

# NEW FREEDOMS, NEW CHALLENGES

INTERNEWS IMPACT REPORT

FOSTERING A  
PROFESSIONAL,  
INCLUSIVE MEDIA  
IN BURMA



## ABOUT INTERNEWS

Internews is an international non-profit organization whose mission is to empower local media worldwide to give people the news and information they need, the ability to connect and the means to make their voices heard.

Formed in 1982, Internews has worked in more than 90 countries, and currently has offices in Africa, Asia, Europe, the Middle East, Latin America and North America.

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# LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT



**JEANNE BOURGAULT**  
*President, Internews*

**MOVING FORWARD, INTERNEWS IS WORKING TO AMPLIFY EMERGING CITIZEN VOICES AND EMBRACE INCREASED ACCESS TO INFORMATION, THE ONGOING PEACE AND DEMOCRATIC PROCESSES, AND THE TIDAL WAVE OF POSSIBILITIES SWEEPING BURMA FROM AN ENTHUSIASTIC INTERNATIONAL PRIVATE SECTOR.**

**W**ITH USAID SUPPORT, Internews has been laying the foundations of a more inclusive media in Burma, a sector whose health is vital for the democratization and peace processes.

For half a century, the people of Burma virtually lost contact with the international community, and with each other.

Censorship of the media, books, and arts shut down news. It silenced analysis, debate, and information sharing. Communication between villages and cities, between the rich and the poor, and between Burma's diverse ethnic groups all but dried up.

Today, two generations of lost conversations are starting again. Few dare predict the future ahead of key national elections in 2015, but for the first time in decades, there may be a decisive chance to contribute to a free and open Burmese society.

For the media, it is a time to seize the day. Privately owned print publications are expanding quickly, but struggling in a newly competitive environment. Social media is booming in the cities. Much more slowly, broadcasting is moving from total state dominance to independent ownership.

These are extraordinary times for the many Internews-trained professionals, some of whom attended covert journalism workshops beginning more than a decade ago and have since gone on to become leading figures in the emerging media landscape.

Moving forward, Internews is working to amplify emerging citizen voices and embrace increased access to information, the ongoing peace and democratic processes, and the tidal wave of possibilities sweeping Burma from an enthusiastic international private sector.

The challenges that lie ahead of Burma's civil society are many, and they are daunting. But drawing on lessons from over a decade of work in and around the country, Internews uniquely understands how this burgeoning media sector can become empowered to serve as a necessary agent of political and social change.

This report introduces and showcases the incredible work of some of the journalists we've worked with over the years. I hope you'll join me in celebrating their successes, while supporting them in the significant challenges that still lie ahead. ■

# INTRODUCTION

SINCE 2001, Internews has trained and supported more than one thousand junior and senior journalists from all of Burma's major ethnic groups, both those inside the country and those based outside, in print, radio, television, and online reporting.

The cumulative effects of this close collaboration with journalists through a period of extreme censorship and tumultuous events are now coming to fruition as the new media environment takes shape.

Internews-trained reporters and editors now occupy senior roles in prominent national print publications. They are familiar voices on ethnic and Burmese-language radio services; they are well known faces on television. Others have emerged as leaders in pivotal media associations, pushing the government to safeguard what most regard as still fragile media freedoms.

At the same time, they are pressing for improved self-regulation as well as higher standards and codified ethics within the media profession. Indeed, journalists are more aware than most of the industry's many remaining weaknesses and



gaps that need to be filled. Nevertheless, with the skills and contacts acquired through years of Internews classes and workshops, this key group of individuals is uniquely poised to lead Burma's media sector to a healthier future.

## EARLY YEARS

Internews launched its Burma work in 2001 just on the other side of the border in neighboring Thailand with the twin objectives of improving the quality of Burmese journalism and supporting its wider dissemination.

## A KEY GROUP OF JOURNALISTS, TRAINED BY INTERNEWS, IS POISED TO LEAD BURMA'S MEDIA SECTOR TO A HEALTHIER FUTURE.



Early work focused on strengthening the professional capacities of small, border-based publications run by exiles and ethnic groups. Soon after, Internews quietly broadened its scope to include covert journalism trainings for reporters in Rangoon for a short period. Strict

state surveillance, however, proved too heavy a burden, and moving forward, Internews resumed full operations outside of the country.

In 2004, Internews introduced its hallmark ten-month journalism training program (“J School”) in Chiang Mai, which evolved into a unique learning opportunity for reporters based inside the country and in border areas. In the safe context of Thailand, trainings in basic journalism and in economic development, business, globalization, disaster reporting, HIV/AIDS, and the environment facilitated cultural exchange and vigorous debate could more easily take place.

At the outset, some participants were reluctant to open up, but over the years, the trust between trainees increased. Reporters from different backgrounds who might otherwise have been inclined to approach each other with suspicion began sharing sources, contacts, and tips. Today, many J School graduates have gone on to hold key positions in Burmese and ethnic language media, and these networks are sowing the seeds for a more inclusive media landscape, one that is vital for the country’s nascent political opening and peace processes.

### BUILDING CRUCIAL COMMUNICATION SYSTEMS

For years, Internews made persistent efforts to repair broken communication loops between regions in Burma, people, and the international community. Several events in particular highlighted the degree to which Internews was able to fill these crucial gaps.







During both the Saffron Revolution in 2007, when thousands took to the streets to protest a rise in fuel prices, and Cyclone Nargis, which killed 140,000 the following year, Internews-trained journalists played vital roles in getting the news out to the international community and to exile radio and TV broadcasters, who in turn fed the information back to wide audiences inside the country.

In addition, trainings led by Internews' Earth Journalism Network resulted in wide media coverage of environmental threats to the Irrawaddy River, arguably helping sway public opinion that in turn influenced a celebrated government decision to halt construction of a dam on the river in 2009.

These are just several of the many instances of trained journalists demonstrating the value of Internews education and media support. Still, the full impact of Internews' work over a decade and a half may be yet to emerge.

### WHAT'S NEXT

Like the country itself, Burma's media sector still faces obstacles of enormous magnitude. Much needs to occur before the Rangoon-dominated national media reflects a true diversity of perspectives.

But the decentralization process is starting, thanks in part to early efforts by Internews program participants, such as U Thiha Saw, an influential Burmese publisher in the commercial capital of Rangoon. His English-language daily paper is one of the first national outlets to publish

news from border-based ethnic outlets. It is vital, he says, that voices formerly consigned to the fringe reach decision-makers.





His hopes are echoed by Ah Mee, a young Lisu radio reporter operating in conflict-affected northern ethnic regions. She says her radio coverage of ethnic issues has taken on a new depth that gives her stories a wider national appeal. This improvement in quality would not have been possible without the contacts and sources she acquired at Internews trainings from colleagues in Rangoon and elsewhere.

In recent years, Internews has adapted its approach to accommodate this rapidly evolving political and economic environment. It has provided marketing and business advice to media proprietors fighting to survive amongst sudden competition, and has trained senior alumni to serve as trainers themselves.

Going forward, Internews will maintain its emphasis on improving journalistic standards and supporting the outreach to Burma's marginalized and ethnic regions, all while exploring new possibilities for developing healthy information ecologies. By helping media professionals employ the tools they need to most effectively engage civil society, Internews will continue its longstanding tradition in Burma of supporting peace and democratization through the empowering of all citizen voices. ■



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# FEEDING THE (INFORMATION) HUNGRY

## MON MON MYAT

FILM PRODUCER, JOURNALIST, WRITER

**T**HE 90-YEAR-OLD ART Deco Shwe Hinthar cinema in Bago town appears faded and worn. But for three days, inside its hulking brown walls were brief echoes of a former heyday, as hundreds packed the building for its first-ever human rights film festival.

“It was an eye opener,” said festival organizer Mon Mon Myat, who toured the festival in the fall of 2013 to fourteen venues around the country. “People are still not getting enough information. There is a real hunger for more, especially in rural areas.”

After five decades of censorship, Burma’s pent-up appetite for knowledge is challenging the energies of those like Mon who are trying to fill it.

Mon, an early graduate of Internews’ ten-month J School program, is currently producing a documentary film on political opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi. At the same time, she’s contributing feature stories on Burmese social issues to Thailand’s *Bangkok Post*, promoting a book of short stories by Burmese women authors,

penning fiction, planning a second film festival to run in 2014, and chairing an association of Southeast Asian journalists.

Quite the list, even by Burma’s workaholic standards, but she maintains that “this is a time to try.”

### LIFE AT THE J SCHOOL

A decade ago, Mon was a struggling young mother living in Thailand. She had finished her business degree but was unsure in which direction she should take her career. A friend encouraged her to apply for one of sixteen slots for the first intake of students at the Internews J School.

Moving to school upon her acceptance proved to be the change she needed – and a shock. The school was housed in a secluded Chiang Mai compound, and had to operate covertly while simultaneously exposing students from one of the world’s most closed societies to ideas and cultures entirely unfamiliar. In the initial weeks of the program, Mon felt confined in the compound upon which students had bestowed the nickname “the Jail School.”

The student group was a microcosm of Burmese society. Several hailed from Rangoon, while others from ethnic groups such as the Karen had

lived in remote border areas and refugee camps. They spoke different languages; few were used to mixing closely with those from other ethnic groups; the oldest, in his late thirties, was more than double the age of the youngest.

What they did have in common was little to no experience in independent journalism.

Having grown up under extreme censorship, students were used to state mouthpieces and the organs of opposition political groups. Independent reporting had not existed in Burma for decades, and its value was not always apparent, even to the program’s participants.

A key challenge for Internews trainers, then, was to clearly delineate between propaganda and professional journalism.

For Mon, training led not to a sudden epiphany, but rather a series of gradual realizations over time. First and foremost, she discovered a sense of mission at the J School. “It changed my life,” she said. “I realized that journalism was a way of truth telling. It was a way to lead a meaningful life. You could do something for society.”

Soon after, though, she grasped the difficulties this career path would entail. In particular, she found the concept of media ethics challenging but fascinating. It was easy to feel like an underdog, given the repression in Burma at the time. The obstacles, though, did not excuse poor journalism; rather, they necessitated a critical understanding of and respect for the responsibilities that come with being a reporter.

### J SCHOOL LESSONS IN PRACTICE

These ethical considerations in particular hit home after Mon's first big reporting project in 2005. Her feature on the little-known but devastating human toll of drugs and human trafficking in the remote border town of Ruili in China, opposite Burma's northern Shan State, garnered a great deal of attention in Burmese media circles.

Soon after Mon filed the report, the police launched a major crackdown on drug usage in the area. It was not clear if Mon's piece sparked this crackdown, but Mon was concerned for those she had interviewed.

When she tried to track down two young girls whose plight as victims, and heroin addicts, her report had exposed, she was unable to find any information. To this day, she still makes efforts to find out what became of them.

"Today, I always tell this story to young journalists," she said. "The point I want to get across is that you must always think about the people you're reporting about."

Of course, stories often take on a life of their own, and reporters cannot control many outcomes of their work. Nevertheless, she believes that those who possess a strong ethical sense ultimately produce stronger journalism.

Her emphasis on ethics and social responsibility only intensified after she returned to Burma to work for outlets that included Agence France-Presse. At an Internews-supported three-day emergency workshop for reporters covering cataclysmic events in the Irrawaddy Delta following 2008's Cyclone Nargis, Mon and other senior J School alumni shared practical tips on how to travel within the devastated region of

muddy waterways while avoiding the attention of the authorities attempting to suppress news even as victims were desperate for information.

At the training, journalists discussed ways of telling the story most effectively. One strategy to beat the censors' red pen, for example, was to bury controversial facts far down in a report.

Mon led discussions on the moral dilemmas coverage of the cyclone would entail. She cautioned reporters to be mindful of their own psychological vulnerability and encouraged them to consider in advance how to avoid further damaging already traumatized survivors.

It was a small workshop, but one packed with big ideas. These lessons on the roles and responsibilities of media still resonate today, which is exactly why Mon and many others working in Burma's resurgent media, film, and art scenes aren't likely to be slowing down any time soon. ■



# "THERE WILL BE WINNERS AND LOSERS"

**U THIHA SAW**  
PUBLISHER OF *MYANMAR FREEDOM*

**U** THIHA SAW remembers when life was ordered, sleep was plentiful, and his daily routine revolved around playing chess with friends.

Sitting at his desk today, where a crimson ashtray fills up as fast as the pressures, deadlines, and costs he faces, those few months of “rest” many years ago in Rangoon’s Insein Jail sometimes hold some appeal.

*Myanmar Freedom*, the English-language daily paper U Thiha started in August 2013, is still young. As the first paper of its kind in over 50 years, the paper was slowly finding its footing by November of that year. Distribution was increasing and leading hotels were making multiple orders. Still, a long list of challenges included bringing in more advertisers and fixing staff shortages.

U Thiha may look like a David to the dual Goliaths of deep-pocketed private Burmese-language dailies and subsidized state media, but for this veteran journalist who twice spent brief periods in jail, nothing beats being in the battle.

“In a year’s time, the media landscape will be clearer. There will be winners and losers,” he said, dragging deep on a cigarette.

### THAT WAS THEN

It’s a very different picture from that of a decade ago, when U Thiha was advising Internews staff and the diplomatic community on how to support the local press in what was then one of the world’s most oppressive media environments.

The American Center in Rangoon was offering English language courses, and U Thiha suggested the venue also hold a course on English for Journalists. The classes couldn’t be free, or they would face government surveillance. So, instead, classes charged a fee of 1000 kyat, or \$1.

Later, U Thiha became a regular speaker at Internews trainings on covering public policy, parliament, and referenda. He regularly sent staff reporters and editors to Thailand to attend thematic trainings on topics such as the environment and economic development. Many of those reporters have since become senior editors for outlets around Burma.

He became one of a core group of senior media figures whose close contacts with Internews ensured that trainings were responsive to real and immediate needs.



In the aftermath of Cyclone Nargis, he worked with Internews to supply radios to affected victims who had lost everything. The program went on to deliver thousands of cheap battery radios that allowed isolated survivors to access the news about aid they so desperately needed.

### NAVIGATING A NEW INDUSTRY

The expanding media landscape that now includes private daily newspapers may be tremendously exciting, but it is also exposing huge gaps in a profession that was suppressed for five decades.

The pressures of daily journalism are entirely new: “One editor I know got so stressed he quit and went off to be a monk for a month to straighten out his head,” U Thiha said. “It worked. He’s back on the job.”

Many publications are still forced to hire untrained reporters with limited educations. Editors also receive little training. Job-hopping is common.

Publishers desperately need staff and editors who have received at least a few months of “diploma-level” training, he said. “Trained people are so hard to find. They get snapped up.”

Donors should cooperate to support a select group of institutions that can churn out more trained professionals, he believes. Basic journalism, business journalism, and investigative reporting are particular gaps.

### BREAKING DOWN OLD BARRIERS

Despite the challenges ahead, U Thiha and others like him are busy trying to forge a new kind of media that could only be dreamt of at Internews trainings a few years back.

His *Myanmar Freedom* has a rare countrywide focus, and, even less common for a Rangoon-based paper, its stories on ethnic issues come from ethnic voices.

The rare cooperation between a Rangoon outlet and ethnic news organizations is possible thanks to old relationships built over the years, many forged at Internews trainings in Thailand.

“Ethnic media needs to be getting more into the mainstream,” U Thiha said. “Their information needs to be getting to decision-makers.”

But fears that media freedoms will be rolled back before the proper media infrastructure takes root are weighing on the minds of many leaders in the media sector.

A member of the Myanmar Interim Press Council, which negotiates with the government on media law, he believes “the battle is not over.” ■





# BACK IN THE FRAY

## YENI

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF, BURMESE SECTION, *THE IRRAWADDY*

**O**N A TYPICAL, hectic day in the bare-bones but crowded offices of *The Irrawaddy* in downtown Rangoon, Yen is a deceptively quiet presence.

As head of the Burmese-language section of the news outlet, he has helped steer the former exile organization through a testing transition back into the fray of local media in the country's commercial capital.

The competition is fierce, the new media landscape fraught with uncertainty – and he is relishing it all.

It has been a long road home for the man who fled Burma as a university student in 1988 and spent time as an activist and musician artist on the Thailand-Burma border before moving to Chiang Mai and into journalism.

“Things could not have been more different then. Nowadays, information is like a consumer product. Then, it was extremely hard to get.”

Yeni, who goes by one name, grew up when the media was entirely controlled by the state. For those of his generation, the most interesting ideas were expressed obliquely, through fiction, poetry, art, and songs.

In exile in Thailand, he drew the connection between free expression and the freedom of the press. “I thought that to inform people about what was happening through the media was an important and worthwhile job.”

After a short stint helping to set up the new Burmese-language Internet news service at *The Irrawaddy*, then based in Chiang Mai, Yeni joined the first batch of students at Internews’ J School program.

“I wanted to know about journalism and developments in the wider world,” he said. “This was a chance to learn.”

### LESSONS ABROAD BROUGHT BACK HOME

Two strands at the J School stood out for him: the professional aspects of reporting, and ‘passion’ for the job, especially under the challenging conditions of political conflict. Yeni was particularly drawn to the stories from a trainer who had worked in the South African media under apartheid.

He jumped at the chance to embark on an Internews-sponsored internship with Johannesburg’s *Sunday Times*, where for four

## AN INTERNEWS-SPONSORED NEWSPAPER INTERNSHIP IN SOUTH AFRICA ENCOURAGED YENI TO CONTINUE IN JOURNALISM.

weeks he trailed senior reporters, observed the work of the different sections of the paper, and learned about newsroom management.

“I was an eyewitness to the society and daily life, especially the divide between black and white. I found parallels with Burma in the diversity, and in some of the politics.”

One key difference he noted was that in South Africa, “Journalism had always survived. There had always been a degree of freedom of expression, even under censorship. Many investigative reporters and photographers had been very influential.”

Another unexpected inspiration came from the local culture.

“There was dancing amid the crying at funerals. There was dancing at protests. People took enjoyment from life, even in their struggles. I saw the power of culture, and this encouraged me to stay with journalism.”

South Africa had also exposed him to wide media coverage of HIV and AIDS, providing him with rare prior knowledge and context when Internews introduced trainings on the topic in mid-2004.

“In Burma, people were totally in the dark about this,” he said. “There was discrimination – people were being cast aside. It was very important to educate people and to give people living with HIV a voice.”

Internews sent eight trained Burmese reporters to a major international AIDS conference in Bangkok that year. Their 25 reports in Burmese-language exile news outlets helped pioneer coverage of the topic at a time when the authorities were just starting to loosen restrictions on AIDS information.

### FULL SPEED AHEAD

Though he recalls being “energized” by his first serious foray into health journalism, Yeni went on to cover business and economics, a difficult leap given the lack of data or information coming out of Burma, then the subjects of Western sanctions. But he was able to shed light on topics like border trade, the underground money transfer system, and the economic hardships of Burmese migrants.

That’s all receding into the past now as Yeni juggles the non-stop demands of daily news in Rangoon, all while planning for a new Burmese-language weekly print paper.

The one-time most censored country in the world is now one of the few places where print media is expanding along with digital media. But change is comfortable for journalists like Yeni, and now it’s full speed ahead. ■



# FROM REFUGEE TO REPORTER

**NAW NOREEN**

REPORTER FOR DEMOCRATIC VOICE OF BURMA RADIO

IT WAS DIFFICULT to have ambitions while growing up as a stateless ethnic Karen refugee in a camp on the Thailand-Burma border. Long before refugee resettlement abroad was a possibility and Burma had a quasi-civilian government, Naw Noreen faced a future strewn with barriers.

Today, she relishes the ever increasing freedoms and opportunities ahead of her as a radio journalist for the Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB).

“As a normal person you don’t get a chance to talk to many kinds of people. But as reporters, we can talk to anyone, from ordinary people experiencing problems to the president,” she said.

Her first break came when she received an offer to work in the Thai town of Mae Sot for *Inside News*, a small magazine working to highlight the difficult lives of thousands of displaced Karen people surviving in conflict zones across the border.

With the support of an Internews trainer, the former refugee learned basic journalism skills and began researching and writing stories, as well as contributing to layout.

She had the journalism bug. “But I wanted more skill,” she recalled. “To be able to report the news about my country and especially about Karen State, I needed more education.”

#### AMPLIFYING A PLURALITY OF VOICES

At Internews’ J School, the trainers’ emphasis on the need for multiple sources for stories and fact-checking felt like a big ask.

“People in Burma in those days could not be open. It was hard to talk to many people for one story. You could certainly never talk to government officials.”

Naw Noreen’s stories were often about events in remote, mountainous, war affected ethnic areas where communication was poor to non-existent. Finding multiple sources for the small amount of news that trickled out of those areas was often impossible.

But the J School was changing her life in other ways.

“In the refugee camp, the issue was always about finding enough money for daily life. At school, I met journalists from lots of backgrounds,” she said. “By the time I had finished I had learned how to work with different people and organizations, and also how I could survive, financially.”

She would have liked to have interned abroad at the end of the program; unfortunately, Internews had just decided it had to impose a moratorium on international internships after a small percentage of trainees from previous years had applied for asylum or opted to live illegally abroad.

“I felt unlucky that I didn’t get the opportunities the trainees had in previous years.”

Instead, however, Internews helped her earn a position at DVB, where she has worked ever since in a career she loves.

DVB’s reputation soared after its television coverage, transmitted on then-illegal satellite dishes, became the main source of news for many people in Burma during the Saffron Revolution and Cyclone Nargis.

Since 2011, reporters’ lives have gotten significantly easier, and journalism more normalized. “It’s totally changed,” she said. “More and more, people want to talk to the media. And we can now use two or three sources for a story.” ■





# "WE NEED TO BUILD A CULTURE OF ETHICS"

**MYINT KYAW**

FREELANCE REPORTER AND SECRETARY GENERAL OF THE MYANMAR JOURNALIST NETWORK

TEN YEARS AFTER attending his first basic journalism course with Internews, Myint Kyaw is now himself teaching the topic at a rural community paper start-up that's just had a 'baptism of fire'. After refusing to drop a sensitive story after pressure from an upset hospital official, the editorial board instead offered the official the chance to tell her side of the story. So pleased was the official at the fairness of the paper that she ended up joining its board.

While the Rangoon-based media has received much attention, little is known about the rise in and success stories of local journalism in the huge territory that makes up the rest of Burma. Shoe-string budgets and insufficient



SOME PEOPLE LIKE TO THINK THAT MAKING PERSONAL AND POLITICAL ATTACKS IN THE MEDIA IS A PART OF JOURNALISM."

INTERNEWS TRAININGS IN THAILAND PROVIDED EXPOSURE TO THE WORLD OUTSIDE.

transport infrastructure means rural and ethnic communities are still worlds away from the national and global media explosion.

Most national Rangoon newspapers are distributed only as far as the large towns of many regions and states. Rural populations that remain extremely cut off are left to fill the information gaps themselves.

### BUILDING BRIDGES ACROSS THE BORDER

Myint Kyaw knows about living with isolation. When he attended his first Internews training at a discreet Rangoon location, the most appealing element was that there had been "nothing like it" in the then-reclusive country. The same was the case in 2006 when he travelled to Bangkok for a two-month Internews training on globalization and economics.

Then a reporter for the monthly business journal *Myanmar Dana*, he welcomed the chance to learn about regional politics and international business from an outside perspective.

The course also helped build and expand Burmese reporters' relationships with foreign news outlets and journalists, which proved crucial when authorities clamped down on the media the following two years during the Saffron Revolution and Cyclone Nargis.

Throughout those events, Myint Kyaw and other Burmese reporters worked clandestinely with Internews and foreign colleagues to break the information blackout and ensure news reached international outlets, particularly exile broadcasters who could feed news back into the country.

### NEW OPPORTUNITIES, NEW CHALLENGES

With seed money from Internews, in 2011 Myint Kyaw and other Internews alumni started Yangon Press International (YPI), a daily news service using Facebook as its platform.

Privately owned daily newspapers had been banned in Burma for decades. YPI successfully "tested the waters" by providing news on Facebook on a daily basis. Funding gaps eventually meant the service was discontinued, but Facebook has since taken off to become the most popular entry platform for online news in Burma.

Today, as the secretary general of the Myanmar Journalist Network (MJN), the second largest of three national journalism associations, Myint Kyaw is focused on two looming challenges.

In August 2013, MJN members collected thousands of signatures for a petition to uphold pressure on the government to deliver on its promises of media freedom that journalists say remain under threat from proposed laws and regulations.

In this context, he said, the second challenge is to build a culture of media ethics and professionalism. It's a particularly daunting task, he says, but one that is more crucial than ever before.

In early November 2013, the MJN criticized a local private journal for carrying out unsubstantiated personal attacks on the grandson of former Senior-General Than Shwe.

"It is okay to publish opinions, but some people like to think that making personal and political attacks in the media is a part of journalism," Myint Kyaw told DVB news. "Seasoned news readers in other countries can tell the difference, but readers in Myanmar are presently unclear about which is which."

Despite the optimism he feels when he sees small outlets beat the odds to produce quality journalism, he knows media freedoms are still tenuous. Poor journalism could be used as a pretext, he believes, "to promote the idea that the media should be controlled by the government."



# A RISING STAR ON NATIONAL TV

**MAY THET HNIN**

NEWS REPORTER AT MYANMAR NATIONAL TV

**M**ay Thet Hnin is adjusting to being a regular face on the news bulletins of Burma's first private TV channel Myanmar National TV (MNTV), but she's not resting on her laurels.

MNTV's news broadcasts three times a day are popular with audiences; still, the station is always looking to improve. "We're not familiar with how broadcasting is done in other countries, so we are facing many challenges," she said.

May's career in journalism began just three years ago when she switched from private teaching to writing features on social and environmental issues for the weekly journal *True News*. She then joined *The Messenger* before jumping to daily news at the Yangon Press International, started by several Internews J School alumni.



*EVERYONE WANTS TO GET THE TRAINING. IT WOULD BE GREAT IF THERE WERE MORE."*

### OVERCOMING FEARS

It was for this third position that she received her first-ever intensive journalism training. The three-month Internews training in Chiang Mai focused on all aspects of running a newsroom, and culminated with trainees covering Burma's 2011 general election.

"We were reporters, editors, chief editors – we had to learn every role," she said. "It was very effective." Learning new interview techniques, like how to handle subjects who are avoiding questions, was especially useful, she added.

In Chiang Mai, she also increased her contacts for stories on political issues. "In Rangoon, we couldn't contact ethnic armed groups, but we could from Thailand," she said.

"I was a bit scared to phone them, but they were very gentle-spoken on the phone and they liked to talk to the media," she said. "This was a very new experience for me."

She also learned the importance of strong newsroom management: "Without it, you can't achieve a quality product. Everyone just does their own thing."

She found that, despite the nerves they prompted initially, feedback sessions in which trainees critiqued each other's work were particularly useful.

That kind of hands-on learning has made Internews events "very popular" with journalists, she says. "Everyone wants to get the training. It would be great if there were more."

### LOOKING AHEAD

In her first three months at the TV station, she's had short, useful trainings from international TV professionals on how to produce news packages. "But it's not enough," she said. "I want trainers to come work with us here at the station, for two or three months."

May envisions herself in this role for many years, even if young reporters in Burma usually become editors as they get older. As a result of her trainings with Internews, May has met foreign reporters of all ages, "even one who was 70." The potential to report the news well into old age gives her hope.

Looking to the immediate future, she says covering the national elections of 2015 will be a real challenge for media. Most reporters are very young and have little to no knowledge of the constitution or experience regarding national elections.

To effectively provide audiences in Burma with the elections information they need, she said, trainings like the one she received are important.





# "JOURNALISM GIVES A VOICE TO THE VOICELESS"

**PETER AUNG**

REPORTER, DEMOCRATIC VOICE OF BURMA

**W**HEN PETER AUNG quit hotel work in Rangoon to follow his father into journalism, he figured that, like any other job, reporting required only a few basic skills.

## AN IMMERSIVE LEARNING EXPERIENCE

As a junior reporter on the *New Era* newspaper in Thailand, he picked up tips from colleagues at the exile paper covering Burmese politics and the migrant community, and at short basic journalism courses run by Internews he learned to write snappy leads and present information logically. Still, he wanted more.

"It was a big world," he said. "I knew I didn't have enough skills. I wanted to produce better-quality stories."



**THE SCHOOL CHANGED MY MIND-SET. IT WAS A TURNING POINT."**

As such, he applied and was accepted to Internews' J School. The first intake comprised a diverse mix of people of different ages, ethnicities, and life experiences. Peter, an ethnic Burmese, was in new territory. "I learned about other communities there, especially from my ethnic friends," he said. "The school changed my mind-set. It was a turning point."

He began to see his job through a different lens. "I hadn't realized the wider role of journalism, the values it stood for in society. When I did, that encouraged me to stay with this career."

Peter was especially taken with one trainer's focus on human interest feature stories. Trainers and students went out to report on the plight of migrant workers exposed to chemicals in orange orchards, spending a lot of time talking to the workers to understand their lives and dilemmas.

"This was very new," he recalled. "Before, we had really just done stories very fast, mainly by contacting people over the phone."

### SEEING JOURNALISM – AND THE ISSUES – IN A NEW LIGHT

At the end of J-School, Peter's approach to his career had an underlying practicality: "I felt that the role of journalists was to provide a service, like fire-fighters or policemen. Journalists had the duty to serve people with reliable news."

But his new perspective gave the job more meaning. Journalists, he said, "give a voice to the voiceless."

He had a renewed sense of professional commitment. "Even if you don't receive much pay, or the work is difficult, you know what your role is."

It also inspired Peter and other reporters to improve upon existing practices. He helped lead the way in reducing the use of pseudonyms, a practice reporters justified as necessary under the former regime.

"People didn't use their real names because they were scared," he said. "But I and others in exile media started to use our own bylines. We were a bit worried at first, but we did it, mainly so that we would take responsibility for our stories. It introduced accountability. Readers could respond and complain to a real person if they wanted to."

An Internews training on reporting about HIV/AIDS also proved to be a major influence on his work. During that period, there were huge misunderstandings about the nature of the condition in Burma. People living with HIV were feared – and demonized.

As has been the case elsewhere in the world, the media's early reporting only increased the stigma.

"Writing about it was difficult," Peter said. "We didn't have fixed terms. All the media were using different words. We had to try to avoid insulting people with words like 'victims.' There was a lot of debate."

Internews went on to produce Burmese-language guidelines on reporting on HIV/AIDS that were distributed to exile media and newsrooms in Rangoon and Mandalay.

Peter sees similarities between the media's treatment of people living with HIV/AIDS in the late 2000s and how it treats homosexuality today.

The parallels are numerous: "We're debating and arguing over words to use. There are a lot of words to describe gays, but they're all quite insulting. It's difficult to find the right terms."

### PLAYING CATCH UP

There are other challenges to be met, too. For one, few newsrooms in Burma use stylebooks or provide reporting guidelines of any sort. The need for agreed-upon standards is just one gap that media professionals need to fill to reach the bar set by the international media industry.

In addition, Peter believes, reporters struggle to do justice to the crucial emerging business sector. Business journalists need help making their stories more readily accessible to readers, who are often bombarded with English words most cannot understand. And in the exciting but complex current sociopolitical landscape, there is as much a need now as ever to build the skills necessary to support objective, thoughtful commentary and analysis. ■



# NEW FREEDOMS, NEW PRESSURES

**MYO MIN HTIKE**  
PUBLISHER OF *VENUS*

**M**ORE FREEDOM can sometimes mean more of a headache, as Burma's media leaders are quickly coming to realize. The arrival of privately owned daily newspapers in 2013 is putting pressure on older publications, said publisher Myo Min Htike of *Venus*, a weekly newspaper.

"Staff are job-hopping. Advertising is down," he said. "We've still got loyal readers. They like our critical voice. But we have to adjust to survive." One of these adjustments, he added, was incorporating more in-depth features to the newspaper, which largely covers political news and analysis.

Still, the dailies aren't having an easy time either: one owner told Myo Min Htike he is losing \$4,000 a day.

## THE BUSINESS OF JOURNALISM

Having attended various Internews trainings on media management, ASEAN, elections, and public policy, a few years ago Myo Min Htike on the advice of Internews' media business specialist expanded his marketing team to improve his relationship with advertisers.

"I had never met my advertisers. I never left the office," he explained. "On the consultant's advice, I started meeting them and making friends. I still do. I believe it makes a difference."

In Burma, he says, advertising agencies and companies have long held all the power. "They design the ads, they demand where they go on the page, and they won't change them – even if the color is ugly and there are mistakes in the spellings!"

The Myanmar Journalists Association member believes there is no room for complacency on media freedom. Censorship may be over, but proprietors are aware that the government still collects and reviews copies of every paper.

"Yellow journalism is an issue too," he said. "We do need more media ethics. Poor journalism is dangerous for our freedom of expression." ■





# "IT'S MY DREAM TO HAVE MY OWN YOUTH SHOW"

## AH MEE

REPORTER FOR VOICE OF AMERICA, RADIO FREE ASIA, AND DEMOCRATIC VOICE OF BURMA

**I**N A LAND OF LIMITED electricity, radio is a lifeline. Millions of Burmese rely on the airwaves for their main source of news, commentary, and insight into events beyond their small and often remote communities.

Ah Mee, a radio and video reporter and ethnic Lisu from Kachin State, has an acute sense of what it's like to live in territories still steeped in virtual silence.

"In the whole Kachin State, there are maybe a handful of journalists," she said. "It's similar in Shan State. It's just not enough."

Basic tasks pose major challenges for journalists: it recently took Ah Mee five hours to complete a 12-mile journey by motorbike in Shan State. More pressingly, there are security concerns, as local

authorities in the Shan and Kachin States remain suspicious of reporters. “I often don’t feel it’s safe to show my media card, so I hide it,” she said.

She hopes to one day have her own radio or TV show for youth, in order to help make a dent in the deprivation she sees during her travels in ethnic areas. Across these regions, she says, education levels are low, political awareness is lacking, and few have relationships beyond their communities.

“Young people leave school at around Grade 4. They are missing so much – it’s my dream to have a show that reaches them.”

Until then, she broadcasts stories on topics such as youth, women, and development for the Burmese-language broadcasts of Voice of America (VOA), Radio Free Asia (RFA), and Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB), all Burmese-language radio services that reach national and ethnic audiences.

### FROM FICTION TO FACT

A one-time migrant worker in Chiang Mai, Ah Mee’s road to a radio career began when she got part-time work as an actor on BBC Burmese radio dramas. The shows incorporated messaging on health issues such as HIV/AIDS and malaria. In many of the rural communities in which these programs were broadcast, knowledge gaps were severe, and the connection between malaria and mosquitoes was not yet understood.

With the help of an Internews training, Ah Mee moved into writing scripts for radio stories with the Network Media Group, one of several small news outlets based in Chiang Mai that in turn supplied radio stories to larger Burmese-language services.

The 2010 training taught her to write better news scripts and achieve quality sound recordings even with limited equipment. She also began to learn how to produce more complex feature packages linking different voices and sound effects.

By 2011, she was the main presenter and reporter for a VOA news program, and later became a key reporter on *Pansagar (Flower)*, a show covering women’s issues for the RFA.

### SHARING EXPERIENCES, CONTACTS, AND FEEDBACK

Still, she wanted to learn more, so she joined an Internews intensive two-month News Lab training later that year that taught journalists to produce quality output in a fast-paced “real-time” daily news environment.

It was especially useful, she said, to bring together journalists from inside the country with those based in Chiang Mai and border areas. “We could share experiences and sources,” she explained. “Working from Thailand, we often couldn’t contact official sources inside the country, or

they wouldn’t talk to us. But the reporters based inside Burma shared their sources with us, and we shared ours with them.”

The training also introduced her to the concept of newsroom management, and the benefits of holding regular newsroom meetings. Now, she and her colleagues based in different locations in border areas in Thailand hold Skype meetings twice a week. “It’s very useful because we share information and can help each other with contacts and ideas.”

Receiving constructive criticism from fellow journalists several times a week was also another useful part of the training. “Before that, if I’m honest, I wasn’t careful about re-reading my stories after I’d written them,” she admitted. “At the NewsLab, there were thirteen people looking at your work, asking, ‘Why didn’t you ask this question?’ Or saying, ‘Maybe you should have done that.’”

“It was good for me to get that feedback,” she added. “Now, my group and I do regular feedback sessions.” ■



# "JOURNALISTS STILL HAVE A CENSOR IN THEIR HEADS"

**LIN THANT**

COMMENTATOR AND SENIOR REPORTER, *THE IRRAWADDY*

LIN THANT BEGAN his career as a newsman for an unconventional outlet: the *Weekly Bulletin*, a 24-page handwritten newspaper written by and for political prisoners in Rangoon's Insein Jail.

That was more than two decades ago, soon after the former political activist began what would become a 19-year stint in different jails. His 'career' as a newsman continued when he gained access to a battery radio that had been smuggled in. It was then that he took on the job of news courier, sharing news from the airwaves with fellow inmates.

There was one broadcaster whose storytelling he especially appreciated. Michael Pan's reporting on Burma from the BBC World Service was "smart, clear, to the point."

So, years later, he was happy to meet the man behind the voice.

Pan had relocated from the BBC in London to Chiang Mai to work as a trainer with Internews. Lin Thant had chosen the same city to rebuild his life as a journalist at *The Irrawaddy*, where he soon became known as a respected writer and commentator on politics, human rights, and ethnic issues.

Through disciplined self-study, a practice he'd adopted in prison, and a little training from Internews, he was also learning the art of daily news reporting.

At one training, Pan introduced journalists to newsroom coordination software that was quickly adopted at *The Irrawaddy*. "We loved it," Lin Thant said. "It helped us coordinate, check each others' work, and share comments and tips. We still use it every day."

An insight from another Internews trainer struck a chord. "He shared the idea that reporting was a bit like putting together a mosaic. That had a big influence on me. It has helped ensure my reporting is colorful."

### A LEGACY OF DICTATORSHIP

He believes that stories should have a "micro element, a macro element, and a conclusion." And yet, Burma's political history complicates reporting even today: years of censorship, he said, have left many Burmese journalists operating with "a censor in their heads."

This "legacy of dictatorship" has conditioned many to report only the "micro" element or bare facts of a story, leaving out the kind of background, context and significance that readers need.

Indeed, he questions why some have chosen this profession at all.

"Many people want to be known as a journalist for the status," he said. "But they may not really know anything about it, or about issues like journalism ethics."

### KNOWING YOURSELF, AND YOUR STUDENT

Many senior Burmese media practitioners are talking today about the need to improve professional standards through new institutions and trainings.

But what forms should these take, and who should take the lead in media development?

He has some insights to share: "My father, a teacher, always said that as a teacher you needed to know three things: yourself, your subject, and your pupil."

Though foreign trainers are very qualified, he said, it is often difficult for them to fully grasp the complexities of Burma's politics, and to really understand their students and the exact nature of the challenges they face.

The solution for the current period is to provide "both local and foreign inputs," he said.

Another challenge the ethnic Burman identifies in the current media landscape is to redress weaknesses in coverage of ethnic issues.

Ethnic journalists, he believes, should "write more about their literature and culture. If the ethnic groups lose their languages and cultures, they will lose their nationality." ■





# "TOP ON TRUST, BUT COMPETING WITH ELEPHANTS"

**THAN WIN HTUT**

PRESENTER AND MANAGER, DEMOCRATIC  
VOICE OF BURMA TV

**A**FTER TEN YEARS SPENT working abroad, television presenter Than Win Htut is back in downtown Rangoon among an audience he once couldn't meet.

It still feels strange to be congratulated by taxi drivers pleased to recognize a face of the formerly exiled DVB satellite TV service, which shot to the forefront of Burmese consciousness when it broke state news blackouts with its coverage of the Saffron Revolution and Cyclone Nargis.

'We're top on [audience] trust,' he said. 'But technically and financially, we're small. We're competing with elephants,' a reference to the new, deep-pocketed privately owned commercial stations as well as state TV.

He started in broadcasting when he joined Internews' J School in 2004, the year the school introduced radio training.

Already a freelance journalist, he wanted more training and to meet the authors of a book on basic journalism that he had come across.

At the J School, he worked with trainers and authors Jeff Hodson and Peter Eng, interacted with students from a variety of backgrounds, and "made friendships that carry on to this day."

The next year, he joined DVB and became a key figure there, working from Thailand and Norway. Though the station's prominence increased significantly after 2007, it also had to respond to the imprisonment of a number of its reporters and citizen journalists.

### A WELL ROUNDED STATION

Today, the station maintains contact with more than 1500 citizen journalists. Given Burma's huge size and DVB's small staff, the role of such informal contributors could be significant.

But lack of technical expertise means much of the material received is unusable for broadcast. He hopes that more technical training will be available for citizen contributors from rural regions and ethnic areas. Local video trainers are ready to help, but have only a limited amount of free time to do so.

Meanwhile, the station is gradually broadening its scope of coverage beyond the political and social issues for which it became famous.

For some staff members used to pursuing hard news, incorporating sports, business, culture, entertainment, and lifestyle coverage does not always hold great appeal.

"My message to staff is: you can't just eat rice all the time," he said. "A full dinner needs vegetables, meat, sauces - and dessert. You need them all to get your vitamins." ■



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