and full of struggle, they want to read entertainment in their free time. They told me that they read sports journal and listen to FM because they want to entertain

themselves. However, shop-owners told me that they sold more copies when KT featured stories and photos about armed conflict in the area, so obviously people are interested in that topic.

In Dawtamyay, I conducted an informal “focus group”-type study with nearly 20 villagers who were gathered together after a funeral ceremony. I put out five different news publications including mainstream Burmese news journals and KT and I asked the villagers to choose the one they liked the most. Most of them chose KT even if they were not familiar with it previously because they could see the news was about Kayah (Karenni) State. Some chose mainstream Burmese weeklies. However, they explained that they just wanted to skim the journal rather than read it. Reading any journal in Burmese language is difficult for them.

The traveling vendor, Bo Htee, said, “I am glad to sell KT because all of the people who order the journal are happy. I promote KT by telling people that it is the only journal that focuses solely on our state. So many residents are interested to read it. I encourage them to take pride in it. Who else will publish our news if they don’t?” (Interview with Bo Htee, February 2014.)

Bo Htee mentioned that many readers are farmers and various ethnic people from the area. Some villagers share their journal with their friends so the sale of one copy has a wider impact. Bo Htee also told me that some state government officials read KT.



Bo Htee, an itinerant vendor, sells copies of Kantarawaddy Times in Demoso on market days. (Photo: San Phyo Tun)

As a member of the Kayaw ethnic group, Bo Htee said that he would like to see KT publish more reports about Kayaw culture. About 20 to 30 percent of KT's readers are Kayaw, and many of his customers raised questions about whether KT was really concerned with Kayaw issues. "I would like to help KT more if they would report about our culture... If they report about our culture and identity, more Kayaw will read the journal," he said. Later, following Bo Htee's suggestion, KT did include a long feature about Kayaw people in one of their issues.

When I was in the area in February 2014, Bo Htee was selling about 300 copies of KT per month in Demoso on market days (Wednesdays and Saturdays). He was also distributing about 200 copies per month to remote villages. He told me that in the villages where he goes, the villagers call it "Bo Htee's journal" rather than "KT." He sometimes goes to the remote hill village of Loi Nam Phat, which ten miles away from Demoso; however, he cannot go regularly because it is so difficult to get there. As people have little money, he charges 400 kyats per unit (rather than 500), so he makes very little profit selling the publication, but he does it gladly to support the publication.

In my interviews with villagers in the state, many indicated a desire to read the KT journal. However, they said they were frequently unable to get copies in their remote villages and could only get the paper in town when they came for market days. Consequently, by the time they read the paper, the news was no longer fresh. Readers said they would like to read the journal once a week. Reading it monthly was difficult because they could not remember facts about a news story from month to month. "The date of the news is too late when we read the journal. We need to know early about events that can impact on our lives, so we can prepare," said one reader. However, KT's loyal readers try to encourage their journal by buying issues even though they know that some of the news is not fresh. As I mentioned, in January 2015, KT began publishing two times a month, so that may solve some of the problems associated with once-a-month publication.

Distributors in the towns told me that two weeks after the publication date, all KT journals were sold out. Clearly there is

strong demand for this publication. However, when KT first started publishing inside the country, this was not the case. Say Reh Soe, the chief editor, explained that at the beginning, many residents in the state were afraid to have copies of KT because they thought it was affiliated with the Karenni National Progress Army. Distributors were reluctant to sell the paper, and some residents were afraid to buy it. Say Reh Soe observed: “Families have suffered the impacts of the war. They view our work as under the framework of the new ceasefire process. If the ceasefire process breaks down in the future, they are afraid that KT readers will be recorded on black lists. People have had bad experiences in the past, when the ceasefire broke down in 1995. At that time, villagers faced threats and arrest. So, they worry that political affiliation through media consumption could again risk their lives.”

Since it began publishing inside Myanmar, KT has dramatically reduced its distribution on the Thai-Burma border. The chief editor, Say Reh Soe explained that sometimes refugees ask whether KT is having difficulties or has been suspended because they are unable to get copies whereas previously KT issues were plentiful and distributed free of charge. He regretted the reduced communication with the border area. Say Reh Soe said: “Actually, it is very important for refugees to read news during the ongoing reform process. During the ceasefire negotiations, refugee issues, and questions about repatriation and humanitarian aid are central topics. It is critical that this information is passed on. Often print is the only way to circulate information in camps as there is often a lack of radios and phones.” (Interview with Say Reh Soe, September 2013.)

5

CASE STUDY 2: HSEN PAI

History of *Hsen Pai*

In August 2013, *Hsen Pai* (“Variety”) became the first Shan-language newspaper published legally inside the country since 1962. However, prior to 2013, *Hsen Pai* had a history as an unofficial, unregistered publication.

An early version of *Hsen Pai* was published without legal registration for about eight months in 2002-2004, when the country was under SPDC military rule. They published about 2,000 or 3,000 copies on a monthly basis. After eight issues, the producers tried to get a license through the Shan Nationalities League for Democracy (SNLD) political party. Under the military government, registered political parties were granted licenses to publish periodicals, so *Hsen Pai* tried to get a legal status this way. *Hsen Pai*’s ninth issue was sent to Press Scrutiny and Registration Department (PSRD) for inspection. The PSRD official rejected their application and told the *Hsen Pai* editor, Sai Laike, that if he tried to publish the journal in the future he would face a prison sentence. Military Intelligence officials also sharply rebuked Sai Nyunt Lwin, the SNLD vice-chairman, for publishing *Hsen Pai*.

After *Hsen Pai* was rejected, the Hurn Kayang and Sai Nood Lwin decided to publish another monthly periodical, which they called *Hsai Pen* (“Attachment”), reversing the vowels in the two words. The new publication was a different format, like a small magazine rather than a paper. *Hsai Pen* has been publishing unofficially

without a license since 2004. It is distributed every two months to Shan communities in Shan State, Kachin State, Yangon and Mandalay. The publication has now reached 35 issues, still without a formal license.

The producers of *Hsen Pai* and *Hsai Pen* had an advantage that they had their own printing house. Sai Nood Lwin established a printing house in the mid-1980s. It was a commercial operation that also printed Burmese publications, but Shan intellectuals could use the facilities to quietly print Shan language work. For example, in the 2000s, they produced several unofficial monthly publications for Shan children and youth, with cartoons and short easy-to-read pieces. They also quietly translated and printed some books about Shan state, such as Inge Sargent's *Twilight Over Burma*.³¹



Youth Reading Hsen Pai at local festival. (Photo: Sai Kyaw Thi Ha)

31. In 2005, Sai Nyunt Lwin was arrested for attending a meeting of ethnic opposition leaders in Taungyi, Shan state. He was charged with high treason and given two life sentences plus 25 years. He was released in 2011 as part of Pres. Thein Sein's amnesty. Currently, he is not on *Hsen Pai's* editorial board, but he does contribute to the paper under the pen name Sai Nut.

After the semi-civilian government assumed office in 2011, Hurn Kayang applied again for a license for *Hsen Pai* as a Shan language bi-weekly news periodical. This time, the application was approved. For its first issue in August 2013, *Hsen Pai* printed 3,000 copies. At the end of 2014, *Hsen Pai* was printing 9,000 copies of each issue. During the Shan New Year, which is in November (approximately), there are more readers for Shan news, so they produce 10,000 copies for wider distribution. The journal is distributed every two weeks on Friday or Monday. It is distributed in northern, southern, and eastern Shan State, in parts of Kachin State, and the major cities of Yangon and Mandalay. The largest market is in northern Shan State. Copies are also sent to Chiang Mai, Thailand where there is a large Shan migrant population.³²

At present, the *Hsen Pai* has five full-time employees in their Yangon office, and three journalists working in Shan state. However, the three journalists in the field work on a free-lance basis and are paid for their contributions. In addition, *Hsen Pai* relies on volunteer citizen-journalists, especially Shan youth, who send in stories about news around Shan state. “Our budget does not allow us to support a regular salary for reporters in rural areas,” said an editor I interviewed in February 2014.

Hsen Pai established a Facebook page in 2013, where they post PDF files of their publication. However, they do not have the human resources to update regularly. The editors and journalists have an ambition for *Hsen Pai* to publish on a weekly basis. They would also like to establish a professional website in English and Shan, and produce FM radio broadcasts. But limited human and financial resources are obstacles to expanding their work.

32. *Hsen Pai* distributes about 2,000 copies each to Kyatme, Lashio and 1,000 copies each to Hsenwi, Muse, Namkham, Nongcho, in northern Shan State. They send about 500 copies to Panglong, and 300 to Taungyi in southern Shan State. Other copies are distributed in eastern Shan state (Kengtong and Tachilek), and in Yangon and Mandalay. About 50 copies are sent to Chiang Mai, Thailand. Vendors make orders in advance for the publication. *Hsen Pai* receives payment after one or two months. *Hsen Pai* takes back the papers that have not sold.

Language policy

One of the main goals of the producers of *Hsen Pai* is to preserve and promote Shan language, writing and literature. Moreover, they want Shan people to know about politics and current events and to understand the longstanding demands of Shan nationalists for greater self-determination.

Towards their goal, *Hsen Pai* publishes solely in Shan language. Under the military regime, the government prohibited teaching ethnic languages, especially writing, which impacted the literacy rate. People did not have proper teaching materials to pass on their literature to the next generation and they lacked books and materials to read. *Hsen Pai's* editor Sai Zin Didizone said: “We try to fill the gap in Shan State because there was no regular publication in Shan language. There were some old books and monthly magazines. But before *Hsen Pai*, there was no weekly publication with news to read.” The editors expect that having news to read will inspire people, especially Shan youths, to learn and use written Shan language.

According to the editors, *Hsen Pai* uses a dialect of Shan that is common among the Shan communities. However, many readers I interviewed — in Chiang Mai, Thailand and in Panglong in southern Shan state — said that the Shan language in *Hsen Pai* is hard to understand, with many unfamiliar spelling and usages.

Panglong has always been a center for Shan learning, with many Buddhist monasteries and an old tradition of Pali scholarship. Currently, at Pitaka monastery in Panglong, there is an effort to translate the Buddhist scriptures into Shan. When I interviewed scholarly monks at this monastery, I learned that many are critical of the language style used in *Hsen Pai*. “The usages make us to think again to understand the whole sentence after reading the sentence,” said one monk. For example, he pointed out that the *Hsen Pai* uses “*mant*” for “village,” rather than the more common usage “*wan*.” The monks also said they do not understand some words, especially those related to science and politics, which are English words written in Shan writing. I heard similar complaints from readers in villages around Panglong. The problem may be a

result of dialect differences between northern and southern Shan state, and between conservative and modern speakers. As I am not a Shan native speaker, I cannot judge this controversy.

***Hsen Pai's* market and funding**

Hsen Pai attempts to be self-funding, relying on sales, advertisers and also local donors or shareholders from the Shan community. *Hsen Pai* producers had a bad experience depending on funding from international donors. In 2011, Hurn Kayang and his colleague received some international money to produce a monthly magazine for youth, called *Hsikhik*. The magazine ran for only three issues and then they had to stop because the funding ran out. Their young readers were disappointed. In 2013, when the group started up *Hsen Pai* again, they remembered the lesson and decided to stand by themselves.

For funding, *Hsen Pai* organized 500 shareholders from the Shan community, asking each to pay 100,000 kyats (\$100 USD) per share. The shareholders included members of the Shan Nationalities League for Democracy (SNLD), the Shan Nationalities Democratic Party (SNDP), and Shan businessmen and NGO workers. According to my informants at *Hsen Pai*, none of the shareholders has asked for their investment back. In fact, some Shan youths are asking to purchase shares in the journal, but *Hsen Pai* is not seeking more shareholders at this time.

Hsen Pai also earns a small profit from selling advertisements. *Hsen Pai* invited some Shan businessmen they knew to purchase advertising space. Now, the paper earns five percent of its income from advertisements. “We cannot demand the same rate for advertisement like Burmese journals because of our distribution is smaller,” said Sai Zin Didizone, an editor of *Hsen Pai*. Regarding income from sales, the production cost is 300 kyats per unit, and *Hsen Pai* sells it to the retailer for 450 kyats per unit. In the market, distributors of *Hsen Pai* sell copies for 500-700 kyats each depending on the transportation costs. In the future, *Hsen Pai* hopes to be able to reduce the price for the paper by increasing the number of copies in their print run.

Of course, because it is a Shan-language publication, *Hsen Pai*'s market is limited to the Shan community. In this small market, *Hsen Pai* competes with other two Shan periodicals: *Voice of Hsan Loi* ("Voice from the Mountains") and *Panglong*. These are both monthly publications and bilingual in Burmese and Shan. *Voice of Hsan Loi* is produced by the Shan State Army-south, and *Panglong* is produced by the exile-based media group, Shan Herald for News Agency (SHAN). Several distributors I interviewed in the town of Panglong told me that the demand for *Hsen Pai* is greater than for these other two publications. "Hsen Pai is the best seller among three Shan journals that sell in my shop," said one store owner. Readers I interviewed in villages in the Panglong area told me that they liked *Hsen Pai* best, because the news in the bi-weekly was more up to date than in the two monthly journals. Also they said they preferred to read only in Shan language. Some of these residents were not comfortable reading in Burmese.

A teashop owner in Panglong told me he had been reading *Hsen Pai* since 2003 when it was an illegal publication. He said that the paper is good for people who are literate in Shan language to help them maintain their reading skills and to get knowledge. He regularly kept the paper in his teashop for his customers to share.

However, I also met a distributor who sells papers in Panglong who criticized *Hsen Pai* because of its layout. "Compared to Burmese journals, the layout of the front cover is very poor. It reduces the interest of the consumer," he said. His shop sells journals ranging from sports, news, children's periodicals, and Chinese language publications. He said his shop used to sell all the Shan language publications, but stopped selling them because of low sales in comparison to mainstream Burmese-language publications.

In addition to *Hsen Pai*, *Voice of Hsan Loi* and *Panglong*, there have been a variety of other small, ethnic-minority oriented publications and state-based publications available in Shan state. These include: *The Taung-gyi*, a journal self-published by a local journalist; *A-shay Yoma* ("Eastern Mountain Ranges"); and *Kanbawza Times*. *The Taung-gyi* published in March 2014 to test the situation but does not yet publish regularly. *A-shay Yoma* also

suspended publication in 2014. *Kambawza Times* started in 2015. These are publications in Burmese language about Shan issues. Previously, I mentioned the *Unity Weekly* paper that began as a journal about ethnic issues but then stopped focusing on ethnic news. As mentioned, *Unity Weekly* ceased publication in 2014. Shan Nationalities Development Party's bi-lingual newsletter *Kyaphyu Thadin-hlwar* ("White Tiger Newsletter") is also publishing in the state.

In the capital of Shan State, Taunggyi, only the monthly *People's Voice* journal is published in the Pa-O language. *The Golden Gong* is another Pa-O publication: I am not sure if it is a Burmese language or bilingual publication. *Marlagar* is a paper about Ta'ang (Palaung) issues, published in Burmese language. This monthly was founded by the Ta'ang (Palaung) Youth Association to focus news from the Ta'ang region.

Content analysis

I reviewed ten copies of *Hsen Pai* with the help of a Shan translator. I looked at the issues from August to December 2013.

Hsen Pai averages 24 pages per copy and includes news, features, editorials and letters to the editor. Seven pages are devoted to news from Shan State and two pages are about international news, translated from international news services. There are also articles about travel, health, education, business, and entertainment. There is a section called "Memories" which gives information about the history of Shan state and Shan nationalist leaders. A section called "Satire" pokes fun at a range of prominent individuals including central government officials and Shan leaders. Another section, called "Perspective" includes commentary about current affairs. There is at least one cartoon per issue, and they sometimes include photo essays about special events, for example in Vol. 1, No. 9 there was a lengthy photo essay about Shan New Year celebrations.

The center two pages of each issue present an extended interview with a well-known Shan celebrity such as a singer, movie star, model or artist. It seems this is especially appealing to Shan youth. A young reader I met in Wanmai village near Panglong told me

that the first thing he looked for in the paper was this center section. Moreover, *Hsen Pai* includes articles about modern issues and problems, which is also appealing to youth. For example, in Vol. 2 No. 1, there was an article “Signs You Need to Unplug from Your Smartphone” translated from the news aggregator Huffington Post.

Hsen Pai’s editors are committed to the principles of equality and self-determination for ethnic peoples in Myanmar and the emergence of a state based on federalism. They are also committed to promoting Shan history and culture. *Hsen Pai’s* content, especially the editorial, satire and “perspective” sections reflect these objectives. For example, an opinion piece in Vol. 1, No. 4 commented that many Shan youths are solely focused on business and getting ahead and do not know much about the history of the Shan struggle for self-determination. Even children of well-known Shan politicians and celebrities may not understand their parents’ history and ideology. The editors encouraged their younger readers to learn more so they can follow in their parents’ footsteps.

An editorial in Vol. 1, No. 7 focused on the welcome news that it was again permitted to teach children in the native ethnic languages in government schools. The piece reviewed the history of discrimination against ethnic minority people and languages, mentioning also that ethnic children are obliged to wear Burmese-style *longyi*s and they only learned about ethnic-Burman leaders and heroes. Rather than learning about ethnic minority leaders, they were told that ethnic minority people just tried to divide the country.

It is especially interesting that the editors mentioned teaching religion in school. The editors encouraged teaching about all religions in school. They said, if schools only teach about the majority religion (Buddhism), it is unfair to minorities that practice other beliefs. It was interesting that they said this because most mainstream Myanmar publications rarely discuss the sensitive topic of religion.

Other articles and editorials in *Hsen Pai* are about resource exploitation, development and the ceasefire process. The editors encourage the central government and ethnic armed groups in

Shan state to respect the will of the state's residents when they implement huge development projects. In an article in Vol. 1, No. 7, the editors warned the central government and armed groups not to implement big projects before the national ceasefire agreement is signed. A key point is that natural resources are the property of the public, not the property of leaders in the government or armed groups.

Human resource issues

As I mentioned, *Hsen Pai* has limited human resource, with five full-time employees and three journalists in the field. *Hsen Pai* would like to distribute weekly and also have a better website presence and a radio program. However, they face obstacles expanding their operation. Already, they find it difficult to fill seven pages of news about Shan state on a bi-weekly basis. Finding reporters is the largest challenge for the journal. Recently, *Hsen Pai* advertised about vacancy for a journalist, but nobody contacted them. There is only one female employee, a copy-editor, but no female reporter. (There are some freelance contributors who are female.) Without reporters in various towns across the state, when there is a news event, *Hsen Pai* has to conduct interviews with people from the Yangon office by phone. "Because telephone lines are not always reliable, some residents record news reports on their smart phones to send to the journal later when they can get a phone connection," an editor told me. He explained, "With so few human resources, we cannot work as well as we would like." They also cannot train inexperienced journalists due to budget limitations.

Readers' attitudes

Residents I interviewed in Panglong told me they view *Hsen Pai* as a "guiding star" for their knowledge. They want to see *Hsen Pai* continue in the long run, unlike other publications in Shan language which only lasted a short time. Some residents said that although the news in *Hsen Pai* is not fresh, due to bi-weekly

publishing, they can learn details and important background information about current events.



Local residents reading Hsen Pai. (Photo: Hsen Pai)

The monks I spoke with in Panglong said they were happy to read the paper to gain knowledge. They read the paper regularly, even though according to their Buddhist discipline (*vinaya*), monks are not supposed to pay so much attention to worldly affairs. These monks I interviewed said that villagers in Shan state read *Hsen Pai* even more than residents in towns. The reason for this is that people in towns are generally more educated, so they can read in Burmese language more easily and so are attracted to the mainstream publications. In the villages, however, people are less “Burmanized.” Villagers are willing to put in the effort to try to read in Shan language even if they cannot read well. The villagers appreciate reading about their culture and history as well as contemporary events.

However, I also learned about some controversy regarding the publication. A *Hsen Pai* editor told me that the chairman of the Shan Nationalities Democratic Party (SNDP) alleged that *Hsen Pai* is not independent. At a party conference in January 2014, the SNDP chairman claimed that *Hsen Pai* is published by the Shan Nationalities League for Democracy (SNLD). The editor I spoke with acknowledged that Sai Nyunt Lwin (Pen name Sai Nood), vice-chairman of the SNLD, is a contributor to the paper, and also *Hsen Pai* uses his printing facilities for their publication; however,

SNLD does not interfere in the paper's editorial policy and reporting. Moreover, *Hsen Pai's* shareholders include members of both SNDF and SNLD. In addition, there have been accusations that *Hsen Pai* took financial support from Shan State Army – North, but the editor I spoke with insisted that this was not true.

The teashop owner I mentioned previously who is a loyal reader of *Hsen Pai*, said: “We do not see the journal as a mouthpiece for the SNLD. The journal represents our state. If it closed down, it would be like turning off the TV. We would be blind and deaf. I would like the journal to last forever.” However, he had one criticism: he wished the journal had room for sports news. Other readers I interviewed said they wished that the publication included sections about law, agricultural issues, and commodity prices.

Hsen Pai provides a place for readers to express their feelings via the “letters to the editor” section. According to the editor I interviewed, readers write to complain about situations in their daily lives, including abuses by local, government-affiliated militia, poor telephone connections, and so on. “Although the political situation is more open than before, we have to review carefully whether we can print some of these letters,” said the editor. He noted that sometimes the criticism of the authorities is very harsh.

6

DISCUSSION

The role of ethnic media in the new Myanmar

As I have discussed, defining the term “ethnic media” is quite complicated in Myanmar. In fact, each ethnic media outlet has its own very specific history and characteristics. Considering just my two case studies, *Kantarawaddy Times*, on the one hand, is a “former-exile” publication. It was first established on the Thai border and now is being produced in the country by former refugee journalists who returned to Myanmar after the reform process began. *Hsen Pai*, on the other hand, is published by individuals who have been based in Myanmar consistently through the years of military rule. They learned how to manage under strict controls, for example by changing their publication’s name and publishing surreptitiously without a license until it became possible to get formal registration. While *Kantarawaddy Times* publishes mostly in Burmese language, with just a few pages in Kayah with Kayah-li script (since January 2015), *Hsen Pai* is a strictly Shan language news publication.

These two media groups, with their distinctive histories and strategies for publishing, exist amid a raft of other small publications that are operated by ethnic minority people. As I have said, the defining characteristic of “ethnic media,” is that these media function to resist cultural assimilation by the central government, which historically has promoted a singular national identity. However, different ethnic media groups have pursued

this goal in different ways.

At the present time, ethnic media in Myanmar are not only contributing to, but also being moulded by Myanmar's dynamic reform process. New ethnic media outlets are emerging while some ethnic publications are disappearing, due to a variety of factors especially financial factors. The situation is very complicated and dynamic. My two case studies are probably not enough to represent the entire ethnic media landscape, but they illustrate some features of the current situation.

We can see that the role of ethnic media in Myanmar is changing. In the past, during the years of direct military rule, ethnic publications, websites and broadcasts could only flourish in border areas, in areas controlled by armed insurgents, or in refugee camps or among communities of migrant laborers in bordering countries. Inside the country, ethnic publications circulated only within very limited circles because it was dangerous to be caught holding these illegal publications.

Operating under difficult circumstances, ethnic media functioned to educate local people about ethnic leaders' demands for greater self-determination. They helped to cultivate awareness of ethnic identities, especially among younger generations. They also helped both citizens and international onlookers to understand the worsening human rights' situation in ethnic minority areas under military rule.

Since 2011, ethnic media outlets have a much wider reach. As part of the new government's reform efforts, ethnic minority media have been given more freedom to operate. Newly issued licenses have enabled ethnic media agencies to publish legally. In many ways, this new openness is decentralizing the flow of information. Ethnic media produced in ethnic minority languages and/or in Burmese are sprouting up in the respective areas.

This freedom has emboldened ethnic minority communities to read ethnic publications, no longer fearing arrest for possession of an illegal title. My field research suggests that ethnic media like *KT* and *Hsen Pai* are strongly supported by their respective local communities. Even though poor villagers find the publications

difficult to read (due to their limited literacy), they still want to buy them because they know the publications represent their concerns and views. These periodicals reflect the realities of ethnic peoples' experiences in contemporary Myanmar.

Publications like *Kantarawaddy Times* and *Hsen Pai* are helping to build communities and strengthen local identities. They transmit historical and cultural information to new generations of readers. In the case of *Kantarawaddy Times*, we see that the journal is helping to cultivate a broad, multi-ethnic "Karenni" identity in the state. *KT* also teaches readers in the state about the border areas and the experiences of refugees. Previously residents inside the state thought of refugees in the border as passive recipients of aid or opportunists who were looking to settle in third countries. In its articles, *KT* explains the reasons why refugees left for Thailand and about other aspects of their lives. Civil war split the Karenni population, and *KT* is helping to build understanding between groups. Meanwhile, other return-from exile publications in Myanmar like *Irrawaddy* and *DVB* are also helping to change people's ideas about what has been happening on the border through the years of military rule.³³

Similarly, *Hsen Pai* is helping to cultivate Shan cultural identity among its readers. The publication attracts readers among diverse segments of the population, including rural villagers, monks and also young people with modern problems and concerns. Because it is a regular news publication, it provides regular practice for people, especially young people, to read in Shan language. In this way, *Hsen Pai* is helping to revive Shan intellectual and literary traditions that were repressed for years under military rule.

Hsen Pai is committed to promoting the right of self-determination for Shan and other ethnic minorities in Myanmar. From my review, I would say the political analysis is very sophisticated and progressive. As I noted, the publication even promotes the rights of religious minorities in Myanmar, which is not a position that

33. When I was growing up inside Myanmar, I never heard anything about what was happening in the border areas. I did not know, for example, what a backpack medical clinic was. This is now slowly changing in Myanmar.

one hears often in the country.

Of course, the situation for ethnic media is still not completely free. Anxious sentiments are still rooted in ethnic communities, especially among those living in the most remote ethnic areas. Until the cease-fire and peace negotiations are complete, readers may fear government backtracking from current openness. Residents from war-affected areas are still concerned that reading these papers could lead to arrests by the Myanmar army in the future. Say Reh Soe mentioned that he thought readers hesitated to purchase *Kantarawaddy Times* for this reason. Because *KT* emerged after the ceasefire negotiations began, many readers fear that it is associated with the KNPP armed group, although, in fact it is independent. I also learned that some residents of Shan communities are afraid to receive the Shan National Development Party (SNDP)'s “White Tiger” newsletter, which is published in the Shan language with official permission.

Struggling against misrepresentation

A major problem in Myanmar is that there is still very little accurate reporting on ethnic minority issues in the mainstream media. Still to this day, most Yangon-based news journals designate only one page for news from ethnic states. This is quite shocking when one considers that some of the most critical issues facing the country have to do with ethnic minority areas. The central government is negotiating ceasefires with ethnic armed groups, as it tries to end decades of civil war. Powerful players are also planning and implementing mega-development projects to exploit resources in the states. Meanwhile, ethnic minority people continue to face human rights violations including forced labor, rape, and extrajudicial killing. There is widespread land confiscation and displacement, ongoing problems with landmines, and racial and religious discrimination.

In Myanmar's mainstream publications, important issues from ethnic areas are often omitted due to space limitations or a lack of concern. The founder of the *Taunggyi Journal*, a state-based publication (in Shan state), pointed out that mainstream Yangon-

based media outlets do not regard news from ethnic areas as serious. “Burmese media will carry a report if one person dies in a big city, but will disregard the death of five people in an ethnic area,” he said. This editor was speaking from his previous experience working for several mainstream publications including *7 Day News* and *The Voice*. (Interview, October 2014.)

The current problem of inaccurate and limited reporting on ethnic minority areas comes after decades of ethnic minority peoples being misrepresented in Myanmar’s state-controlled media. As I mentioned, government portrayals of ethnic people have long been skewed and not in keeping with what was happening on the ground. Because of official propaganda, it was almost impossible for the majority population to comprehend the nature or the reasons behind ethnic armed struggle for self-determination. The extent of the human rights abuses was never really understood by mainstream society.

Today, ethnic media groups are trying to counteract a history of misrepresentation. Ethnic people now have some opportunity to accurately portray their lives and concerns, using their own media. They are working to change the shape of their circumstances. Although it is true that ethnic publications do not have a wide audience, and the majority Burman population still has little understanding of ethnic concerns, at least these ethnic media groups have an opportunity to document in an honest way the realities of their circumstances. Their reporting is available if the majority society wants to learn from them. The larger goal is to create a bridge to the majority and build understanding of the plight of ethnic people.

An older Burmese writer I spoke with, Thagyi Maung Zaya, observed: “Ethnic people live in remote areas, often without the tools to assist their struggle towards equality. Media is often the only way for them to achieve recognition and to stand on their own feet by themselves. Through media, ethnic communities have to open a cultural front that can get recognition from people from around the country and to continue their struggle.”

Even under the new “reform” government, the Myanmar Ministry of Information continues to try to manage representations of

ethnic minorities. The “Tain-yin-tha Thadin-zin” ethnic news supplements in the state-run *Myanma Alin* newspaper and the “National Races” TV and radio programs are part of this project. In these outlets, ethnic minority peoples are presented dancing their traditional dances and living happily under the central government’s administration. It is not a realistic view. The ethnic media producers I interviewed are trying to counter this government effort with the goal to help create a truly multi-ethnic and federal union in which Myanmar’s diverse peoples are equal and acknowledged participants.

The future of ethnic media?

Although currently small-scale ethnic publications have more possibilities to publish and distribute than before, it is not clear whether they can be financially viable. At the March 2015 ethnic media conference in Hakha, Chin state, the deputy Minister of Information announced that since 2012, the ministry had given out 26 licenses for ethnic-minority publications.³⁴ However, only a handful of these periodicals are currently in operation. Many have been obliged to suspend or terminate production because of financial difficulties.

As I have discussed, ethnic publications find it difficult to capture and maintain a market share in the new Myanmar. Because they tailor their contents to ethnic minority audiences, they have a limited readership. At the same time, in this small market, they have to compete with the big mainstream Burmese language weekly journals for readers and for advertisers. Because of their small market, ethnic periodicals are not immediately attractive to advertisers.

I want to point out that, at the present time in Myanmar, *all* small, independent publications are struggling for survival. Not only ethnic media groups, but also many new Burmese-language

34. It was not clear whether he is referring to ethnic *language* publications or just small, state-based media. He did not provide a list of these publications. (Personal communication with an attendee at the conference, March 2015.).

periodicals have had to shut down because of financial difficulties. This is because the media market is dominated by a small number of wealthy, powerful business tycoons who have been investing in the sector since 2012. In an interview in April 2014, the veteran journalist U Thiha Saw noted that before 2012 private investment in the print media sector was in the thousands of millions of kyat (equivalent to \$100,000s in USD). Since 2012, investment has increased ten fold to ten thousand millions of kyat (i.e. \$1,000,000 USD). With their substantial resources, big investors are able to sustain losses from poorly performing publications for a long period until they gain a larger portion of the market share. In this environment, the small, independent media groups cannot compete – that is, not unless they can find wealthy patrons.³⁵

The big media investors have not been interested in investing in ethnic media because there is little chance they will earn big profits. The *KT* chief editor, Say Reh Soe told me that he tried to find investors for *KT*, but businessmen in Kayah state were unwilling to invest. He also offered to produce the paper as a joint venture with another investor, but nobody was interested due to the small market.

While many ethnic minority publications have been forced to close for financial reasons, my two case studies, *KT* and *Hsen Pai*, have each developed strategies for sustaining themselves. *KT* regains the expenses of publishing by selling the journal and also by selling TV and radio programs to Radio Free Asia and Democratic Voice of Burma. Importantly, *KT* receives financial support from international donors that ensure the survival of the periodical. On the other hand, *Hsen Pai* has chosen not to seek support from international donors. Rather, the business has been floated publically, with shares in the paper sold throughout their Shan community. Both papers have to keep their expenses down, but this means that their journalists are under-paid, so it is difficult

35. U Thiha Saw was the chief editor of the first English language daily in Myanmar after 2012, called *Myanmar Freedom*. This well respected paper had to shut down in April 2014 for the reasons he describes. He was unable to find investors for his paper.

to attract and retain talented employees.

Because of their limited financial resources, neither *KT* nor *Hsen Pai* is in a position to expand operations, although both groups have expressed interest in doing so. *KT* hopes to produce an FM radio station for their area. They also want to develop their website in Kayah, Burmese and English languages. This expanded website would be attractive to Karenni people living abroad in third countries, and could also bring in online advertising revenue. Having a web presence inside the country will be more feasible when mobile telecommunications expand and more people have Internet access on their telephones. *Hsen Pai* would also like to expand into Shan language radio broadcasting and have a website, in both English and Shan languages.

At present, it seems many ethnic media groups in Myanmar are "ghetto-ized": that is, they do not reach out beyond their own small areas or communities. This can be significantly seen in both of my case studies, *Kantarawaddy Times* and *Hsen Pai*. Arguably, *KT*, which publishes in Burmese language and produces radio and TV programs for broader audiences, is a little more outward looking than *Hsen Pai*.

So, an important question remains about whether or not the ethnic media that have been emerging since 2012 can have an impact on mainstream public discourse and understanding in Myanmar. The situation for ethnic media in Myanmar continues to evolve. One positive development in recent years is that smaller ethnic media organizations have been learning to work together to share knowledge, resources and news articles for mutual benefit. Some are also reaching out to their colleagues in the mainstream Burmese media to sell their stories. The goal is not only bring in revenue, but also to improve reporting on ethnic minority issues in the country. Currently, several ethnic minority media groups are negotiating with the mainstream media group *Mizzima* to carry their stories. *Mizzima* is based in Yangon and part of the mainstream, but it used to be based in exile (in New Delhi and Chiang Mai) and so it still belongs to the BNI (Burma News International) consortium.

The ethnic media conferences organized by BNI and held in 2013 and 2014 focused respectively on strengthening ethnic media and networking among media groups. Most recently, the March 2015 conference focused on sustainability for ethnic media. As they organize, these small ethnic media organizations push the mainstream society to pay more attention.

Ethnic media have long history of struggling. Ethnic media groups continue to emerge and disappear due to market forces, but they try hard and still keep trying. Ethnic minority people will persevere in their struggle to be heard. The effort to have a diverse, decentralized media landscape will continue in order to create a truly inclusive new Myanmar.

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About the Author

Soe Lynn Htwe is a journalist who has been reporting on Burmese issues for nearly a decade. He has worked for the *Irrawaddy Publishing Group* and the *Democratic Voice of Burma*. His reports have also appeared in *The Bangkok Post* and the Australia based *Walkley* magazine. He has a strong interest in the societies and cultures of the ethnic minority peoples of Burma-Myanmar.

THE ROLE OF ETHNIC MEDIA IN THE “NEW MYANMAR”

The Understanding Myanmar’s Development (UMD) series is an exploration and analysis of the economic, political, and social changes of Myanmar. In this volume Soe Lynn Htwe analyzes the crucial role of ethnic media outlets in the context of a rapidly changing political, cultural, and economic context. While perhaps freer in their ability to write and report than at any other time in Myanmar’s recent history, the market forces that are now shaping the media landscape in Myanmar threaten to overwhelm and silence ethnic media.

Soe Lynn Htwe shows in this volume how ethnic media outlets in Myanmar are facing a new set of challenges in the rapidly changing society and economy of Myanmar. Ethnic minority people in Myanmar now finally have the opportunity to present themselves and their perspectives via their own media after decades of misrepresentation in official news produced under central state control. At this time, access to accurate information from trustworthy sources is crucial for ethnic minority peoples in Myanmar because of huge natural resource exploitation projects and unsettled armed conflicts in ethnic minority areas, and the role of these ethnic media outlets is perhaps greater than ever before.



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RESEARCH
REPORT
No. 06