

We Come from an Activist Background

An Interview with Htaike Htaike Aung, MIDO

Myanmar ICT for Development Organization, or MIDO, is a Myanmar based, non-governmental and non-profit organization. It collaborates globally and acts locally. MIDO is linked with both International as well as local organizations in order to help people deploy ICTs as a tool to meet core development goals. It is run by a board of directors, full-time staff, part-time staff and volunteers, all of whom are both committed and experienced. It also has an Advisory Board from various sectors that extend and guide to achieve the vision set by MIDO.

The following is the edited transcript of an interview with Htaike Htaike Aung, Programme Manager at MIDO, conducted by Sumandro Chattapadhyay in Yangon, Myanmar, on May 15, 2015.

Sumandro Chattapadhyay: Let us begin by asking you what you think of the term 'digital activism'?

Htaike Htaike Aung: Simply as using digital tools for activism. Digital tools may be online or offline.

SC: Do you use this term? Is it a term that is prominent in everyday usage?

HHA: Digital activism? Not really, they are words that are combined together... the word digital itself and activism itself are totally not new but then combining together is actually a new thing.

SC: Can you talk a little about the history of 'digital activism' in Myanmar?

HHA: In Myanmar we have always said that there are generations of activists. So the first activists (that we know of) are from way back,

during 1964-1965, during the start of the military regime. The second generation, we call them the 88 generation. And then the third generation, we called them the 2007 Saffron Revolution generation. I myself am much more from the Saffron Revolution generation. So during the time [of the Saffron Revolution] the public already had some access to the Internet. At that time people were starting to use blogs because in the offline world there was a lot of scrutiny. People [could] actually write anything but on the other hand getting information from the outside was difficult, so people were very interested in blogging and the whole blogosphere. So I find that [that] was the first instance of using these digital tools for activism. I remember many bloggers in the country using these blogging tools to voice what was happening in the country. That was one [instance] that I remember and experienced as well.

- SC: In 2007 during the Saffron Revolution, with various kinds of digital tools, especially the Internet being available, and as you were saying with blogs as an important medium of expression in general, did you also experience significant intervention by the government? A kind of counter attack by the government in the digital sphere?
- HHA: Of course. During the Saffron Revolution, for our generation it is the first thing that we kind of witnessed in our lives... I mean it did happen in 88 too but people were too young to know what was happening... That one was the first [experiences of media censorship by government that] we witnessed. But what is different from the 88 generation is that we now have some noticeable tools and ICT tools that we can use to [send our] voice out. So many of the bloggers [were] actually going underground, working with the protestors, taking pictures and videos, and uploading them on their blogs. That is when the main big media for example like CNN and other main media take all that content and then publish it online. Just after a day or two the government shut down the full Internet so people weren't able to use it... That [happened] just like that.
- SC: So the taste of the benefits of digital tools and the dangers [were experienced] simultaneously almost?
- HHA: Yes, exactly so! After that many bloggers that we know of were under watch by the government. One of our colleagues Nay Phone Latt was dragged from his home and put behind bars.
- SC: On that note, can you talk about the formation of MIDO, [in the context of the Saffron Revolution]?

HHA: We come from very [much an] activist background. Before MIDO, we self-organized as Myanmar Bloggers Society. It was a self-help group. We propagated blogging so that people can use these tools to know and share knowledge, or share what is happening, and so on. After Nay Phone Latt got detained, and when he got released, we [and] some of the blogger friends that we met [through] this Myanmar Blogger Society thought that we should do something: not only on blogging, or not only on freedom of expression on Internet, but on the whole ICT and Internet as a whole. So we formed MIDO together with some of our like-minded friends. We come from [these] activist roots. Not only development but also activism.

SC: This question of activism and activism that uses digital technology have thus been central to MIDO's work. Can you [speak briefly about the different] things MIDO does?

HHA: Mainly there are three things that we are doing. One is capacity building, another one is dissemination, and the third one is research. In capacity building we previously did a lot of digital literacy training and social media training because we think making people digitally literate can help them to maybe get information or disseminate information. In dissemination we did research and advocacy work as well. For example, we are highly involved in this campaign called the Panzagar campaign. It's all about using social media to combat hate speech. Also, we do research on hate speech, Internet and [work on] some of the ICT related things in the country.

SC: How do you understand digital literacy, because that is the key idea here, right?

HHA: There are many, not necessarily high-tech but also low-tech, digital tools that have been introduced to the world and to our country as well. The people who want to use it, or who *have* to use it, need to have the knowledge of not only digital literacy but also media literacy. These digital tools are like a knife: you can use it to kill people or use it to help people too. So not only digital literacy but we give media literacy training to them as well.

SC: What does this digital literacy training involve?

HHA: In digital literacy training, we teach very basic concepts of how to use the mobile phone, how to use the computer, what is the Internet, how to search for information on the Internet, how to find reliable information on the Internet. i.e. introducing them to reliable media and sources on the Internet. We also give training on social media, and a little bit of privacy, security and also media literacy.



[Image 1] Poster for the Panzagar campaign. Credit: Myanmar ICT for Development Organization.

SC: Often with new forms of social movements, mostly urban ones, which use digital media as a central tool for coordination ... and also to grab the media spotlight ... there is a [possibility] of being dependant on particular social media channels. And this is a difficult question because on one hand activism needs to happen where the people are, and the

people are often in social media networks... [While,] social media is an important place for activists to be in, [it also] has its own logic and own constraints. For example, it may make people easier to spot for the government...

- HHA: Yes, it is a concern. It depends on the kind of activism what we are doing. In some kinds of activism we just need to crowdsource and get more people to believe in the cause or to [contribute to] the cause. So for [those] cases... we definitely need the power of social media. But on the other hand some activism tools we might not [use], [especially] if [high media visibility makes us] vulnerable... It depends on the kind of activism actually. For example in Myanmar a year ago there was this blogger who was [writing about the functioning of the parliament]... [T]he parliament [started] trying to shut the [blogger] down by using various means, for example setting up a committee to search him,... [and] asking for help from Google, because the blogger was using a Blogspot platform... In this case if you are using a specific social media platform, which would not be safe for you, then you get captured very easily. It still depends on the type of activism.
- SC: Earlier you mentioned that MIDO is interested in both online and offline digital activism. Can you please talk a bit about that?
- HHA: Sure. In offline digital activism, we are a big supporter of using a low-tech approach. For example, using SMSs for campaigning, SMSs for advocacy too, shooting videos with your mobile phone, and then coming up with an advocacy video as well. So it does not necessarily need to be online. Also creating very [effective] messages and illustrations as print material. For online [activism, we] of course [talk about] using Internet, Facebook, and so on.
- SC: Can you please talk about hate speech in Myanmar, and how MIDO [thinks of] addressing it?
- HHA: In Myanmar we do have [a] history of religious groups having a [presence] in the country. After the Internet [becomes available] to the public, and everybody has a mobile in their hand, it is becoming much easier to spread hate speech. For example, Facebook is a hotbed of extremism here. You can see all types of hate speeches and extremist messages passing around. That is also because people are not digitally literate. When you buy a mobile phone, as a service the mobile shop installs Facebook for you and even creates an account and helps you to like some of the popular pages... This often includes many viral news pages, and many kinds of nationalist pages. Now people with the [new] mobile phone [already] have Facebook installed and, all these things that they did not voluntarily [subscribe for appearing] on the mobile.

They see these things, they share things, and it is much more easily spread. We were trying to find a way not to stop, because it is very difficult to stop, but to tone down these messages. So we came up with this campaign called the Panzagar movement, which starts online by [posting] a message that we will not be the one who incite hate... We started Panzagar with very nice illustrations, [messages, and stickers] and ... people who support Panzagar began to use our messages, began their campaigns, and also [distributed] the Panzagar messages and campaign materials offline as well. We can say that [the movement] creates a difficult situation for some pages, and high profile people on Facebook, who create hate speech. This is how Panzagar is trying to make the online space a bit safe from hate speech. ...

SC: On the one hand, you are saying there is fresh [public] memory ... [of people facing imprisonment] due to the lack of privacy on internet, in the sense that when you write something ... it is possible for the government to find out who you are. On the other hand, in the hate speech world you see that this [online] visibility does not necessarily prevent people from saying hateful things. Do you see a kind of paradox in how the government reacts to these two things: the criticisms of the government and the [online] hate speech?

HHA: The government takes very fast and firm action upon [anyone posting or sharing] criticism of itself. But on the other hand the government will not pay much attention to all these anonymous accounts on Facebook that are spreading hate speech. That is why the grassroots and civil society organisations are trying to take up actions against it. For example, in Panzagar we have this online campaign, and some groups are trying to set up small monitoring efforts on what the people who are living in their region are saying [on Facebook], what are the rumours being spread, and how to limit, verify or take action against them.

SC: Do you see a difference in doing activism in Myanmar today from say 2007?

HHA: Definitely the space has opened up a little bit, but it does not mean that it is open to what you want... We are becoming much more visible as you can see lots of campaigns going on. For example, around Sule [Pagoda] you can see the people whose lands have been grabbed, and they have spent almost a year [protesting against] this and occupying the street there. But nothing has been done. Previously you could not [even] do that: if you just go on the streets and shout, then you could get behind bars. But now you [are not immediately imprisoned] but still you are not getting the things you ask for.

SC: With the government [developing] significant interest in digital [infrastructure and] tools for [purposes of governance]..., how do you see MIDO's role in this [situation] where digital activism is not only about using digital tools to [express yourselves], but also doing activism about how the government is planning to use digital tools?

HHA: Exactly. There are many steps that the government is going to take [towards using digital tools in governance], they are talking much about e-government, e-participation, e-citizenship, and e-everything. [However,] they are not building the capacity of the citizens [simultaneously]. So we find that one [side] is very powerful and has all those resources, but the other [side] does not... [Also, to realise] e-participation, there [is] still a lot of things involved. It is not only the e-participation part, but also that the digital rights and fundamental human rights that apply to the Internet, or to ICT... [W]e need to get laws and policies that address this issue.

SC: What is MIDO's experience in working with other activist organisations, whose work does not necessarily focus on digital activism but who may benefit from learning about it or knowing about it?

HHA: There are a lot of civil society organisations coming up online but they are really not using it to the fullest. They may have pages online or may organise their discussions online, but there are still many other things that they can do. So when we conduct training or when they ask for help, we always offer them the idea of 'online marketing' to apply to their campaigning: having a kind of social media activities calendar for their campaigns, and so on. We find that these civil society organisations are interested in learning but then they are actually doing their work [at the same time] and do not have the time or the capacity to do [social media communications]. Sometimes that is true for us as well!

SC: My last question: what do you think of 'ICT for development'?

HHA: ICT for development... That is also something that we are trying to understand and study. You know, when people talk about development from the government sector, they often talk about basic economic development, socio-economic development. But in our understanding of development, we also have in mind the development of rights. We think development is not only for the economy, or for the social, but also for the rights, and for the citizens' ability to engage [with the government].

Interviewer's Note: *Throughout the transcription, '...' is used to mark pauses in the conversation and deleted unfinished sentences (which usually have been restated by the interviewee afterwards), and '[]' is used when either the actual word used by the interviewee has been replaced by a word that may convey the meaning more effectively given the context of the conversation, or to insert additional words so as to convey the meaning of the sentence more clearly. The text above also includes simple grammatical and language changes (for example, from 'are having' to 'organising') that are unmarked.*

References and Further Readings

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