Disinformation as a weapon in Myanmar

Disinformation in Myanmar is a deliberate, State-sponsored strategy designed to control narratives, silence dissent, and undermine human rights. This report, prepared by Human Rights Myanmar for the Human Rights Council Advisory Committee (Human Rights Council Resolution 55/10) investigates the methods of these disinformation campaigns, their impact on human rights, the harms caused by counter-measures, and the role of private actors such as social media companies.

Unmasking Myanmar's disinformation channels

Disinformation in Myanmar is spread through a network of State-controlled broadcasters, newspapers, and their online representation, as well as military-aligned proxies. The military tightly controls these channels, using them to manipulate public perceptions.

Information Ops

The military has built a sophisticated information ops unit—comprising a psychological warfare department, covert agencies, and thousands of soldiers tasked with disinformation.[1] This effort is supported by a quasi-civilian state infrastructure, including the Ministry of Information and its nationwide offices.

The State media puppets of propaganda

Myanmar's State-controlled broadcasters and newspapers, such as MRTV, Myawaddy TV, and publications like the Mirror, are central to the regime's disinformation strategy. They regularly air and print fabricated narratives that portray the military as guardians of stability while branding dissent as "terrorism". Following the 2021 coup, the systematic shutdown of independent media has ensured that state-run outlets dominate, particularly in rural communities where access to alternative sources has been eliminated.

State narratives on social platforms

The military extends its control into the digital space by operating on platforms like Facebook, Telegram, YouTube, and TikTok. Even as international platforms intermittently ban military-

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[1] Free Expression Myanmar (2022), "UN submission on military propaganda and disinformation".

linked accounts, new ones appear, often disguised as independent news outlets. These accounts spread false reports, label opposition figures as foreign agents, and manipulate the narrative surrounding elections and conflict, thereby reaching an even wider audience online.

Covert proxies

Beyond official State media, the military relies on military proxies and coordinated online campaigns to maintain its grip on information. These proxies, ranging from so-called "independent" influencers to organised disinformation networks, systematically flood social media with misleading stories, harass human rights defenders, and artificially amplify pro-military content. This digital manipulation further obscures the truth, making it nearly impossible for citizens to access independent, accurate information.

Disinformation laws a tool to silence dissent

Myanmar's legal framework includes multiple laws ostensibly designed to prevent disinformation that instigates hatred and violence.

The military's Constitution (2008) limits civil and political rights and prohibits the politicisation of religion by barring acts likely to promote hatred or discord among racial or religious communities (Arts 364, 365).[2] The Penal Code (1861) includes broad provisions criminalising incitement to war, promoting hatred, and acts that stir public fear or incite offenses against particular groups. Specialised laws, such as the Broadcasting Law, Electronic Transactions Law, News Media Law, Peaceful Assembly and Procession Law, Printing and Publishing Law, and Telecommunications Law, all contain further provisions against inflammatory content.

However, in practice, these laws are wielded arbitrarily to silence dissent rather than to address genuine disinformation. They provide authorities with sweeping powers to censor content and stifle dissent under the guise of maintaining public order and protecting community harmony.

The human rights toll of disinformation

Disinformation in Myanmar has a profound and direct impact on several fundamental human rights.

Eroding freedom of expression

Disinformation in Myanmar undermines the right to seek, receive, and share information (ICCPR, Art. 19). With an "information coup" in place, State-sponsored narratives crowd out dissenting voices, effectively stifling freedom of expression and impeding the public's ability to make informed decisions.[3]

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[2] Free Expression Myanmar (2022), "UN submission on military propaganda and disinformation".
[3] Free Expression Myanmar (2023), "Military orchestrated an 'information coup'".

Public participation in crisis

The proliferation of false narratives has severely skewed public discourse, undermining people's ability to participate in public affairs (ICCPR, Art. 25). By manipulating the media landscape, the military restricts genuine civic engagement and diminishes the quality of public participation in governance, further eroding democratic accountability.

Attacks on Reputation

Coordinated disinformation campaigns are deliberately used to unfairly tarnish the reputations of political opponents and marginalised communities (ICCPR, Art. 17). False allegations, often with a gendered dimension when used against women, serve to vilify individuals and justify repressive policies, ultimately eroding public trust and fostering societal divisions.[4]

War propaganda

Disinformation frequently crosses the line into incitement and propaganda for war (ICCPR, Art. 20). Fabricated reports and inflammatory rhetoric have not only been used to justify military crackdowns but have also directly contributed to a public appetite for war. This manipulation of facts transforms falsehoods into tools that enable and even promote conflict.

Endangering Lives

By distorting reality, disinformation endangers lives and destabilises community security (ICCPR, Arts. 6, 9). Manipulated narratives have led to severe human rights violations, including wrongful detentions, extrajudicial killings, and mass displacement. This alarming reality underscores that disinformation is as lethal as any physical weapon.

The darkest forms of disinformation

The consequences of disinformation campaigns extend far beyond misleading the public. The darkest forms have resulted in many significant human rights violations.

Inciting atrocities

Disinformation in Myanmar plays a critical role in sparking violence. For over a decade, state-sponsored propaganda and coordinated online disinformation campaigns have fanned intercommunal tensions, most notably in the military's campaign against the Rohingya. Fabricated reports circulated via State-controlled media and social platforms have not only incited brutal military crackdowns but also contributed to thousands of deaths and mass displacement. Since the 2021 coup, similar tactics have been deployed against pro-democracy advocates by portraying them as "terrorists," thereby justifying mass arrests and violent suppression and fostering an environment where vigilante violence becomes socially acceptable.

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[4] Human Rights Myanmar (2024), "Gendered impact of the Myanmar coup on free expression".

Suppressing political dissent

The military has intensified its disinformation efforts to silence critics and consolidate power. By invoking vaguely defined "fake news" laws under Penal Code 505A, authorities have framed political activists, journalists, and human rights defenders as criminals or foreign agents.[5] False accusations of "terrorism" have led to mass arrests and political executions, including the 2022 execution of four political prisoners. They have also forced many journalists and activists into exile.[6] This systematic suppression has created one of the most restricted media environments in the region.

Undermining democratic processes

Disinformation is also used to delegitimise democratic institutions. The military's unfounded claims of widespread electoral fraud in the 2020 elections, despite a lack of credible evidence, have been repeated until they gained traction among small but authoritarian segments of society. This persistent narrative erodes public trust in electoral integrity and discourages meaningful democratic participation, leaving citizens feeling disengaged and powerless.

Manipulating long-term social perceptions

Beyond immediate political gains, disinformation moulds long-term societal attitudes. Ethnic and religious minorities, particularly the Rohingya, are persistently depicted as outsiders or security threats, reinforcing structural discrimination by denying rights such as citizenship, land, and education.[7] Additionally, targeted false narratives, many of them sexual, against women undermine their leadership and discourage their participation in public life, entrenching patriarchal norms and long-term inequities.[8]

Economic and humanitarian harm

False claims about international organisations and domestic civil society as tools of Western interference have led to restrictions on humanitarian aid in conflict zones, worsening food insecurity and limiting medical care. Moreover, economic disinformation about currency policies and sabotage has spurred panic-driven financial decisions, deepening the nation's economic crisis and leaving workers, especially in informal sectors, increasingly vulnerable.

The harm caused by disinformation countermeasures

Efforts to combat disinformation must be carefully designed to avoid infringing on fundamental rights. Rather than addressing the harms of disinformation, policies can reinforce State propaganda and deepen human rights violations in several ways.

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[5] Free Expression Myanmar (2022), "505A Act of revenge".
[6] Human Rights Myanmar (2024), "Human rights violations experienced by exiled journalists".
[7] Human Rights Myanmar (2024), "Myanmar's militarisation of education".
[8] Human Rights Myanmar (2024), "Gendered impact of the Myanmar coup on free expression".

Suppression of freedom of expression

Efforts to counter disinformation have been misused to stifle independent voices. Broad, vaguely worded "fake news" laws, particularly under the Telecommunications Law (2013) and Penal Code (1861), have been employed to detain journalists and human rights defenders.[9] With over 200 journalists arrested since the coup and some facing decades-long sentences, these measures have created an atmosphere of fear, deterring legitimate reporting and public criticism of the regime.[10]

Restricting public access to information

Counter-disinformation policies have led to severe restrictions on public access. The military's bans on independent media outlets, routine blocking of websites and social media platforms, and prolonged internet shutdowns in regions such as Sagaing and Chin leave communities without reliable information about security threats or humanitarian aid.[11] This ensures that only State-sanctioned narratives reach the public, deepening the overall information crisis.

Overregulation of digital platforms

Sweeping cybersecurity and telecommunications laws force digital platforms to install surveillance technologies that enable State monitoring of online activity. The recently enacted Cybersecurity Law (2025) not only mandates the removal of "false" content but also provides authorities with broad powers to intercept communications.[12] These measures drive many into exile or force self-censorship, undermining privacy rights and stifling free expression.

Unintended consequences for marginalised groups

Overzealous counter-disinformation efforts also hurt already marginalised communities. While some military-affiliated hatred is removed from platforms like Facebook, new networks quickly emerge on less-regulated services such as Telegram. These networks continue to circulate anti-Rohingya, anti-ethnic minority, and anti-women propaganda, with overly broad censorship laws simultaneously suppressing legitimate discussions on human rights abuses and exacerbating discrimination.[13]

Leveraging digital companies for truth

Private sector companies, particularly social media platforms, digital service providers, and telecoms, play a critical role in mitigating disinformation. However, their support has waned over recent months, and there is much they can do.[14]

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[9] Free Expression Myanmar (2022), "505A Act of revenge".
[10] Human Rights Myanmar (2024), "Human rights violations experienced by exiled journalists".
[11] Human Rights Myanmar (2024), "Myanmar freedom on the net 2024".
[12] Human Rights Myanmar (2025), "Myanmar's cyber law a serious threat to privacy, speech, and security".
[13] Human Rights Myanmar (2024), "Gendered impact of the Myanmar coup on free expression".
[14] Human Rights Myanmar (2024), "Meta/Facebook changes threaten Myanmar's digital space".

Strengthening content moderation and fact-checking

A critical step is to bolster content moderation and fact-checking, especially for Burmese and minority languages. Social media companies must expand their local-language capacities and work closely with independent organisations to counter false narratives. Past efforts—such as Facebook's 2018 takedown of military-linked pages—demonstrate the potential of proactive moderation, though consistent enforcement remains a challenge.

Reducing the spread of harmful content through algorithm reforms

Current engagement-driven algorithms amplify sensationalist and inflammatory content. Companies need to revise these systems to de-prioritise disinformation, particularly content that incites discrimination and violence. Additionally, implementing clear labelling of misleading content, rather than outright removal, can help users access contextualised, verified information without crossing into unnecessary censorship.

Preventing state exploitation of digital platforms

Companies must resist State pressure to censor critical content. By rejecting data-sharing requests that violate user privacy and strengthening encryption measures, companies can protect activists and journalists from targeted surveillance. Moreover, challenging repressive legislation that forces platforms to act as State enforcers is essential to avoid complicity in human rights abuses.

Supporting independent media

Long-term resilience against disinformation depends on empowering independent media through financial and technical assistance and partnering with civil society to promote digital literacy. Support from companies like Facebook and Google has declined in recent months. Expanding access to tools like VPNs and encrypted messaging services will help to bypass military-imposed restrictions, ensuring broader access to reliable information.

Conclusion for a path toward truth

Disinformation in Myanmar remains a formidable threat to human rights, democracy, and social cohesion. The deliberate spread of false narratives by State-controlled media and military proxies, independently and via digital platforms, has not only silenced dissent but also incited violence and deepened societal fractures. OHCHR's review of disinformation is an opportunity to encourage the wider international community, including private sector companies, to do more to achieve a robust, rights-based response.

Enhance accountability for digital platforms: Urge social media companies to invest in local language moderation, establish transparent fact-checking protocols, and reform algorithms to limit the amplification of inflammatory content.

Impose targeted sanctions: Support measures that impose targeted sanctions on individuals and entities directly involved in orchestrating disinformation campaigns, particularly those linked to military operations.

Strengthen support for independent media: Increase international funding and technical assistance for independent media outlets in Myanmar to ensure people have access to reliable information.

Promote international cooperation: Foster global partnerships among governments, tech companies, and civil society organisations to share intelligence, best practices, and resources aimed at countering disinformation effectively.