Meta in Myanmar, Part I: The Setup

"Technology is like a bomb in Myanmar." —Kyaw Kyaw, frontman of Burmese punk band Rebel Riot [1]

Back in early July, I started working on a quick series of posts about online structures of refuge and exposure. In a draft of what I meant to be the second post in the series, I tried to write a tight two or three paragraphs about the role Meta played in the genocide of the Rohingya people in Myanmar, and why it made me dubious about Threads. Over time, those two or three paragraphs turned into a long summary, then a detailed timeline, then an unholy hybrid of blog post and research paper.

What I learned in the process was so starkly awful that I finally set the whole series aside for a while until I could do a lot more reading and write something more substantial. Nearly three months later, I'm ready to share my notes.

Here's a necessary personal disclosure: I've never trusted Facebook, mostly because I've been around tech for a long time and everything I've

But once I started to really dig in, what I learned was so much gnarlier and grosser and more devastating than what I'd assumed. The harms Meta passively and actively fueled destroyed or ended hundreds of thousands of lives that might have been yours or mine, but for accidents of birth. I say "hundreds of thousands" because "millions" sounds unbelievable, but by the end of my research I came to believe that the actual number is very, very large.

To make sense of it, I had to try to go back, reset my assumptions, and try build up a detailed, factual understanding of what happened in this one tiny slice of the world's experience with Meta. The risks and harms in Myanmar—and their connection to Meta's platform—are meticulously documented. And if you're willing to spend time in the documents, it's not that hard to piece together what happened.

I started down this path—in this series, on this site, over this whole year—because I want to help make better technologies and systems in service of a better world. And I think the only way to make better things is to thoroughly understand what's happened so far. Put another way, I want to base decisions on transparently sourced facts and cautiously reasoned analysis, not on assumptions or vibes—mine or anyone else's.

precision as I can. I cite a lot of documentation from humanitarian organizations and many well-sourced media reports, and also a bunch of internal Meta documentation. What I'm after is maybe something like a *cultural-technical incident report*. I hope it helps.

This is the first of four posts in the series. Thank you for reading.

I've put notes about terms (Meta vs. Facebook, Myanmar vs. Burma, etc.) and sources and warnings in a separate meta-post. If you're someone who likes to know about that kind of thing, you might want to pop that post open in a tab. If you spot typos or inaccuracies, I'm reachable at erin at incisive.nu and appreciate all bug reports.

Content warning: I'm marking some sections and some cited sources with individual warnings, but this is a story with a genocide at its heart, so be aware of that going in. I've also included a small selection of hateful messages in this post and throughout the series so that it's clear what we're talking about when we talk about "hate speech." Some contain words that, used in specific contexts, constitute slurs. I put some notes about all of that in the meta post as well.

Even if you never read any further, know this: Facebook played what the lead investigator on the UN Human Rights Council's Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar (hereafter just "the UN Mission") called a "determining role" in the bloody emergence of what would become the genocide of the Rohingya people in Myanmar.[2]

From far away, I think Meta's role in the Rohingya crisis can feel blurry and debatable—it was content moderation fuckups, right? In a country they weren't paying much attention to? Unethical and probably negligent, but come on, what tech company isn't, at some point?

Plus, Meta has popped up in the press and before Congress to admit that they fucked up and have concrete plans to do better. They lost sleep over it, said Adam Mosseri, the person in charge of Facebook's News Feed, back in March of 2018.

By that point in 2018, Myanmar's military had murdered thousands of Rohingya people, including babies and children, and beaten, raped, tortured, starved, and imprisoned thousands more. About *three-quarters of a million* Rohingya had fled Myanmar to live in huge, disease-infested refugee camps in Bangladesh.

By that point, Meta had been receiving detailed and increasingly desperate warnings about Facebook's role as an accelerant of genocidal propaganda in Myanmar for *six years.*

My big hope for the internet is that we handle the shit we need to handle to make sturdier, less poisoned/poisonous ways to connect and collaborate in the gnarly-looking decades ahead. I think that's not just *possible*, but that it's our responsibility to work toward it. Also, I'm pretty sure that despite the best intentions and the most transparent processes, we risk doing enormous harm if we don't learn from the past. (Maybe even if we do.)

This series is for anyone who, like me—and despite everything not good about the tech world —has found themselves periodically heartened and sustained by open technology projects, online communities, and ways of being together even when we're far apart.

And the thing I want you, and all of us, to remember about the sudden flowering of the internet in Myanmar in the 2010s is that in the beginning, it was incredibly welcome and so filled with hope.

After decades of crushing state repression, a more democratic regime came into power in Myanmar in 2011 and gradually relaxed restrictions on the internet, and on speech more generally. Journalist and tech researcher Faine Greenwood (they/them) is working in Southeast Asia at the time, and gets caught up in the spirit of the moment, despite their skepticism about the benefits of the internet:

> I'd connected with a Myanmar NGO dedicated to digital inclusion, and through them, I got a chance to meet and interview a number of brilliant and extremely online Burmese people, all of them brimming with long-suppressed, almost giddy, optimism about their country's technological future.
>
> It was hard for me not to share their enthusiasm, their massive relief at finally getting out from under the jackboot of a military regime that had tried to lock them away from the rest of their world for as long as they could remember. I came away from speaking with them with a warm, happy feeling about how online communication maybe, just maybe, really did have the power to unfuck the world.[3]

by the ruling junta, dropped from the equivalent
of $2,000 USD in 2009, to $250 in 2012, to $1.50
in 2014.[4]

Mobile adoption explodes, from less than one
quarter of a percent of the population in 2011 to
more than 90% in 2017.[5] And smartphone use
and internet uptake spikes *with* the mobile
revolution instead of dragging along behind—a
2017 Bloomberg article does some flavor reporting
to contextualize those numbers:

> Thiri Thant Mon, owner of a small
> investment bank in the city, says she
> still remembers how magazines from the
> outside world used to arrive weeks late
> because censors needed time to comb
> through them.

> "Suddenly because we're on internet,"
> she said, "people realize what the rest of
> the world looks like. Now it's like
> everybody on the street is talking about
> Trump. A few years ago, nobody knew
> what was happening in the next
> town."[6]

In 2015, writer and photographer Craig Mod is
working with a team doing internet ethnography
in rural Myanmar on behalf of an organization

lives of farmers, who make up the majority of Myanmar's populace. (Disclosure: Craig and I have halfass-known each other for going on a couple of decades, and I'm a longtime fan of his work.)

[Mod's essay about his work](#) is clearly the product of a sensitive eye and a nerd's delight in the way new technology twines up with the unevenly distributed realities of daily life:

> The village still lacks electricity although they've pooled funds and a dozen newly planted metal-power poles dot the fields, waiting to be wired up. Through our interpreter I ask, Where do you charge? Farmer Number Ten points to a car battery hanging in the corner onto which familiar USB wires are spliced.

The tech is all over the place, "cheap but capable," and Craig wonders if the one-smartphone-per-human result would [make Nicholas Negroponte happy](#). There are no iPhones, no credit cards, no data plans: "Everyone buys top-up from top-up shops, scratches off complex serial numbers printed in a small font, types them with special network codes into their phone dialers in a way that feels steampunkish, like they're divining data. They feel each megabyte."[7]

This is the point in the conversation when it becomes impossible not to talk about Facebook. Because in Myanmar, even back in 2012 and 2013, being online meant being on Facebook.

I'd read about Facebook's superdominance in Amnesty International's reporting, in long stories from Reuters and *Wired* and the *NYT* and the *Guardian*, in books, even in UN reports. But Mod's notes bring to life both Facebook's pervasiveness and the way Burmese people actually used it:

> We ask about apps. The farmer uses [chat app] Viber and Facebook. He says he chats with a few friends on Facebook but mainly people he doesn't know. Most of his Facebook friends are strangers. He tells us his brother installed the app for him, and set up his account. He doesn't know the email address that was used. He gets most of his news from Facebook. The election looms and he loves the political updates.

> Farmer Number Ten tells us he used to use radio for news but no more. He says he hasn't turned the radio on in years. Other news apps—like one called TZ— use too much data. He's data conscious.

And speaking with the proprietor of a cellphone shop:

> Facebook is the most popular app, he says. Nine out of ten people who come into the shop want Facebook. Ten months ago SIM prices dropped, data prices dropped, interest in Facebook jumped. I take note. Only half the people who come into the shop already have a Facebook account. The other half don't know how to make one. I do that for them, he says. I am the account maker.
>
> And what about other apps? He mentions a news app called TZ. Once popular, now less so. He brushes his hand aside and says it's too data hungry. Everyone is data sensitive he says and reiterates: Facebook. Nobody needs a special app for their interests. Just search for your interest on Facebook. Facebook is the Internet.[8]

But how did Facebook get to be the internet?

In the early years, there's a stripped-down version of the app kicking around that used less data than competitors'. But also, when Myanmar's

Telenor, "zero-rates" Facebook.[9] Essentially, [zero-rating is a selective subsidy](); it means that customers won't be charged for the data they use for some parts of the internet, but not others. For all of Telenor's customers, using Facebook is free.

I want to briefly flip ahead to something Meta whistleblower Frances Haugen says in a 2021 interview:

> Facebook bought the privilege of being the internet for the majority of languages in the world. It subsidized people's use of its own platform, and said "Hey, you can use anything you want, but you'll have to pay for that—or you can use our platform for free." As a result, for the majority of languages in the world, 80 or 90% of all the content in that exists in those languages is on Facebook.[10]

That this explosion of connectivity presented dangers as well as freedoms is immediately clear to civil society orgs in Myanmar, for two main reasons: The first is the state of comparative innocence with which the vast majority of Burmese people approach the internet. The second is that the political situation in Myanmar is a powderkeg at best.

about Myanmar reflects no willingness to adjust for the first two. To get to that, we need to start at the beginning.

The blogger and the monk

A tiny canned history of modern Myanmar might go like this: In a series of East-India-Company–entangled conflicts, the British Empire took control of Myanmar, then called Burma. From the beginning of the wars in 1824 to 1948, Britain ruled Burma, with a big rupture during WWII when Japan invaded Burma.

After the war, the Burmese government the British left behind was too weak to withstand the combination of vigorous civil conflict with ethnic minorities on the frontiers and a 1962 coup by military leaders.

Thant U-Mynt's *The River of Lost Footsteps: Histories of Burma* (FSG, 2006) is a very readable history of Myanmar.

Beginning in 1962, Burma—renamed Myanmar in English by the ruling junta, but the two names come from the same root—is under incredibly tight military rule. Beginning in 2011, the junta relaxes their grip, and Myanmar begins a precarious transition to a more democratic form of government. Note: All through this entire period, Myanmar's military, the Tatmadaw, is also waging a 70-year civil war with armed insurgencies

Starting the year after Myanmar's first quasi-democratic general election in 2010, the Burmese government begins granting mass amnesties to the country's many political prisoners. Hundreds of people—journalists, activists, artists, religious leaders, and many more—are released over the next few years.

In the mass amnesty granted in January of 2012, two of the many prisoners released will go on to found organizations that play major and opposing roles in escalating crises of communal and military violence that Myanmar's entry to the internet will fuel.

One is Nay Phone Latt, an early blogger and digital rights activist, who was jailed in 2008, basically for blogging about the 2007 Saffron Revolution demonstrations. Nay Phone Latt will go on to co-found MIDO, an organization dedicated to helping Myanmar's ordinary citizens reap the benefits of the newly available internet. Over the next several years, MIDO will come up repeatedly in the intense struggle against online hate campaigns, especially on Facebook.[11]

The second is Ashin Wirathu, a Buddhist monk jailed in 2003 for sermons inciting violence against Myanmar's Muslim communities.[12]

major role in the coming waves of anti-Muslim violence—also especially on Facebook.

In 2013, Faine Greenwood goes back to Myanmar to write about the country's first Internet Freedom Forum, "a gathering dedicated to helping Myanmar's people take advantage of the new, liberated Internet." Faine writes about the heady vibes:

> Nay Phone Latt spoke at the conference, and so did a number of the other brilliant young Burmese tech enthusiasts I'd met before. The mood was still buoyantly optimistic as we circulated from one Post-It note-filled brainstorming session to the next, as we drank tea, discussed Internet freedom regulations and online privacy.
>
> And yet, I could detect a slight edge in the air, a certain trepidation that had grown, mutated into new forms, in the few months since I'd been away […] During the conference, we talked about how hateful talk about the Rohingya was starting to pop up on Facebook, about how it was casting an ominous shadow

The edge in the air and the ominous shadow aren't just vague feelings—they're connected to a surge in communal violence the same year of that critical mass amnesty, and to a parallel rise in online hate speech.

MIDO co-founder and program director Htaike Htaike Aung spoke on the online dynamics she and her colleagues encountered in the early days:

> Unlike in countries where people gradually got used to the Internet and learnt how to find good content, thus learning what is bad content, for Myanmar this hype went straight up and people did not have the time to reflect on what the Internet is actually about. This perception can be summarized in the phrase: "Okay, if it's on the Internet it must be right". This really is dangerous, particularly if there are people who are using the Internet for the wrong agenda and propaganda.[14]

In 2014, Nay Phone Latt explains what he's seeing and why he's worried about it:

> When we advocate for free speech, reducing hate speech is included....

hate among people and is a risk for society… It is the wrong use of freedom of speech. I am worried about that because it is not only spreading on social media but also by some writers and [Buddhist] monks who are spreading hate speech publicly. [...]

If people hate each other, a place will not be safe to live. I worry about that most for our society. In some places, although they are not fighting, hate exists within their heart because they have poured poison into their heart for a long time [through hate speech]. It can explode in anytime.[15]

So what were Htaike Htaike Aung and Nay Phone Latt and their colleagues seeing that made them so worried? Here are some Facebook comments from all the way back in 2011, sparked by the BBC's audacity in…referring to Rohingya people as a ethnic group that exists in Myanmar at all. The BBC's offending infographic had been up for a year before the BBC's Burmese Facebook page was flooded with comments:

Kick out all Muslim Kalar [Rohingyas, South Asians/Indians] from Burma. If this doesn't work, then kill them to

> Don't assume that I won't sharpen my knife. I am ready to make it sharp for the sake of protecting our nation, religion and races against those Bengali cheaters.
>
> F@#$-ing Kalar, we will slap your face with shoes and cut your heads. Don't criticize the god with little of what you know. We will set you on fire to death and turn the mosques into wholesales/retail pork markets…[16]

The New Mandala article about the controversy includes memes mocking BBC journalist Anna Jones using vintage 4chan trollface visuals, if that helps situate things for you.

So this is the landscape already in place *before* Nay Phone Latt was released from prison in 2012. And things don't get any better as Facebook/internet adoption spikes.

We know now that behind the scenes, Burmese activists and organizations—and concerned westerners—spent this period desperately trying to get Facebook to act on the rapidly rising surge of anti-Rohingya hate speech. But neither those efforts nor public educational/digital literacy

"Kalar," when used to refer to Rohingya people and other Muslims in Myanmar, is a slur with implications of ugliness, dark skin, and/or foreign ancestry.

The Rohingya

I need to make a brief detour, about the Rohingya. Here's Médicins Sans Frontières, from their [reference page about the Rohingya refugee crisis](#):

> The Rohingya are a stateless ethnic group, the majority of whom are Muslim, who have lived for centuries in the majority Buddhist Myanmar, mostly in the country's north, in Rakhine state. However, Myanmar authorities contest this; they claim the Rohingya are Bengali immigrants who came to Myanmar in the 20th century.
>
> Described by the United Nations in 2013 as one of the most persecuted minorities in the world, the Rohingya are denied citizenship under Myanmar law. [17]

It's hard to overstate how contested those basic facts are within Myanmar itself, where successive governments have rejected any recognition of Rohingya *existence*, let along legitimacy, referring to them instead as illegal "Bengali" immigrants. [18] (The Rohingya Culture Center in Chicago has

I've relied heavily on Carlos Sardiña Galache's The Burmese Labyrinth (Verso, 2020) and Thant Myint-U's The Hidden History of Burma (WW Norton, 2019) to build

Going deeper, things get immediately, bogglingly complicated. My background is inadequate to the task of explaining the entangled ethnic, religious, and political histories of Myanmar in even just Rakhine (formerly Arakan) State, where the Rohingya crisis takes place. What you need to know to understand this series is mostly just that Rohingya people do in fact exist and have long lived under crushing restrictions. Also that Myanmar's Buddhist political mainstream has long been concerned with racial purity and security. And openly so: the official motto of the Ministry of Immigration and Population is: "The earth will not swallow a race to extinction but another race will."[20]

The rumors and the killings (2012)

Content warning: Violence against men, women, and children.

On the 28th of May, 2012, a Buddhist Rakhine woman called Ma Thida Htwe is killed in a village in Rakhine State. The next day, a newspaper reports that she was raped and murdered by "kalars" and calls the killing "the worst homicide case in Myanmar." Almost immediately, graphic photos of her body begin circulating online. [21]

In this section, I draw heavily from the findings of the UN Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar. I want to put a caution here in the main text that the findings document is *an analysis of atrocities*, so heads up, it's very rough reading.

rape allegation and ethnic origin of the suspected culprits remain in doubt, and that, "In the following days and weeks, it was mainly the rape allegation, more than the murder, which was used to incite violence and hatred against the Rohingya."[22]

For the people who've been working to whip up anti-Rohingya hatred and violence, the crime against Ma Thida Htwe is a perfect opportunity—and they use it, immediately, to suggest that it's merely the leading edge of a coming wave of attacks by Rohingya terrorists. Four days after Ma Thida Htwe's death, on June 1st, Zaw Htay, the spokesman of the President of Myanmar, posts a statement on Facebook warning that "Rohingya terrorists" are "crossing the border into Myanmar with weapons." He goes on:

> We don't want to hear any humanitarian or human rights excuses. We don't want to hear your moral superiority, or so-called peace and loving kindness…. Our ethnic people are in constant fear in their own land. I feel very bitter about this. This is our country. This is our land.[23]

On June 3rd, five days after the Rakhine woman's murder, a nationalist Buddhist group hands out leaflets in a village in southern Rakhine State stating that Muslims are assaulting Buddhist

day, and the villagers haul the men out, beat them to death, and destroy the bus. A few days later, Rohingya people in a nearby town riot, killing Buddhist villagers and burning homes. [24]

In [an article published on the academic regional analysis site New Mandala](#) only seven days after the Rohingya men are killed in Rakhine State, Burmese PhD candidate Sai Latt writes:

> What actually triggered public anger? It may have been racial profiling by the ethnic Arakan news agency, Narinjara… When the rape incident took place, the agency published news identifying the accused with their Islamic faith. In its Burmese language news, the incident was presented as if Muslims [read aliens] were threatening local people, and now they have raped and brutally killed a woman. The words—Muslims, Kalar, Islam—were repeatedly used in its news reports. The news spread and people started talking about it in terms of Kalar and "Lu Myo Char [i.e. different race/people or alien] insulting our woman".

> Interestingly, Naranjara and Facebook users started talking about the accused rapists as Kalars even when the

The information landscape in Myanmar is so unstable that accounts of any given incident conflict, often in major ways. Sai Latt's post I link to refers to nine Rohingya men and a woman—other accounts refer to ten Muslim men and one Buddhist killed by mistake. I'm using the UN Mission's carefully investigated accounts as the closest thing to ground truths, but few details—especially in media accounts—should be taken as absolute facts.

In the wave of military and communal violence that follows, members of both Rakhine (the dominant Buddhist ethnicity in Rakhine State) and Rohingya communities commit murder and arson, but the brunt of the attacks falls on the Rohingya. The UN Mission's findings describe house-burning, looting, "extrajudicial and indiscriminate killings, including of women, children and elderly people," and the "mass arbitrary arrests" and torture of Rohingya people by soldiers and police. More than 100,000 people, most of them Rohinyga, are forced from their homes. [26]

The next wave of violence comes in October and shows evidence of coordinated planning. According to Human Rights Watch, the fall attacks were "organized, incited, and committed by local Arakanese political party operatives, the Buddhist monkhood, and ordinary Arakanese, at times directly supported by state security forces." The attacks included mass killings of Rohingya men, women, and children, whose villages and homes were burned to the ground, sometimes in simultaneous attacks across geographically distant communities.

In the worst attack that October, police and soldiers in Myanmar's military, the Tatmadaw, preemptively confiscate sticks and other

murders at least 70 Rohingya people over the course of a single day.

Human Rights Watch reports that 28 children are hacked to death in the attack, including 13 children under the age of 5.[27]

Every spark is more likely to turn into a fire

According to many of Amnesty International's interviews with Rohingya refugees, the 2012 episodes of communal violence mark the turning point of Myanmar's slide into intense anti-Rohingya rhetoric, persecution, and, ultimately, genocide. Mohamed Ayas, a Rohingya schoolteacher and refugee, puts it this way:

> We used to live together peacefully alongside the other ethnic groups in Myanmar. Their intentions were good to the Rohingya, but the government was against us. The public used to follow their religious leaders, so when the religious leaders and government started spreading hate speech on Facebook, the minds of the people changed.[28]

a Myanmar-based political analyst with decades of experience in the country and (now, at least) advisor to The International Crisis Group.

Horsey's take on the situation in Myanmar accords with the Amnesty interviews:

> We've seen violence in previous decades by Buddhist populations against Muslim populations, but what's new is that this information is readily available and transmissible. People are using Facebook and mobile phones, and so you get a much greater resonation every time there's an issue. Every time there's a spark, it's much more likely to turn into a fire.[29]

In the months between the June and October waves of violence in Myanmar, dehumanizing and violence-inciting anti-Rohingya messages continue to circulate on Burmese-language Facebook. Western observers who fly in to conduct investigations emphasize town-hall meetings and pamphlets spreading hateful and violent rhetoric, but—while noting that it was also surging online—write off the internet as a major influence on the events because internet access remains unusual in rural Rakhine State.[30]

—Htaike Htaike Aung, Nay Phone Latt, and Sai Latt—about hate speech on *Facebook specifically* suggest to me that it's possible that western observers may have underestimated the role of secondhand transmission of internet-circulated ideas, including *printed copies* of internet propaganda, which are cited as a vector in an interview with another MIDO co-founder, Phyu Phyu Thi. (This exact dynamic—the printed internet—shows up in Sheera Frenkel's 2016 BuzzFeed News article, which cites "print magazines called Facebook and The Internet.") [31]

In any case, online and off, hardline Buddhist monks, members of the government, and what *appear* to be ordinary people are all echoing a few distinct ideas: They claim that the Rohingya are not a real ethnic group, but illegal "Bengali" immigrants; subhuman animals who "outbreed" Buddhists; indistinguishable from terrorists; an immediate danger to the sexual purity and safety of Buddhist women and to Buddhist Myanmar as a whole. [32]

Sai Latt writes in June 2012 that the anti-Rohingya hate campaign is "a public and transnational movement orchestrated openly on social media websites," which includes thousands of people from the Burmese diaspora:

Sai Latt also cites a Facebook account for exiled Burmese film director Cho Tu Zal with 5,000 friends and more than 2,000 subscribers

littered on thousands of Facebook walls and pages. Thousands of Burmese-speaking Facebook users are exposed to them every single day. Many Facebook groups such as "Kalar Beheading Gang" appeared one after another. While it is possible to report abuse to Facebook, there were few Burmese Muslim Facebook users who would report to Facebook. Even when they did successfully, new groups keep appearing frequently.

That Facebook Page, "Kalar Beheading Gang," shows up in the international press as well. It features "an illustration of a grim reaper with an Islamic symbol on its robe on a blood-spattered background," and a stream of graphic photos presented as evidence of Rohingya atrocities. By the time the *Hindustan Times* article goes to press on June 14, 2012, the Page already has more than 500 likes.[33]

When Sai Latt says that what he's seeing on Facebook is an orchestrated movement, he's right. Remember Wirathu, the Buddhist monk released in the same amnesty as MIDO's Nay Phone Latt? Soon after his release from prison, he's one of the people doing the orchestrating.

"We are being raped in every town, being sexually harassed in every town, being ganged up on and bullied in every town.… In every town, there is a crude and savage Muslim majority." —Wirathu, 2013 [34]

Ashin Wirathu is very, very good at Facebook. He spoke with BuzzFeed News about his history on the platform:

> [Wirathu's] first account was small, he said, and almost immediately deleted by Facebook moderators who wrote that it violated their community standards. The second had 5,000 friends and grew so quickly he could no longer accept new requests. So he started a new page and hired two full-time employees who now update the site hourly.

> "I have a Facebook account with 190,000 followers and a news Facebook page. The internet and Facebook are very useful and important to spread my messages," he said.

> On the dozens of Facebook pages he runs out of a dedicated office, Wirathu has called for the boycott of Muslim

In a [2013 video interview with the Global Post](#), Wirathu speaks placidly about the possibility of interfaith problem-solving and multi-ethnic peace—and then, with no transition or change of tone, about Muslims "devouring the Burmese people, destroying Buddhist and Buddhist order, forcefully taking action to establish Myanmar as an Islamic country, and forcefully implementing them." To these absolute fantasies—Muslims make up maybe five percent of Myanmar's population at this time—Wirathu adds that, "Muslims are like the African carp. They breed quickly and they are very violent and they eat their own kind."[36]

In 2013, *Time* puts Wirathu on the cover of its international editions as "[The Face of Buddhist Terror](#)." *Time* reporter Hannah Beech quotes him in the cover story explaining that 90% of Muslims in Myanmar are "radical bad people," and that Barack Obama is "tainted by black Muslim blood." [37]

International perception matters to Myanmar's Buddhist establishment. In [Callan's documentary](#), you can see protesting monks carrying a printed banner denouncing Hannah Beech, with her photograph crossed out.

Photo by Adam Dean/Panos

It would be hard to overstate Wirathu's influence in Myanmar during the years leading up to the beginning of the Rohingya genocide. One NGO writes that, "It is noteworthy that almost every major outbreak of communal violence since October 2012 in Rakhine state has been preceded by a 969-sponsored preaching tour in the area, usually by [Wirathu] himself."[38] In fact, the same thing is true of the 2012 violence, though

proposal by then-President Thein Sein to deport the Rohingya en masse. The worst of the violence in Rakhine State took place the very next month. [39]

I think it's useful to note that the 969/Ma Bha Tha movement Wirathu is associated with is also a force for practical and immediate good among Myanmar's Buddhist majority—they run or support lots of Buddhist religious education for children, legal aid, donation drives, and relief campaigns. And these things, along with the high esteem in which monks are generally held in Myanmar, makes them seem exceptionally credible. [40]

Wirathu himself is beloved not only for his incendiary sermons that "defend" Buddhism by demonizing Muslims, but also for his direct involvement in community support. If the project of supporting and defending Buddhism is extended to eliminating the Rohingya, maybe those two kinds of action blur. In Callan's documentary, Wirathu holds office hours to help ordinary community members solve problems and disputes. His attention flicks constantly between the petitioners kneeling in front of him and the smartphone cradled in his hand.

A few years later, Wirathu—by then running a Facebook empire with nearly 200,000 followers,

[Myanmar], not many people would know my opinion and messages like now," Wirathu told BuzzFeed News, adding that he had always written books and delivered sermons but that the "internet is a faster way to spread the messages." [41]

A quick aside

I don't want to spend much time on my process, but I do want to make a note about the provenance of a document that would otherwise have unclear sourcing.

Several accounts of Meta's role in Myanmar's persecution of the Rohingya include partial lists of the *many* warnings people on the ground in Burma—and concerned international human-rights watchers—delivered to Meta executives between 2012 and 2018. Taking on the implications of that litany of warnings and missed chances is what first gave me the first taste of the sinking dread that has characterized my experience of this project.

Because of citations in Amnesty International's big Meta/Myanmar report, I knew there was a "briefing deck" floating around somewhere that had more details, but the closest reference I could

up.

Eventually, I found a version of it on a French timeline-making site in the form of a [heavily annotated timeline](#), and cross-referenced that version with tweets from [Htaike Htaike Aung](#) and [Victoire Rio](#), the women credited in the Amnesty report with making the deck. The URL they link to in the tweets is the dead one, but the preview image in their tweets is an exact match for the timeline I found. I cite this timeline a lot below.

The warnings
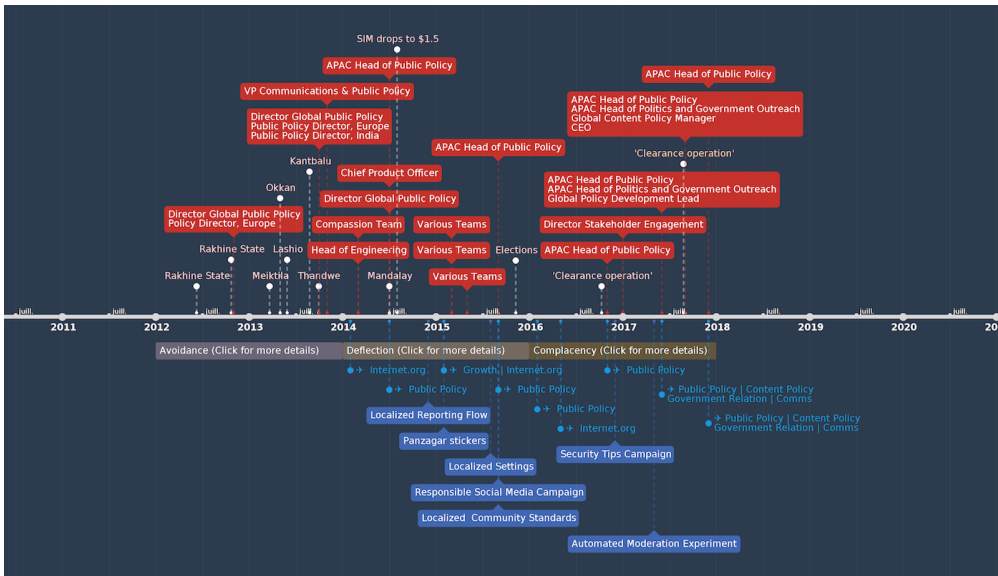
Screenshot of the timeline discussed above.

All the way back in **November of 2012**, **Htaike Htaike Aung**, MIDO's program director, speaks with Meta's Director of Global Public Policy and

Azerbaijan. Eleven months later, in **October 2013**, **Htaike Htaike Aung** brings up her concerns again in the context of "rising inter-communal tensions" at a roundtable discussion in Indonesia attended by three Meta policy executives including the Director of Global Public Policy.[42]

At the same time, activists and researchers from MIDO and Yangon-based tech-accelerator Phandeeyar "followed up over email to ask for ways to get Facebook to review problematic content and address emergency escalations." Facebook didn't respond. MIDO and Phandeeyar staff start doing "targeted research on hate speech."[43]

In **November of 2013**, **Aela Callan** (whose documentary work I've cited) meets with Facebook's VP of Communications and Public Policy, Eliot Schrage, to warn about anti-Rohingya hate speech—and the fake accounts promoting it —on Facebook.[44] After her visit, Meta puts Callan in touch with Internet.org—the global initiative that would eventually cement Facebook's hegemony in Myanmar, among other places—and with Facebook's bullying-focused "Compassion Team," but not with anyone inside Facebook who could actually help.[45]

In March 2014, four months before deadly, Facebook-juiced riots break out in Mandalay,

two women met with members of Meta's Compassion Team to try once again to get Facebook to pay attention to the threat its service poses in Myanmar. [46]

In the same month, **Susan Benesch**, head of the [Dangerous Speech Project](#), coordinates a briefing call for Meta, attended by half a dozen Meta employees, including Arturo Bejar, head of engineering at Facebook.

On the call, **Matt Schissler**, a Myanmar-based human-rights specialist, delivers a grim assessment describing dehumanizing messages, faked photos, and misinformation spreading on Facebook. In *An Ugly Truth: Inside Facebook's Battle for Domination*, their 2021 book about Facebook's dysfunction, reporters Sheera Frenkel and Cecilia Kang describe Schissler's presentation:

> Toward the end of the meeting, Schissler gave a stark recounting of how Facebook was hosting dangerous Islamophobia. He detailed the dehumanizing and disturbing language people were using in posts and the doctored photos and misinformation being spread widely.[47]

"We will genocide all of the Muslims and feed them to the dogs." [48]

None of this seems to get through to the Meta employees on the line, who are interested in... cyberbullying. Frenkel and Kang write that the Meta employees on the call "believed that the same set of tools they used to stop a high school senior from intimidating an incoming freshman could be used to stop Buddhist monks in Myanmar."[49]

Aela Callan later tells *Wired* that hate speech seemed to be a "low priority" for Facebook, and that the situation in Myanmar, "was seen as a connectivity opportunity rather than a big pressing problem."[50]

Then comes Mandalay.

"Facebook said nothing"

I don't have space to tell the whole story of the 2014 Mandalay violence here—Timothy McLaughlin's *Wired* article is good on it—but it has all the elements civil society watchdogs have been worried about: Two innocent Muslim men are falsely accused of raping a Buddhist woman, sensationalist news coverage explodes, and Ashin

circulating on Facebook.

This is exactly the kind of situation Htaike Htaike Aung, Callan, Schissler, and others had been warning Meta could happen—but when it actually arrives, no one at Meta picks up the phone.

As the violence in Mandalay worsens, the head of Deloitte in Myanmar gets an urgent call. Zaw Htay, the official spokesman of Myanmar's president, needs help reaching Meta. The Deloitte executive works into the night trying to get someone to respond, but never gets through. On the third day of rioting, the government gets tired of waiting and blocks access to Facebook in Mandalay. The block works—the riots died down. And the Deloitte guy's inbox suddenly fills with emails from Meta staffers wanting to know why Facebook has been blocked.[51]

The government wasn't the only group trying to get through. A few months before, a handful of Facebook employees—including members of policy, legal, and comms teams—had formed a private Facebook group, to allow some of the civil-society experts from Myanmar to flag problems to Facebook staff directly.

With false reports and calls to violence beginning to spread on Facebook in Mandalay, Burmese

the violence turns deadly. A member of the group later tells Frenkel and Kang:

> When it came to answering our messages about the riots, Facebook said nothing. When it came to the internet being shut down, and people losing Facebook, suddenly, they are returning messages right away. It showed where their priorities are.[52]

A couple of weeks after the violence in Mandalay in 2014, Facebook's Director of Policy for the Asia-Pacific region, Mia Garlick, travels to Myanmar for the first time. In a panel discussion, Garlick discusses Meta's policies and promises to…speed up the translation of Facebook's Community Standards (its basic content rules) into Burmese. That single piece of translation work—Facebook's main offering in response to internationally significant ethnic violence about which the company has been warned for two years —takes Meta fourteen months to accomplish and relies, in the end, on the Phandeeyar folks in the private Facebook group.[53]

Also in 2014, Meta agrees to localize their reporting tool for hate speech and other objectionable content. Meta employees work with MIDO and other Burmese civil-society people to

There's just one problem: As the Burmese civil society people in the private Facebook group finally learn, Facebook has *a single Burmese-speaking moderator*—a contractor based in Dublin—to review everything that comes in. The Burmese-language reporting tool is, as Htaike Htaike Aung and Victoire Rio put it in their timeline, "a road to nowhere."[54]

Yet more warnings

Heading into 2015, the warnings keep coming:

February 2015: Susan Benesch, founder and director of the Dangerous Speech Project at the Berkman Klein Center (that's the Berkman Center as was, for my fellow olds) gives a presentation called "The Dangerous Side of Language" during *Compassion Day* at Facebook. According to this legal filing for a class-action suit against Meta on behalf of the Rohingya, the presentation explains "how anti-Rohingya speech is being disseminated by Facebook."[55]

March 2015: Matt Schissler travels to Menlo Park to meet with Facebook employees in person. Reuters reports that he "gave a talk at Facebook's California headquarters about new media,

employees attended, he said." Frenkel and Kang describe his presentation as documenting "the seriousness of what was happening in Myanmar: hate speech on Facebook was leading to real-world violence in the country, and it was getting people killed."[56]

After his meeting at Meta, Schissler has lunch with a few Meta employees, and one of them asked Schissler if he thought Facebook could contribute to a genocide in Myanmar, to which Schissler responded, "Absolutely." Afterwards, Schissler tells Frenkel and Kang, one Facebook employee loudly remarks, "He can't be serious. That's just not possible."[57]

May 2015: Another expert comes to Menlo Park to warn Facebook about the dangerous dynamics it was feeding in Myanmar: **David Madden**, founder of Phandeeyar, the technology accelerator in Myanmar. In an interview with Amnesty International, Madden reported that "those of us who were working on these issues in Myanmar had a sense that people in Facebook didn't appreciate the nature of the political situation in the country."[58]

PBS Frontline interviewed David Madden in 2018 for its documentary, *The Facebook Dilemma*; that interview is a good introduction to the dynamics in play.

In his meeting with Meta, Madden discusses specific examples of dangerous content and drew a direct analogy between radio news in Rwanda and Meta's role in Myanmar, "meaning it would

made."[59]

September 2015: Mia Garlick, Facebook's Director of Public Policy, Asia-Pacific, comes to Myanmar to *finally* launch Facebook's Burmese-language Community Standards. Phandeeyar puts together a group of "15+ civil-society leaders from across Myanmar" to brief Garlick "on specific incidents and actors."[60]

In an interview with Amnesty International, **Victoire Rio** reports that several of these leaders specifically tell Garlick that Facebook's Community Standards aren't being enforced in Myanmar.[61]

Which, of course they aren't: Reuters reports that in 2015, Facebook employed a total of two (2) Burmese-speaking moderators, expanding to four (4) by the year's end.[62]

To sum up a little bit, by the end of 2015, Meta knew—as much as any organization can be said to *know*—that both international civil society experts *and the government of Myanmar* believe Facebook had a significant role in the 2014 Mandalay riots.

organizations believed that Facebook was worsening ethnic conflict.

They'd been shown example after example of dehumanizing posts and comments calling for mass murder, even explicitly calling for genocide. And David Madden had told Meta staff to their faces that *Facebook might well play the role in Myanmar that radio played in Rwanda*. Nothing was subtle.

After all that, Meta decided not to dramatically scale up moderation capacity, to permanently ban the known worst actors, or to make fundamental product-design changes to reliably deviralize posts inciting hatred and violence.

Instead, in 2016, it was time to *get way more people in Myanmar onto Facebook*.

That's next, in Part II: The Crisis.

Footnotes

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Date   28 September 2023

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I wrote so many posts that that my posts needed a post. Sorry about that. For now,