

Facebook and the Rohingya Crisis

REFLECTION | 29 September 2022

Much has been written about Facebook’s role in the Rohingya crisis and its implications for tech accountability. More will undoubtedly follow.

We asked Myanmar digital rights activists - who had a front row seat throughout Facebook’s Myanmar history, both as users, living and breathing the platform, and as researchers and advocates, with opportunities to engage the company from as early as 2012 - for their perspective.

WHAT WAS USING FACEBOOK LIKE IN THE LEAD UP TO THE ROHINGYA CRISIS?

Hate speech and disinformation was always a big part of the Facebook experience, as was graphic violence - which would flare up in the days following specific incidents.

When Facebook started becoming popular in Myanmar, in 2011-2012, we were going through a period of political transition and some people feared that change. Ultra-nationalists and some monks were concerned that Myanmar would lose its traditional values. They saw Islam, in particular, as a threat (Myanmar is predominantly Buddhist) and were quite vocal about their fears on Facebook. Facebook enabled them to broadcast their fears to large audiences and made it easy for people to engage with and build on these fears. It also enabled these monks and ultra-nationalists to connect with one another and build communities.

Most notably, Facebook was instrumental to the emergence of a mass Buddhist nationalist movement, which grew from 2012 to 2015 to encompass hundreds of thousands of members across the country and came to be known as Ma Ba Tha (Patriotic Association of Myanmar). Ma Ba Tha made extensive use of Facebook, leveraging the platform to build hundreds of local chapters, recruit members, fundraise, organize protests and events and run campaigns. As a movement, Ma Ba Tha launched a campaign to pass a set of four Race and Religion laws, including a monogamy law, a religious conversion law, an interfaith marriage law and a population control law. All four [laws were eventually passed](#) in 2015, after a big campaign on Facebook which further stigmatized and vilified Muslims.

With the campaign unfolding months to a general election, the military and the political sphere widely endorsed Ma Ba Tha and its messages. This helped to normalize the anti-Muslim and anti-Rohingya discourse. As the narratives became increasingly politicized, there was also a lot of disinformation, which sought to further stoke fear. Disinformation fueled distrust between communities and triggered a number of violent intercommunal incidents, which made fears of the Muslim community even more real and immediate for people.

By the time the military launched its clearance operations against the Rohingya community in Rakhine State, first in October 2016 and again in September 2017, the public had been primed to fear Muslims, and in particular the Rohingya, who personified the idea of an external threat of Islamisation from the 'Western Gate'. As reports of attacks on military outposts made their way onto Facebook, most people bought the official government narrative, which framed the attacks as terrorism and branded Rohingyas as Muslim terrorists. The weeks that followed the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) attacks on military outposts, in both years, were particularly dreadful. Facebook went wild with rumors, graphic violence and threats of further attacks. People were afraid and hungry for information. That made them particularly susceptible to sharing unverified claims and to refer back and echo many of the narratives they had previously heard. A lot of out of context images were also used to depict growing horrors -

and they were widespread rumors that Muslims were getting ready for larger attacks, and an all-out ‘jihad.’

In [Annex 1](#), we collected a few examples of the type of content and narratives which were widespread on Facebook both before and as the violence escalated, as well as a brief review of the roles played by different actors.

HOW DID THE COMPANY RESPOND TO THE SITUATION - AND YOUR WARNINGS?

We became concerned very early on that social media was a double edged sword.

In 2012 and 2013, Myanmar faced a wave of intercommunal violence. Many people died. In several of the cases, the violence had been triggered by unverified - and often outright fabricated - rumors, which had spread on Facebook.

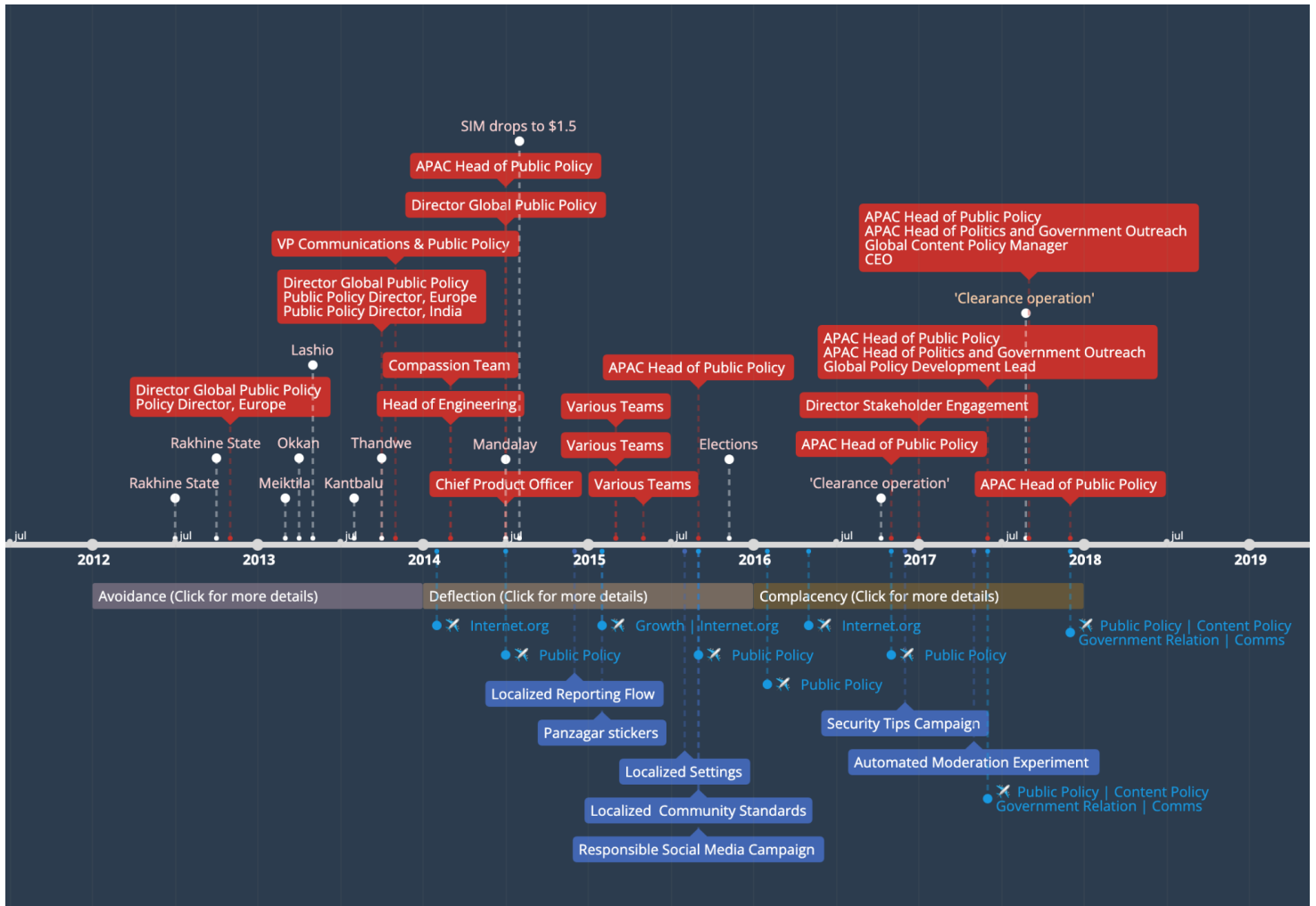
We tried to warn Facebook at every occasion we had, starting in 2012, that hate speech and disinformation were becoming a serious problem, but they didn’t seem to see it as their responsibility and simply ignored us.

This went on for a couple of years until we enlisted the help of a Harvard professor, Susan Benesch, who headed the [Dangerous Speech Project](#) and helped us get their attention. Even then, Facebook deflected its responsibility, making the risk situation all about the users: “people lack digital literacy”, “speech norms are the problem”, “people aren’t reporting enough”.

We made it clear to them - time and again - that what we were dealing with was organized actors, with a political agenda. It wasn’t just about people being naive or lacking literacy. But the few things they did focused on users - translating the reporting system, the settings, the rules, and supporting the occasional awareness raising campaign.

It wasn’t until 2018, after they had been formally called out in relation to the Rohingya genocide, that they faced to the fact that their platform was actively being weaponized and started taking action on the actors, both through [dangerous actor designations](#) and [coordinated inauthentic behaviour takedowns](#).

Below is an overview of the warnings we gave or know the company received through to 2017 - as well as their response. We'll update this list as we become aware of more formal warnings or actions that may have taken place over that period.



2012 - 2013 : Avoidance

The years 2012-2013 were marked by a wave of intercommunal riots and incidents, targeting both Rohingyas and Muslim communities across the country. Facebook was growing quickly and we were getting concerned about the virulent hate speech which was circulating on the platform. We briefed Facebook executives, including Facebook’s Director of Global Public Policy, Policy Director, Europe and Policy Director, India, whom Htaike Htaike Aung, co-founder of MIDO, met at international conferences on two distinct occasions - in November 2012 in Baku and in October 2013 in Bali. We also followed up over email to ask for ways to get Facebook to review

problematic content and address emergency escalations. They never responded. The platform was getting more and more users, eventually reaching the 1 million mark. The situation was getting so concerning that we started doing targeted research on hate speech. Both the local and international press were starting to pay more attention to the issue, as was academia. We had warned Facebook. They knew how to reach us. But they didn't.

At the end of 2013, journalist Aela Callan eventually managed to get a meeting with Facebook's VP of Communications and Public Policy, Eliot Schrage, at Facebook's headquarters. He responded to her warnings of inter communal violence and genocide by linking her up with the Facebook compassion team, whose focus at the time was preventing bullying.

2014 - 2015 : Deflection

In early 2014, the situation was getting worse. We launched the Panzagar campaign ('flower speech') to rally opposition to hate speech. Together with Aela, Htaike Htaike Aung visited Facebook's Menlo Park headquarters and met with the compassion team. At the same time, working with Matt Schissler, we got connected to a professor at Harvard, Susan Benesh, who arranged for Matt to present on the Myanmar situation to Facebook staff in March 2014, and, together with Matt and Aela, helped bring us into a group call with the compassion team. The compassion team responded to our concerns by offering to localize their tool for reporting objectionable content. They worked with all of us over the course of a few months to refine and translate the reporting flow. By the end of 2014, Facebook had a Burmese language reporting tool - but it was a road to nowhere: they did not have the capacity to review user reports. In May 2014, we were told by Facebook that they only had a lone Burmese language reviewer. According to Reuter, this grew to 2 by February 2015, and eventually to 4 by the time Myanmar went through its general elections, in November 2015. At that point, Facebook had 7.5 million users and abuse, fueled by Ma Ba Tha's race and religion law campaign as well as the elections, was widespread.

The link between online content and offline violence was also becoming increasingly clear by then. A fake rumor of rape, shared by Wira Thu, had triggered major riots in the city of Mandalay in 2014, leaving two dead. This had led the government to shut down Facebook and call in an emergency forum. Facebook's APAC Head of Public Policy, who oversaw Myanmar, took her first official trip to the country on this occasion. She visited a few more times subsequently.

We kept warning Facebook that the problem was one of organized hate that wouldn't get solved just with translated policies (they localized their community standards) or guidance on how to behave online (they commissioned a series of campaign resources and videos). Matt Schissler

and David Madden, then CEO of Phandeeyar, each made a trip to Menlo Park in March and May 2015 respectively, to stress the risks and potential consequences for the country. Matt was asked by a Facebook employee if he thought a genocide against the Rohingya was possible. He said yes. Our warnings were clear, but Facebook wasn't listening. Rather than to invest in improving and scaling their enforcement capacity, the company focused its interventions on public facing activities with high PR potential, which deflected its responsibility and shifted the burden for security onto users, who were regularly portrayed in conversations as either not behaving properly, or not doing enough to report violations.

2016 - 2017 : Complacency

By 2016, with the 2015 elections safely behind us, Facebook became complacent. By then, they had Burmese language community standards, a localized reporting tool, a few Burmese language videos on online bullying and hate speech, and direct links to civil society partners who could escalate high risk and emergency issues to their attention. They seemed to think that they had fulfilled their safety requirements towards their Myanmar users - and started to shift their focus towards monetizing their business in the country. In February 2016, Facebook met with Myanmar media and marketing agencies in Yangon, Myanmar, to pitch their publisher program - instant article - which positions Facebook as an intermediary between advertisers and publishers. The program was eventually rolled out in April 2016. In May 2016, Facebook also launched Free Basics and Facebook FLEX in partnership with Myanmar's state owned telecom provider MPT. We were not briefed nor consulted on the risks associated with the introduction of either of these services, and it's unclear that Facebook ever did a human rights impact assessment.

As the situation of the Rohingya quickly deteriorated in October 2016, Facebook was unequipped to proactively address risk concerns. They relied nearly exclusively on us, as local partners, to point them to problematic content. Upon receiving our escalations, which were made over a mix of emails, Facebook Messenger, Facebook Group, WhatsApp or Skype, they would typically address the copy we escalated but take no further steps to remove duplicate copies or address the systemic policy or enforcement gaps that these escalations brought to light. The time it took to address escalations also varied greatly, with evening escalations (most frequent), subject to the greatest delays, as Australia - where the Myanmar market was managed from - was asleep. We kept asking for more points of contact, better escalation protocols, and interlocutors with knowledge of the language and context who could make decisions on the violations without requiring the need for translators and further delays. We got none of that. When we met with the

manager in charge of escalations, upon his visit to Yangon in June 2017, we were told that our best bet was to report using the user reporting tool in parallel to our escalations as reports submitted through that tool, he claimed, were being reviewed within an average of 6 hours. That obviously wasn't true. Our own data later showed that the median turnaround time on a report, assuming a review took place, was closer to 48 hours. Facebook had no Burmese language classifiers at the time either, which could have helped triage and prioritize reports.

Despite the escalating risks, we did not see much progress over that period, and Facebook was just as unequipped to deal with the escalation of anti-Rohingya rhetoric and violence in August 2017 as they had been in 2016. They had made some attempt at leveraging automated moderation using slur lists in early 2017, but [had run into challenges](#). Ultimately, it was still down to us, as local partners, to warn them. We simply couldn't cope with the scale. On 9 September 2017, Victoire Rio, then Social Impact Director at Phandeeeyar, warned in an email that a Facebook Messenger campaign had the potential to trigger countrywide violence. Her warning couldn't have been more explicit. She barely got a response. In fact, it wasn't until December 2017, when Facebook first visited the country past the events, that she was told that her warnings had made it to Mark Zuckerberg. In spite of the explicit warning, there was no apparent attempt at addressing the broader risk concerns in the months that followed the attacks. Mark Zuckerberg later [referred to this period as a success](#), claiming that Facebook's 'systems' had successfully prevented violence. We called him out in [an open letter](#) in April 2018, prompting a formal apology.

WOULD YOU SAY THAT FACEBOOK WAS COMPLICIT IN WHAT HAPPENED TO THE ROHINGYA?

Facebook knew that its platform was being weaponized against Muslims in Myanmar, and that the situation of the Rohingya minority was particularly precarious. We warned them. The media warned them. Academia warned them. Myanmar became 'the' textbook example of dangerous speech and social media weaponization. Their own compassion team was looking at the country as a case study. Executives were briefed on it as a prime example.

Not only did they know about the weaponization of their platform in Myanmar, but they also knew the risks. They had seen first hand how Facebook rumors had fueled deadly riots - on multiple occasions. One of their executives had even visited Myanmar after one such incident left two people dead in Mandalay, Myanmar's second biggest city, and after the government, out of options, had resorted to shutting down the platform.

They knew, but they didn't take appropriate measures to address the problem - and we watched as the same risk patterns repeated themselves, over and over again. Their teams knew that the integrity measures they had in place were inadequate and far from on par with the mitigation measures they had in place in the US and other Western countries. They often had a pretty good grasp of what would help too, but the investments didn't follow. In some cases, the investments would have had substantial cost implications, like hiring more content reviewers, which made them redhibitory. In others, however, the required investments would have been minimal, like tweaking a word in the reporting UI, yet even those types of investments were not prioritized.

Not only did Facebook fail in its responsibility to moderate its platform in Myanmar, the company's business model also made the situation materially worse. As a platform, Facebook was not neutral. The company amplified and recommended content which it determined would keep users on its platform longer, as part of its growth strategy. Dangerous content, which triggered strong reactions and sparked debate, were unnaturally amplified by the platform's algorithms. Facebook also offered distribution as a service, and accepted money from the very actors it knew were weaponizing the platform, allowing them to reach both large and targeted audiences. As it sought to expand its Burmese language ads real estate, the company also launched its instant article program in Myanmar. The program was launched without adequate safeguards, and fueled the emergence of a new type of content publishers which thrived on sensationalistic and clickbait content. This fundamentally altered and sensationalized the Myanmar information environment, and played an important role in the mainstreaming of anti-Rohingya narratives, as well as in fueling fear in the wake of the attacks.

In [Annex 2](#), we collected a few concrete examples of security vulnerabilities which we flagged to Facebook and which were not addressed at the time.

TO WHAT EXTENT DO YOU FEEL THAT THE PROBLEMS HAVE NOW BEEN ADDRESSED ?

Facebook was called out very publicly in 2018 for their role in the Rohingya crisis. The UN fact finding mission called them out in their [report](#). We called them out in [an open letter](#). We also worked with Senator Leahy and Senator Blumenthal to raise questions to Mark Zuckerberg, when he was [questioned by the US Congress](#). Ultimately, Facebook had to [admit](#) that they had not reacted quickly enough and done enough in Myanmar. They committed to doing more and have

ramped up their investments and engagement in the country since.

Facebook's experience in Myanmar triggered some important changes, which carry global significance and are worth stressing. Most notably, Facebook finally acknowledged that context matters, and endorsed the need for contextualized policies to account for specific risk environments. This is an important departure from their prior standpoint, which emphasized the global nature of policies, and prevented Facebook from acting on a number of serious escalations we made for fear of disproportionately impacting on freedom of expression in other markets. This prioritization of context was also positive in that it drove the company to hire Myanmar expertise and to step up its engagement with local civil society. Another significant development was the company's acknowledgement that it needed to do more to restrict access to the actors responsible for weaponizing its services. They designated a number of actors over the weaponization of the platform in the Rohingya crisis, including military officials and entities, covert assets attributed to the military, and Ma Ba Tha and affiliated spokespersons. Though enforcement remains a challenge (see below), the Myanmar experience provides a clear case for deplatforming, with the designation of Ma Ba Tha, in particular, being critical to bringing the movement into check and mitigating its ability to commit further harms.

These developments are important progress but they are not enough. ***Much more needs to be done if we are to prevent a repeat of what happened to the Rohingya and ensure that Facebook, and other similar platforms, do not contribute to exposing communities to heightened security risks, the world over.***

As a priority, we need platforms to:

1. Invest in Enforcement

Facebook's enforcement capacity is still inadequate in Myanmar. Violating content still regularly goes unmoderated, which in turn results in violating actors not facing strikes or sanctions for their recurring abuse. We also continue to deal with undue removals, often explained as AI errors. These are problematic as they tend to disproportionately impact on activists and the media who are most vocal and political on the platform. The situation is even worse with other platforms, such as YouTube - whose enforcement capacity for Myanmar is still minimal, or Telegram - which is just ignoring all reports of violation. It is not enough for platforms to have policies that describe what is prohibited. They need to invest in their capacity to enforce these policies. ***Facebook and other companies need to increase their pool of language and context-aware human reviewers; Where leveraging slur lists, they need to ensure that these are properly***

contextualized and subjected to regular audits and independent reviews; They also need to prioritize developing AI classifiers for minority languages and ensure that these are regularly audited to guarantee accuracy and prevent overenforcement.

2. Scale Actor-level Moderation

While Facebook did acknowledge its responsibility to restrict access to actors with a track record of weaponizing its services, and nominally restricted several individuals and entities involved in the anti-Rohingya campaign, it continues to be unable to reliably prevent these actors from using its services. As a matter of fact, most, if not all, of the key stakeholders in the anti-Rohingya campaign continue to maintain a presence on Facebook and to leverage Facebook and other platforms for influence. As we repeatedly warned the platforms, the bulk of the harmful content we face comes from a handful of actors, who have been consistently violating Terms of Services and Community Standards. ***Facebook and other companies need to rethink their moderation approach to more effectively deter and - where warranted - restrict actors with a track record of violating their rules and terms of services, including by enforcing sanctions and restrictions at an actor and not account level, and by developing better strategies to detect and remove accounts of actors under bans.***

3. Make amplification an earned right

Though Facebook introduced a number of measures to try to prevent the amplification of harmful content in Myanmar, with some success, disinformation, in particular, continues to regularly reach audiences in the millions. According to disclosures from disinformation publishers with a well established presence in Myanmar, upward of 90% of their views, as of 2022, come from Facebook's algorithmic amplification, rather than their own audience or the shares received on their content. This is true even for pages which were recently established, with some disinformation pages managing to get more reach than Myanmar's most established independent media within days of operation. ***Facebook and other companies need to commit to making algorithmic amplification an earned right, which requires content authors to meet certain trustworthiness criteria, rather than rely primarily on signals based on a content's actual and predicted engagement. Companies should be transparent about their trust criteria and undertake regular audits of their recommendation algorithms to ensure that they do not amplify problematic content.***

4. Be responsible - and accountable - for who they do business with

Facebook not only took money from the military and Ma Ba Tha, in exchange for helping them distribute their content to wide audiences. It's also been channeling funds, through its

monetization programs, to a range of publishers spreading disinformation and hate for profit. By failing to do due diligence on these actors, Facebook subsidized the creation of a new industry, which is becoming an increasing problem in Myanmar and elsewhere. **Facebook and other companies need to commit to not funding hate and disinformation actors. They need to conduct adequate due diligence on who they sell ads to and on behalf of. Monetization program partners should be publicly disclosed and a mechanism to report harmful actors provided. Monetization program review and appeal processes should also be regularly audited.**

While it's critical that platforms take more responsibility and accountability for mitigating the harm of their products and services in *all* of their markets, we also want to stress our strong disagreement with existing calls for platforms such as Facebook to get out of markets like Myanmar. **Countries like Myanmar should not be written out of global platforms. To even suggest it is deeply unhelpful and has the potential to be incredibly harmful.** Big Tech platforms are accessed and used globally. Restricting access to a handful of countries where the human rights situation is troubling is not going to prevent people from using these services. It will just make it harder for people to exercise their freedom of expression and have the counter-productive effect of providing legal cover for platforms to do nothing to protect users in those countries.

Cite this report:

“Facebook and the Rohingya Crisis,” Myanmar Internet Project, September 29, 2022, <https://www.rh.myanmarinternet.info>




About the Myanmar Internet Project

The Myanmar Internet Project was established in 2022 by a collective of researchers, practitioners and advocates with years of experience tracking developments in the Myanmar digital space.

We aim to document the history of the Myanmar Internet – past, present and future – by consolidating and amplifying existing research, with a particular emphasis on making Myanmar perspectives more widely available.

Read more at <https://myanmarinternet.info/> | Get in touch at info@myanmarinternet.info

ANNEX 1

Case studies	Screenshot
<p style="text-align: center;">Islam as an existential threat</p> <p>At the heart of the anti-Rohingya campaign was the notion that Islam presents an existential threat to Myanmar and its Buddhist identity. Prominent narratives included recountings of Asia’s Buddhist past and the conversion to Islam of countries such as Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Maldives, Malaysia, Indonesia, Philippines, and South Korea; claims that Buddhism and Hinduism are particularly at risk of disappearance due to their peaceful nature; regular exaggerations of the size of Myanmar’s Muslim population and the pace of its growth; the notion of a ‘tipping’ point when Muslims would seek to forcefully convert the country and rid it of Buddhism; and claims that Muslims were trying to gain political control by infiltrating the political establishment.</p>	 <p>The screenshot shows a Facebook post from the page 'BUMi (Burmese Uncensored) Memes-1' posted 2 hours ago. The post contains a meme with two columns. The left column is titled 'Muslims when MINORITY' and lists: 1. Pretend secular, 2. Play victim card, 3. Build Mosques, 4. Demand special rights. The right column is titled 'Muslims when MAJORITY' and lists: 1. Islamic country, 2. Impose Sharia, 3. Ban Temples, 4. Evict or kill Non-Muslims. The meme also includes images of a child holding a sign that says 'I am a Muslim Please dont HATE me!' and a group of people holding a sign that says 'MASSACRE THOSE WHO INSULT ISLAM'.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Muslim threat from abroad</p> <p>Within the context of Islam being seen as an existential threat, the Rohingya community was portrayed as a Muslim threat from abroad - presented both as a demographic threat, fueled by concerns over illegal immigration and “boat people”, and as a security threat, fueled by references to “jihadists” with connections to global terrorist networks and financial and political support from the Organization for Islamic Cooperation (OIC). Rakhine State, where the Rohingya lived, was regularly referred to as Myanmar’s “Western Gate”, protecting the country from the expansion of Islam from neighboring Bangladesh. Rohingyas, for their part, were widely referred to as ‘Bengali’, to emphasize their status as ‘outsiders’, and living example of that threat.</p>	<p>The post reads “The ‘Bengalis’ will cause the extinction of the Myanmar race”</p>  <p>The screenshot shows a Facebook post from a page with a profile picture of a person in a yellow shirt. The post text in Burmese reads: "ဘင်္ဂလားဒေ့ရှ်နိုင်ငံ မြန်မာလူမျိုးများ သွားနိုင်" and "အရှင်မုဆိုးတော် မြို့ပျံ့လွှဲ စီမံကိန်းတပ်ဖွဲ့ဆောင်ရွက်ခြင်း" (See More). Below the text is a large image of a crowd of people, many wearing white head coverings. Below the image is Burmese text: "ဘင်္ဂလားဒေ့ရှ်နိုင်ငံ မြန်မာလူမျိုးများ သွားနိုင်" and "မြန်မာလူမျိုးများ သွားနိုင်". The post has 6.3k likes, 2,175 shares, 102 comments, and 4,028 reactions.</p>  <p>The screenshot shows a Facebook post from a page with a profile picture of a person in a white shirt. The post contains a map of Myanmar and the surrounding region, with labels in Burmese and Arabic script. The map highlights the area around Rakhine State and Bangladesh.</p>

Muslim threat from within

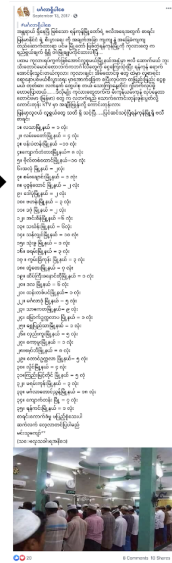
The external threat of the Rohingya was also amplified through the depiction of Muslims as a threat from within. The narratives focused on Muslims as both a demographic threat - building on social and religious prejudices around high fertility rates and polygamy, as well as claims of widespread inter-marriage, and as a security threat - building on widespread claims that mosques were used to hide weapons, hide terrorist cells and coordinate jihadist activities, as well as allegations that Muslims were violent and the most likely perpetrators of rapes and murders.

September 2017

"Here is a list of dangerous mosques in Yangon"

"They collect the money. They collect the weapons. Every Friday, they discuss the Jihad..."

"Burmese people need to be careful and ready"



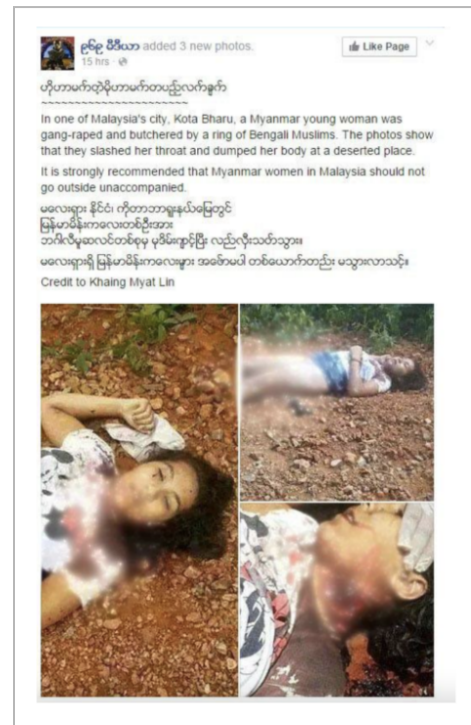
Hate speech & dehumanization of the Rohingya

The Rohingyas were subjected to widespread hate speech on Facebook and frequently dehumanized through the use of cartoons and narrative comparisons to animals. Common references included cockroaches, crocodiles, and camels. The latter builds on a word play with the word 'kalar' (camel = kalar aot), which is widely used as a slur against individuals of South Asian descent.



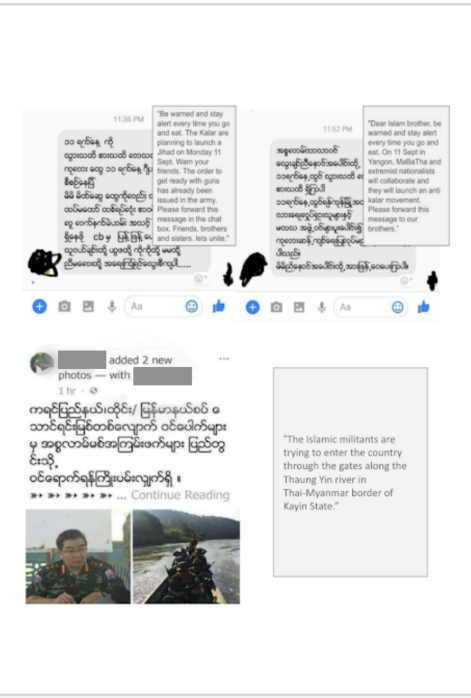
Allegations of rape

The wave of intercommunal violence that shook Rakhine State in 2012 was triggered by allegations that a Rakhine Buddhist woman had been raped and killed by Rohingya men. Her death was used as a cautionary story by nationalists who repeatedly used rape narratives to instigate fear towards the Muslim and Rohingya communities. Anniversaries of the day of her death were held annually by nationalist networks to keep the narrative and fear running, and rumors of rape regularly surfaced on social media. These narratives were particularly sensitive and played an important role as “triggers” of intercommunal violence. Most notably, it was such a rumor, since discredited, which triggered the 2014 Mandalay riots that resulted in two deaths and widespread damage.



Fake rumors of attacks and violence

Reports of ongoing or upcoming attacks also regularly circulated on Facebook. Much as with the rape reports, there is evidence that these rumors were often planted, with the apparent intention of triggering tension and conflict. This included warnings of upcoming attacks, like the Facebook Messenger messages which warned both communities in parallel that an escalation of violence would take place on 11 September 2017. It also included regular - and often highly localized - reports of incidents being underway. This included made up reports that armed militants were on their way to a particular town, made up reports of bomb threats, as well as made up reports that violence had already broken out in some communities. In several cases, these reports were supported by fake statements or memos, presented as intelligence leaks, which gave them added credibility.



Doxxing and accusation of 'treason'

Alongside posts targeting Muslim and Rohingya communities, we also documented a number of posts targeting actors who had expressed support for, or sought to document, the plight

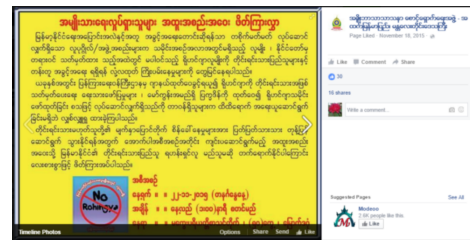
of the Muslim and Rohingya communities. This included journalists and activists, as well as some civil society organizations, who were labeled as “traitors” to the country, accused of receiving money from entities such as the Organization for Islamic Cooperation (OIC), or framed as ‘agents’ of the OIC or the ‘imperialist’ West. These journalists and activists were regularly doxxed on Facebook, with their personal information shared alongside calls to target -and in some cases even assassinate - them.

THE LIST OF THE ACTIVISTS TO BE ASSASSINATED ARE: ရိုဟင်ဂျာလေး: Go Share Lay
 @ Aung N Htwe @ <https://www.facebook.com/>
 ဝေဟာလေး: Htay Lwin Oo @ <https://www.facebook.com/>
 ဝေဟာလေး Aung Tin
 ရိုဟင်ဂျာလေး: Ro Nay San Lwin
 ဦးဘစိန်စု U Ba Sein or U Ba Sein
 Charle Aung
 ဝေဟာလေး (ပျံဖွဲ့) Mya Aye
 ရိုဟင်ဂျာလေး? former BBC.
 နှစ်စဉ်ပြောသော သူနာ ? Wrongly written, likely to be wai hnin pwint thon
 @ <https://www.facebook.com/>
 အေပီအေ ဝေဟာလေး: Arakan Army General Tun Myant Naing
 ဩစတေးလျန် (AA) (Buddhist Rakhine)

Movement building

The Facebook platform offered a range of features which were instrumental to helping Ma Ba Tha develop into a strong and powerful national movement. This included Facebook groups, which enabled two way postings, and provided an entry point for people to engage with the movement, as well as a way for members to organize into local chapters; Facebook Events, which were widely used to organize protests and community activities; Facebook Messenger, which facilitated the connection of people who met over these groups or events, both on a 1-to-1 basis and as Messenger groups; and Facebook Pages, which allowed the Ma Ba Tha central committee to broadcast its message and the various local chapters to showcase their activities and inspire others.

Ma Ba Tha made extensive use of Facebook to organize events and rallies.



The role of monks

Monks play a central role in Myanmar society. Beyond serving as places of worship, monasteries often double as community centers, offering education and social support to the community. More than spiritual leaders, monks are highly respected community leaders, with significant influence over their communities. The fact that Ma Ba Tha was driven by monks, many of whom had large established followings, was critical to the legitimacy and appeal of the Ma Ba Tha

movement. Some of the younger monks took an active role on Facebook, and were profusive posters. Wira Thu, in particular, was very vocal on Facebook, using strong and often extreme rhetoric against Muslims and the Rohingya. His statements often relied on exaggerated and false information. Coming from monks, however, these narratives were given credibility, which helped fuel their mainstreaming.

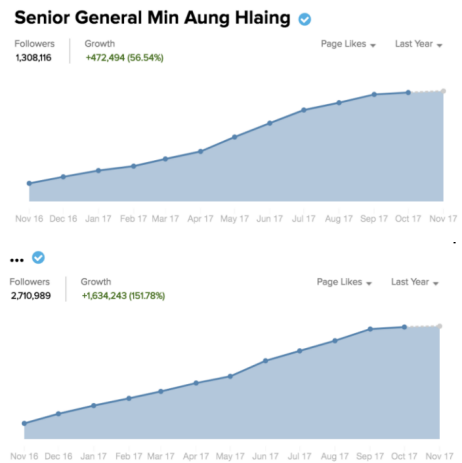
The meme, which depicts scenes of violence involving Rohingya, calls on readers to 'stay alert to the Rakhine situation'



The role of the military

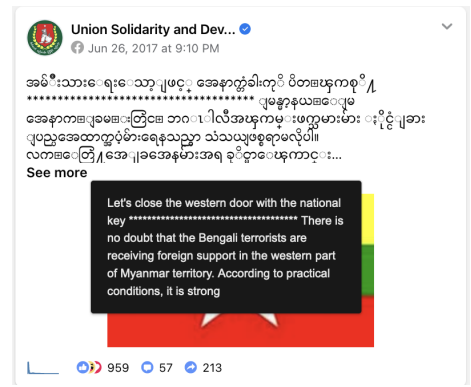
The Myanmar military defines itself as the defender of Myanmar's 'race and religion' and regularly emphasizes threats against Buddhism as part of its raison d'etre. In official communications, shared through its official Facebook presences, as well as its media network, the military regularly emphasized the religious threat alongside concerns over terrorism and immigration. Several military officials, including the commander in chief, openly supported the Ma Ba Tha movement, including by providing it with financial support. As the [New York Times reported](#), the military also engaged in a multi-year covert influence operation, which involved several hundred soldiers, and sought to promote anti-Muslim and anti-Rohingya narratives, as well as to leverage disinformation to exacerbate and foment tensions. In the wake of the ARSA attacks in 2016 and 2017, in particular, the military leveraged Facebook extensively to spread fear and justify its clearance operations. In those few months, their audience grew significantly.

The Facebook page of 'Senior General Min Aung Hlaing' and the 'Commander in Chief Office' experienced significant growth in 2016-2017.



The role of USDP

The Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) was established in 2010 by former military generals to support Myanmar’s transition to civilian rule. One of the party’s core political agenda is to uphold Buddhist nationalism. In power through 2016, the party leveraged its official Facebook presence and that of the government and its spokesperson to echo many of the Ma Ba Tha narratives. Most notably, the USDP government repetitively endorsed the notion that Rohingyas are not native to Myanmar, and fueled anti-Rohingya and anti-Muslim sentiment. The party also sought to leverage nationalist sentiment in its 2015 electoral campaign. Though it lost that election to the National League for Democracy (NLD), USDP has continued to regularly use its official presence to fuel anti-Rohingya sentiment.



The role of the NLD

The National League for Democracy (NLD), led by Nobel laureate and democracy icon Aung San Suu Kyi, came to power in a historic election in 2015. Despite the change of regime, and the party’s claim to democracy and human rights, the NLD government continued to describe Rohingyas as ‘Bengali’, originating from Bangladesh, and refused to recognise their ethnic identity. In the aftermaths of the ARSA attacks, both the government and Aung San Suu Kyi’s own state counsellor Facebook presence were also instrumental in framing the attacks as terrorism and inferring it a religious agenda. Government pages also regularly criticized the media coverage of the crisis, which it claimed to be one sided and not acknowledging local ‘truth’. Aung San Suu Kyi even went as far as declaring, [on her Facebook page](#), that the rapes reported in the context of the clearance operations were ‘fake rapes.’



The role of the media

Mainstream media also played a part in mainstreaming anti-Rohingya sentiment. Following the government’s example, local media outlets came to refer to the Rohingya as “Bengali.” Their reporting also gave prominence to religion as a factor of conflict, often in spite of circumstances, fueling intercommunal tensions. In some cases, the media was also party to the spread of harmful disinformation. One of the main national media outlets, Eleven Media, for example, reported the government’s claim that Rohingyas were burning down their own houses as a fact. The claim, which was planted by the NLD Government Spokesperson, was later debunked and the pictures found to be staged.

Eleven Media Group - English Edition
6 September at 21:29 · €

Photos emerge of Bengalis who are setting fire to their houses

Photos showing Bengalis are setting fire to their houses in Ward No.4 in Maungdaw Township, are being circulated on social media on the evening of September 6.

Read more>>>
<http://elevenmyanmar.com/local/11482>



Photos emerge of Bengalis who are setting fire to their houses | Eleven Myanmar

Photos showing Bengalis are setting fire to their houses in Ward No.4 in Maungdaw Township, are being circulated on social media on the evening of...

ELEVENMYANMAR.COM

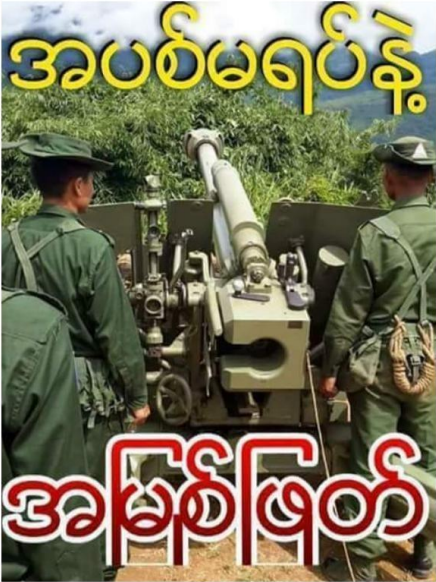
The role of clickbait

The clickbait industry took off in Myanmar in 2016 and 2017, as the crisis escalated, and played a key role in mainstreaming anti-Rohingya sentiment and fueling societal fears. The growth of this industry was driven by Facebook’s instant article monetization program, which was launched in the country in April 2016. The program, which provides web publishers with the option to monetize their traffic on Facebook, fueled the emergence of many new publishers whose primary motivation was to build large audiences and monetize people’s attention. Within the space of a few months, hundreds of new websites and associated Facebook presences emerged, spreading sensationalized content designed to get people to click. These actors capitalized on escalating fears and sensationalized incidents to drive traffic. In the wake of the ARSA attacks, they were also instrumental in driving popular support for the military. The enclosed post, spread by a Facebook page associated with clickbait actors, with a following in the million, for example, asked readers to like the post if they agreed that the military should “not stop firing and kill them all.”

The meme reads: “don’t stop until we kill them all”, with the caption calling on readers to give a like or comment if they agree


မြန်မာ့...
Nov 27, 2016 at 7:50 PM

သဘောတူရင်လက်မထောင်ပေး
ရင်ဘတ်ခြင်းတူရင်မနဲ့ RSO နှင့် သူပုန် မှန် သမျှကို
CREDIT



13.2K 747 717

ANNEX 2

Case studies	Screenshot
<p style="text-align: center;">INADEQUATE POLICIES</p> <p>Facebook’s policies, which were conceived as global, failed to account for the Myanmar specific risk environment.</p> <p>A prime example was disagreements over what constitutes a credible threat of violence. Our escalation of posts calling on Buddhist nationalists to pick up bamboo sticks to attack a Muslim conference for example, was deemed to not meet Facebook’s threshold for incitement to violence, despite clear precedents that such violence had occurred with deadly consequences.</p> <p>Similarly, Facebook’s disinformation policy foresaw content being demoted rather than removed, regardless of the nature of the disinformation. This prevented the company from taking action on a number of escalations we made of dangerous narratives, including claims that Muslims were involved in localized acts of violence or hiding weapons in mosques, even when those claims were demonstrably false.</p>	<p>Facebook had a policy not to remove disinformation content. The below post is based on a falsified poster, which reads: “ Dear Muslims - the time has come for us to kill people of other religions, in accordance with verse 47/4 of the Coran. Signed: Haji Youth, OIC”</p> 
<p style="text-align: center;">INADEQUATE ACTOR MODERATION</p> <p>Facebook’s moderation was centered around content and failed to effectively account for actors.</p> <p>A prime example is Wira Thu, who was a central figure of the Ma Ba Tha movement, known for his extremist and Islamophobic rhetoric. He made the cover of Time magazine in July 2013, branded as “The Face of Buddhist Terror.”</p> <p>Though we regularly reported his accounts and content to Facebook, the company failed to effectively act on those reports and to prevent him from weaponizing the platform. The enclosed sample of reports exemplifies how despite being</p>	<p>Reviews of Wira Thu’s Facebook presences did not take into account his history of recurring violations, making his nominal ban ultimately irrelevant.</p>

restricted from using Facebook services from as early as 2015, Wira Thu had no problem coming back, time and again, and was able to retain a presence on the platform through the years despite his intention being well known to the company and his significant track record of violating Facebook’s policies and inciting real world harm.



You anonymously reported Wira Thu for posting inappropriate content. **REPORT REVIEWED**

ACTIVITY
Your report
Feb 20, 2015
You anonymously reported Wira Thu for posting inappropriate content.
We removed the profile you reported
We reviewed the profile you reported. Since it violated our Community Standards, we removed it. Thanks for your report. We let Wira Thu know that their profile has been removed, but not who reported it.

You anonymously reported Wira Thu for being full of inappropriate content. **REPORT REVIEWED**

Thanks for your feedback
Sep 10, 2015
Thanks for your report - you did the right thing by letting us know about this. We looked over the profile you reported, and though it doesn't go against one of our specific Community Standards, we **removed the entire profile or something they shared** may still be offensive to you. We want to help you avoid things you don't want to see on Facebook.
If you think we should look at something specific on this or another profile, you can report that exact content (ex: photo) instead of the entire profile.

ACTIVITY
Your Report
10 June 2017
You anonymously reported Wira Thu for displaying hate speech.
Our reply
17 June 2017
We've reviewed Wira Thu and found content on the Page that doesn't follow our Community Standards. We've **removed the specific content** (e.g. photos, posts) instead of the entire Page.
Please let us know if you see anything else that concerns you. If you want us to look at something specific on a Page, make sure that you report the content (e.g. photo), not the entire Page. We want to keep Facebook safe and welcoming for everyone.

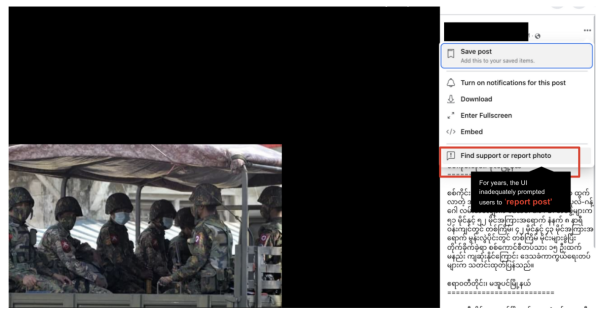
FLAWED REPORTING SYSTEM

What’s the point of reporting violations if these violations are not reviewed - or adequately processed?

Though we worked with Facebook to localize their reporting system, and actively encouraged users to report community standards violations, Facebook lacked the human and AI capacity to review reported content, which meant that only a small fraction of the reports made it to a reviewer. Rather than to let users know that a content hadn’t been reviewed, the system often closed unreviewed reports with a ‘doesn’t go against our community standards’ notification. This created widespread frustration and discouraged people from reporting.

The reporting tool also contained inherent flaws. A prime example was the tool’s UI, which prompted users to “report the post” regardless of the post

Current ‘photo view’ UI prompts users to ‘report post’. Until mid 2020, the UI used to misleadingly prompt users to ‘report post’ - when only the photo would get through the review process



sticker campaign.

In March 2014, in response to the proliferation of hate speech on Facebook, we launched the Panzagar ('flower speech') campaign to counter divisive narratives and promote intercommunal harmony. Later that year, we thought to make it easier for people to call out divisive behavior by allowing them to use stickers as comments. The sticker feature had just launched in the US, and wasn't yet available to publishers in Myanmar but Facebook offered to make an exception for our sticker pack.

The Panzagar sticker campaign was regularly praised by Facebook as a prime example of counter speech and received significant global attention. What Facebook failed to mention, however, was that stickers carried significant weight in their distribution algorithm. Using stickers to counter divisive speech, it turned out, contributed to their disproportionate boosting, rendering our efforts ultimately counter-productive.

