

Resilience of the Media Outlets in Rakhine State after the 2021 Coup

Three Researchers
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after the 2021 Coup

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Abstract

Media outlets and individual journalists have never had the luxury of freedom under successive military rule in Myanmar. Even under semi-democratic government, Rakhine state was severely targeted to halt the flow of information, as seen arrest of Reuter journalists. The 2021 military coup has further deteriorated media operations in Rakhine State, yet little research exists on this current media landscape. Therefore, the research aims to explore the resilience of the Rakhine-based media under the severe military suppression, focusing on the challenges of operating the news and the coping strategies. The research used qualitative methodology, particularly 8 key informant interviews with the members from local, ethnic-based, emerging, and mainstream media in Rakhine, who held various roles to capture a diverse perspective. The finding is framed by Olsen and Mona's concepts of resources, technology, and organization. Regarding resources, both human and financial resources are more limited to the local and ethnic-based media. In terms of technology, they adopt diverse communication tools and data storage methods.

Reliance on citizen journalists and community trust building are critical in news gathering while dissemination is navigated through paper and in-person distributions and FM broadcasting. Internal strategies include physical relocation to safer areas and increased collaboration among journalists. Moreover, new findings were discovered such as extensive partnership with external stakeholders and voices for support gaps.

Key words: Myanmar, Rakhine, media outlets, resilience, SAC repression.

Introduction

Myanmar stands as a strong case where media repression has been systematically institutionalized under successive regimes. According to the Free Press Unlimited organization's description, press freedom has never taken a step on the media landscape in Myanmar throughout five-decades long under military dictatorship. Before 2010 was the darkest era for the journalists and generally, a dim light of freedom gradually emerged during 2010 to 2021. Yet, the most significant arrest case on journalists, Wa Lone and Kyaw Soe Oe from Reuters, happened in 2018 under the semi-democratic rule. They were arrested for working on the investigation of killing Rohingya men following the military crackdown in the Rakhine state (Wintour, 2019). Regardless of military rule or military back-civilian government, the media pillar has always been severely suppressed by the regime and even under the semi-democratic government.

The history recurred itself with the 2021 military coup. The junta immediately geared up its suppression on media outlets and individual journalists which consequently filled the headlines with arrest, torture, and even killed (Bhattacharyya, 2024). Particularly, Rakhine state, with its a region with a history of inter-communal violence and armed conflicts involving the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) and the Arakan Army (AA), has long been a flashpoint for media repression (Paul, 2018). After the 2021 military coup, boosted by the 1027 military operation and the growing territorial gains of the Arakan Army in 2024, the media access to the area has been cut by the military. Accordingly, both mainstream and local media outlets in Rakhine State are in a hard situation to sustain their existence even in digital space, which may consequently abolish the media freedom and access to information within the state. However, there is little investigation on the ongoing media landscape in Rakhine state due to the conflict sensitivity, communication blackout, and other obstacles.

Therefore, the research aims to examine the resilience of the mainstream and local media outlets in Rakhine State under the brutal military suppression. Particularly, this study aims to shed light on the challenges of operating the news under these junta oppression and examine the coping strategies employed by media outlets in Rakhine to sustain their operations. Accordingly, the study will describe five chapters: Introduction, Literature review, Methodology, Findings and Discussion, and Conclusion.

Literature Review

Fragility of Media Freedom under Authoritarianism

Widely, the media pillar is recognized as the lifeblood of democratic system to facilitate transparency and accountability by delivering the information to the people. As the international norm, ICCPR referred to the media as “The free communication” between citizens and elected representatives, which implies “a free press and other media able to comment on public issues without censorship or restraint and to inform public opinion” (CCPR *General Comment No. 25*, 1996). On the same page, the Human Rights Committee generally remarked on the ICCPR’s Article 19 that “A free, uncensored and unhindered press or other media is essential in any society to ensure freedom of opinion and expression and the enjoyment of other Covenant rights” (CCPR *General Comment No. 34*, 2011). Although media freedom is protected by the international treaties and law, it has been reportedly threatened, particularly free flow of information to the people is happening to be limited due to the individual governments’ adopted law, censorship, and overarching legislation.

Myanmar, a country with over half of the century conflict and deep-rooted military authoritarianism, unsurprisingly, media freedom has never been fully protected. Under the first military backed civilian government, in 2014, the new Myanmar Media Law was enacted with the objectives “to ensure that News Media can stand up firmly as the fourth Estate of our nation, to guarantee that News Media workers are fully provided with their entitlements and freedom, to make news accessible to every citizen” (Media Law, Law No.12, 2014). Despite the adoption of this media so-called protective law, the successive government in Myanmar possessed two-sided faces of targeting the journalist and blocking the free flow of evidence by developing a number of laws and provisions, profoundly such as the 2004 Electronics Transactions Law, the 2013 Telecommunications Law, especially Article 66D (Freedom House, Freedom of the Press 2017), along with the 2014 Counter Terrorism Law.

The 2021 military coup has worsened the media freedom featuring internet and website blocks, denial of licenses, threats of arrest, raid, and severe death issues (Kyaw Hsan Hlaing and Emily Fishbein, 2021). Worsely, death cases during custody or military interrogation were

recorded¹. Consequently, several media agencies fled to safer places. Apparently, a threatened speech on journalists was delivered by a military regime's spokesperson, Zaw Min Tun. In his speech, journalism is allowed to operate under SAC, however, the news media will be closely monitored if they violate any provision of the terrorism law (Kha, 2023). Then, the increasing number of arrests, torture, raid, and even death case accusely fall under that vague terrorism law.

Obviously, the military junta manipulated the existing laws and intentionally made efforts to block the flow of information, which is the evidence of what is happening on the ground. Therefore, the conflict-affected areas have been particularly targeted. Among them, Rakhine region is one of the well-known regions for state-led oppression against journalists since the previous semi-democratic government² and hardly surviving the flow of information under the military regime.

Media Repression in Rakhine State prior to the Coup

From many conflicted areas in the state, Rakhine State, characterized by its cultural diversity and geostrategic significance, has a tumultuous history marked by prolonged and recurrent conflicts, 'communal violence' and 'armed violence'. Therefore, the region is known for the historical repression on the media darkness under continuous and various conflict situations. Firstly, the inter-communal conflict between Buddhist Rakhine and Muslim Rohingyas caused in 2012, spreading the whole region (Center for Arakan Studies 2024) (Nyein 2013). Later on, the rise of Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) caused the serial clashes with the military junta in 2016 and 2017, impacting the humanitarian crisis which is remarked as the crime against humanity (Archambault, 2022) (Naing and Lin 2019). Meanwhile, starting from January 2018 to November 2020, another armed group, Arakan Army (AA) started fighting

¹ According to Reporters Without Borders, five journalists have been reported to be dead as follows. 1. Soe Naing, Freelance photographer, was arrested while he was covering a silent street protest in Yangon (14 December 2021), 2. Sai Win Aung, Federal News Journal editor, was killed in the southeastern state of Kayin (25 December 2021), 3. Pu Tuidim, founder and editor of the Khonumthung Media Group, was abducted and found his death body in Matupi (9 January 2022), 4. Aye Kyaw, photographer who had covered many anti-junta protests, died in custody and his body was held in Sagain hospital (30 July 2022), 5. Myat Thu Tun, a contributor to the local media Western News, was shot and killed while in military detention (31 January 2024).

² See the link for the most significant example case happened in Rakhine, Journalist Ko Wa Lone and Ko Kyaw Soe Oo <https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/case/ko-wa-lone-arrested-under-official-secrets-act>

against the military with the aim of self-determination (Radio Free Asia 2022). Through targeted harassment to journalists, spreading propaganda and media restrictions, the junta has continuously suppressed independent reporting by erasing the evidence of state-led crimes in the region (Brickey, et al. 2018). Therefore, Rakhine State with serial conflicts is known for long-term media repression under successive governments including the semi-civilian government, NLD led by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi with information blockages.

Media repression in the Arakan region has been historic since before the 2021 coup. Due to tight media restrictions, ground reporting was seriously prevented with limited access to conflict zones during Myanmar's military "clearance operation" (Brickey, et al. 2018). Internet shutdown is another form of media repression, notably during 2019, in around 9 towns in northern Rakhine region where minorities reside (Robertson, 2020). This lack of internet access hindered the journalists' reporting, being unable to utilize encrypted messaging apps or send/receive emails in areas. They had to rely on physical file transportation and phone calls or text messages for communication (Hlaing and Fishbein 2021). Those persistent oppression did not stop there, interfering on the ground-level reality of conflict narratives. Furthermore, reporters who attempted to report independently without waiting for permission faced serious harassment. For instance, two Reuters journalists, Wa Lone and Kyaw Soe Oo, were sentenced to seven years in prison for reporting the Rohingya massacre (BBC, 2018). Besides, threatening messages and emails were sent to media outlets such as Radio Free Asia or directly to journalists from Eleven Media Group, 7Day Daily, Mizzima, The Voice, Democracy Today, and Khit Thit Media, warning them against unfavorable coverage of the military or the Arakan Army. In those threats, some were issued by military-aligned groups like the Patriot Soldiers Group, urging the journalist to align with the military, if failed, warning of consequences similar to the assassination of U Ko Ni, a human rights attorney critical of anti-Muslim sentiment (Radio Free Asia, 2019).

In addition to targeting the individual reports and journalists in Rakhine State, the authorities had also tried to crack down the independent media outlets as a whole. Among the 67 "fake news" categorized websites listed of 230 websites banned by the government on March 23 of 2020, it included two distinct media from Rakhine State, named Development Media Group

(DMG) and Narinjara News (Hlaing and Fishbein 2021). They were blocked access to information and press freedom and banned by the authorities when the flights between AA and military were serious in 2019 and 2020. Then, DMG faced delays in licensing so that it had to stop publishing its bimonthly print journal. They filed requests in March 2019 and remained pending for nearly 18 months. Its editor, Aung Marm Oo was also charged under the Unlawful Associations Act, for blocking access to the outlet's web pages in GOEnglish and Burmese (Human Rights Watch 2020). Those kinds of media repression strategies employed by junta before the coup not only impacted the independent media freedom and reporting but also allowed the state's control over the real narratives to the fake news which were the evidence of intense human right violations in the region.

Silencing the Reporters in Rakhine State amidst the Coup

After the 2021 coup, journalists from Rakhine State have been facing continuous repression, arrests, and even violence for reporting on sensitive issues such as military atrocities and human rights abuses. The Committee to Protect Journalists (2023) reported several cases of journalists being targeted by security forces. In Rakhine State, five editors and reporters from DMG, Narinjara, Western News, and Border News Agency have been charged by the junta since the coup (Burma News International, 2023). Apparently, a photojournalist from Myanmar Now was arrested in May while covering the aftermath of Cyclone Mocha and sentenced to 20 years, which is the highest sentence among journalists (Linn Htin, 2023). In late October 2023, the junta arrested a reporter and an office worker from DMG after raiding the office by the combined forces of the military and police (Scott, 2023). Moreover, a freelance journalist in Mrauk U, who has engaged with various media outlets such as DMG, DVB, and 7 Day News Journal was killed by the military junta in January 2024 (Bhattacharyya, 2024). These kinds of junta's repression describe how the journalists working in conflict areas are being threatened for their security.

Censorship on news reporting and publishing also became strict. The military revoked the licenses of most independent media outlets and ordered telecommunications companies to block their websites, prohibiting them from publishing and cutting them off from their audiences. The first revocations were announced by state media in March 2021, as five mainstream media outlets covering Rakhine local news_ Myanmar Now, Khit Thit Media, Democratic Voice of

Burma, Mizzima, and 7Day News_were told that they were “no longer allowed to broadcast or write or give information by using any kind of media platform or using any media technology” (Freedom House, 2023). As usual, the military junta again applied the internet shutdowns in almost all townships of Rakhine State as a weapon along with the intense fighting with Arakan Army (Win, 2025). Furthermore, local media outlets, Western News Media faced investigation, and Development Media Group, Narinjara, Border News Agency had their license revoked (Center for Arakan Studies, 2024).

Amidst the repression, few journalists are still operating on the ground, while many outlets have moved their operations and teams outside the country. Therefore, another challenge is verifying on-the-ground reports as the journalists who fled Myanmar cannot cover at least half of what is happening on the ground because of lack of verification. Moreover, the biggest problem for media outlets today is funding. According to Ben Dunant, editor-in-chief of Frontier Myanmar, an English-language magazine that relocated from Yangon to Thailand, told VOA that, "It is difficult — or even impossible — for many of them to make commercial revenue in this environment. This underlines the vulnerability of these media organizations whose operations are dependent on the whims of donors in faraway countries” (Scott, 2024). Therefore, these continuous ongoing repressions on journalists and media freedom after the coup causes difficulties in their operations with the double restrictions of harassment, censorship and security concerns.

In spite of having these challenges, several media outlets are still operating to disseminate the ground news in Rakhine State. Among them, media agencies like [DMG](#), [Narinjara](#), [Western News](#) and [BNA](#) are primarily produced in the region, covering the local news which mainly describe and focus on the communities and conflict ridden situations throughout the coup. Mainly, the local residents are their targeted audiences as they rely on their sources about the regional news which are often absent from the national or international newsrooms. They also target the national and international audiences by informing the local on-ground news. On the other side, at the national level, mainstream media outlets including [Radio Free Asia](#) (RFA), [Irrawaddy](#), [Khit Thit Media](#), [Mizzima](#), [Eleven Media Group](#), [Frontier Myanmar](#), [BNI-Myanmar Peace Monitor](#), and [Democratic Voice of Burma](#) (DVB) also cover the news from Rakhine State

but more border coverage of national and international news. They specifically pay attention to the minorities, ethnic, and regional conflicts not only in Rakhine but also other areas with the typical production outside of Rakhine State. They have more significant influence towards the wider audiences as the whole state and even international audiences (organizations).

Furthermore, some new local outlets such as [Arakan Princess Media](#), [Laywaddy FM](#), [Coastal News Agency](#), [Arakan Bay News](#), [Arakan Express News](#), and Rohingya Vision have emerged after the coup. Most of them mainly cover the news and issues to specific marginalized communities in addition to reporting about the whole regional issues. Actually, most of these outlets are splitted by the former employees of exiled reporters or organizations, running in mixed operations both inside and outside of the region. Like the other regional media from Rakhine State, they mostly target the local communities, expressing the voices of the marginalized societies amidst the conflicts and different issues. Providing the crucial information which are otherwise inaccessible due to military censorship to the local populations, they serve the essential roles for the media landscape both in the region and the state.

By analyzing the roles of these different media and their landscape, it is crucial to examine how both local, mainstream and newly emerged media try to navigate the junta's repression and how they try to maintain the resilience strategies for contributing to information access towards the targeted audiences amidst the ongoing conflict in Rakhine State.

No	Newsroom	Types of Media	Dissemination Channel	Language
1.	Development Media Group	Local	Website, Facebook, Telegram, YouTube, X (Twitter), TikTok, Soundcloud	Burmese, English
2.	Narinjara News	Local	Website, Facebook, YouTube, X (Twitter), Telegram, VK.com	Burmese, English,

3.	Western News	Local	Website, Facebook, Telegram, X (Twitter), YouTube, TikTok, Instagram	Burmese, English,
4.	Border News Agency	Local	Website, Facebook, Telegram, X (Twitter), YouTube, Instagram, Threads	Burmese, English
5.	Arakan Princess Media	Local	Website, Facebook, Telegram, YouTube, X (Twitter)	Arakanese, English
6.	Arakan Bay News	Local	Website, Facebook, Telegram, YouTube, X (Twitter), Soundcloud	Burmese, English
7.	Arakan Express News	Local	Website, Facebook, Telegram, YouTube, X (Twitter), Instagram, Threads	Burmese, English
8.	Lay Waddy FM	Local	Website, Facebook, YouTube	Burmese, English
9.	Coastal News Agency	Local	Website, Facebook, YouTube, X (Twitter), Telegram, TikTok, Instagram	Burmese, English
10.	Radio Free Asia	National	Website, Facebook, X (Twitter), YouTube, Instagram, iTunes	Burmese, English
11.	The Irrawaddy News	National	Website, Facebook, X (Twitter), YouTube, Telegram, Instagram	Burmese, English

12.	Khit Thit Media	National	Website, Facebook, X (Twitter), YouTube, Telegram, TikTok	Burmese
13.	Mizzima	National	Website, Facebook, X (Twitter), Telegram, YouTube, Spotify, Digital Magazine	Burmese, English
14.	Eleven Media Group	National	Website, Facebook, YouTube, Telegram, X (Twitter), Instagram	Burmese, English
15.	Frontier Myanmar	National	Website, Facebook, YouTube, X (Twitter), Instagram	Burmese, English
16.	BNI-Myanmar Peace Monitor	National	Website, Facebook, YouTube, X (Twitter), Instagram	Burmese, English
17.	Democratic Voice of Burma	National	Website, Facebook, YouTube, TikTok, Telegram, X (Twitter)	Burmese, English
18.	BBC Burmese	National	Website, Facebook, YouTube, X (Twitter), Instagram	Burmese, English
19.	VOA Burmese	National	Website, Facebook, YouTube, X (Twitter), Telegram, Instagram, Podcasts	Burmese, English
20.	Myanmar Now	National	Website, Facebook, YouTube, X (Twitter), Telegram, Instagram	Burmese, English

Resilience (Conceptual Framework)

In general, resilience can be regarded as the concept for the resistance strategies of how individuals, community and organization are trying to manage adversity in a mean. There are different kinds of defining concepts over the resilience theory. Firstly, American Psychological Association (**2014**) frames resilience as the theme of adaptability during the time of adversity, having trauma, tragedy, threats and other significant sources of stress. This definition underscores the psychological aspects of resilience, emphasizing the adaptability of individuals in the face of challenges (*The Road to Resilience*, 2014). In the technical report “Resilience: Theory and Application”, the researchers came out with their own definition on resilience after thoroughly reviewing and analyzing the variety of existing interpretations on resilience. In their definition, resilience is categorized in a variety of stages or forms in which an entity is able to deal with a disturbance such as anticipation, resistance, absorption, responding to, adapting to, and recovering (Carlson et al., 2012). It is indicative of the necessity of capacity to be able to deal with the disturbance situation.

When it comes to examining the resilience of the news media industry, there are more empirical perspectives than normative approaches. Notably, in the book shedding a light on the resilience of journalism and news media, Olsen and Mona (2024) approached the resilience in journalism through the lens of innovation because it commonly plays a vital role in different forms of resilience. In this regard, the authors differentiated the innovation into external and internal factors: the first include audiences and society at large , and the latter include resources, technology, organisation, management, culture, and business model that involve value creation. Importantly, they focus on innovation as a crucial foundation to survive through the crisis. On the same page, according to Meera Selva, a deputy director of the Reuters Institute, resilience is the capacity to "withstand shocks" and "survive, to adapt usefully" in the face of crises, whether these are immediate disruptions or gradual changes in circumstances. Selva emphasizes that resilience entails dealing with both short-term and long-term shifts, making it a crucial skill in media management as well as broader organizational contexts (Selva, 2022).

Through those different kinds of analysis over the resilience definition, the idea of Olsen and Mona will serve as the foundation for this research study to describe and analyze the situation of media resistance in Myanmar against the military repression. According to their definition, this research will focus on only internal factors in innovations as a foundation of resilience. Among the internal factors, the study will dive only into resources, technology, and organization to keep the organization moving forward against repression. Resources refer to tangible and intangible assets such as financial assets, physical newsrooms, and so on. Technology reflects adoption of the variety of digital platforms in news production, presentation and distribution. Lastly, organization means to adapt to a broad category including employees, structures, routines, competency, and communication practices. Grounded by this theoretical framework, the research will probe how the media outlets in Rakhine state manage resources in terms of human and financial sectors, technological adoption in news gathering and dissemination, and organization including communication and collaboration.

Methodology

The research used qualitative methodology, particularly key informant interviews with the members from local/ ethnic-based, emerging, and mainstream media outlets in Rakhine State. The researchers selected this method to get the most relevant and first-hand knowledge on the chosen research topic. Moreover, the interviewees could reflect on their previous and current experiences related to the military junta's extreme oppression and their resilience to address those repression. The sample included 8 interviewees in total, and 2 were females. The study attempted to cover the whole Rakhine media landscape, the researchers ensured to include diverse outlets such as (1) four respondents from local/ ethnic based media covering both majority and double minority groups, (2) two respondents from emerging newsrooms, and (3) two respondents from national/ mainstream level media outlets.

All selected newsrooms represented a diverse range of voices within Rakhine State including minority within minority communities and different levels of media experience. They also disseminate the news in different ways like radio, printing newspapers, online, which could provide the researchers the ground information and contribute with their own experiences while operating in conflict areas under junta's severe repression. As the study aims to explore

organizational-level conditions such as operational difficulties, financial constraints, shortage of human resources, and the whole outlet strategies, the researchers purposely selected members with different types of positions from those eight media outlets, which could provide insightful perspectives and experiences on both individual and organizational circumstances.

Based on the resilient theory framework defined by Olsen and Mona, the interview questions were developed. Under semi-structured interviews, there were 12 interview questions in the interview guide. The four main sections were divided as challenges after the coup, overall adaptation of media outlets, technological advancement, and collaboration. All the questions were open-ended to allow respondents to discuss and express their experiences and opinions freely. Even so, the researchers asked some follow-up questions to explore more insights based on provided information when it was necessary.

The data collection was started in late October and ended in late November 2024. All interviews were conducted online using the Zoom platform due to the sensitive nature of the research. The interviews lasted 20 to 45 minutes, depending on the length of the respondents' responses. With the consent of the interviewees, the interviews were recorded, and the researchers transcribed them. Each interview started with a verbal explanation of the research's aim and their rights, including confidentiality. In other words, the respondents' participation in this research project was entirely voluntary, and they were able to decline any questions and to leave the interview at any time. Prior to the interview, the researcher requested permission from the respondents to record the conversation. The data was only kept in audio format, and no names were mentioned throughout the whole interviews even though Zoom was utilized. Nonetheless, the researchers will disclose the respondents' identities, such as their positions and media outlets with their permission. Eventually, the collected data were categorized, coded and analyzed in accordance with the grounded theoretical framework.

Findings & Discussion

This chapter will provide the results of the qualitative analysis on the interview data collected from 8 media outlets, both from local/ethnic-based and mainstream level in Rakhine state. First and foremost, the significance of the SAC repression mainly targeted against the

media outlets and individual journalists in Rakhine state were briefed. The key findings of resistance strategies by those outlets throughout the persistent challenges fell into three main themes; (1) resources that describes about the limited human resources and financial constraints amidst the junta's severe repression (2) technological strategies to continue their new gathering and dissemination of accurate news, (3) organizational adjustments such as relocation and extensive collaboration. In addition to that, the study collected voices for required support for their long-term survival.

SAC Repression

Since the coup, the junta has obviously oppressed the media both physically and digitally, especially targeting the media in conflict-affected areas like Rakhine state. They are facing continuous repression like raiding, arresting, banning websites and licenses, and even restricting travel. After being raided by the junta, not only some journalists were arrested but also their family members were threatened with their security. Ko Kaung Mrat Naing, an editor-in-chief from Border News Agency (BNA) shared his experience, **"Since the coup, the BNA office was initially raided by the military and staff. I was issued a warrant of arrest, and my family and I were arrested in Yangon in November 2022. We were released from detention after one week. Since the junta threatened the security of journalists and their families, it had a negative impact on work."** As a result, journalists have to hide in safe places, some have to flee to the outside of the country, and they are unable to gather news as they used to before the coup.

Beyond physical threats, the digital suppression is inevitable to media outlets regardless of inside or exile-based. Particularly, the internet and mobile cut off is the most significant hardship for them which consequently delays the daily news operations. One of the interviewees, a journalist from mainstream media, stated that **"we had to rely on second-hand information to gather news. Later on, while the internet and phone lines are being cut off, it's becoming more challenging for journalists to collect news, gather the footage on the ground and fact-check."** Moreover, the military regime banned the websites and Facebook pages, which made the media outlets facing shortage of income. U Toe Zaw Latt, the Media Development Consultant at Mizzima Media Group said, **"When the junta banned the TV broadcasting channel of Mizzima, it had no way to earn the commercial income because none of the**

businesses were willing to advertise their products in license banned channels. So, they are becoming donor dependent media groups.” Therefore, these kinds of digital censorships have a serious impact on media outlets which imposed several restrictions on their role.

Resources

According to the resilience definition of Olsen and Mona, resources indicate both tangible and intangible factors such as physical newsrooms, financial assets, and so on. Through the lens of its theoretical framework, the study found that the media outlets in Rakhine state have been attempting to hardly maintain their operation in line with their objective amidst the junta’s severe repression. In doing so, the media outlets are mainly facing two major tangible problems which are limited human resources and financial constraints.

Limited Human Resources

Self-resignation of team members and difficulty in recruitment are the two primary reasons for limited human resources of media outlets. According to the interview discussions, team members from the local/ ethnic based media outlets resigned more than the mainstream media because they did not receive the sufficient salary and security concerns. Ko Aung Gyi, General Manager and in charge of External Relations from Arakan Express News expressed his organization's condition, **“When the junta intensified the detention and arrest of journalists, most staff members from our organization resigned due to security concerns. One staff member's house was also foreclosed by the junta. Most journalists in our organization were unwilling to stop working in the journalism field, but they decided to resign from the job due to their and their families’ security.”** In addition, inadequate salary led the journalists to quit their jobs. Ko Kaung Mrat Naing from Border News Agency highlighted this problem that with the cost of living in Rakhine rising fivefold, their staff could no longer make ends meet with the limited salaries they were able to provide, resulting in the staff resigning.

Media outlets are also struggling with recruiting new members due to the organization's limited funding and certain security risks, which are intertwined with each other. Editor in Chief, Ma Kay Zue from Laywaddy FM talked about her media’s recruitment challenge, **“We have not organized Laywaddy FM with permanent staff because of financial constraints and**

security concerns. For example, if the founding member of Laywaddy FM has received a story grant, we invite the local CJs or journalists to work with us as a team during the project period.” Besides, the media outlets have to ensure the safety of both their staff and extensively their family members, which makes it difficult to recruit more members. Consequently, the limited human resources has led to a significant impact on the operations, even daily news gathering, reporting, and dissemination processes. So, an editor-in-chief of Coastal News Agency highlighted this challenge, **“Although our mission is to publish daily newspapers, we can only afford to publish bi-weekly, and we are unable to hire journalists to assign one journalist per town in Rakhine.”** Similarly, the staff shortage also makes the remaining members more burdened that they have to take multiple roles to fill the gaps. Regarding it, **“To solve these challenges, remaining staff had to take more responsibilities and tasks while recruiting new staff”**, shared by an interviewee from a Rakhine-based news agency.

Financial Constraints

Financial challenge is another constraint for most media outlets while maintaining their operation, particularly for the local and emerging media outlets according to the findings from this study. To reduce financial burden, they have to rely on self-funding to sustain their outlet. Although some mainstream media receive grants and financial assistance from donors, many ethnic-based and emerging ones are operating with self-funding through distribution of their incomes to each other. Editor in Chief from Laywaddy FM, an emerging media, expressed her outlet’s condition that they have not received any grants or financial support from other supporters, and they run with their own budgets. Moreover, she said that, **“The founding members of Laywaddy apply story grants and work as freelance journalists, and they distribute their personal incomes with CJ and the team of Laywaddy FM to ensure our media continues working.”** Meanwhile, some newsrooms are still struggling with debts when they could not provide regular salaries for staff and sometimes overdue office rent. Therefore, it might be apparently unsustainable in the long term even though those Rakhine-based and newly formed media outlets are attempting to be resilient with their self-funding.

Significantly, local media outlets have also been marginalized by donor organizations in terms of financial support due to different reasons including political situation in the region. Editor in chief from Border News Agency mentioned, **“These donor organizations view Rakhine media as being pro-Rakhine and anti-Rohingya. In the early days of the coup, there were no protests in Rakhine, and many assumed that the Rakhine community supported the junta. All these factors contributed to the marginalization of Rakhine media, which has been left without adequate support.”** Furthermore, the business owners avoid associating with such emerging media due to sensitive news dissemination, which makes the outlets block the commercial revenue³. To that account, **“We broadcast news on FM, but as an emerging media and as a channel which broadcasts sensitive news, the business owners are not willing to contact us to advertise their products in our program. We have no secure way to earn income and have no significant financial support,”** highlighted by an interviewee from Laywaddy FM. On the other hand, the media outlets have to adopt the alternative methods with the additional cost for news gathering and dissemination. Ko Tun Thar, Editor-in-Chief of Arakan Bay News pointed out this problem that due to internet restrictions, they need to find the places where the internet is accessible and transportation costs for seeking internet accessible places and the cost of going back and forth is costly. Hence, these extended costs also increased the operational budgets, impacting the limited financial resources.

Technology

According to Olsen and Mona’s definition on resilience, technology reflects the adoption of various digital platforms for news production, presentation and distribution. In line with that, the media outlets from Rakhine State have tried to adapt new technological pathways including digital platforms, news gathering and dissemination strategies in order to maintain their media operations in the long run amidst the continuous crisis in the aftermath of the coup.

Digital Strategies

The study also found the installation of diverse technological pathways to keep their operation and resist the junta suppression according to Olsen and Mona’s definition on media

³ Before 2021 coup - media outlets could rely on commercial revenue to some extent by accepting private advertisement on their newspaper, radio and TV broadcasting regardless of mainstream or local media

resilience. Accordingly, the media outlets keep updating their communication channels, particularly the encrypted applications including the Signal, Telegram and Email which are widely used for internal communication and information sharing after the coup. A journalist from a Rakhine local news agency stated, **“We use Telegram app, Signal, and Email for sharing news, information, and internal communication”**. At the same time, cloud-based platforms like Google Drive are widely applied for secure data storage and sharing multimedia files such as videos and reports. On the other hand, some media outlets highlight QR code systems which convey sensitive information during communication. An editor-in-chief of Coastal News Agency highlighted **“We use the QR code system for secure communication within an organization ...If someone scans that Code without knowing the Organizational passcode, an error code will be displayed.”** It is noticeable that some local outlets are fully aware of the digital safeguard regarding their using platforms while some outlets still require to advance security procedures

Under internet blockage, both mainstream and local Rakhine media outlets have to keep a backup plan like innovative offline communication methods to maintain regular news gathering. Ko Kaung Mrat Naing from Border News Agency noted, **“...we used a USB to collect data and then handed it over to other reporters/editors through a reliable person.** However, physically transferring the USB without a security lock system through multiple check-points amid the ongoing is dangerous. Any loss or detain of USD can impose a big threat to individual journalists but also extensively security breakage on the whole media outlet. With no chance of using these alternative digital strategies, some outlets have to end up delivering the news via SMS or phone call, even though they are fully aware of military surveillance. Nevertheless, they demonstrate the constant efforts on the back and forth approaches of digital and physical methods in order to ensure security during their communication and operation.

Using multiple SIM cards is another means for bypassing the difficulties caused by internet prohibitions. Most respondents mentioned the application of Bangladesh and MEC Sim cards. **“The local reporters are using Bangladesh Sim Cards and they need to go to the Bangladesh-Myanmar border to get access to the internet”**, claimed by Ko Kaung Mrat Naing. However, using those cards is still dangerous for the onground journalists because of the

presence of different armed groups and border guards stationed, who always keep their eyes on them. Kay Zue from Laywaddy FM also noted that using MEC cards is difficult as it is hard to obtain and costly. Besides, Starlink is another usable way for navigating the whole internet shutdown. A journalist from mainstream media said, **“During the internet and phone line restrictions, we have to try to reach out to the sources who use MEC sim cards and the starlink internet”**. This demonstrates how the journalists from Rakhine media outlets take the extreme measures for internet access despite having security concerns.

Shift in News Gathering and News Accuracy

While adapting the different strategies for the organizational survival, the media outlets also attempt to navigate the various means of news gathering and the news accuracy in spite of facing internet shutdowns, security risks, lack of reliable sources, and ground conflict situations. Interestingly, the study found that media outlets are ensuring to reduce the possible risks in news gathering with one way or another. U Toe Zaw Latt, the Media Development Consultant at Mizzima media group spotlighted a transition to **“one-man show”** journalism to avoid the risks of working with the whole team. It is a new technique of coordination in the possibility of arresting one journalist leading to the leaks of information that can threaten the whole media outlet. To that account, building trust with the local community for reliable sources becomes a crucial factor due to the challenges of heightened surveillance. Therefore, an editor-in-chief of Coastal News Agency emphasized, **“As adaptation, we need to approach the high profile persons such as influencers, philanthropists or who are closely working with the community”**. They can provide credible information without exposing journalists to significant risks. Those shifted techniques demonstrate the intense safety concerns in the conflict zones after the coup but their adapted technologies help the media longlasting operation to date.

Consequently, the role of CJs is substantial for a localized approach for news gathering. A Rakhine-based news agency, stated assignment of reporters to their townships and the training of CJs in each township. Likewise, Ko Aung Gyi from Arakan Express News significantly described the important note about the essentiality of voluntary reports from local areas that can fill the gaps of exiled journalists or reporters. He commented, **“To continue news gathering, we have to connect with CJs, local journalists and voluntary reporters.....Since most**

journalists and reporters have been exiled”. Therefore, having voluntary participation from the local community and extensive role of citizen journalists are found to be the supportive platforms for news coverage.

As a matter of fact, ensuring the accuracy of news has become a complex and multifaceted challenge in conflict-affected regions like Rakhine state. Lack of access to the reliable internet has significantly affected the quality of reporting, especially delay in fact-checking and even impossibility for fact-checking. An interviewee from a Rakhine-based news agency expressed the situation, **“The reporters are unable to travel to gather footage and the CJs are unable to send the footage via the internet.”** Consequently, lack of fact-checking reduces the credibility of news and the ability to provide real-time on ground updates to the public which is an important factor of conflict reporting. Besides, the internet blackouts hinder the communication between the media outlets and associated parties in the case like traditional verification they used to adopt before the coup. Ko Tun Thar from Arakan Bay News shared their media’s trouble, **“We assign volunteers in different regions and need to contact them to gather and verify the news. Mostly we are unable to direct contact with the sources (victims) on ground. In some cases, we need to rely on the AA’s reporting for fact-checking and cross-referencing.”** The intermittent internet makes the media outlets nearly impossible to verify with primary sources, which affects the timeliness and credibility of news reports.

Despite these restrictions, media outlets expressed their constant efforts on the quality of overall reporting and news accuracy through various fact-checking processes, particularly cross-verification and cross-referencing. Ko Aung Gyi from Arakan Express News shared their ways of verification, **“If we gather some news regarding the AA’s functioning, we reach out to the AA for fact-checking, and wait until they confirm the news. So, sometimes it takes about one month to disseminate news. When we receive the report of the incidents on ground from CJs, we contact perpetrators groups to ensure the news accuracy.”** Moreover, an interviewee from a Rakhine-based media shared another way of cross-referencing, **“After collecting news from CJs, we do fact-checking those collected news with the news from AA owned media and sometimes reference news from that media”**. Despite the junta's severe

restrictions, all these rigorous fact-checking processes, addressing internet shutdown issues and security concerns, demonstrate the resilience of media outlets and their strong commitment to the news ecosystem in Rakhine state.

Shifts in Dissemination

Following the coup, the news dissemination conditions in Rakhine State presents various struggles including different approval requirements, financial limitations, travel restrictions and delay in operations. For conducting interviews and distribution of newspapers, the media outlets have to take the multiple approvals from stakeholders such as from ULA/AA at its controlled areas and from both ULA/AA and SAC at mixed controlled areas. It has become standard requirements for all media agencies in Rakhine State. Ko Kaung Mrat Naing, an editor-in-chief at Border News Agency described requirements of direct permissions from ULA/AA to interview with the sensitive groups such as Rohingyas and Hindus who are fleeing the conflict zones. He continued, **“..for some articles we need to approach directly to the sources for covert reporting and try to get information and consent from them”**.

A corresponding condition was noted by an editor-in-chief of Coastal News Agency. Their agency faced waiting up to five days for receiving the approval from ULA/AA authorities while they approached for newspaper distributions. It impacted over the delays in disseminations plans, causing the lack of urgent information towards the targeted audiences. Such delays in dissemination worsen due to travel restrictions and connectivity issues. Local reporters and journalists need to travel physically to the areas where internet access is possible for uploading the news. It highly impacts the timely reporting and dissemination. A journalist from mainstream media described, **“I gathered news on the groundhad to seek the internet accessible places to report the news which caused delay in news dissemination”**.

The study pointed out that Rakhine media outlets have inserted different means to bypass the challenges in dissemination. A critical change is the shift from TV news broadcasting (online) to audio formats. By using that method, the reporters can refrain from direct threats while they show off during broadcasting TV news. Paper distribution is another remarkable approach amidst the internet blockage and electricity cutoff. An editor-in-chief of Coastal News

Agency highlighted, **"We are connecting with respective persons in Rathedaung and Ponnagyun to be able to distribute the newspapers in those towns. Currently, we can only distribute about 50 newspapers in each township, specifically we distribute the newspapers in the market, IDP camps and libraries to ensure the people are easily accessible to the newspapers."** That method however costs so much due to physical distribution and paper printing. So, it is hard to expand as a sustainable strategy for long-term reliance.

Amidst the various repression, another alternative dissemination strategy is FM broadcasting. Nonetheless, Rakhine media agencies faced high costs and electricity blackouts causing limited access. For continuing broadcasting, collaboration with external agencies becomes another reliable technique. For example, **"Since Laywaddy FM lacks the capability to have its own Radio station frequency, we requested Mizzima Media to let us collaborate on a Radio Program,"** pointed out by Kay Zue from Laywaddy FM. Additionally, in-person dissemination to the community is interestingly found as an final option. Ko Kaung Mrat Naing from BNA mentioned, **"During the current conflict, we convey updated news in person with the community while we travel rather than relying on social platforms."** That totally helps the reporters and community be more engaged building the trusts, effectively sharing the information to targeted audiences. Those updated technologies adopted by Rakhine media outlets to bypass the military's physical and digital suppression have performed the crucial foundation of media resistance in conflict zones.

Organizational Adaptation

Driven by Olsen and Mona's approach to resilience, organizational adaptation including employee management, communication and collaboration were examined in detail. According to the interviewed discussions by the mainstream and local media outlets in Rakhine state, physical relocation to the safe place is found to be the first response to the repression in order to sustain the operation while the collaboration among the individual journalists in Rakhine state and extensively the outlets level partnership beyond the state are remarkably happened during crisis.

Physical Relocation

The study found out that Rakhine Media outlets apply the relocation strategy for sustained operation and staffs' safety under continuous junta's threats. They have to move their offices to safer areas like Thai-Myanmar and Myanmar-Bangladesh borders and operate as remote measures while some are still inside voluntarily or inevitably. Ko Kaung Mrat Naing noted that **"As an adaptation, the office was relocated to the Thai-Myanmar border and Myanmar-Bangladesh border. Currently, we are operating the newsroom from those two offices."** Due to relocation strategy, their work arrangement also shifts. Whereas, the journalists use the mobile working methods as noted by Ko Tun Thar, an editor-in-chief of Arakan Bay News. He commented, **"As recent changes, ...mobile work, requires us to seek internet-accessible locations to disseminate news."** This approach apparently shields them from direct impacts of SAC repressions. Nevertheless, Kay Zue from Laywaddy emphasized that even relocation cannot overcome the extensive restrictions and security threats all the time so that they need to stay low-profiles in operations which help to mitigate the potential risks.

Consequently, relocated media agencies in Rakhine State heavily rely on the sources collected by the local citizen journalists (CJs) in Myanmar. Ko Aung Gyi from Arakan Express News noted, **"Since most journalists and reporters have been exiled, to be able to operate our organization regularly, we need to mainly rely on CJs and local people to gather news."** Meanwhile, under the extended security risks, reporters and journalists have to also seek refugees in border areas controlled by ethnic armed organizations or abroad (exile). A Rakhine-based local news agency highlighted, **".. the media could not work properly due to the reporters fled to border areas and some fled to ethnic armed groups control areas to seek a safe place."** Therefore, the reliance on local journalists and reporters who are still at risk amid the ongoing conflict and no guarantee on operation in exile is questioning the long-term resistance.

Extensive Collaboration

The study found that all these struggles create a strong connection among all Rakhine Journalists. Beyond that, the new emergence of partnerships is also found between media outlets

in Rakhine and across other regions and also extensive collaboration among the journalists across the country as well. Ko Aung Gyi from Arakan Express News shared that “**During the revolutionary period, journalists have been uniting to collaborate in opposition to authoritarian rule and work together to bring out accurate news**”. The hardships amid the military repression led the coordination among individual journalists to share information, to give advice to each other regardless of either mainstream or local from any region.

Interestingly, partnerships between local and mainstream media outlets are also remarked amid the resistance against the military dictatorship. During the internet shutdown, Lawadday FM collaborated with Mizzima Radio Program to broadcast Rakhine news while coordinating with other local media outlets to establish local Radio stations. Besides, the Coastal News Agency collaborates with Akyab post and Arakha Times in publishing the ArrakkaDesh newspaper in Rakhine. There is also a significant partnership among media organizations for joint training on digital security and technical support training, and organize training to share with other media outlets.

As the nation wide coordination mechanism, U Toe Zaw from Mizzima media group shared the establishment of Independent Press Council Myanmar last year (2023) bringing together 37 media outlets, including both mainstream and ethnic media. It is mainly intended for security and protecting the journalists, and sustainability of the media in this crisis. Ko Tun Thar from Arakan Bay news also mentioned, “**We have collaborated with Independent Myanmar Journalists Associations (IMJA) in order to share coping strategies and find solutions to overcome the challenge**”. All in all, these collaborations across media outlets, regions, and different sectors reveal a resilient and adaptive strategy of media outlets in Rakhine state to sustain operations and keep the flow of information.

Rooms for Support

The consecutive waves of junta repression shifted the media landscape in Rakhine State. Despite the fact that Rakhine media outlets have been hardly surviving in the dark era to keep the flow of information, there is no traditional circulation of financial income anymore. Almost all the media outlets changed to rely on the donor to receive the core funding. Meanwhile, there is

also intentionally avoiding the donor at the expense of editorial independence. According to the editor-in-chief of Coastal News Agency, he said **“For example, we might use the wording “Muslim”, and the donor might pressure us to use “Rohingya” instead of “Muslim”.** Due to the complexity of the local conflicts, the media outlets are navigating the way to deal with different authorities to keep survival. Meanwhile, it is more of a burden to deal with the donor. Therefore, he expressed their standing point that **“ I will not accept any kind of support which will threaten media freedom and try to influence our standard.”** However, it reveals a need for balance between media freedom and media ethics not to be subjective.

The study collected voices advocating or urging the donor to manage the funding in line with the changing media landscape on the ground. Particularly, Ko Kaung Mrat Naing from BNA described the limited distribution of funding to the newly emerged groups. He advocated **“International organizations should monitor media and support newly emerged media outlets that present balanced, accurate, and reliable news”.** Besides, a journalist from the mainstream media also expressed the same voice that they have not faced financial hardship as of being a reporter at the mainstream but **“local media are currently facing their hardship financially”.** Therefore, the study realizes the fact of the urgent need for targeted and equal-distribution of funding mechanisms to sustain local voice in Rakhine State.

The study also found the critical role of non-funding support for the media resistance in Rakhine State. Due to the digital repression along with the internet and mobile connection shutdown, many interviewees stressed the need of the Starlink device as the alternative internet access to enable them to continuously report and operate the media. Meanwhile, some interviewees shared their idea of community radio (an initiation of broadcasting for the regional level) as a long-term solution of keeping the flow of information in the areas without the internet. Apart from the internet access, there is also a significant demand for the equipment including high-quality phones, computers, cameras, and so on. Ko Kaung Mrat Naing from BNA particularly highlighted the need for high-quality phones, saying **“Since the coup, it is risky to bring a camera when we gather the news, we need high quality mobile phones to record evidence.”** They are in need of both technical and financial support; however, they stress the point again that **“We welcome any assistance that is offered without any agenda (influence).”**

Beyond the need for infrastructure, the study also found the demand for technical support. Some media outlets expressed their interest in monetizing their digital pages on social media and YouTube to circulate financial resources and so less relying on the grant. Meanwhile, some urged for digital security training with hands-on experience on resolving technical errors. An interviewee from a Rakhine-based news agency highlighted the difficulty of lack of knowledge on digital security saying **“These types of issues have caused the work to be paused for one or two months, significantly affecting our progress”**.

In addition to that, there is also a particular demand on individual journalist’s capacity building rather than support to the media outlets. The opportunity to harness their reporting skills and to learn other extensive skills are essential. A journalist from mainstream media stresses that point **“it is important to offer capacity building opportunities for the journalists to ensure their quality of work and to sustain their career in journalism fields”**. It was described that the capacity building approach will enable the journalist to handle on their own in difficult situations and will strengthen the media resistance. Hence, media outlets are still resilient to date standing on their own feet with creative ways, however, it has become a big concern whether they can survive for long-term under the extensive repressive regime with the growing intensity of conflicts. Handing a help will be a crucial support in terms of distributing core funding for local outlets, equipment for operation, and technical support for monetization and digital security training.

Conclusion

The media outlets from Rakhine State have been facing persistent historic challenges which became more intense after the coup. This research attempted to gather not only those challenges after 2021 but also coping strategies of different media outlets including local, mainstream and emerging agencies from the region through the lens of resilience. The study found Rakhine media outlets faced both physical and digital threats such as raiding, arresting, banning websites or social media and licenses, internet shutdown and restricting travel. The research found out that the three factors: resources, technology and organization guided by Olsen and Mona have been confronting in the Rakhine media landscape. Moreover, the new findings

such as extensive collaboration with external stakeholders and voices for support gaps by media outlets were also discovered through key informant interviews.

Regarding resources, both human and financial resources are more limited to the local and ethnic-based media, disrupting their organizational management and operations. Limited human resources occurs due to more resignation and difficulty to recruit impacted by financial constraint, and security concerns. No circulation of income generation and reliance on self-funding like own contribution led to financial constraints. For the second factor of the study's focus, technology, all local and mainstream media outlets have adopted a diverse range of communication channels such as Signal, Telegram, QR code systems to bypass surveillance. Beyond this, using multiple sim cards, USB, Starlink internet are other backup strategies amidst internet blockages, though security awareness of those tools remain as limited for some outlets.

A significant shift in new gathering is noted as the importance of local voluntary reporters who can fill the gaps of exiled journalists. Particularly, reporters and CJs from Rakhine media outlets have built trust with the local community which helps to collect credible sources. Approval requirements from different authorities impose a delay in dissemination. Besides, multiple layers of junta suppression could not stop the flow of information because the media outlets have advanced their ways of disseminating by using paper distributions, FM broadcasting by collaboration with external agencies, and in-person dissemination in community. Lastly, the findings highlight the support needs consisting of equitable fundings, better equipment for operation and technical support to sustain in the long-run. Additionally, with the extensive death threats, both media agencies and most team members have to relocate in safer places for continuation of their media operation. Consequently, those exile media heavily rely on the local citizen journalists who are still under security risks. Collaborations were strengthened among the individual journalists in Rakhine state to coordinate regionally. Beyond that, partnerships at the media outlet level were also significantly found not only among the Rakhine media outlets but also across other states and regions in a response to the political crisis.

While the study provides the crucial insights related to the adaptive innovative strategies applied by Rakhine media outlets, the study has its own limitations. The study did not include all the internal and external factors which were defined by Olsen and Mona. The focus was

determined in line with the ongoing media landscape in Rakhine state. Besides, according to the experience throughout this study, there should be further research on gender-based challenges and risks of the journalists amid the continuous conflict and under the junta repression. Furthermore, almost all the interviewees expressed the need of technical support, particularly digital security and monetization of their page. In this regard, there should be a development of research on the shortage of the digital support organization to reach the internet inaccessible place with the aim of possible project implementation and advocacy. Nevertheless, the study still reflects the ground and real experiences of CJs, reporters, editors of local, emerging, ethnic-based and mainstream newsrooms, providing the unique and insightful viewpoints from media in conflict-affected Rakhine State. Hence, it offers the crucial information for further studies with useful initiatives for promoting media resilience amidst the risking circumstances.

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This paper is collaboratively written by three emerging researchers from Myanmar, each representing different regions of the country and diverse ethnic and academic backgrounds. All three authors have academic training in international relations and governance. Their research experiences span across peace and conflict studies, media and governance, and community resilience under crisis, with a particular focus on marginalized communities in Myanmar. Prior to the 2021 military coup, they were engaged with local research institutes, civil society organizations, and youth-led education programs. Since the coup, they have continued their commitment to research and advocacy through voluntary mentoring, international academic collaboration, and involvement in initiatives supporting media freedom and vulnerable groups. Due to the sensitive political context in Myanmar, the authors have chosen to remain anonymous.

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