

Meta/Facebook changes threaten Myanmar's digital space

8 January 2025

Mark Zuckerberg's [announcement](#) of significant changes to Meta's content moderation policies raises serious concerns for Myanmar, where Facebook has both enabled anti-coup dissent and [fuelled](#) real-world consequences, including [contributing](#) to atrocities against the Rohingya. While fostering free expression is commendable, Meta also has [heightened](#) legal and moral [responsibilities](#) under international human rights law and its previous [commitments](#) to prevent its platforms from enabling harm in high-risk environments like Myanmar.

Return to free expression must start with algorithms

Zuckerberg's acknowledgement that Meta's content moderation systems make "too many mistakes" is a positive step, as over-moderation stifles legitimate expression and censors reliable sources, including Myanmar's independent media. However, restoring freedom of expression should first address Meta's algorithms, which prioritise emotive content—including disinformation and divisive rhetoric—over trustworthy sources. In Myanmar, where such content [fuels](#) violence, tackling algorithmic bias is essential. Moderation alone cannot resolve the issue if harmful content remains prioritised for profit.

Meta's goal of fostering "friendly and positive" platforms [again](#) misreads contexts like Myanmar, where people face widespread human rights violations and censorship, going online to seek truth and accountability—not superficial positivity. Meta must emphasise accurate and context-aware content over sentiment.

Eliminating fact-checkers weakens truth-seeking efforts

Meta's decision to phase out fact-checkers, first in the U.S. and then globally, in favour of community-based systems is concerning, especially in Myanmar, where military propaganda and disinformation campaigns are [rampant](#) online. Zuckerberg's use of language discrediting fact-checkers as "politically biased" mirrors authoritarian regimes' attacks on civil society.

Fact-checkers counter false narratives in Myanmar often spread by a military that simultaneously [attacks](#) independent media and civil society. They are digital safeguards that promote truth and integrity in public discourse. Indeed, Meta's Human Rights Impact Assessment [recommended](#) that the company support fact-checkers in Myanmar. If fact-checkers' public reach is limited, Meta could easily amplify their influence. Many fact-checkers are journalists so withdrawing support also threatens the long-term viability of independent media, a critical pillar of democratic societies.

Reintroducing current affairs content is positive, but Ameri-centric approach persists

Zuckerberg's announcement to reverse the earlier deprioritisation of current affairs content is welcome. A coalition of Myanmar's civil society and independent media previously [warned](#) Meta that deprioritising current affairs content globally because of political polarisation in America would undermine public access to independent news in countries like Myanmar, given the severe restrictions on traditional media in the country.

While the policy reversal is positive, it highlights Meta's continued Ameri-centric approach in which global decisions are shaped by American political priorities, often disregarding the diverse needs of people worldwide that would be best served by prior consultation and potentially localised policies.

Free expression must be balanced with protection from harm

Meta's plan to promote free expression by removing "out of touch" restrictions on topics such as immigration and gender shows a similar Ameri-centric approach to balancing human rights according to American political priorities that raises serious concerns in the Myanmar context.

Discriminatory online speech targeting the Rohingya—often framed as claims about illegal migration—[contributed](#) to atrocity crimes in the country. Thousands of women and transgender persons have [suffered](#) from online harassment and abuse leading to real-world consequences. Establishing the right balance between protecting freedom of expression and protecting other rights cannot be done on a global level and should not be done without proper due diligence.

Challenge global digital dictators, not protectors

Zuckerberg's pledge to collaborate with the U.S. administration to resist governmental pressures on digital platforms could positively impact Myanmar, where the military seeks to control the digital space.

However, Meta must prioritise challenging truly oppressive regimes rather than use human rights language to cloak a pushback on democratic governments attempting to protect human rights such as privacy and data protection.

Meta has human rights responsibilities

Meta has conducted Human Rights Impact [Assessments](#) on Myanmar and other high-risk countries after [admitting](#) its platforms [enabled](#) human rights violations, including crimes against the Rohingya. These assessments are part of the United Nations' Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, which Meta has [committed](#) to follow. Meta's Myanmar assessment emphasises the need for context-based decisions and prior consultation. However, there is no indication that Meta has conducted adequate due diligence outside the U.S. ahead of these global changes. HRM fears this clear oversight could foreshadow a repeat of past mistakes.