

The Digital Battleground: Control, Resistance, and Hybridity in Early Post-Coup Burma

“How did the Burmese military attempt to disrupt digital hybridity in the first week following the 2021 coup, and what early forms of digital resistance and adaptation emerged among Burmese citizens in response?”

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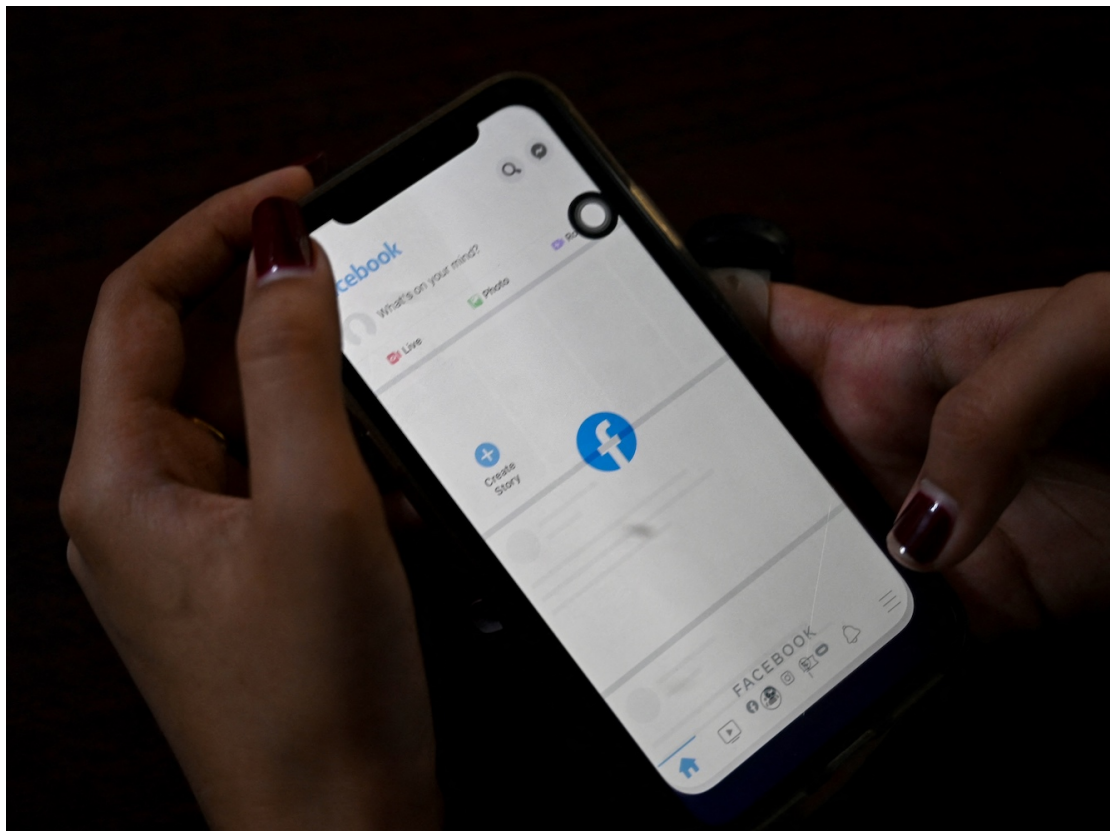


Figure 1: A woman uses her mobile phone to check Facebook in Yangon on February 4, 2021. (AFP, 2021)

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Executive Summary

Burma(Myanmar), a developing third-world country in Southeast Asia, was progressively transitioning towards a democratic nation in the last decade until a military coup in February 2021 triggered intense political and social conflict. This time, the digital sphere emerged as a crucial 'locus of conflict'. This report aims to underscore the vital role of the digital sphere in autocratization, a battleground between the military junta's power-consolidating efforts and the people's resistance movements.



Figure 2: Protest in Central Yangon, Burma. (Oo, 2021)

Abstract

The report will analyze these critical events, detailing the Burmese Military deploying digital tactics, including internet shutdowns, social media blocking, and surveillance, to oppress and solidify its authority and its profound impact on citizens, the population's adaptive digital resistance strategies, such as VPN and encrypted communication, through the dual lenses of digital authoritarianism and Homi Bhabha's cultural hybridity, understanding the interplay between digital influences and local cultural expressions. Journalistic accounts from local on-the-ground media such as BBC, RFA, Myanmar Now, international media, research organizations, and human rights groups will be drawn. Overall, the military junta's swift implementation of digital control and the immediate response of widespread digital resistance from the population highlight cyberspace as a central battleground in the unfolding crisis. The report aims to provide insights for Burmese youth to comprehend this pivotal historical moment and inform strategies against similar forms of digital control.



Figure 3: Win Maw Oo, an icon of Burma's pro-democracy 8888 uprising movement (Lehman, 1988).

I. Introduction Brief.

Ever since the pro-democracy “National League for Democracy” party led by Aung San Suu Kyi won the supermajority of the 2015 election, paving the way for the country’s first non-military president since Ne Win’s 1962 coup (Jap and Ziegfeld, 2020; Aung-Thwin and Aung-Thwin, 2012). Burma (Myanmar) has experienced a period of rapid technological advancement, significantly increasing internet access and mobile connectivity. Social media platforms have become deeply integrated into the significant population’s social, economic, and political lives, from video-calling loved ones and protesting cronies to online Facebook live sales. Such dynamic exchange between global and local cultural influences threatened the military junta.



Figure 4: Aung San Suu Kyi in her party’s Landmadaw township branch opening ceremony (Tun, 2012)

Immediately following the coup, the junta prioritized the control of the increasingly influential space. The strategy was multi-pronged, with deliberate disruption of internet access nationwide, blockage of popular social media platforms that had become hubs for web-based networks, and implementation of various surveillance measures aimed at monitoring online activities, those threatening to their newly established regime.

Despite the junta's efforts to control the digital sphere, Burmese citizens demonstrated remarkable resilience. They adopted digital resistance tactics, such as Virtual Private Networks (VPNs) and encrypted messaging applications, and utilized alternatives, like offline communication methods, to outmaneuver state-imposed measures.



Figure 5: A fitness instructor performing aerobics, capturing the country's military coup unfolding (Treisman, 2021).

II. Pre-Coup Myanmar: A Flourishing Digital Hybridity

Growth of Internet and Mobile Usage

Prior to the February 2021 coup, Burma experienced rapid digital growth.

Internet users increased from 22 million to 23.65 million (41% to 43.3% penetration) within one year, although it is still below Asia's average (74% in 2020)

(Kemp, 2020; Kemp, 2021; Internet Society Pulse, 2025). Mobile connections were exceptionally high at 127.2% of the population in January 2021, indicating widespread multi-device ownership, with 90% having 4G access by 2023.

However, a digital divide persisted, affecting 68.7% of the rural population and varying regionally (Kemp, 2021).

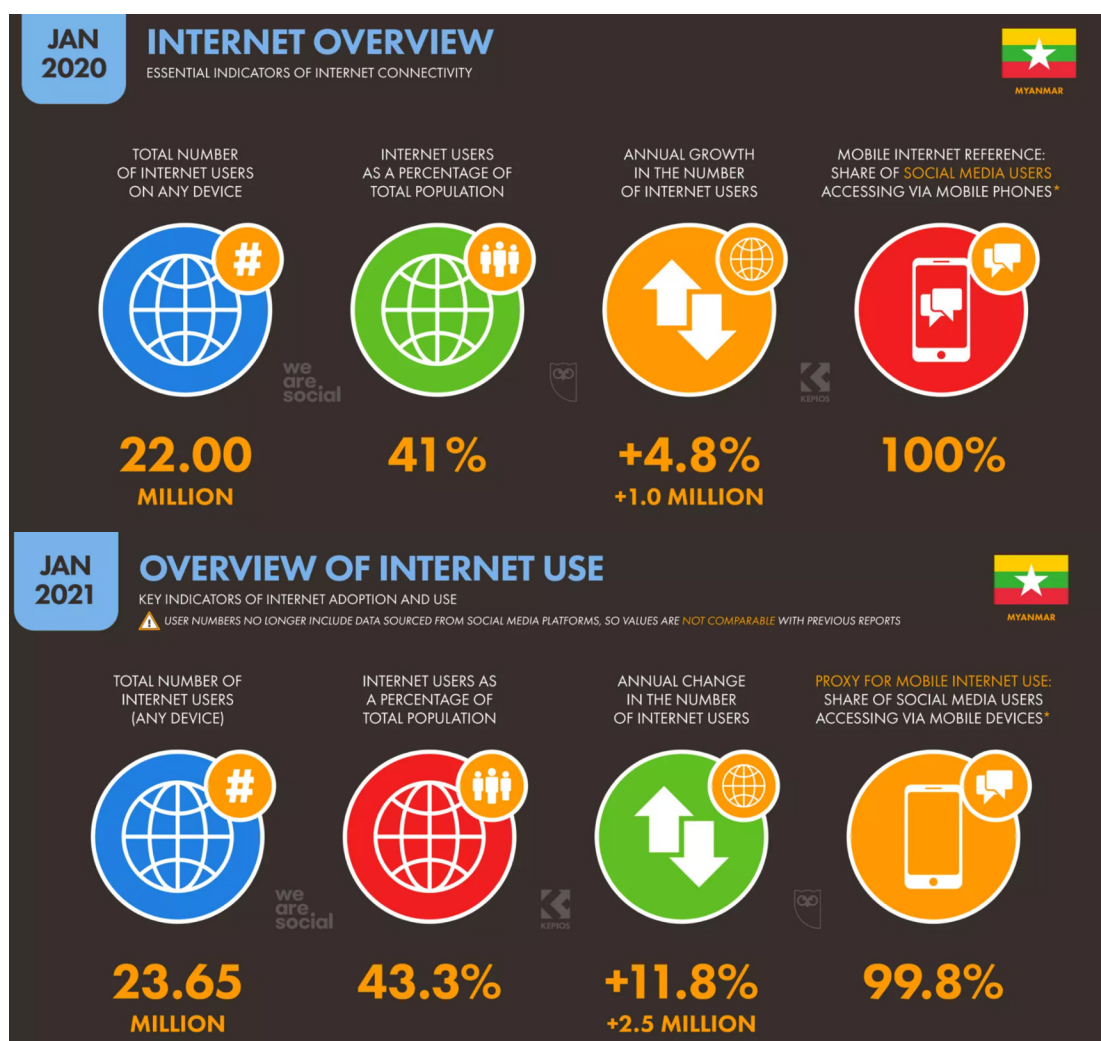


Figure 6a and b: Overview of internet usage in Burma in comparison (Kemp, 2020; Kemp 2021)

Social Media Dominance

Social media usage surged to 29 million users (53.1% penetration) by January 2021, a significant jump from 22 million (41%) in January 2020 (Kemp, 2020; Kemp, 2021). Facebook was dominant, accounting for 89.7% of social media web traffic, and used monthly by 74.9% pre-coup, making it nearly synonymous with the Internet for many (Mineshima-Lowe, 2025). Other platforms like Messenger (47.0%) and YouTube (41.9%) were also popular (Standard Insights, 2022; Zaleznik, 2021; Crystal, 2023). Nevertheless, the influence was varying, with some suggesting potential hate speech. For instance, conflicting views in the violence against the Rohingya minority highlights the dual nature of social media's Influence in Burma, both as a source of division and connection (Tähtinen, 2024; Nyi Nyi Kyaw, 2020; Samet, Arriola and Matanock, 2024).



Figure 7: Rohingya genocide in Burma (Physicians for Human Rights, 2012)

E-commerce Growth

E-commerce flourished, driven by platforms like Shop.com.mm, mobile payment systems (KBZPay, Wave Money), card payments, and sales via Facebook (Kanale, 2024; Webmaster, 2024; Tun, 2023). The 2013 telecommunications sector liberalization, allowing international telecommunications companies like Ooredoo and Telenor to enter the market, spurred this connectivity (Naing and Htun, 2025). The increased internet access and affordable digital technology fostered cultural hybridity globally, primarily via platforms like Facebook and YouTube. This digital dependency made subsequent internet disruptions particularly impactful (Wikipedia Contributors, 2019).

Cultural Hybridity and Digital Connectivity

With increased internet access and more affordable digital technology, there was widespread exposure to global cultures, ideas, and information. The military's post-coup actions were aimed at controlling this 'culturally hybrid' digital space, seeking to assert dominance and impose restrictions within the nation.



Figure 8: Riot police guarding Myanmar Economic Bank. (Nikkei Asia, 2022)

III. The Coup and the Digital Blackout: Dismantling Hybridity (Day 1-3)

The military realized that to hold up their agenda, tactics from blocking communication to seizing information had to be done by all means. On February 1st, 2021, around 3:00 AM, everything in Burma suddenly turned black. Internet nationwide and phone lines to the capital, Nay Pyi Daw, where the democratically elected leaders reside, were disrupted. Internet connectivity dropped to 50-75% below normal levels (Netblocks, 2021; Webmaster, 2021; Freedom House, 2021; Asia Centre, 2021).

Blocking Social Media Platforms

Within three days, access to crucial social media platforms such as Facebook, Messenger, and WhatsApp was blocked, initiating a “digital dictatorship” by unsubstantiated claims as “the platforms spread “fake news” and disrupted stability,” invoking Section 77 of the Telecommunication Law, and violating international rights to information access and freedom of expression (Caster, 2021; United Nations, 2022; Ortega, 2021; Asia Centre, 2021).

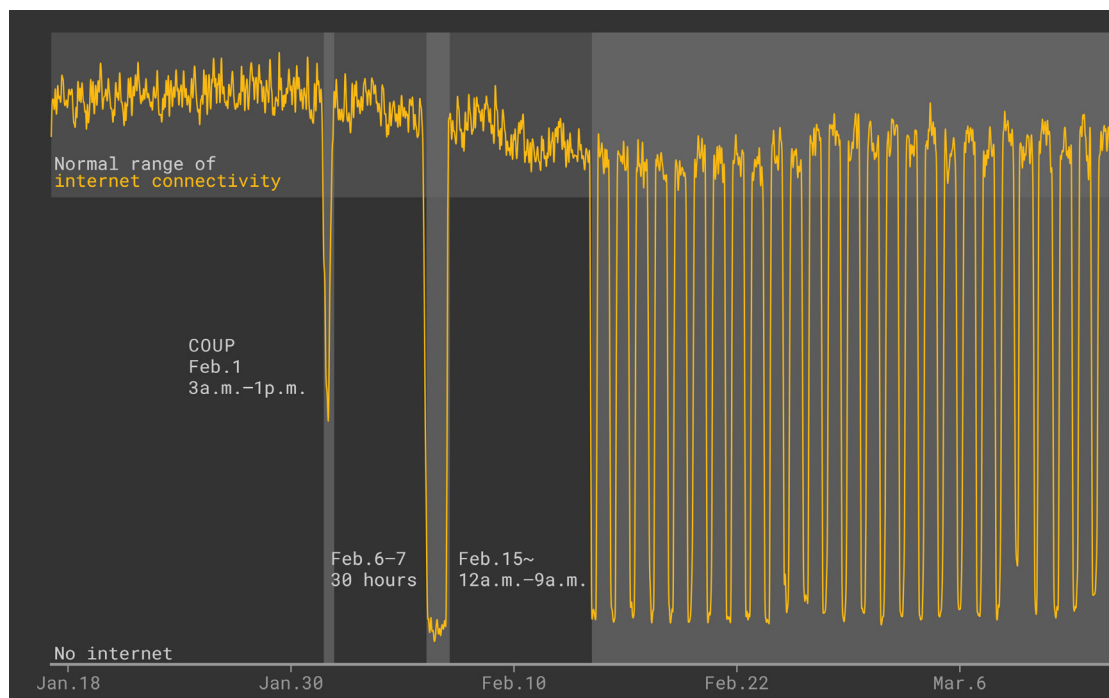


Figure 9: Post coup internet connectivity fluctuation in Burma (Reuters, 2021)

Only state-run media like Myawaddy and MRTV were permitted to broadcast, especially in military barracks, where all personnel, including families, were ordered to watch them compulsorily (Padaythar P2P, 2023).

By implementing such an 'immediate, comprehensive blackout,' the regime continued to create an information vacuum and suppress dissent, mirroring strategies common to authoritarian predecessors. The initial steps in dismantling the pre-coup environment of digital connectivity and hybridity were crucial in controlling the narrative and public discourse.

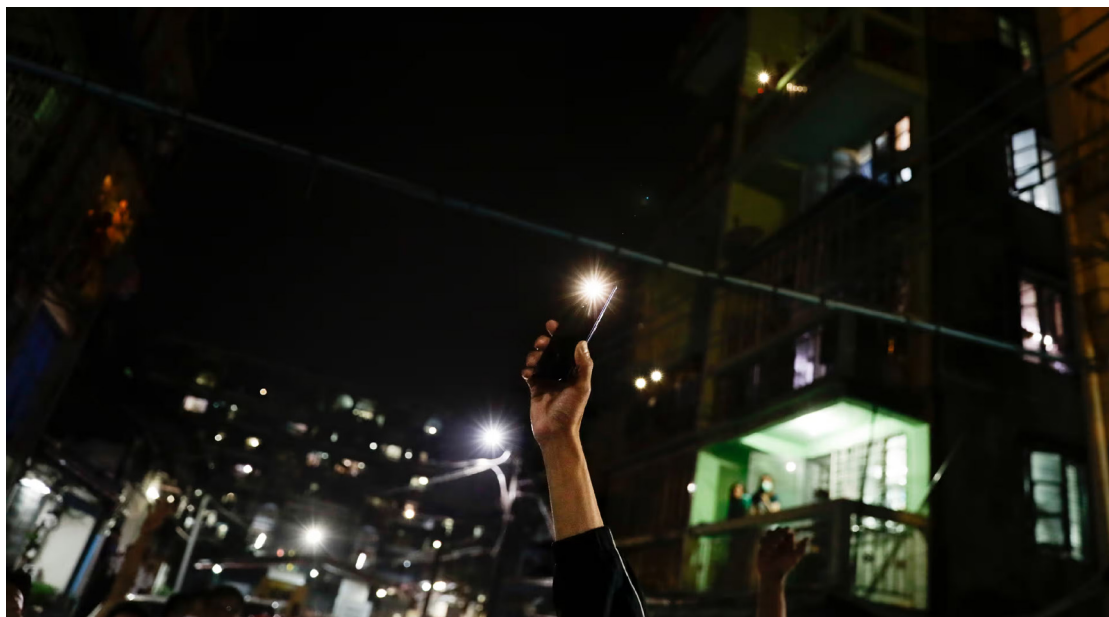


Figure 10: Protester waving phone in anti coup protest, where internet has been shut down five times in two weeks. (Bo, 2021)

IV. Expanding Control: Surveillance and Censorship (Day 4-7)

The initial belief was that waiting 72 hours without resistance would revoke the coup d'état, although it turned out to be unfounded and possibly fueled by misinformation (YU Open Political Society, 2022). The junta, nevertheless, expanded digital controls. Prior to the coup, all telecommunication providers had to enable surveillance of calls, messages, web traffic, and location under military instructions (Scott, 2023; Access Now, 2021; Meaker, 2022). For instance, Telenor, one of the four major telecommunication providers, had to comply with demands for its 19 million user data, aiding the tracking of resistance figures (Naing, 2022).



Figure 11: A Burmese activist holding up phone during anti-coup protest (Li, 2022)

Aung San Suu Kyi, the Nobel laureate, was charged with possessing communication devices, indicating the junta's focus on technology. Furthermore, Twitter and Instagram were blocked on February 5th. A 30-hour internet blackout was imposed on the sixth day, slashing connectivity to just 16% of normal levels.

Nevertheless, protests grew with civil disobedience movements, and hundreds of online dissenters and journalists were arrested and detained within one week (Office of the High Commissioner, UN, 2022). Administrators banned people from gathering, and a military curfew under Section 144 of the Code of Criminal Procedure (AAPP, 2024). Burmese people quickly began to adopt various forms of resistance and adaptation.



Figure 12: Myanmar's Military Deploys Digital Arsenal of Repression in Crackdown (Beech, 2021).

V. The Emergence of a 'Third Space': Digital Resistance and Adaptation.

Burmese people rapidly employed diverse methods of resistance despite the Burmese military's all-out controls (Mi. Caster, 2021; Gar Gar, 2024). To bypass internet shutdowns and social media platform blocking, Virtual Private Network (VPN) usage skyrocketed, with one report suggesting a 7,200% increase (Eyako Heh, 2021). The digitally literate population was determined to stay connected (International Crisis Group, 2021; Fee, 2021).

Citizens also shifted to more secure encrypted messaging applications such as Signal and Telegram for organizing and sharing sensitive information, reflecting increased awareness of security risks. Offline solutions were also employed. Bridgefy, a Bluetooth-based messaging app that creates mesh networks without the internet, was downloaded more than 1.1 million times within 48 hours of the coup (The Strait Times, 2021; Bridgefy, 2021).

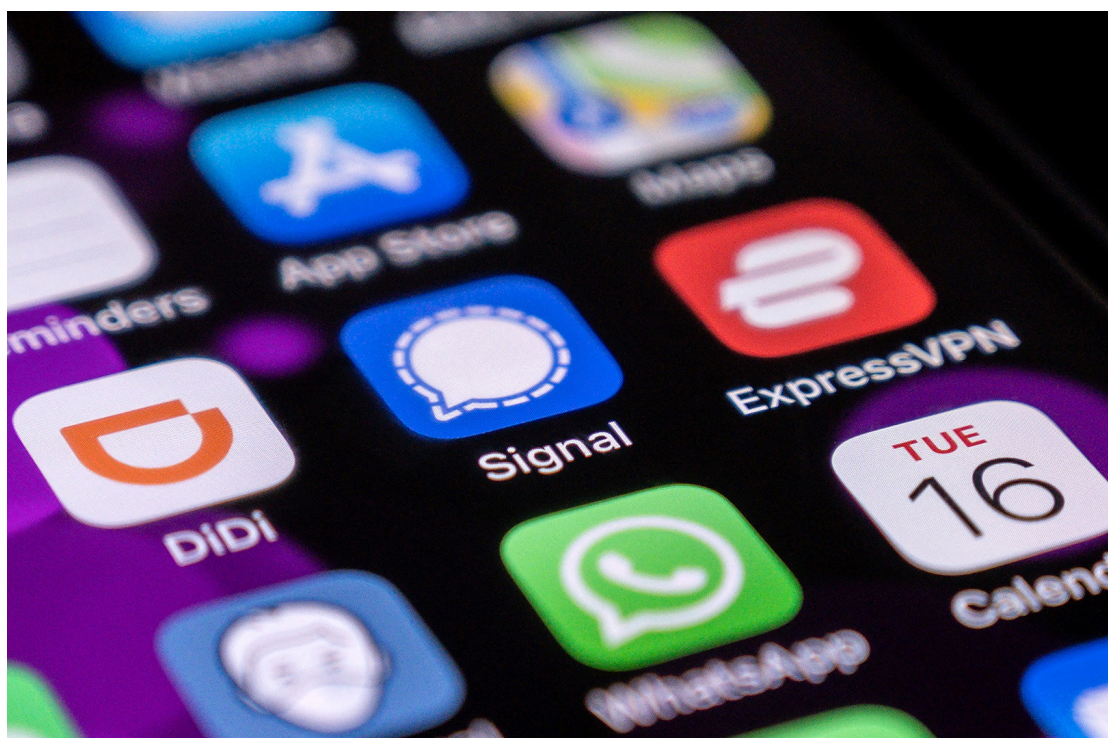


Figure 13: The encrypted messaging app, signal being pictured on a smart phone screen (Asfour, 2021).

Other methods include manually encrypting and decrypting texts, walkie-talkie applications, and acquiring foreign SIM cards (e.g., from Thailand) (Bergman and Gunawan, 2021). These efforts highlight the determination to maintain information flow and resist digital control.

Journalistic outlets like Myanmar Now, BBC, and RFA, alongside independent reporters such as Mratt Kyaw Thu, provided unbiased reporting during the first week, corroborating the military's actions, documenting Tel-enor's data sharing allegation, news site blocking, the impact of blackouts, and arrests linked to online activities, receiving supports of millions of the population (Aljazeera, 2021; Bächtold, 2022; McDermott, 2022).



Figure 14: Poster collage about children being recruited to the Burmese Tatmadaw(military) (Insight Myanmar, 2021)

VI. Impact on Citizens: Isolation, Fear, and Resilience

The Burmese population showed immediate resilience despite intense control. Hundreds of thousands of healthcare workers, civil servants, students, teachers, and those from other sectors participated in the strike, and digital circumvention tools were widely adopted (Wikipedia Contributors, 2019).

Despite the strong-hearted spirit, the Burmese population suffered from psychological and social damages from being cut off from access to information and communications amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic. Internet shutdowns impacted essential services and humanitarian aid, intensifying public anxiety caused. (Saw et al., 2023)



Figure 15: Journalists covering an anti-coup protest in Yangon (Frontier, 2021)

The population's resistance to finding a way around using VPNs and encrypted applications represented more than just accessing information. The 5-year democratically rule opened global connections, and the people want to preserve the ongoing process of hybridizing the cultural landscape (Mint, 2025; IPDForum, 2024; Amnesty International UK, 2025).

Such situations do not happen only after a coup. Privacy, freedom of speech, and human rights—some of the most fundamental rights—are being threatened as nations increasingly weaponize technology. The ongoing struggle between authoritarian control and the public in Burma's digital sphere represents social and diminished digital environment instability on a global scale (Khine, 2023; Repucci and Slipowitz, 2022).



Figure 16: Police officer taking protesters' photo. (AP, 2021)

VII. Conclusion

Following the coup, the Burmese military junta swiftly implemented digital authoritarian tactics, such as internet shutdowns, social media blocking, surveillance, and arrests for online activities, to control information, maintain power, and establish a “digital dictatorship.” Such actions threatened the pre-coup environment where digital connectivity and cultural hybridity (the blend of local and global influences) had thrived as the junta aimed to impose a more state-controlled nature.

Despite the immediate and comprehensive digital control measures, the Burmese responded resiliently, utilizing various digital resistance techniques. The tension has been ongoing to this day, frequently cutting connectivity in numerous townships, targeting areas prone to resistance, and hindering humanitarian aid, even during crises like the 7.7-magnitude quake in Burma’s second-largest city, Mandalay. The battle between the Burmese military junta to seize digital space and the people determined for information freedom continues to define Burma’s severely constrained landscape.



Figure 17: Burmese monk in a post-quake town in Burma (Mizzima, 2025)

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