From Scarcity to Overload:
Finding "Good Enough" Public Information in Myanmar's Transition

Information Symposium Summary Report

2016

About the Information Symposium

The Myanmar Book Aid Preservation Foundation ([MBAPF](#)) and Enlightened Research Myanmar ([EMR](#)) held an Information Symposium titled, *From Scarcity to Overload: Finding "Good Enough" Public Information in Myanmar's Transition in Yangon, Myanmar* on January 28-29, 2016. The Symposium was co-sponsored by the University of Washington's Henry M. Jackson School of International Studies ([JSIS](#)) and the Technology & Social Change Group ([TASCHA](#)) of the University's Information School with support from the United States Agency for International Development ([USAID](#)), [Microsoft](#), the [Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation](#), and the [Asia Foundation](#). The Information Symposium was held as part of a larger project supported by USAID, Microsoft, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and the [Tableau Foundation](#) implemented by the University of Washington's JSIS and TASCHA, along with Myanmar partners, MBAPF and EMR. This project, *[Information Strategies for Societies in Transition](#)*, was developed largely because of the staggering challenges Myanmar is facing as it seeks to "catch-up" in the world's most economically competitive region.

For more information about the event, this report, or the project, please email tascha@uw.edu.

Myanmar faces staggering challenges as it seeks to "catch up" after decades of military rule in the world's most economically competitive region. Myanmar is also leaping numerous "digital divides" in unprecedented ways as mobile phones become exponentially cheaper and more widespread while internet penetration grows. Aiding in this leap are unprecedented political change, new civic freedoms, and openness of information.

Mere days before the country swore in its first elected parliament on February 1st, 2016, the Myanmar Information Symposium, *From Scarcity to Overload: Finding "Good Enough" Public Information in Myanmar's Transition,* brought together practitioners and academics from across Myanmar's information landscape to stimulate discussion on the role and potential of open, transparent public information in Myanmar's transition. In addition to panels, keynotes, and group discussions, the symposium hosted a Marketplace of Ideas to give organizations an opportunity to showcase their ideas and projects ranging from data visualizations to research initiatives to Myanmar-language children's books.

This event was part of the larger *Information Strategies for Societies in Transition* project to address information challenges presented by Myanmar's digital revolution. The project is supported by USAID, Microsoft, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Asia Foundation, and the Tableau Foundation, and implemented by the Myanmar Book Aid and Preservation Foundation, Enlightened Myanmar Research, and the University of Washington. The project focuses broadly on building organizational capacity across sectors to design and implement effective and transparent information solutions, designing and implementing curricula to enhance digital and mobile information literacy, growing the capacity of libraries as community infomediaries, and pursuing new platforms to tackle digital and information challenges.

Sectors Represented at Information Symposium
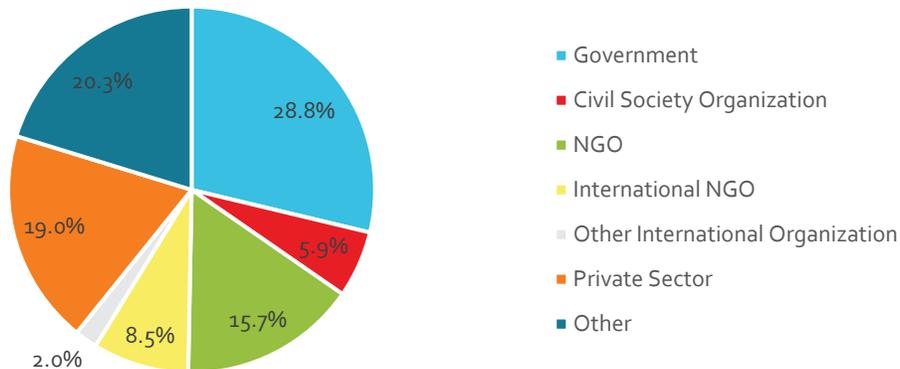
In service to these goals, the Information Symposium brought together stakeholders from across Myanmar's information society. Participants came from non-governmental organizations (NGOs), civil society organizations (CSOs), libraries, mainstream media, research firms, the private ICT sector, bi- and multilateral development agencies, and UN agencies. Attendees also included representatives of government ministries (including Education, ICT, Labour, and Immigration) and political parties, as well as newly elected Members of Parliament. Together, symposium participants encompassed a range of Myanmar's information users, regulators, providers, and distributors.

The symposium raised many questions and sparked lively discussions. Participants deliberated questions such as: How does information scarcity interact with public trust, or lack thereof, in information providers like researchers and the media? How do the legacies of political rule continue to influence mindsets and logistical challenges around information? What reforms are most urgent, and what regulations and legislation must be implemented to accomplish them? How do we balance freedom of speech and expression with the need to curb hate speech and protect privacy? What opportunities exist to leverage civic information tools for voter education, election monitoring, and e-government? How can libraries bridge education gaps in the transition to a more democratic, digital society? What strategies can we use to implement all of the above programs and content in Burmese and ethnic minority languages?

The vast depth and breadth of the questions raised and discussions held during the symposium cannot be fully captured in a summary report. However, below are seven key takeaways that emerged over two days.

Key takeaways

1. *Many are working to solve the scarcity of information and data that still exists.*

Even though Myanmar is rapidly moving towards greater openness and transparency, there remains a dearth of accurate and reliable information, and updated and up-to-date data, particularly from the government. After decades of active suppression of information and closed databases, reliable sources of trustworthy information remain few and lacking.

Citizens, government, media, and other groups are wary of the information they provide each other and share. This leads in turn to information scarcity, which allows one group to strictly control information and further increases divisions among groups. While more and more sources of information and data are emerging, many in Myanmar's society have a distrust of information and an unwillingness to share that persists.

The symposium highlighted there are many organizations and initiatives working to reduce this scarcity by increasing the availability of reliable and accurate information. Examples can be seen in many libraries across the country, where library staff are helping people find, access, and assess quality information, helping citizens distinguish reliable information from propaganda and rumors.

Researchers are also working to build trust among many segments of the population. An increase in collective trust will help future research efforts to collect and make available reliable and up-to-date data about Myanmar. By decreasing distrust in the government and increasing access to reliable data and information, this scarcity will diminish.

2. *Digitization of records and services faces significant logistical and mindset challenges.*

Much of the research, information, and data in Myanmar exists only in hard copy form - data recorded in manual ledgers, information contained in paper-only reports. Despite the recent digital revolution sweeping the country, information and data is often still collected by pen and paper. Digitization efforts anywhere poses challenges, but particularly so in Myanmar.

Outside of the infrastructure and resource demands these efforts take, Myanmar faces additional challenges as the digital font has yet to be standardized across platforms, applications, and software. While many technology companies such as Facebook, Google, and Apple have endorsed Unicode, there has not been an outright demand from the government that Unicode must be used if they want to do on using Unicode or Zawgyi fonts when digitizing records and developing new digital systems and applications. This poses problems when trying to search, share and access digital data and information in interoperable and user-friendly formats. Coding is a

serious challenge. In addition, media and culture has been almost entirely paper-based in Myanmar until recently, shifting mindsets from analog and hard copy recording to digital storing and representation will take some time.

Despite pledges by political parties to make e-Government and other digital initiatives part of their election platforms, moving data and information online will not be easy to do. The country lacks trained personnel, physical resources, infrastructure, and networks, and the services and content won't be easy to access in compatible formats. It will take time before both the government and non-governmental organizations can offer all of their information, data, and services online.

3. *The digital and information revolution in Myanmar requires reforming, creating, and implementing laws and regulations.*

There are many sectors in Myanmar that would greatly benefit from both reforming old laws and creating new legislation. Some of these areas include laws that mandate government at all levels has a responsibility to make information available to the public. Legislation that requires openness and transparency of how the government operates is also required.

In order for Myanmar to continue moving forward as a democratic nation, reforms in the education sector are urgently needed to foster a society that embraces critical thinking and the creation of new knowledge and information. While education reform will need a long time to take hold and cascade, public libraries can help bridge the education gaps with proper laws and legislation that provide public libraries with government support and funding.

4. *Freedom of speech and information should be embraced, but not abused.*

Since Myanmar's transition began to take hold in recent years, there has been a notable shift in the public mindset wanting everything to be open and all expression to be embraced to recognition of a need to balance this freedom with curbs and controls on hate speech and rumors run wild. The proliferation of mobile phones and associated applications such as Facebook has created an information firehose. While this is positive in many respects, it has also created an online environment where anyone can say anything without any evidence - often reported by the media as fact - which in turn provokes conflict in the physical environment.

As in any other information society, there is also a need to protect the privacy of personal information and data. Not all data should be shared, not all information should be available for all to access. Citizens must protect their private information, particularly online, and institutions such as public libraries can play a pivotal role in educating people in privacy basics, as well as distinguishing fact from fiction on platforms like Facebook and even in the media.

5. *Civic engagement and democratic citizenship is emerging, even if eGovernment and eGovernance has a long way to go.*

The General Election in November 2015 demonstrated that citizens of Myanmar are very ready and willing to engage civically and actively participate in the new democratic society. Many civil society organizations (CSOs) and other non-governmental organizations (NGOs) spearheaded initiatives surrounding the election - from voter education programs to election monitoring and data collection and reporting. The public was very engaged and active civically and politically before, during, and after the election.

While there are promises of providing eGovernment and eGovernance services to Myanmar's citizens, they have yet to be realized. Even as these services are created, there will need to be outreach and education efforts to make the public aware these services exist and teach them how to use them. This transition will take time, but the

active participation and eager engagement around the election testifies to the fact that Myanmar is ready to embrace new ways of interacting with the government.

6. *Public libraries play a large role Myanmar's transition to the information society.*

The symposium brought together people from many sectors, including libraries. While it is not unusual for library staff to recognize the many roles that public libraries play in society, it is rare to have the recognition from people from other sectors. However, many of the symposium participants and panelists from other sectors - civil society, government, research, and media to name a few - acknowledged the strong role that public libraries can and do play in development and democracy.

One example of how public libraries are doing this is by bridging the education gap that will likely persist for the next several years. From teaching digital and information literacy skills and promoting critical thinking to assisting the public in navigating information overload and facilitating newly available digital applications, public libraries in Myanmar are providing much-needed services in the communities that exist. Some libraries are partnering with other sectors, such as international development agencies and civil society organizations, to identify and respond to community needs with information and literacy solutions. Library staff are often trusted members in their communities, and as such, can also help build trust between the government, media, and citizens.

As eGovernment and eGovernance services emerge, public libraries are uniquely positioned to help inform the public about these new services and applications, as well as teach people how to access and use them.

7. *Programs and services work best and most effectively when provided in both Burmese and in non-Burmese indigenous language.*

Lack of locally relevant content in local languages is a major barrier for adoption of information and communication technologies. Programs that are delivered in local languages with locally relevant content customized to local contexts are much more effective.

Programs and services that are available in not only the national language, but other languages and dialects spoken throughout the country help reach more people and more communities. Even a few short years ago, many in central Myanmar assumed that everyone in the country could speak and read Burmese, or that they should. During the symposium, however, participants voiced a recognition that many people in Myanmar speak and read languages other than Burmese, and programs and services should be adapted and delivered in these as well.

What's next?

The symposium revealed that much progress is being made to address the information challenges that Myanmar faces. This progress was exemplified by the fact that *all* participants - from many different sectors, at various levels in their careers - were able to speak freely and frankly with each other, even with a heavy media presence in the room.

While this is indeed encouraging and exciting, many challenges remain. During registration at the beginning of the symposium, all participants were asked to complete a survey about the most important information challenges that Myanmar currently faces. Out of ten choices, participants surveyed said the top five information challenges are:

1. Equalizing access to information across social divides (31%)
2. Developing laws and regulations that guarantee freedom of information across all sectors (23%)
3. Improving media standards and practices (22%)
4. Overcoming lack of trust from sharing information (22%)

5. Improving quality and availability of data for all sectors (21%) (tie)
   Removing government barriers to conducting public research (21%)

Recommendations

Many, if not all, of these challenges are addressed in the key takeaways from the symposium. Keeping the key takeaways and the top information challenges highlighted during the symposium in mind, the symposium's concluding remarks and discussion offered the following recommendations for all stakeholders - government, CSOs, NGOs, development agencies, media, libraries - to consider as they continue to build an open and transparent information and digital society in Myanmar.

- Continue to build trust between the government and citizens as this is a chronic issue. Democracy needs a trustworthy government that takes accountability.
- Provide the public with transparent access to government information and data.
- Practice information and data sharing among research firms and other organizations to avoid duplication of efforts.
- Recognize and encourage the role of librarians as facilitators in helping citizens find and use eGovernment services and information.
- Promote and use journalism best practices for trustworthy media reports.
- Formalize the Myanmar font to use Unicode font for consistent application development, broader adoption, and consistent usage.
- Include libraries in national development agendas.
- Encourage and support university research.
- Recognize that mobile information literacy is needed for well-informed citizens in the digital age.

The symposium showed that many opportunities exist for sectors to work together to tackle Myanmar's information challenges. Many participants said they would like to see more events like this symposium throughout Myanmar to bring sectors together to continue to discuss ideas and solutions for these challenges.

Appendix #1: Panel summaries

Panel 1: What makes information "good enough"?

Moderator: U Pe Myting

Panelists: H.E U Ye Htut, Kim Ninh, Dr. Chaw Chaw Sein, Dan Arnaudo

Myanmar is moving toward public service-oriented media media, underpinned by reform in law, norms, and procedures. The importance of basic data gathering, mapping, documenting, and analysis in emerging topics starts with answering the question: Where is the location of information in Myanmar? The "access denied" period of military rule influences the challenges and opportunities we face now. Information from Facebook and other social media is often not good enough for Myanmar's people, and is only one of many options for accessing information on the Internet. People should think critically about the role Facebook is playing in their society, in particular.

Panel 2: Information access, literacy and competency in a transitional landscape

Moderator: U Thiha Saw

Panelists: Thaung Su Nyein, Dr. Tun Thura Thet, Dr. Ma Thidar (Sanchaung)

The transition to a digital media system has led to information overload. In this environment, information rights, content, and access are paramount. In terms of hate speech, freedom of expression at the expense of others-- particularly religious or ethnic minorities--is simply not a right. Further, citizens and the media need to embrace their shared responsibility and accountability in information production and consumption. In the absence of an effective editorial culture in Myanmar, the consumer *is* the editor.

Panel 3: How historical scarcity still matters?

Moderator: Dr. Aung Tun Thet

Panelists: Dr. Thant Thaw Kaung, Nay Phone Latt, Ye Myat Thu, U Aung Min

Public libraries face legal challenges moving forward, particularly in terms of legislation specifying how and how much public taxes and funds must support them. Programs and initiatives that libraries could promote--including hate speech reduction and e-government--all require public buy-in to be successful. Although "naming and shaming" is one strategy for hate speech reduction, some take issue because of Myanmar's historical context, and instead advocate for peer education and monitoring. Launching e-government may rely in part of distinguishing between e-government--the body that is administering law--and *e-governance*--the system with which user and citizens interact.

Panel 4: Citizen information challenges

Moderator: U Ko Ko

Panelists: Myat The Thitsar, Zeya Thu, Dr. Basheerhamad Shadrach, Zaw Htet Aung

Myanmar suffers from "trust scarcity," in which citizens, government, media, and other groups are wary of the information they provide each other. This leads in turn to information scarcity, which allows one group to strictly control information and further increases divisions among groups. In this environment, content creation and access negotiation become the citizen's responsibility, ideally with support and assistance from libraries. This

creates both challenges and opportunities for a more streamlined, efficient e-governance system better poised to serve citizens at various levels of digital and media literacy.

Panel 5: Information disconnect between international and local actors

Moderator: Lei Zhang (Rosie)

Panelists: Ari Katz, Fiona Bradley, U Shwe Thein, U Aung Naing Oo

Both Beyond Access's experience with local libraries and IFLA's international collaboration with Myanmar's library associations are grounded in the historical legacy of Myanmar's large library system and the value that people see in having open community hubs. A combined advocacy voice between locally and internationally engaged Myanmar library actors will make that legacy even stronger. On a separate topic, the lack of legal clarity surrounding land ownership in Myanmar demands more clearly defined and communicated land rights. With 20 departments and over 32 laws on land, discriminatory practices of information in this area are common and problematic. Equal access to land information will benefit investors, public servants, researchers, and--above all-- the people working and living on contested land.

Panel 6: Role of information strategies in 2015 general election

Moderator: Mary Callahan

Panelists: Sai Ye Kyaw Swar Myint, U Kapno, Soe Lin Htoot, Myat The Thitsar

Although there was great joy in the popular outcome of Myanmar's 2015 national election, the electoral process itself still faces many challenges. Key issues include voter lists and registration, the election timetable, and communication and dissemination of election results in accessible, interoperable formats. In addition to working on these issues for upcoming local elections, some anticipate questioning whether the UEC--a non-independent electoral body--will be appropriate for democratic Myanmar in the future.