

"NEW MEDIA CONFIGURATIONS - CHANGING SOCIETIES? CURRENT RESEARCH PERSPECTIVES ON SOUTH ASIA, SOUTHEAST ASIA, THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA"

Panel 2: The Political Economy of Media: Politics, Ownership and Technologies

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"Myanmar's Bumpy Road to Media Freedom"

Abstract

The media with their social and political impact is often considered a change agent within and for democratization processes. Castells (2001, 2004) emphasizes the potential of the network society to create social transformation processes and states a drift of vertical powers (hegemony) to horizontal "counter-powers". I propose that the dependency on context is essential for potential changes due to democratization processes which can lead to the development of a free and plural media system. Therefore, the analysis of the specific context is the basis of the consideration of Myanmar's contemporary way to media freedom.

Based on qualitative interviews with 20 different local and international experts and media practitioners this article considers the current changing media landscape in the wake of political changes in Myanmar. The analysis predominantly reflects the interdependencies of ongoing transformations of the political system and the media landscape and presents the current challenges, opportunities and risks for journalists and media practitioners occurring with this transformation.

Before the coup by the military in 1962, Myanmar enjoyed freedom of the press to the extent that even criticism of the monarchy was permissible. After the military takeover in 1962, public access to media was restricted by draconian laws.

Due to international pressure and suffering from economic sanctions, the military government was forced to proceed with the realization of the 2003 announced "roadmap to democracy", which led to general elections in 2010 and the inauguration of new President Thein Sein in February 2011.

In the wake of these developments, Myanmar has witnessed a liberalization of the media landscape, the release of journalists and political prisoners, and the initiation of a political dialogue between the government, the opposition, civil society groups, and at least the media. For the first time since 1966, no journalists are imprisoned in Myanmar. For two generations Myanmar was considered one of the most dangerous places for critical journalists. This shift is having an enormous effect on the development of the Myanmar media landscape. The most important step to decrease the control of the media by the government was the abolition of censorship prior to publication in August 2012.

Now journalists have the opportunity to operate more freely giving them the opportunity to act as a watchdog and play a democratic role in society. Still, all publications are monitored by the PSRD after publication. This surveillance pressures the media and encourages self-censorship.

The new fragile freedom along with existing laws brings new challenges. Hence, journalists and editors face a new situation. Now the censors are no longer responsible for the content of publications, the predominantly young and inexperienced journalists and editors are accountable themselves. For nearly five decades the media coverage in Myanmar predominantly consisted of governmental propaganda, descriptive and biased coverage, and a still widespread cronyism in the media sector. This still distracts journalists as well as the civil and political society from communicating their needs and attitudes on crucial topics in a critical and creative manner.