

# Myanmar

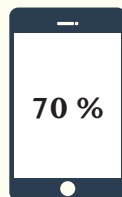
Myanmar, a country with a long history of political suppression and censorship currently positions itself on the brink of growth and development, as evident in its telecommunications capacity. After the 2011 economic liberalization, Myanmar moved to modernize and promote ICT development in rural and urban areas. Despite Myanmar's weak broadband infrastructure, the country has markedly improved its mobile internet access. Moving forward, policymakers and mobile activists will face a mix of old and new challenges in ICT development.



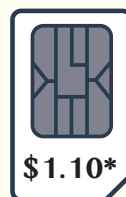
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Internet users



Access via smartphones



Cost of a SIM card

\* Or MMK1,500

## Digital Censorship

Under the military junta, Myanmar extended freedom of speech limitations to digital platforms in September 1996 under the Myanmar Computer Science Development Law. With the arrival of the internet, political activism found a new platform for sharing information and for mobilizing activists as marked by the Saffron Revolution of 2007. Named for the color of the protesting Buddhist monks' clothing, the Saffron Revolution focused on political and economic reform. However, the internet was instrumental as activists shared with the world the oppression of the ruling military junta. Due to widespread digital coverage, the government issued a countrywide internet blackout. Systematic state censorship of traditional and electronic media continued until 2013, paving the way for further reform. Under the Telecoms Law of 2013, Myanmar expressively supported the modernization and development of Myanmar by means of telecommunications technology. Yet, old and new challenges ranging from imprisonment of journalists, self-censorship, the spread of misinformation, and the prevalence of filter bubbles in social media continue to impact Myanmar society.

## Timeline

**November 1997:** The state-owned Myanmar Post and Telecommunications (MPT) company launched the first official e-mail service.

**September 2000:** Myanmar established the first private ISP -- Bagan Cybertech

**Aug - Oct 2007:** The Saffron Revolution developed as a pivotal event for internet accessibility and as a backlash against internet censorship

**2010:** The Myanmar registered over 520 registered cybercafes in Burma, located mainly in a few major cities.

**March 2011:** Civilian government, sworn in under President Thein Sein, began to liberalize.

**2012:** Government lifted systematic state censorship of traditional and electronic media

**October 2013:** The Myanmar parliament enacted the Telecommunications Law to support the modernization and development of Myanmar by means of telecommunications technology.

**January 2014:** Myanmar granted licenses to two foreign cell companies, Norway's Telenor Group and Qatar's Ooredoo

**January 2017:** Government granted a license to a fourth operator, Mytel, owned by a Vietnamese-military controlled company.

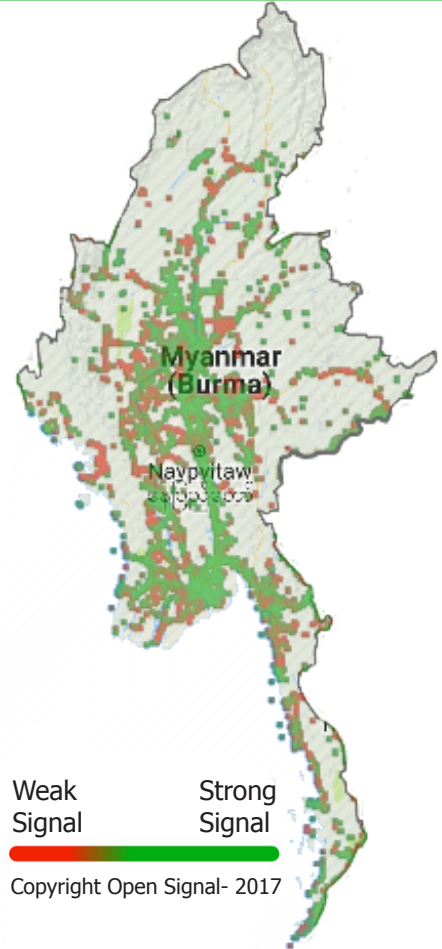
**May 2017:** Mobile phone penetration reached 70%

*Smartphones are a magic device that will transform everything—from communication to education, from agriculture to politics. This is the new normal. Everyone thinks that the telecom revolution in Myanmar is finished, but really, it's just beginning.*

**- Thaug Tin (Sept 2017 in Wired)**

### Connectivity Restrictions

The primary challenges that Myanmar face in its ICT development are the connectivity restrictions found throughout the country. Lack of infrastructure, chronic power outages, and service interruptions impede internet usage throughout the country and impact rural users greater than urban users. The lack of ICT infrastructures is more notable in internet access via computer or laptop. Only 20% of internet users access via the computer, whereas mobile access is at 70% in 2017. Also, rural area mobile service, when existent, is often slower with reduced connectivity than mobile service in urban areas. Yet, the potential for robust internet access in rural areas has only amplified since the introduction of foreign mobile providers.



### The Rise of the Smartphone

Myanmar's poor telecom infrastructure created a country primed for a smartphone revolution. Until 2014, however, smartphones were only seen as a status symbol in society. Under the state-owned carrier, Myanmar Posts and Telecommunications (MPT), SIM cards could cost up to \$250 in 2013 and \$2000 prior to liberalization in 2011. The cost of SIM cards dramatically decreased to \$1.50 in 2014 after the government granted licenses to two foreign smartphone companies, Norway's Telenor Group and Qatar's Ooredoo. Currently, three foreign carriers have licenses to operate in Myanmar; however the state-owned smartphone carrier, Myanmar Posts and Telecommunications (MPT), still dominates the market.

Accessibility to mobile services has increased throughout the country, especially in rural areas. Farmers, for example, now connect with family members in cities and also monitor market prices from their phones. Smartphone apps have made banking easier and has even aided relief workers in locating victims of natural disasters. Despite significant benefits from a surge in smartphone usage, Myanmar's society currently faces a number of new problems related to social media, such as filter bubbles and echo chambers.

### Filter Bubbles

In Myanmar, Facebook is one of the most popular mobile apps. Mobile users access Facebook for maintaining contact with friends and family, sharing content, and receiving news. However, like much of the world today, mobile users enter into filter bubbles and echo chambers, thus increasing the spread of misinformation. The problem of filter bubbles in Myanmar strongly affects the opinions of one of the most marginalized group in the region, the Rohingya. While Myanmar has achieved freedom of speech, the virtual coercion of those in power potentially maintains a cohesive viewpoint that marginalizes dissenting opinion.

### Sources and further reading:

- Freedom on the Net 2017- Freedom House
- Digital in Southeast Asia in 2017- We are Social and Hootsuite
- Unliked: How Facebook is playing a part in the Rohingya genocide- The Conversation